



SWORD'S EDGE

THE ALPHANTASY E-ZINE

Issue 18

Spring 2004

With Fiction
by:

Steven L.
Shrewsbury

Jeanry
Chandler

A.J.
Thompson

Christian R.
Bonawandt

AND

C.J. Burch

Reviews of

28 Days Later

Underworld

The Core

Ars Magica

Star Trek

TNG: Genesis
Force

AND

Grim-N-Citty
Revised

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Sweet mother of God! Ken Hood is back and he's bringing Grim-N-Gritty with him, updating this gamer's favourite rules supplement. And there was great rejoicing. No, seriously, there was!

We are always looking for quality fiction, articles about writing, artwork and reviews. If you have a submission for us, please check our Submission Guidelines.

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My Critical Faculties

Written by Fraser Ronald
fraser.ronald@atfantasy.com

Well, the spring has finally come to Halifax, where I make my home these days. The fine weather helped to motivate me to get off my "duff" and get some things done--foremost being the new issue of Sword's Edge. The only thing that I've done since the last issue has been a bit of reading and a lot of working. Not much writing. And why not?

For a while there, I was one of those people who could just sit down and write. I looked at it as a job. Every evening, either at seven or at eight, I would sit down and write. Sometimes the stuff I wrote would be crap and I would delete it the next day, but I found that the discipline of forcing myself to write soon allowed me to enter the writing mood pretty much on command. I got a lot of work done at that time, unfortunately, though, that's in the past.

Soon after my move to Halifax, I stopped setting a specific writing time and I went back to writing when the mood took me. Well, the mood just didn't take me. When it was important, such as writing for the Parasitorim anthology *Terrors Within*, I could sit down and do the writing. I'm also involved in role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons* and *d20 Modern*. When it came time to work on a campaign, or to write up the rules supplement *Blood & Guts: In Her Majesty's Service*, I could do it and I seemed to find the zone or mood quite easily and quickly. Writing fiction though, when not working against a deadline, proved difficult, often impossible.

I'm afraid I don't have an answer as to why it has become so difficult for me to write fiction. Could it be that I've lost interest? I don't think so. Has my muse left me? Well, I always kind of considered my wife my muse, and she's still with me, so I don't think that's right. Maybe I can't find the time? No, I always found the time before.

The truth is, why this is happening isn't so important as how to combat it. I'm going to try to get back into writing nightly for at least an hour. For those other writers out there I'm sure you'll back me up when I say that this is not an easy thing to do. I'm not famous for my discipline. Quite the contrary. However, I found I was capable of at least this--through the week at least, if not on the weekends. I would actually suggest this to other writers with the same problem I've encountered. Don't wait for the mood to strike you, treat this like a vocation and maybe someday it will become one. As for me, I just picked up a half-decent laptop used, and I'm ready to get back into writing. Proof of that is I finally have this issue out. Imagine that.

Take care all.

Fraser Ronald (1 May 2004, Halifax NS)

Kicking Against the Pricks

By Steven L. Shrewsbury

The Official Steven L. Shrewsbury Site can be found at:

<http://www.stevenshrewsbury.com/>

"I hear the cries of long dead heroes whistling in the void, and the shouts of forgotten gods. To each being there is an appointed time, and even the gods must die..."

ROBERT E. HOWARD

THE TWILIGHT OF THE GREY GODS

Moonlight crept into the small chapel as the long doors swung open. The heavy boots of the men who entered alerted those in the sanctuary of danger. In the dim, lunar radiance and the flicker of many candles, those cavorting upon the altar froze. Jagged smiles from men in the robes of priests spread fast at the echo in the sanctuary. The sound from the intruders wearing armor was that of swords being unsheathed.

Never did a metallic visor rise on any helmet as the knights ran forward. Roughly, under the power of many hands, the monks exited the altar.

One of the ruddy skinned Clerics shouted, "So, you caught us, damn you all! We have defiled this church under the cross of Christ itself! You are too late!"

The men in armor said nothing as they stripped the counterfeit monks. Under their religious clothes the naked bodies were painted and tattooed with wicked, myriad symbols of long forgotten gods.

More knights sporting crosses on their chests dragged other fake men of God into the region near the altar. Each man wore religious vestments of Roman Catholic Priests or Monks of the order of Benedict until they were unclothed. Sans their garb, each flushed skinned man swore and spat at the knights.

"So, you have us, curse you, each and every one!" the man from the tryst on the altar snorted with great arrogance. "We are not monks, warriors of Christ! I see your crosses and know that by your armor you have just returned from the so called Holy Land! Bah! I spit on your cross and your new sect of a carpenter! We here still worship the gods of the oak as our ancestors did in Gaul before the time of Rome! You will never get us to accept your cross. We call down the dark forces of night on you, no matter what you may promise or threaten."

The Crusaders said nothing, but hauled the nude men down the aisle of the church. One of the pagans put up quite a struggle and the Crusader in the rear confiscated his head.

Once outside in the light of the moon, the six knights assembled in a semi-circle around the heretics who dishonored the church.

The mouthy leader of the pagans stood up and blinked, staring at the wooden cart that accompanied the Crusaders horses. "What have you for the King of France? Is it gold or booty from the Holy Land? Is it a relic so precious that none may see it for free? There is a black case! Do you bring religious articles for foolish pilgrims to fawn over?"

Five of the Crusaders wrestled the nude men down and made them go to their all fours. The sixth man who wore the Cross of Christ on his chest walked to the cart and opened up the long, slender ebony casing.

Again, the director of the pagans laughed and taunted them, saying, "Do you not give us the chance to convert? Are you going to behead us all and never offer us Heaven? Many found heaven on this spot before you fools placed a church here!"

From out of the artifact case came a long, gleaming treasure. At last, the voice of the lead Crusader resounded in the French countryside. "Death to the unbelievers, such are the words of God."

The face of the pagan registered confusion as the moon shone on the relic, and the odd curve of the object that sparkled so in the light.

When the knights raised their visors, the heretic swallowed hard. It all became real to him just who had him at a disadvantage. Leering at their dark skin and dark hair, the pagan shouted, "You are not Christians! You are Saracens! You are not our enemy!"

The man in Crusader armor said, "The holy words say *fight and slay pagans where you may find them*. I care naught for your ancient gods for they are not mine. With this, the sword of Mohammed itself, I shall kill the King of France. With this divine instrument, the Christians will know terror. For as the words of the prophet say, *I will inspire terror into the hearts of the unbelievers*."

The Saracens dropped their swords and the heads of the pagans rolled onto the grasses of France.

As the night deepened, those in Europe under subversive means dined on the communion wafers and wine. Consuming their fill, they looked up to the Heavens.

Under the light of the crescent moon, their leader declared, "God is great."

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Steven L. Shrewsbury, 34, has had over 110 short stories online or in print media. His short story collection *Depths of Savagery* was just released from Double Dragon Publishing which can be found at <http://www.double-dragon-ebooks.com/>. Also look for his novel *Nocturnal Vacations*. His work has also appeared in the High Fantasy anthology *Grimoire de Solace*.

Black Fur: Chapter 3

By Jeanry Chandler

Drifter Bob's Slum Fu FULL CONTACT Sparring Weapons can be found at:
<http://bellsouthwpw.net/d/e/deodand23/Weapons3.htm>

Boutaric and Valturio sat on a crude wooden bench on the bank of a wide, rushing stream. Officially, they watched over a raft tied up to the small dock, and a small fleet of skin boats pulled up on the tiny beach. Valturio was a short and swarthy man in his early forties, a native of the Oscay hamlets on the peninsula of old Valedia. He sang an aimless, meandering tune while he adjusted the prod of his crossbow. Every few minutes, he ate one of the olives he warmed in his armpit. Boutaric, a much taller, bigger, and younger man, was a Lycian from the far northern canton of Stoss-Berenise.

Valturio was in a petulant mood. He resented the cold inhospitable climate, and in his mind he cursed the Emperor for having sent him to this godforsaken post to freeze his toes off in misery. His indolent brother Balga, stationed in the Oscay garrison, even now lounged on some beach off of Devilfish Bay, and freely spent his pay in the wine shops and bordellos of their sun drenched home province.

Curling a lip in disgust, Boutaric turned his head upwind. The smell of garlic and rank meat which emanating from Valturio offended him. The man's his overall demeanor annoyed him, but he bit his tongue. He could not risk another fight after being warned for brawling only the week before. Valturio could easily sense Boutaric's poorly concealed disgust, and kept spitting olive pits near by his feet.

Shivering in the cold wind, broad shouldered and bear-like Boutaric stood up and moved a little bit toward the camp to avoid a fight. As he strolled down the path--couching his spear under his arm while he rubbed his hands together to keep them from freezing--he thought he heard a stealthy crackle in the forest to his left. He listened carefully, still maintaining his casual gait so as not to reveal his alarm, and heard it again.

Boutaric froze in place and cocked his head to one side. Slowly adjusting his grip on his spear, he peered into the twilight gloom of the snow-blanketed woods. Valturio, who had watched him all along with beady raven eyes, was alerted to a sense of genuine danger. His song trailed off to silence as he smoothly picked up a bolt for his crossbow and held it in his teeth as he began to rapidly wind the cranequin. The remaining olives fell from his armpit...

In the guards' hall, a tall, pretty red headed slave girl approached the stranger and offered him a wooden bowl of water to wash his hands in, which he did. She then led him to a board on which he saw a smorgasbord of food. His stomach, long cooperatively dormant

through his arduous ordeal, came suddenly awake with a vengeance, wracking him with a painful hunger. The board was laid out primarily with what the guards called 'hardfiskur' (dried fish) and 'brod', a flatbread made of oats, though he also noted small portions of many other delicacies: a few slices of cold smoked lamb, a bowl of watery goat cheese, some pickled eel, a small piece of smoked salmon, a bowl of boiled leeks, and several dried plums. He ate everything set before him gratefully and with a hearty appetite, to the continuing approval of the gathered guards.

The white haired leader who had arranged his duel earlier in the day approached and sat beside him.

"My name is Aussig," he said. "These men are my spear-brothers and boon companions. We are Lycians, from Stoss-Berenise in the Mountains of Morobodus."

The stranger looked up from his food.

"I thought Lycians made war upon the Valadian Empire."

Aussig pursed his lips and looked away.

"In our homeland, war still rages. My brothers and I fought in many campaigns, and so did our fathers and grandfathers before us. Yet still, high in the mountain peaks, an endless stalemate continues. The Valedans have not successfully pushed through the mountain peaks in 6 generations, nor have they been driven from the frontier. The war may go on forever, and the only prospect there for our clan is death. We don't fear dying mind you, but there are those of us who wish to enjoy some of the mysteries and pleasures of this world before we entered the next.

"Out here in on the frontier, an experienced Lycian warrior can find good paying work protecting Imperial outposts from the barbarians. Here, we need not fight against our own people." Aussig paused to gulp down some ale, then presented the stranger with a leather arm bracer. "Enough somber news. This is a gift from Herulf, who noticed that you admired his own."

The stranger looked up at Herulf who smiled wanly where he sat at the other end of the hall, half-dazed with pain and mead, attended by two women. The stranger slipped his hand through the arm guard, setting it comfortably on his forearm, and then dug in his pouch.

"Please present the honorable Herulf with this small token of my esteem."

He handed Aussig a string of 8 small copper pellets and a tiny disk shaped amber bead. Aussig crossed the hall and handed the beads to Herulf who promptly hung them around his neck, obviously much pleased. Aussig returned, grinning broadly.

"And now, let us talk and drink ale."

The stranger nodded silent assent as a slave girl filled his bronze tankard from a large clay jug.

"Tell me my friend, why are you so wary?" Aussig asked. "Surely you have seen hardships on your journey, but you have faced *holmgang* bravely this day and are now among friends. Yet you stare at the doorway and the rafters and shift nervously from side to side, as if uncomfortable in your own skin. Are the men of the south so grim that they do not enjoy feasting, drinking, and the hospitality of a stout hall with a warm hearth?"

The stranger sipped his ale and put a piece of pickled eel into his mouth. "I enjoy feasting and drinking more than most men," He paused to take another bite of eel, as if to verify his appetite. "But despite my desire to take make merry, it is as you have observed: in my spirit I have no stomach for feasting this day, for I fear for my life, even here in this stout hall, among this heroic company."

Aussig looked intently at the stranger, but saw that he was in earnest. "What could possibly threaten us here? Do you have knowledge of a scraeling rising?"

The stranger shook his head, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. "If I told you what I fear, you would laugh in my face."

Aussig finished his cup and handed it to a slave girl to refill. "You have said enough already to arouse my curiosity. I know from your skill with the sword that you are not a man to be trifled with. Tell me what such a dangerous man fears."

The stranger looked apprehensively at the door. "You have heard the old tales of the first expeditions, after the opening of the mountain gates? Of the nightmare beasts and creatures encountered by the Legions?"

Aussig frowned, then laughed. "I thought we had already put to rest any suspicion of Troll-Magic this day!"

The stranger sighed. "Not all of those old tales are mere superstition. My people whisper many strange things of these northern hills. There is much in these lands which are beyond the ken of the Emperor. I myself have seen predators which slay men as wolves slay sheep. I believe these creatures have pursued me to this stockade, and I fear attack by them even now." He looked relieved at having finally said his piece.

Aussig frowned deeply, and stared at the stranger for several moments, weighing his words carefully, studying his face for signs of jest or madness. "Say no more of your fears of man-eating beasts, I do not want my spear brothers to hear of this. Instead I will join you on your visit to our commandant, Seeliger. The third bell will ring shortly. Until then, let us drink ale quietly. Seeliger must decide what to do."

Back at the dock, Boutaric hefted his spear. Valturio nimbly tossed him his iron helmet, which he donned, and he walked out among the dark trees to investigate the sound in the thicket, while Valturio covered him with his now cocked and loaded crossbow. Overhead, the strengthening wind stirred the frost stripped branches restlessly.

Suddenly, Valturio saw movement out of the corners of his eyes. Before he could even

flinch, he felt a heavy impact in his left abdomen and a grinding pressure as his right wrist was seized. He fell to the ground without uttering a word, marveling at the crunching sound his ribs made as they cracked under the jaws of a beast with a face from nightmare. He didn't even realize that his hand was severed, that he had triggered his crossbow, or that he had inadvertently hit Boutaric in the back.

Boutaric felt the bolt slam home and pierce his heavy mail hauberk and furs. He turned in agony and was instantly seized and pulled down by three swift moving black forms. Over the agony of the bolt in his back, he felt jaws clamping down on his neck, his left thigh, and his spear arm. He fell to the ground and cried out piteously as the most horrible face he had ever seen confronted him, tugged off his mail coif, and plunged its hot muzzle into his throat.

Boutaric cried out hoarsely a second time before he was slain and ripped apart, a noise which was almost lost on the wind, but just barely heard by the two guards further up at the stockade gate. The guards at the gate didn't know what to make of the sound, and argued for some minutes if it was the wind or the cry of a bird.

As the stranger and Aussig the guard leader exited the hall, the stranger kept his hand on his sword hilt and scanned the roofs and the stockade wall, his body coiled up and ready to spring. Aussig looked him over carefully, wondering if he put on an act. Together they walked across the compound to a stout stone building where a spear-armed guard stood bundled in heavy furs.

As they approached the door, a second great wolf's howl echoed across the camp from the forest beyond the stockade wall. Aussig looked at the stranger, and then at the guard, who appeared nervous. Other guards in the towers peered uneasily into the trees.

Aussig frowned and signaled the guard, who let them pass. They walked down a short stone corridor and into a brightly lit chamber where Seeliger, the camp commandant, and four of his staff lounged on couches, all dressed in elegant black togas. The room was warm though Aussig only noted a small brazier, apparently full of incense. White plaster coated the walls, upon which was painted fanciful garden scenes depicting ponds, water plants, fish and birds, mostly in pale blue and green. Blue drapes covered the back of the room and in the corners, huge silver candelabra held clusters of candles. Before them a table was laden with wine and yet more food.

"Greetings traveler." Seeliger said from his reclined position. "Congratulations on your luck this afternoon on the dueling square." He winked at Aussig. "The temper of these Lycians of mine can be rather unpredictable, and their custom of constant fighting is quite barbaric. Still, you seem to have acquitted yourself well." He indicated one of the three huge couches covered in soft furs. "Please, have a seat, drink some wine. Break bread with us and amuse us with these matters of 'utmost importance' which you spoke of earlier."

As Aussig and the stranger sat on the available couch, two slaves appeared from behind

the blue curtain bearing cups, and poured watered wine for them. Aussig seemed somewhat disgusted by the fare and none too eager to drink the wine, but the stranger heaped food on a fine blue porcelain plate despite having just eaten. The table was piled high with delicious items suitable for the more refined Valeden palette: fresh olives, boiled crawfish tails spiced with horseradish and garlic, river mussels sautéed in olive oil, goat cheese, a finer flatbread made from wheat, mutton cooked and garnished with mint leaves and dried blueberries. He selected a silver spoon and dinner knife from a small bronze tray on the table, and began to eat again, wishing he had more room in his stomach.

As soon as he had swallowed his third mouthful of the delectable food, he grinned at Aussig, then looked at the commandant. "You keep a fine table, sir commandant. Please," he rummaged in his pouch, "let me present you with a small token of my gratitude for your hospitality." He produced a large amber disk and six crude silver thumb rings, which he handed to one of Seeliger's staff members, who in turn passed them to Seeliger himself.

Seeliger looked over the rings politely, hefting their considerable weight in his palm, and then placed them on the table before him. He then examined the amber disk with some care. "This is fine quality amber, fine indeed. Was that your purpose in coming to my camp then, to trade amber with us?"

"My arrival here was an accident," the stranger said. "I was not even aware of the existence of this post, it must have been built quite recently."

Seeliger nodded his assent. "In the fall, before the first rains. This is to be the first in a series of outposts intended to protect independent silver and tin miners from being attacked by rogue scraelings."

The stranger sipped wine, and nodded. Between the wine, the ale and the incredible throbbing pain in his wounded left arm, he was feeling giddy. "It's about time, with all due respect. I know from personal experience that this protection is much needed."

Seeliger raised an eyebrow at this quasi-insurrectionary remark, but finally smiled. "So what then is your great mission in these remote and barbaric mountains?"

"My tale is a hard one to credit, and is one which, frankly, I grow weary of telling and retelling, only to be called a liar. Aussig here has heard the basic gist, and I fear he does not believe a word of it. Let us not dwell on it then. Fortune has brought me here, and I happen to carry a quantity of amber with me, let us instead discuss business. My requirements are simple. I wish to purchase a few personal items which your quartermaster refused to sell to me, namely some armor and a few weapons, and a boat capable of traveling down the river. In exchange for this I am willing to pay a king's ransom in amber."

Seeliger delicately wiped his mouth with a linen napkin. "But surely you know that the Emperor has declared a moratorium of trade in these types of items, to prevent their dissemination into the hands of scraelings. You are lucky we did not confiscate your own

sword when you arrived. In any event, why load yourself down with armor and weapons when good sesterces take up less space and are more valuable in civilized climes."

The stranger's face was grim.

"Your eminence, you force me to be frank. I must warn you that this entire camp is in grave danger. To be succinct, the howl you heard earlier today was of an extremely dangerous man-eating beast. This beast pursued me to your camp, and I believe that even now its allies gather to aid it in the investiture and massacre of this camp."

Seeliger arched an eyebrow skeptically.

"This camp is surrounded by a ditch and a double stockade. There are four fortified buildings and three archery towers. My front gate is of stout oak, iron bound, and barred by a 16 inch beam. We are defended by a score of Lycian spearmen, a dozen Valedan marksmen, nearly thirty slaves and camp servants, and 5 armed Imperial officers, including myself. Are you honestly suggesting that we are at risk of attack from wild animals?"

The stranger looked at the ground. "These creatures are cunning, they scale walls as a squirrel climbs a tree. They slay armed men as a wolf slays wild hares . . ."

He looked up, but could see that the Commandant was frowning with deep skepticism. He shrugged, and took a sip of wine.

"Wolves, squirrels, or hares, I fear no beast."

"I agree, Commandant, my story is hard to swallow," the stranger said. "I can scarcely credit it myself, though savage memories haunt me even as we speak. Do whatever you wish then. I have discharged my responsibilities in telling you what little I have so far, and I greatly dislike being in this position. I ask you to simply grant my request for the personal equipment I need. Price is no obstacle."

With that, the stranger opened up his large bag of amber nuggets. The astonished commandant raised his eyebrows and glanced at his personal staff and at Aussig.

"I am forced to wonder, against my own trusting nature, if you might be some kind of spy for the scraelings!"

The stranger then produced another bag, a small sack of dark, heavy pebbles, crystals ranging from almost black to amber color, looking something like obsidian. He dumped these out on the table next and gestured toward them to Seeliger.

"In addition to the amber, I know the location of a sled packed with tinstone of this quality in the woods a few days journey upriver. I offer all the amber I carry and the location of the sled in exchange for armor, some weapons and personal equipment, and a hide boat or a raft to depart downriver."

All present were amazed, this quantity of amber and tinstone was of immense value compared to the items requested.

Seeliger, now somewhat annoyed, examined one of the brownish, semi-opaque stones.

"You have stimulated my interest, and your amazing display borders on either insolence or genius. I must insist on hearing your tale, stranger. If it is a boring lie, I will execute you as a spy. If it was at least entertaining, you will be safe if not satisfied. If by some miracle I am convinced that I am hearing the truth, I will grant your request."

The stranger paused, weighing his options.

"Did the Imperial Jaegermeister pass through this camp about a month back?"

Seeliger admitted this was the case, and the stranger's demeanor became somewhat more serious. He sighed again, staring into the middle distance, as if collecting his thoughts were a distasteful chore, and speaking at length even more so. Folding his arms, and staring at his feet, he told his story.

I was a bodyguard, hired by a prospector named Carlis. Carlis believed he had discovered a fantastically rich source of tin ore in a small tributary of the Mostander river. Like myself, Carlis was a southerner, and did not fully trust the Valedan prospectors who worked this area. He feared that they might act against him if they knew of his success.

So he hired half a dozen foreign-born guards, for protection from scraelings and from his rivals. We were to escort an enormous horde of tin ore Carlis had buried in the remote foothills of the Cobalt Mountains.

Our party left the Imperial border town of Asciburigum and accompanied this prospector Carlis on an arduous journey into the wilderness. We traveled deep into the Cobalt Mountains for three months. In the Fall, we were twice ambushed by small war-parties of scraelings, losing only two porters and one guard to a wound from what turned out to be a poisoned javelin. Later another guard, a mule and two more porters fell through the ice while crossing a river. We lost much of our food and all of our salt.

After much hardship, we finally reached a remote and well hidden campsite deep in the mountains. After smelting some of the ore in clay pots, we packed a sled and made our way back down the mountain, following a creek. Though shadowed by scouts, we were not attacked. Carlis grew fearful however of being massacred, so after we sought protection at a small prospectors winter camp on the Mostander river.

As soon as we arrived we learned that we had fallen into grave misfortune Scraelings already had this camp under siege. Each night the wild-men surrounded the stockade and beat on their drums, and shot fire-arrows over our walls. After four days of this the scraelings abruptly retired and a heavily armed party of seven men and three Imperial officers arrived at the camp, with many horses and mules, lead by an Imperial Jaegermeister and two Equestrians on horseback. They paused only briefly to refresh their supplies, and after only few hours rest pressed on into the hills despite being warned of the threat of barbarian attack. They were outfitted for the chase, they had many wolf pelts with them which they traded for food and supplies, and among their

party were lean hunters from every corner of the Empire, and in their gear were large cages and many traps.

Three days after the Imperials left, the compound was again attacked by a major force of scraelings. Nine men were killed in the attack, including two more guards. The stockade was breached by fire, and massacre seemed imminent. But at the very height of the battle, the savages suddenly broke off and decamped, uncharacteristically leaving their dead and wounded behind.

That same evening as the bodies still burned on a large funeral pyre, three men appeared before our gate with one horse. We saw that one was the Imperial Jaegermeister himself, mortally wounded by an animal bite to his thigh, he was accompanied by a hunter and one of the Equestrians, whose right arm was also terribly wounded. Even their horse bore many wounds. Men and horse alike had the look of hunted animals--their eyes wild and rolling with fear and panic. The Imperials raved about man-eating beasts and shadows coming down from the trees to devour them, and could not be consoled.

A few hours later that night in the great prospectors hall, the Jaegermeister died from his wound. The two men from the Jaegermeister's group were raving, near to madness, and they insisted that beasts would attack our camp. At first we thought them daft, but eventually we grew fearful. We packed our gear and prepared to depart on a moments notice if necessary, and saddled several of the horses and mules . We then armed ourselves and prepared for the unknown, but no attack came during the night.

Shortly after dawn, Carlis unbarred the great oak door of the hall and went out to bring in more firewood. He walked out into the snow and disappeared without a sound, leaving the portal wide open and the cold air rushing in. There was a nervous pause, as many of us sensed something might be wrong.

One of the traders got up to close the door, when he was suddenly bowled over by a shaggy beast. like a huge, lean wolf with a mouth full of giant gleaming white saw-teeth. The beast had a horribly expressive face, alive with malice and sinister intelligence, and huge oversized paws tipped with sharp claws. Four of these great wolves appeared in the opening of the still dark building, and with them came slaughter and terror

They leaped upon the men, many of whom were still asleep. With one bite of their great snapping jaws they could sever a man's hand, hamstring him, or tear out his throat. They slid through the shadows sewing death, and cunningly took advantage of our confusion. Many died in the first few moments. Some were still asleep on the floor, some blundered about until they were clipped from behind and dragged down, others reacted too slowly and were instantly mutilated as they reached for their weapons.

The hall was large and spacious however, and the men were hardened, well armed and very experienced. Several men fought back with determination and skill, though the beasts were difficult to harm, their supple bodies shrugged off many wounds which would have slain a normal man. One of the beasts was finally struck down by a sword stroke which severed its leg. It snarled and whirled about horribly, and finally died. Another

was struck by a crossbow, and its head was pinned to the wall. Two more of the horrible creatures remained.

A group of us had managed to back ourselves into a corner and sought shelter behind an impromptu barricade of two tables and a cot. The two remaining wolves faced us, snarling with hatred, their faces distorted and terrifying visions of evil, all white teeth, cruel eyes, and lolling tongues. After a brief pause, they attacked. With incredible speed, they seized and pulled down three men, but in the process we slew one of them and the other finally fled, injured by two sword cuts on its back and a spear wound in its belly.

The four of us who remained stood in our corner, panting and clutching our weapons in the dark and smoky room, knee deep in carnage. Myself, another bodyguard named Maupertuis and two Valedan prospectors whose names I never did learn, were all who remained. Before us in the half darkness lay the inert bodies of three horrible beasts and nine men.

There was an eerie stillness in the air, not a sound could be heard. Smoky light beamed in through the still open door. Not trusting that exit, we kicked open a shuttered window on the other side of the building and fled out into the camp grounds, where we saw many the horses and pack beasts which had been mutilated and slain. We barely had time to recover from this shock before three more beasts scrambled around the sides of the building and attacked in a snarling rage. Their faces were hideous masks of distorted hatred and leering murder-lust, an image which made my blood run cold.

The other bodyguard, Maupertuis, bravely met the attack of the first creature with his shield. It was apparently the same beast which we had already wounded in the hall, for it was streaked with gore and moved with less grace than the others. As it tried to scramble over the shield to get at him, he hacked into its side with his broadsword as I hewed into its head with my own blade, shearing off an ear and causing what I believed was a mortal injury, though I barely leapt back in time as it flung itself from the shield and viciously lunged at me. It died at my feet, still snapping its nightmare jaws.

Another of the beasts was apparently brought down by a bolt from a crossbow fired by one of the prospectors, for I saw it flipped over onto its back, kicking feebly and biting at an impaling quarrel. The third however dodged a javelin with serpentine agility, and rising up on its hind legs, leapt upon Maupertuis with whiplash quickness. It tore away his shield as a man would fling aside a child's toy, seized him by his shoulders, lifted him off of the ground and bit into his throat, shaking him viciously until he was limp. We all heard his neck snap and saw the blood spurt. Then it looked up at the rest of us and seemed to grin.

I backed away as one terrified prospector menaced the snarling wolf-beast with his spear, while the other desperately tried to reload his crossbow. I knew then in my heart that I was going to die, but at that very instant I spied one of the horses which still alive, trotting by behind me in a near panic. Seeing my chance, I leapt upon the mare and galloped away. As I fled I looked over my shoulder and saw the two prospectors being

savaged by the last beast, which then wasted no time in initiating pursuit.

"Coward!" Aussig leaped half off his couch.

The commandant, his face white with indignation over the depiction of the Imperial Jaegermeister's demise, held up his hand. "Peace Aussig. Let this fool finish his story, then we will see what happens."

The stranger now leaned back against the wall, his hand still on his hilt, and watched as Aussig sat down on his couch. He resumed his story . . .

I rode hard for several hours, leaving the beast behind. I thought it had given up the chase, and I stopped to let the horse cool down. We had rested for about half an hour and I was about to let the horse drink water from the stream when by chance I looked back up the trail behind me, and I spied a tiny dark shape darting through a clearing about a half a mile back. Much alarmed, I leapt onto the horse again and galloped off.

I rode hard until nightfall, and kept riding down the trail at a walking pace all night, stopping only twice very briefly to water the horse. In the morning after fording another stream I spied another camp, this one a somewhat larger compound with four stone buildings.

"The three rivers camp." Aussig's eyes met the Commandant's. "We have sent four messengers there in the last two weeks, and heard nothing back."

There were thirty men wintering in this camp, and the sky was black with an oncoming blizzard. I was greeted warmly enough when I rode in through the open gate, but I soon faced derision and scorn as I explained my plight. No man there could believe that the Imperial Jaegermeister could have been slain by an animal, nor could they believe that a score of men had been brought down by wolves of any kind. I was made a mockery and my presence was barely tolerated through the day. I humbled myself to their harsh words and asked only to purchase a boat so that I could depart downriver. They at first agreed to sell me a hide boat at an exorbitant price, but I could not leave during the blizzard, so slept on the floor of one of their great cabins.

It was shortly after nightfall that the first great howl was heard. The beast roamed the periphery of the camp, and howled again and again in the blinding snow. It was a hideous, terrifying sound, a deeper throated noise than that made by wolves or dogs. After about an hour the first howl was answered by others. I was roused from my sleeping point and asked again to tell my tale, which this time was met with slightly less open mockery.

The men debated what to do about me. They still could not fully credit my story. Many suspected I was deranged from fear, or that I was a spy for the scraelings who were prowling around the periphery of the camp in the guise of wolves, and that I had come to spread terror in advance of an attack. One or two even feared that I was a witch of some kind.

They decided to lock me into an empty smokehouse on the site, which was stoutly built and had a heavy oaken door. They bound me and took away my sword and my belongings and locked me into a tiny soot-blackened building which reeked of fish so badly that my head swam. They gave me many bear furs to keep me warm and promised to release me in the morning, if there was no barbarian attack.

That night as I worked at my bonds I heard the first terrifying sounds of carnage and slaughter outside of the cabin. I kept still lest I draw attention to myself, and cowered in my bed of furs like a field mouse in a hummock of grass. After some time I again heard snarling, yells, clangs of metal and the smack and crack of crossbow bolts striking wood. Then screams. Then nothing.

After a long period of silence the hair on my neck stood up as I heard snuffling at the door of my hut. I could distinctly hear the iron lock rattling. A few moments later my heart froze even more than my numb feet as a great weight pressed against the door, but the heavy timbers held. Still later, something scratched and snuffed again, trying to dig under the door. I hoped that the intense reeking fish and smoke smells of the hut would mask my own scent, and I lay still as a corpse so as not to make any sound.

At some point I must have fallen asleep because when I woke up there was light coming through the small smoke-hole in the roof, and it was much warmer. I at last worked my hands free of my bonds, and I tried the door, but the building was incredibly sturdy. I kicked the door and walls until my heels were bruised, and then sat down in frustration. I began to work at a heavy iron hook which was set into the wall. After an eternity of constant pulling and pushing I managed to worry it free. I tried using the hook to bang on the hinges, but that made too much noise. I tried to dig into the hard, frozen dirt under the door, so that I could squeeze my way out under it, but it was too hard.

From the hole above me, the scant light was already growing dim and I began to panic as night fell. Even more than discovery by the beasts I began to fear freezing to death. I knew I would not last another night in this chilled hut. Finally after an interminable period I managed to pry the bottom hinges off of the door, and push it partially open, enough to squeeze under and out. I stood there, filthy in the moonlight, still holding the iron hook in my hand as a weapon. Timidly at first, then with increasing boldness, I searched the camp. There were no living men, only black crows everywhere, feasting on the dead. There were no dead beasts, only the half eaten corpses of men and an immense quantity of frozen blood in the snow.

I entered one of the cabins and despite the risk, I started a fire to warm myself. I rummaged through the hall and discovered my sword, and the great cache of Amber which I carry now, and many other items. I outfitted myself for travel and as soon as I felt warm enough to walk without shattering my bones, I put my gear into one of the small canoes at the camp, and pushed the boat into the water.

I had rowed only a short distance down the stream when I saw one of the beasts looking at me from the shore. I continued down the river for four days, pursued by the creature,

and at last, I came upon this place, where I was met with extortion, a forced duel, and more scorn and insults.

With these words, the stranger began to step back, his hand on his hilt. He could tell from the pinched, angry faces of Seeliger and Aussig that they had not believed his story, and he was determined not to be brought to any further indignity without a fight. Outraged at his hostile posture, Aussig stood up and grasped the hilt of his own sword. Seeliger also stood, signaling to his staff members and speaking to Aussig through clenched teeth.

"Take this fool down, alive if possible, we need to get to the bottom of this and find out if he is a spy or merely a madman."

Aussig and two of the guards were about to step forward, when a commotion was heard down the hall.

"Commandant! Commandant! I must report"

Seeliger, eyeing the Stranger suspiciously, faced the hall where a soldier dressed in Valadian Battle-gear appeared and saluted, accompanied by two guards and a terrified and roughed up looking slave.

"Commandant! This slave claims that the woodcutting party was ambushed by beasts in the forest and slain!"

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Jeanry Chandler lives in New Orleans, Louisiana with his girlfriend, their cats, and his Tropical fish. His latest work, *The Primer of Practical Magic*, is available from Pelgrane Press (which can be found at <http://www.pelgrane.com/>) out of England. He has also written articles for various Aquarium trade magazines. He is an over the hill punk rocker, a Discordian, a History fanatic, and a long time sword enthusiast. His favourite sci fi/fantasy authors are Jack Vance, Stanislaw Lem, and Philip K Dick.

The Gilded Flame

By A.J. Thompson

Vertigo Alley can be found at: <http://www.vertigoalley.com/>

Four hundred turns, thought Alexander as Touchwood Inn came into view. It was a welcome sight amidst the winter landscape he'd been traversing on foot for the better part of a fortnight. So much has changed, and yet nothing at all.

He quickened his pace, for as much as he'd come to appreciate the natural beauty of snowfall in Kyrth, cold was cold, and he suddenly found himself longing to wind down the remainder of the evening beside a warm fire. He entered the inn and stood in place for a moment, savoring the warmth as tiny eddies of snow slithered across the shag carpeting of the parlor.

Home at last.

Behind him, a stout dwarf, serving as doorman, politely pushed the door shut and tapped his staff on the rug. A small sparkling cloud settled onto the fabric, dissolving the snow before it had a chance to melt.

"You be warming your garments during your stay?" he asked in sharply accented Human as he hobbled in front of Alexander and gestured at the complimentary hearth.

Alexander responded with a silent nod. He was not unkind; his extended journey had merely made him weary and not in the mood for small talk—at least not until he'd had a drink or two in him.

He slipped out of his clothing and descended down a shallow staircase, which brought him into the belly of the inn. Subdued lighting, provided by enchanted torches hung between delicate tapestries, illuminated cushioned, burgundy-colored wooden seats pulled around oaken tables. To the left, a walkway (carved out of the inn's stone foundation) led up to the steaming bathhouse; to the right, another shallow staircase leading to a crescent-shaped pit of personal booths that had been carved as elaborate alcoves into the woodwork of the walls. Each booth was complimented by a decorative spray of flowering vines.

The furnace was apparently in good repair this evening, for there was an abundance of bare flesh amongst the patrons. Alexander nodded at several of the waitresses, who welcomed him with hugs and kisses as he made his way into the bathhouse. He bathed among familiar friends and shared many tales of his most recent journeys across Marrybird (as well as the rest of Kyrth). His audience was enraptured, not wanting to let him go until at last he rose from the water to dry himself off.

"As much as I have enjoyed regaling you with stories from the theatre," he said, "I'm afraid I am quite tired."

"Just one more story?" implored an appealing lass.

Alexander smiled gently, slicking back his long dark hair. "Another time, when the weariness of the flesh does not weigh so heavily upon the mind."

He returned to the den, where Gregori waited. Gregori called out to him as Alexander descended into the pit.

Gregori was several turns older than Alexander, and as such had a certain heavysset look to his otherwise youthful face. It was sometimes referred to as 'the weight of advanced calendar age,' and it had crept into his bones ever so slightly as the seasons had passed. He was not old, for his skin was still smooth, his auburn hair still full, his posture straight...he had, as nearly all veteran Kyrthians did, the body of a youth who'd lived a long, long life.

Nevertheless, Alexander was pleased to see him once again. He offered the man a hug. "Wonderful to see you, Greg. And wonderful to see Touchwood is still going strong."

Gregori chuckled. "When the place isn't being repaired due to some outrageous accident or minor mishap. Never mind that, though. You must be weary after your long journey. Here, I have a table for you." He led Alexander to a booth. A cinnamon-scented candle rested at the center of a modestly-sized table, illuminating the alcove, warming the woodwork.

"Very good, Gregori." Alexander sighed as he slid onto the seat and rested his head against the wall.

"Can I get anything for you?"

"A bowl of soup, perhaps."

Gregori bowed humbly. "Of course. Anything, old friend."

He left the booth and Alexander was left alone to enjoy a quiet moment. He closed his eyes and stretched somewhat, feeling the warm stone beneath his bare feet, the silky cushioning against his buttocks and thighs. The pleasant smells of good food wafted through the air, blending with the sounds of peoples' merriment as they conversed cheerfully with one another. Many, many seasons had passed since he'd first come to Touchwood (and to the city of Faire), but for a moment he was able to reach back across a sea of memories and touch the shoulder of the pouting adolescent he'd once been.

"A recipe from Helena."

Alexander opened his eyes to find Gregori had placed a steaming bowl upon the table. He'd also brought cider.

"Tell me again," said Alexander, sitting forward and calmly stirring his soup, "why you chose such a...questionable name for this place."

Settling himself across from Alexander, Gregori uncorked the cider bottle and began pouring. "A bit of humor is all. Used to be called the Crystal Goblet back when I first opened as your average brawl house. However, in the past five or six hundred turns, the bloody place has been burned down on no less than fifteen separate occasions. In the beginning it was war with the elves, then, even when Marrybird was at peace, drunken Guardsmen would stumble in and find a way to misuse their royal mana-I finally wised up to my rotten luck and decided to take it with a chuckle rather than a curse. In fact, due to a rather unpleasant rogue curse I happened to receive before I had Touchwood properly enchanted, I actually called the place The Rotten Apple for nearly eight turns. But people seem to appreciate the humor, and business has always been astounding. There never ceases to be an abundance of amiable young men who are willing to give of their time and energy to make sure we're running proper. I'd wager our bed maids have just a little something to do with that."

"And Arin? Is she still around these days?"

"Of course. She's, ah, with one of our patrons at the moment."

"So she's still...?"

"A bed maid? Why, yes. I can pass along the news of your arrival, if you like."

"Yes, of course."

Gregori nodded and rose to his feet. "Well, like I've always said, please stay as long as you like-I've reserved a room for you, naturally. If I'm not available when you're ready to turn in, approach old Dale at the bar. He'll give you the key."

"Thank you," Alexander said. "Give my regards to Helena and the laundry girls."

"I surely will."

Gregori left the booth, and Alexander ate his soup, sipped his cider. Soon he was tingling from head to toe and comfortable enough to nap right there at the table. He leaned back, bottle in hand, and gazed at the candle, allowing himself to become somewhat hypnotized by its flame.

"Alexander!"

He felt a soft hand on his shoulder, turned and found himself in the presence of a slender blonde woman. She was somewhat flushed, her body glistening with a light sheen of scented bathwater.

"Arin, my dear," said Alexander, making room for her in the booth. She bounced beside him, throwing her arms around him and pecking him on the cheek. He was not quite in the mood for such cheerful play just yet, but for her sake he acquiesced, replacing the cider bottle on the table and returning her embrace. She had the feel of a carefree youth despite the fact that she was a mere season younger than he. After a moment, tasting strawberry cider on her lips, he asked, "Have you been drinking?"

Arin giggled. "A little. I know I shouldn't get carried away, but Goddess knows I can't help myself sometimes. Especially when I think of you and how long it's been since we were last together." She sobered somewhat and ran her hands down his chest, traced the ridges of muscle with her fingers. "You've been hardened by your journey, but now that you've come home, things can be as they once were."

"If only that were possible." Alexander sighed. "I'm afraid there's something on my mind at the moment."

"Let the mind rest, then." Arin snuggled closer.

"Not this time, my dear, my precious love."

"What is it, then? Why has your mood become sullied?"

Alexander gazed into her eyes as he brushed her soft cheek with his hand. "I am four hundred seasons old this morning . . . I've become old these last few turns."

She blinked, tilted her head to one side, for she did not understand. "But nobody becomes old in Kyrth, Alexander. Lifelong youth is a gift from the Goddess, given to those who have taken Her into their hearts."

"Ah, but She did not promise immortality. Our youth is lifelong, but we still have not been granted long life. We still leave this realm once our precious time in the flesh has run its course."

"You are half elf," Arin said, as though to remind him.

True, his face was beardless--even his genitalia lacked adult hair--but his ears were rounded, and he had the height of a typical human adult. His mother had been human, after all; her blood was undoubtedly the dominant force flowing through his veins.

"Only half," he said, contemplatively. "It is not enough to disregard my mortality. Only full-blooded elves know the secret to eternity. Perhaps that is why, when one gazes into their endless, crystalline eyes, one sees an entire history. Kingdoms built and destroyed; lovers lost long ago to war or time; thousands, tens of thousands of sunrises and sunsets, all blended into the gilded flame of remembrance."

Arin rested her head against his chest. He felt the hot sting of her tears against his skin and he knew she was crying. Perhaps she was genuinely saddened, in her own childlike manner, to lose a lover who'd shared so many intimate nights with her. However, she would never understand. He would leave Touchwood for the last time tomorrow morning, and she would go about her business as a bed maid, sharing endless nights with endless men . . . and eventually she would forget him. She would find simple bliss, and he would be happy for her.

Arin whimpered. "Why do you speak of such things?"

"I did not want to leave before saying goodbye."

"But you do not have to leave. You can stay here with me."

"Do not be selfish, my dear." Alexander made an effort to cool his emotions. "I would like nothing more than to spend an eternity beside the hearth, with you by my side. However, I have come to avenge Min."

At this Arin stiffened, straightened in his arms. Her gaze met his.

"I am sorry," he said.

"Do not be," Arin replied, softly. "Perhaps you are right. Perhaps it is I who have been callow towards your love for her. She was yours, and you were hers."

Alexander fell silent, allowing memories of Min to flow through him once again. She had been his soul mate, she had come after all his childhood infatuations, after his adolescent experimentation with Arin and other girls. She had been a mature passion, a lifelong promise that had failed to fulfill itself, for she had died many turns ago while training as a royal athlete at the Eternal Champion. At the time, Alexander had been devastated, unable to understand why the Goddess and her consorts had allowed such a thing to happen to someone so young, someone who'd endured immense challenges during her childhood as a Marrybird exile, only to have her life ended in a fit of godly passion during a Game of the Gods. Gods were not supposed to use their fleshed children for such deeds, but an exception had been made in Min's case. An exception that had proven fatal.

Arin had become Alexander's lover afterward, offering him solace as a familiar acquaintance who could share his despair and offer her affection. He shared love with her, though it was somewhat detached, and certainly not enough to stave off his thirst for the answers to questions a mere mortal was perhaps never meant to know. Subsequently, he'd left her here in Faire and gone to explore Kyrth. However, his life had quickly become, he now realized, an unsatisfying journey that had led him full circle without providing the answers he sought. As such, sitting here in the familiar warmth of the inn, he was ready to end the journey.

Presently, Gregori returned to the booth with more cider and a bowl of fruit. He immediately noticed Arin's solemn disposition.

"Arin, my child, what's the matter?"

She did not answer, but rather looked imploringly at Alexander.

"I shall go to the Shrine of Taurus tomorrow," he said slowly, and finished off the last of his drink. "I will summon Taurus. We will discuss . . . retribution."

Gregori went pale. He seated himself. "Vengeance? Against one of the gods?"

"I have waited long enough for an alternative to present itself to me."

"And so you will fight a god?"

"If need be."

"You're only part elf. You are still mortal. I don't suppose I can talk you out of this."

"Alas, no. My mind is made up."

Gregori sighed, poured himself a glass of cider. "Gods, I need a drink--and I'm not even the one whose life is at stake."

Alexander smiled. "Do not worry yourself, my friend. Our many, many turns of friendship have engraved themselves into my memory. In life or in death, I will not forget."

"Yes, of course." Gregori shook his head and laughed. "Listen to you, all full of nymph talk. I remember when you were still just a cub, when you first came into Faire from the Cove. Ha, a human boy with elves' blood raised by nymphs. Tell me that's not the humor of the gods. You used to sneak in here constantly to see the ladies. Laurel finally gave up and instructed that if you were to come here, it would be to work. Whatever skirts you chased, you were to chase them on the clock."

"Indeed."

"You stuck to it, though. I'll give you that. Laurel raised her boys right."

Silence fell over the booth as everyone entertained their own thoughts. Arin had separated herself from Alexander and was now brooding over a handful of figs.

Gregori eventually sighed, set down his glass, and paid Alexander a serious look. "You're really going to do this? Tomorrow?"

Alexander nodded.

"Then you will need a flesh oracle, a human body Taurus can animate during battle."

"Yes, but--"

"Then I will be yours."

"Gregori, I cannot ask this of you--"

Gregori held up his hand. "Alex, If this is the manner by which you will leave Kyrth, then I will be at your side."

Alexander studied his friend's face, noted the unwavering gaze, the firm set of the jaw. Throughout his life, Gregori had been a friend and a father-in-name, and despite his instinctive objection, he could think of no one he would rather have at his side.

"You realize," said Alexander slowly, "that if I win, you will most likely be dead or wounded beyond salvation."

Gregori nodded. "Of course. And, if Taurus wins..."

"I would give no other man the honor."

"Bloody right."

Alexander smiled and clasped Gregori's hand in his own. "Thank you, my friend."

"Min is dead."

"I thought you were asleep."

"There is no changing that."

"Perhaps not."

"Then why go through with this madness?"

Arin lay with Alexander, her legs intertwined with his, her head resting atop his chest. She'd caught him quite off guard, feigning sleep after their lovemaking and then suddenly lifting her face to his and presenting her thoughts.

He twitched, ever so slightly, and gently ran his fingers through her golden locks, the edges of which had been set aglow by the faint candlelight. "The gods know all, while mortals must spend their lives seeking their own answers. I have journeyed far, and for a long, long time. I have found nothing. The only thing that has made it bearable is the promise that one day it will all pass, and I will find my answers. I have chosen tomorrow as that day."

"But the Goddess gives us all the gift of free will. This is not a path you must follow in order to be reunited with Min."

"Min's free will was taken from her. Taurus exercised his own on the day he usurped my beloved and killed her. What free will has there been for me, separated from my mate and forced to wander this realm alone?"

Arin pouted, rose from the bed and cleaned the seasoned honey from between her legs. "There is still beauty in life, moments to cherish, moments of delight. Were you not in ecstasy when you made love to me tonight?"

Alexander did not answer, for he had no answer to give. Physical pleasure and spiritual pleasure were, for him, oftentimes very similar. He knew that he had been comforted by her presence, but to speak of their coupling in words would be to act as any average man did towards any average bed maid.

Such is not the case, he thought. I love Arin, but I also love Min.

"When you leave Touchwood in the morning," Arin said, crossing the bedchamber, "you will be leaving me, again."

With that she turned away and let herself out.

Arin did not offer her presence for the Calling. While a small part of Alexander was hurt by this, he did understand her motives. It is better this way, he thought, rising from his bed. The morning sunlight cascaded into the bedchamber, warming the woodwork, warming his body. At some point during the early morning, one of the laundry maids had brought his clothes, (cleaned and dried), and placed them atop the chifffonier. He pulled

on his leggings. To imagine his absence as something intangible, like a dream. To know that he is gone, but not having to witness his death. It was perhaps not the ideal scenario, but it would have to do.

He pulled his hair back, bundled it at the nape of his neck, and examined himself briefly in the mirror. It had been a long while since he had seen himself as such. He was not surprised, however, to find that he still carried the appearance of a young man. It was as if his body had refused to take more than a few modest steps past adolescence, past the Games (and past Min's death).

A knock at the door signaled Gregori's arrival. Alexander left the bedchamber and greeted his friend with a meaningful embrace. They descended the staircase together, crossed the unoccupied den, and exited the inn. Outside, the sky was clear, the sunlight reflecting off the snow-covered ground, highlighting the web like wings of the morning fairies as they dashed between the tree branches.

Touchwood's pantheon was located behind the inn, in a subterranean grotto. Polished stone steps led inside, where the many gods' shrines were illuminated by enchanted torches hanging along the walls. A multitude of alcoves had been carved into the stone of the walls; each alcove held a meticulously-carved statue resembling one of Kyrth's numerous minor gods and goddesses. The males were tall and muscular, with handsome faces. The females were lithe, with generous, well-shaped breasts and lush figures.

"Welcome," greeted the caretaker, a slight, robed man who appeared out of the shadows as if he'd been conjured from the firelight itself. "Let those who pass into Her kingdom be pure of heart." He rose his hand and, in a swift, efficient motion, sprinkled holy water on his guests.

Alexander bowed, offering his thanks and requesting an audience with Taurus.

"Ah, of course. His shrine is available at the moment. Please proceed."

Taurus' statue was perhaps the most provocative of all the male gods'. Being a god of the flesh, a god of the senses, he expected interpretations of his physical form to carry a certain degree of exaggeration. As such, his rendered body was exceedingly sensual, his large, acutely alert genital sculpted in great detail. Many human men came to him seeking manifestations of virility. Alexander, however, was uninterested in such affairs at the moment. He knelt on the cold stone floor before Taurus' likeness and, with an affirming nod from Gregori, began the Calling.

Humans, having no inborn magical abilities, were required to use physical catalysts, such as enchanted water, in order to perform magic. Alexander, on the other hand, was half elf, and possessed his own reservoir of inborn mana, which he'd cultivated over the course of his life. He extended his mana now, cupping his hands together and working a receptacle spell as he called forth the essence of Taurus. The transference proceeded at Alexander's discretion, for gods could not inhabit the bodies of human men or women unless they were granted the proper permissions.

Momentarily, the area surrounding Taurus' alcove brightened as Alexander directed the receptacle at Gregori, who solemnly received the god into his body. The transfer was nearly instantaneous, and marked by a sudden straightening of Gregori's shoulders, a narrowing of the eyes as human determination was replaced with godly assurance.

"Alexander," Taurus greeted, now fully integrated within Gregori's body. He flexed his limbs, adjusting to the strengths and sensations of a fleshed man. He smiled. "My subject, my child. Why have you called Taurus to the physical realm?"

The gods were all-knowing. Taurus did not have to ask a question that had an obvious answer. Still, it was appropriate that Alexander play along until the ultimatum presented itself.

He rose to his feet. "Many turns past, when I was a youth, my beloved Min and I trained at the Eternal Champion as royal athletes for your Games. While on display before the many gathered kingdoms, come to witness the splendor of the competition, a god let loose his wrath for the sake of his own passion."

All cheer drained from Taurus' face. "Speak with care, mortal child."

Alexander continued, unflinching. "We are both minor creations forged by Lorianis' benevolence. I speak as a mortal man to a minor god, to a long-ago human who has evolved over many lifetimes and achieved a state of grace beyond the confines of the flesh. You may have created Kyrth, but you are nevertheless bound by the Goddess' rules. When you affected Min during the Games, you violated those rules." He paused, sensing Taurus' mounting rage. The minor gods were not infallible, and when this was sometimes pointed out...

"You place your life at risk for the wrong reasons," Taurus warned. "Min was a beautiful child, a glorious flesh creation-but she had no power beyond the strength of her body. She would have lived out her life in mediocrity and eventually died, just as you will eventually die. As meaningful as your presence here in Kyrth may seem, you are all bound by the same fate."

Alexander closed his eyes, and for the briefest of moments, Min was alive again: a radiant young woman, sound of body and of heart, though perhaps unalluring to other men, due to her plain facial features. On the afternoon of her death, he'd left the watercourse to watch her performance in the gymnasium. He was there now, working his way through the masses of other fellow athletes (and gathered citizens) milling about the floor. He caught sight of her on the podium, chalking up her bare hands and feet. She was preparing for her routine on the extended trainer, a culmination of Old Earth gymnastics apparatus arranged into three ascending tiers: uneven bars, dance floor, and balance beam.

The domed ceiling of the gymnasium, comprised of several levels of intricately intertwining arches, rose high into the otherworldly haze of Kyrth's minor gods and goddesses. They observed the proceedings with much anticipation as their chosen human athletes competed for them. The kingdom with the most highly-decorated team would

garner much godly favor, and would be rewarded handsomely with prosperous weather and seasonal safety from dangerous wildlife, rogue magic, and so forth.

Alexander watched with pride as Min, facing the apparatus, walked up the podium and stood poised. Her performance here would bring Marrybird to the forefront of the rankings. When the scorekeeper called her name, she presented herself before the judges and began the exercise. Her unclad body, a prime example of tempered musculature and graceful beauty, moved unhindered between the bars. For the first half of her routine, her form was fine: well-executed skills, impeccable lines, neat toe point. She advanced easily to the second tier. Her trainer, riding atop a rather large and colorful dragonfly, kept pace alongside the apparatus while calling out instructions. Min was almost ready to ascend to the third (and final) tier when the air around her suddenly humidified, causing large droplets of water to condense onto the springboard. It was during her attempted mounting of the balance beam that her feet slipped violently upward, as if tied together by invisible ropes.

A non-physical intervention.

The amassed spectators elicited a collective gasp, watching in horror as Min convulsed involuntarily. She fell headfirst onto the beam, her body instantly going limp as it collapsed awkwardly onto the podium.

"Min..." There were tears in Alexander's eyes as he came out of his reverie. "You sacrificed her so your chosen kingdom would win. Marrybird lost the Games to Krey by a single head that season."

"Sacrifices are made," Taurus answered, "for the good of the whole. You forget how much you are given in this life, Alexander Day Tree. Long life, lasting youth, free will to roam this realm without the ravages of disease or age...there is always a price for such splendor."

"But why her?" Alexander flared. "Why not a hardened criminal or an ungrateful heretic?"

Taurus' patience was at its end. "The experienced storyteller does not ask why his story must be told. He merely knows that he must tell it, and that its characters must be created and destroyed in order to reach an acceptable ending. There is no malice in such an act—humans have created malice in demanding too much of their storytellers."

"That is no challenge for you. You are the storyteller, while humankind has been relegated to playing meaningless characters."

"Silence!"

With a powerful swoop of his arm, Taurus grabbed Alexander around the neck, hauling him off his feet. Somewhere nearby, the pantheon's caretaker cried out in distress. Taurus glared at him, and the man promptly scurried back into the wavering shadows.

"Passion alone," growled Alexander, now gathering his mana, "does not win the battle."

He grabbed Taurus' arm with both hands and used it for leverage as he planted his feet in the god's abdomen. That separated them, and gave Alexander a window of opportunity. He called his mana, forming his battle circle. A sapphire-hued sphere expanded from his solar plexus, enveloping himself and his opponent. The perimeter of his influence hissed and crackled as it came into contact with the various stone structures of the chamber.

Taurus' expression turned lethal as he realized his mistake: He'd allowed himself to become ensnared in Alexander's battle circle. Therefore, Alexander would be able to execute the first attack move, not Taurus, whose only options were self-protection at this point.

Alexander attacked. It was a cautionary blow that struck Taurus square in the chest and sent him sprawling into one of the pantheon's many shadowy corners. Alexander followed, though not before deftly removing his boots so that his bare feet touched the stone floor. This allowed him to better maintain his protective shell, as energy was discharged outward through his hands, and reabsorbed through his feet in a continuous cycle.

"Even the gods must be held accountable for their actions," he said, scanning the shadows. Taurus had evidently hidden himself. "The question is to whom." He sent a burst of flame into one corner of the chamber, replacing shadow with light. Simultaneously, he was abruptly knocked off his feet by a blow to the head as Taurus appeared beside him. He stumbled forward onto his knees, his vision blurring, his mana wavering uncertainly (and matching his state of sudden semi-consciousness).

"Accountability," said the god, extending his own mana, "can be interpreted in many different ways."

Alexander stumbled to his feet. He was now caught in Taurus' battle circle, though he noted that the mana used to construct it was crimson-hued, and therefore powered by passion, aggression. The blow of his opponent's move would be powerful, but it would not have any of the precision that Alexander's had had. Taurus may have been a minor god, with godly abilities, but working through the flesh circuit of Gregori's body, he was prone to the same tendencies as any human being.

Still, it was powerful. Alexander could only block and brace himself as a bolt of energy the length of his own body sent him through the ceiling of the pantheon. He was blasted up into the snowy wilds in an explosion of crumbled stonework and fiery embers that sent the immediate wildlife scattering. Physically, his body was unbroken, for he had been blocking well-however, the mana he'd expended for such an effort would take some time to recharge. He stood, ignoring the intense cold pressing against his bare feet, and quickly retreated into the nearby forest growth.

Taurus' voice mocked him as he scurried up the puckered trunk of an elderwood: "You see, Alexander? The forces that drive this realm and all living things within it are more powerful than you can ever imagine! Perhaps you are in need of a lesson concerning retribution!"

Alexander continued his ascent, finding handholds and toeholds where he could until he was well off the ground. Peering through the leafage, he spied Taurus making his way out of the hole in the ground and advancing into the woods.

"Oh, great tree spirit," Alexander whispered (in the Elvish tongue) as he grasped the bark more firmly. "Allow me to partake of your abundant magical reserves so that I may protect myself from danger."

The voice of the elderwood's druid spirit sounded in his head: Bring no quarrel to these woods.

Indeed, Alexander felt no stream of energy in his feet. The druid sensed that its magic was wanted for personal gain-Alexander's survival against an enemy he'd purposely provoked-and would have no part of it. He could filch the druid's mana, thereby acquiring the energy he sought, but such an act of selfishness would likely tarnish his reputation amongst the other residents of the forest. If he defeated Taurus, he would have to live with such an encumbrance.

He looked down below, spotted Taurus making his way between the trees. He was calling out Alexander's name as he would a lost child's. "Alexander...where are you, Alexander? Come out and play. Isn't that what you want?"

Alexander waited patiently until his opponent passed close to the tree-at which point he dropped down onto the god's shoulders. Both men started rolling around on the snow, eliciting primal growls and using their fists (rather than their magic) to batter each other.

He has come for a fight, Alexander thought, noting the apparent absence of a battle circle. He slammed his fist into Taurus' face. Blood splattered onto the snow. A simple game, a game of conflict-that's all I am to him. That's all Min was... He dodged a blow, rolled onto his feet as he took the initiative and formed his second battle circle.

"A game, then," he said, conjuring a pair of pseudo-swords. He tossed one to Taurus. "We shall fight to the death."

Taurus seemed only too happy to oblige. He accepted the offered weapon, parrying Alexander's subsequent thrusts, retaliating in kind. They continued in this manner for several bouts-the battle circle alternating between them both-until, at last, Alexander knocked the sword from Taurus' hand. Battered and bloodied from the mêlée, he crouched over his opponent, the flickering blade of his sword pressed delicately against Taurus' neck.

"Alexander..."

He froze, poised to kill, his eyes going wide as he spotted his beloved Min standing in the snow several feet away. Her translucent body was robed in bright white light. She was the same as she'd been those many seasons ago, except for her russet-brown hair, which had grown long and luxurious.

"Min..."

She smiled pleasantly at him. "Oh, Alex..."

"I have defeated Taurus, then! You have come back-"

"No, I am here of my own accord, for I could bear witness to your suffering no longer." She stepped closer. Her feet left no prints. "Lorianis does not wish her children to quarrel so. It saddens her to see such things."

Alexander removed himself from Taurus, collapsed in the snow at Min's feet. He reached out to touch her, but his fingers passed through. She was unfleshed, an apparition-perhaps even an illusion. "Min," he breathed. It was difficult to speak, for he had sought her presence for so long, and now to suddenly have her standing before him...

She sighed again. She spoke gently into his ear. "What is it you wish to achieve by slaying Taurus? You cannot reverse the events of the past, nor can you affect Taurus' soul once it passes from this realm. The body is disposable; the soul is forever."

"But I have missed you so very much," Alexander replied, his entire body shivering from the cold, as well as from his own unbridled emotion. "Seeking the reason behind your demise, trying to convince myself life was worth living...for more than three-hundred turns I have lived in uncertainty."

"I know, my love...but this is not how the Goddess wishes us to be reunited."

"You cannot know," Alexander continued, hearing her, knowing. "No one can possibly know what it is like for me. I am trapped here, my everlasting youth a curse, because I must endure it alone." Somewhere behind him he knew Taurus was shifting, perhaps readying himself for another attack move. He felt the breath of Min's angelic touch upon his neck, in his hair, and he did not move, did not even call the slightest spark of defensive magic.

"We are not children anymore," Min said. "You must remove yourself from this place of anguish, or you will remain in a state of unrest forever. As the gods create him, Man creates his own Heaven, and he creates his own Hell. The time has come for you to choose between the two."

Alexander said nothing. He turned slightly, half-hearing Taurus' bloodcurdling cry, catching sight of his murderous expression as he rushed forward, pseudo-sword flaring crimson. His instinct was to block, to survive at all costs-but instead he did something else altogether. He lowered his arms, gazed at Taurus, and said:

"I forgive you."

The blade speared him through the chest. The pain was at once terrible and liberating, and it caused him to cry out in agony as he fell forward onto the ground. The battle circle faded away as did his life force. Closing his eyes, he relegated himself to death's steely grip and hoped for Heaven, hoped for Min. The cold stung him, mixed with the pain, until at last he could take no more.

Soul was separated from flesh.

It is a vision of tranquility, lasting an eternity and lasting no time at all. There is no way to differentiate between Heaven and hope, but it does not matter to him, for he is happy at last. Touchwood is his world, his tapestry of warm memories, his space of love. He spends a lifetime there with Min, with Arin and Gregori, and with a multitude of other friends. There is food and drink, music, games, and an abundance of good cheer throughout. In the mornings Alexander takes long walks with Min along Faire's snowy borderlands; in the evenings, they retire together to his bedchamber and make love. Afterwards, they lay curled together and listen to the far-off echoes of anguish and longing rumbling in distant thunderclouds.

The storm may come again, but not for a long while.

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A.J. Thompson lives and works in California, and has been published in a number of online venues such as *Anotherealm*, *Aphelion*, *Deep Magic*, and *Demensions* (indeed, with an "e").

Idols

By Christian R. Bonawandt

Stendhal paced the one-room apartment like an angry bull. Not that he was angry. Or was he? He had a five million credit ticket on the desk. That was a lot of money.

Not that he hadn't done jobs for more, but this time things were different. The contract read "five million plus expenses within reason." That meant no buying compact particle beam weapons without a good explanation as to why it was critical to the mission. Still a good deal, though. Real good. And it was a simple hit-and-run. Just get the man's head and come back. Even a photo might be satisfactory. It would only take a few days before the entire world acknowledged the man's death.

Lamb-dada was hardly a subtle individual, hadn't been for years. You don't publish a book titled, "Once You've Been Shot At . . ." without attracting some attention.

"Once You've Been Shot At," subtitled *Your Perspective on Life Changes*, was the landmark book written twenty-five years ago by Lamb-dada. To most of the populace of the civilized world it was a fictional and quasi-philosophical account of the trails that turned an innocent man into the underworld's most notorious hitman.

Innocent my ass, Stendhal often thought.

Twenty more books followed, all featuring Lamb-dada as the central character, narrating first person. He has never said publicly whether the books were fiction or not, which most take as a publicity stunt.

Stendhal knew better. So did his employer.

It was that first book that inspired Stendhal Macross to take up a life as a mercenary after being court-martialed by the Kilmount Confederacy National Guard for losing too much of his peripheral vision on both sides in an explosion. He read it and recognized seven names from the hierarchy of the Confederacy's "elite" personnel--i.e. they were frequently hired guns.

Soon after reading the first ten of Lamb's books and maintaining good contacts in the military world, Stendhal had acquired the knowledge necessary to sink deep into the secret underworld of the common merc. That was fourteen years ago.

Now Stendhal was being hired to flush out the man who had indirectly helped him find a purpose after being ejected from the one mode of life he saw fit for himself. It was kind of ironic. It was kind of sickening too. But that was the nature of the game.

The only problem was that Stendhal was not the first. Plenty of men had not only read all of Lamb's books, which named people, places, methods and even figures with abrasive precision, but also had gone toe-to-toe with him before.

But there's something about his life now that seems to be worth more. No one can touch him, and it ain't because they have to abide by the rules of the legal underground--as long as it doesn't interfere with normal civilian life and your actions can be covered up by routine government investigation, then it's tolerable.

No, that rule was always in effect, and just because the man was suddenly a celebrity doesn't make him harder to hit. In some cases it makes it easier.

It has to do with a desire to live.

That wasn't important to Stendhal. Or maybe it was, he wasn't sure. The only thing he was sure was that he signed the contract without thinking through what he was getting into. That had never happened before. He usually was more careful, more patient when it came to reading fine print and doing heavy research before agreeing to a job. Smyther Reens, Stendhal's right-hand man and explosives expert, was quick to point out this deviation. That pissed him off.

"I'm up for leveling his house at night," Smyther said, interrupting the pacing. "We can take one day to put the explosives down then wait in a remote location until he comes home, and--wham!--five mil in the bag."

That was always Smyther's suggestion. Not that it wasn't do-able, just not practical.

"Normally I'd just go about this the old fashioned way," Stendhal muttered, seemingly to himself more than to Smyther. "But he won't be as easy as that. This is the man that wrote the manuals I learned from, so he'll know every trick I know."

"But doesn't that mean you know all the tricks he knows too?" Smyther countered.

"No you dope, you think he'd write down everything he knows? Besides, even if he did, the man wouldn't've earned a reputation as the nastiest merc in the business if he didn't know how to improvise or even counter the counters to his own tricks. I'm not the first man who's gone after him and definitely not the first who's read all his books."

Smyther tilted back his seat, lifting the front legs almost far enough to knock himself over, and planted his sandaled blue feet on the table. "That's why we take the easy route blow him and everything he owns to tiny bits."

"No." Stendhal said that like he was speaking to child. Sometimes Smyther could be like that.

For ten minutes there was silence. Smyther stared blankly into space. If he was feeling anything there was no way to tell; Smyther's race had no muscles in their tear-shaped heads to make facial expressions with. It was something Smee used to his advantage psychologically. His whole head consisted of two black spheres for eyes and two small slits for a nose. The voice seemed to just emanate from his face, like an organic stereo.

The silence radiating from Smee's motionless features got under Stendhal's skin like an insect. Suddenly needing to justify his stubbornness, he said, "I remember reading a chapter of one of his books that describes how he could survive an entire house collapsing in on him."

"How?"

"I don't remember."

"Which book? I'll read the chapter and see if I can't find a loophole."

"You won't. Trust me."

"Which book, I'll look anyway?"

Stendhal punched through the wall, engulfing an inch past his elbow in sheetrock. "Shit, Smee, I don't remember! Now let me fucking think."

Again there was silence. To break it, Stendhal woke up the glue-sniffing punk-ass sleeping on the couch that Smee had convinced Stendhal to take along on the last three jobs. He couldn't do much but divert fire from Smyther and Stendhal and was better at dodging bullets than he was at knowing his bodily limitations when it came to intoxicating himself on inhalants. Jeff was his name? It didn't really matter because Stendhal called him asshole all the time. He was skinny, weak and smelled bad, and despite dragging him into the discussion, Stendhal had no intentions of splitting one-third of five million credits with a walking target.

"I like Smee's idea," Jeff said. His eyes rolled to the back of the head as if he was going to die and he dropped onto his side.

"Smee's idea won't work."

"Why not?" he asked like a child upset that he couldn't have a toy he wanted.

Stupid, whiney Human. "Lamb is part Katala, and Katala are built like stone. Mix that with the fact that he was the best damned merc in his day and you have someone that a few well-placed bombs won't get rid of."

That was true. Katala were tough people. Stendhal wasn't quite sure what race (or races) he himself was--he had never seen another person with skin as bleach white and blondish-green hair--but he knew that he was a little stronger than a Human, but not quite as strong as a Katala. He was certainly a mixed breed, like Lamb-dada.

"Yeah," said Jeff, "But he is kind of old."

Ninety isn't old for someone who can afford quality cybernetic organs, no matter what race you are, but Stendhal didn't want to bother. It was bad enough the kid had never heard of Lamb-dada, let alone realize what kind of challenge this was.

Four hours later the three of them sat in an unmarked convertible with the top up, four

houses down and across the street from Lamb-dada's home. The neighborhood was rather wealthy, but not so much that the houses were miles apart. Everything was pretty. Clean yards, colorful gardens, even children running around and laughing, totally oblivious to the evil that sat so close to them. It was so peaceful it made Stendhal's stomach churn.

Easily Lamb could have had a near military-level security system. If that was the case, the house alone had the firepower of an army. There was no evidence of a commercial system on the lawn or in the window. No chance in hell he'd risk not having something. Even Stendhal purposely chose to stay in motel rooms and apartments with creaky floors and windows because his cybernetic hearing enhancements would pick up any movements; he was better at detecting impending danger than a canine, and fifty times as vicious.

Then it hit him: "There is such thing as being over prepared."

It was psychological. If an assassin went in bundled up in enough crap to take out a military security system and found nothing, he'd be overly wary--even paranoid--about every little thing. It would come down to a matter of mind games then.

"Why do so many people want to take him out now that he's retired?" Jeff muttered from the back seat of the dented sports car between glances with the macro-lenses.

"He named names," Stendhal said, his eyes never leaving the perimeter of the two-story, white-washed house. "Not to mention places and events. Commoners and civilians shrug it off being quasi-fictional, but would you want your every exploit documented in a publication anyone with 20 credits can pick up? Not if you had enemies who are literate."

He turned to Smyther, who was sitting shotgun. "Travel light, I'm putting my money on no security system."

Smyther nodded, began consolidating the contents of the two duffle bags. They had brought enough ammo and machinery to take down ten men, not that they'd survivor three-on-one odds.

"Whao," Jeff blurted out. "You're putting more than money on that far-fetched thought."

"How old are you?" Stendhal asked.

"24 and I've been part of the underground since I was 17."

Stendhal craned his head back like a man possessed. "You mean you've been stealing sneakers since you dropped out of high school. I've been a merc twice as long as you've known there was an entire world beneath the happy-crap society most people dwell in. I'm also familiar with this bastard's background so shut your trap and follow suit."

They drove off and came back later that night. Jeff was paranoid that Lamb was home. Stendhal hoped he was. How are you supposed to kill a man when he isn't home?

"Come on, you even said before we left that Smee could plant just the right amount of explosives to kill him but leave something for the coroners to ID him with," Jeff argued.

"Yes and no," was all Stendhal would give him.

Lamb-dada knew his share of explosives too. In his first book, Lamb mentioned he had started his life as a mechanic. Working often enough with hyper-cars for racing, he learned about nitro and other explosives and got his first taste of what was used in concussion bombs.

Lamb was pulled into the underground after being blamed for rigging a ring lord's limo. It wasn't him, but that wasn't the point. His wife and son were killed. Lamb-dada survived with only a missing arm, since replaced with a bionic. He extracted his revenge four years later, but was dragged back into it all only ten years after that, and that's when he took on the mercenary life-style full time--the thing about the underworld is that the only people you can kill without igniting vengeful retaliation are homeless bums, and even then one should be wary.

It was Lamb's tales of hardship that reminded Stendhal there was no retiring from this life. Someone's always out to get you; as long as you're out getting someone else you can never get caught with your pants down.

There was no one in the world who was as level as Lamb-dada. Only someone so sane, so accepting of the circumstances of his life could survive as long as he has. He didn't make it past age 90 solely because he had the money to keep his body in working order--it was because he wanted to live. It was as if living was his revenge on everyone in the underworld. The books may have been an effort to make money, maybe even vent some of his frustration of the events that turned his life so rancid. Mainly, Stendhal was convinced, it was to remind his enemies that he was still alive, still kicking, and making money off what they had done to him.

It was so righteous it was almost evil.

Most hitmen would have tried to conceal their intentions, their actions, their guns. But that was why they failed. In order to defeat the ultimate mercenary, you had to break the mercenary tradition. No incognito, no beating around the bush, no waiting for him to be asleep or out of the house or any crap like that.

Completely shrouded in black they approached the front door. Smyther used a release gun to blow past the dead bolt and key lock. Lamb was home, and likely thought it was a bunch of stupid, drugged-up teens looking for quick cash who'd run when they saw a hardened, well-armed, self-taught soldier.

The lights were off. Stendhal had opted for infrared goggles over night vision in case the lights were thrown on suddenly. Around them the world was shades of greens. They stood immediately inside a large foyer with a staircase to their right heading up and a short hallway in front of them. The kitchen was at the top of the stairs, so the master bedroom was likely there too.

But Lamb wouldn't be there. With his cyber-hearing, Stendhal could decipher the babbling of a TV news channel. That was a distraction.

"Wherever your enemies think you are, don't be there."

He was nearby, hoping to ambush them. Stendhal gave the hand signal for Smyther to creep up the stairs. Lamb always raved about his terrific night vision in his books, which meant the best way to incapacitate him was with a flash grenade. That kind of bomb was silent, and if it didn't blind Lamb, it would still burn without frying him like a plasma grenade would.

Smee made his way up the stairs with two grenades in hand. Using infrared would keep him from needing to protect himself from the flash. Stendhal followed, purposely walking erratically to give the impression of being uncoordinated, with Jeff taking up the rear, doing the same thing unintentionally. If they marched out of tune, like punk kids instead of organized mercs, Lamb would be mentally unprepared for the force he was about to face.

Unless he saw them coming out of the car. Stendhal wasn't sure how that could be, but if Lamb had seen them approach the front door then he'd want them to think that he thought . . . no, don't triple think yourself. Stick with the plan and don't deviate. Three on one were bad odds for anyone.

Finally they made it to the master bedroom. The door was ajar, light flickered inconsistently from a source near the far wall. Something told Stendhal that Lamb was there, and it wasn't the sound of breath on the cyber-ears. Smyther waited for Stendhal and Jeff to catch up, line up against the wall like a SWAT team. Then he trotted into the room as if he knew the man.

That was the plan: be preparedly inconsistent, throw off the target's instincts and confuse him, force him to make a mistake.

Lamb-dada lay in the double bed, head cocked to right and mouth ajar. The blanket covered him just below his shoulders, revealing the awkward transition from the skin of his chest to the metal arm. He seemed asleep. The blanket was conspicuously smooth.

Shit! He was playing their game against them. How the hell could he have known? Luckily Stendhal knew Smyther well enough to anticipate his mistake.

The next few seconds moved like minutes. As Smee turned to look and shrug (after which, he would have tossed the grenades), Stendhal burst past him with two silenced submachine guns. Lamb-dada's body flung up from a lying to a standing position as though he was spring loaded with hinges on his heels. The heavy 9mms in his hands didn't get past his waist before Stendhal let a few rounds fly just left of the target. If he had remembered to switch on the laser targeting, which Stendhal was sadly dependent on in order to focus on anything, he would have had Lamb for sure.

Sounding like mini, mechanical birds on speed, the bullets ate up the wall beyond Lamb-dada. The old man tucked and rolled past Smyther, too slow readying his 7.62mm pistol to get off any of the loaded explosive rounds. (Probably better that way since you can't silence an explosion.) Lamb fled into the bathroom and slammed the door shut.

Stendhal let him have to comfort of locking it. He set off two test shots. His cyber-hearing picked up the thud of the bullets against a thin layer of lead imbedded in the door between the sheets of wood. Damn, he's good at facades.

They had him now anyway. There couldn't be a trap door on the opposite wall because that was where the kitchen utilities were positioned. And Stendhal had taken a mental note of the thickness of the walls and was pretty sure there wasn't enough room for a hidden passage or dumbwaiter. If there was a secret door to the hallway, he'd have Jeff to contend with. They had him good.

Sheet rock and wood beams crashed and crumbled under a muffled growl. Stendhal started. "Don't be afraid to make a door where you need one." How could Stendhal have forgotten that line? Smyther had a T-shirt with that phrase on it.

Four shots were exchanged and Jeff went down with a hole in the forehead. Maybe Stendhal should have invested in a helmet with infrared optics for him. Too late now. He peaked out of the room and finished one clip. His shots landed in the far wall by the foyer as Lamb flipped over the banister. The trail of blood leading in that direction meant Jeff did all he needed -- at least one shot hit the old merc.

As though they were racing, Stendhal darted for the banister and hurdled it. In midair he clicked on the laser targeting of the still-loaded SMG. The bionic gears of the PA285 model armor absorbed the shock of impact with the landing. Lamb was heading down the hall. Stendhal spun around and aimed the red dot in the center of his target's back, but failed to fire before he made into the last door on the right.

There weren't any windows in that room -- Stendhal recalled the stucco placed over where the windows should be. When Smyther made it down the stairs the two marched forward, confident in their kill.

A keypad replaced the doorknob on the room Lamb occupied.

"Hack it," Stendhal said.

Smyther used a jackknife to rip off the face of the keypad. He grabbed the exposed wires, twisted them in a knot, skinned the colored rubber and clamped on a thumbnail-sized alligator clip. The clip followed a spiraling cord to a palm-sized plastic box. Smyther pressed one of the myriad buttons. Sparks bounced from the wires like electric fleas and a bit of smoke puffed up as though the device's soul had been released.

"Figured I'd just fry the thing," Smee explained.

Upon command, the magnet holding the door shut gave way and slid ajar. Stendhal reloaded the other gun, this time with THV rounds to knock him on his ass if he tried to run again. With the laser targeting a go on both guns, Stendhal kicked the door open and presented himself, allowing a half-second to survey the area.

Damned good thing too. The weapon Lamb held had twelve bores circling a fifteen-inch diameter. It was perfectly cylindrical with only two handles 90-degrees from each other to hold it with. A short belt feed dangled menacingly from the ass-end.

Stendhal managed to duck into the hall before the TX-700 thundered out it's death call. Firing 20-30 rounds per second at a velocity twice that of any weapon in Stendhal's arsenal, it was sure to wake the neighbors.

"Grenade," Stendhal ordered. "Two -- Plasma. Let's just fry the fucker."

Smyther did as commanded and tossed two plasma grenades blindly into the room. They listened mournfully as the TX-700 chewed them to unusable bits.

"Cut our losses?" Smyther suggested in a whisper.

"We've invested too much time and money into this," Stendhal hissed back.

"You've done easier jobs for higher profit. Why bother getting yourself killed?"

Stendhal switched off the lasers and tucked his head between his forearms. "I want his head on a plate."

Smyther moved one of his arms away and looked into Stendhal's eyes. It was creepy considering Stendhal's face could not be seen through the helmet. "I know this guy is your idol," Smyther said, lowering his voice even more. "But there are better ways to prove you're a great merc."

Stendhal hated the way Smyther's words seemed to crawl down his throat and fester in his chest. "What the hell is this crap you're talking?" he argued.

"You signed on to this so fast that you didn't even take time to think about what was involved. You were too preoccupied with the thought of taking out the world's greatest hitman. But think about it. No one will know except for you and me because you don't spread your reputation around. You've got more to lose than you do to gain."

God how Stendhal hated it when Smyther made sense. He could take the man out and ruin Lamb's reputation, and that would either be a fruitless victory because no one knew or, if someone did, make him the prime target of the world. Or he could die trying to get to that point. Five million wasn't worth this crap. He'd go back to corporate executives. They were fat, slow and worth more money.

"Fuck, you're right."

As though leaving a boring party, they turned, walked out the front door and drove off.

Lamb waited in the weapon room for another two hours after they left. Hesitantly, he figured they weren't coming back. Not that night, anyway.

Thank God. Once his TX-700 was out of ammo he was shot for last resources. There was no other weapon in the entire room that he could have loaded in time to save his ass. That

damned merc knew his shit. If he had persisted then Lamb-dada would have been little more than a legend. He relied too much on his reputation preceding him, acting like an aura of fear and protection. Some of them others had come close, but not this close. If only he knew his assailant's name he'd write about him in his next book. Oh well, he'd just have to pretend it was someone else.

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Christian R. Bonawandt is a journalist from Long Island. His works have been published on numerous web zines across the 'net, including *TwilightTimes.com*, *Dark Moon Rising.com*, *Aphelion Webzine*, *Demensions Zine*, *Planet Magazine* and *Scifantastic*. His first novel, *Dreamers*, is available as an e-book from Stone Garden Publishing (www.stonegarden.net).

The Burr Conspiracy

Chapter Seven

By CJ Burch

It was late. He should have been asleep. Tomorrow morning the Congress would convene and the government of the United States of America would operate again. He would be expected to preside in the Senate.

He was not asleep, though, he was in a tavern of little quality and less repute and sat at a table in a corner with a pair of seconds each tall and strong and accustomed to rough times in rough places.

On the other side of the table sat the men who had summoned him there; Abdul Sokollu, the Saracen, who had written him a second letter, this one strange and poorly penned letter, and the ridiculous Victor Wolf.

After he settled into his chair he nodded towards the Saracen and made as if to speak, but Wolf interrupted him.

"Mr. Vice President, I apologize for our surroundings, but secrecy is a necessity and we did not feel we would be observed in Georgetown."

Aaron Burr stared at Wolf as if he were a bug. Then he turned to Sokollu and gave him a questioning look.

Sokollu shrugged and remained silent. Now that his wizard was dead the doppelganger was traveling under its own sails. He did not know how to steer it and would impede it only if it went seriously astray.

"As you know I am Victor Wolf. I am seated in the House of Representative for the State of Georgia. We have met twice. This," Wolf was oblivious to Burr's confusion, "Is Theopolis Pirelli," he motioned towards Sokollu, "he is a close friend from Italy, a confidant and a man disgusted with French rule."

"Confidant?" Burr's gaze turned venomous. He wasn't certain of the game Wolf and the Saracen played, but he didn't have to be privy to it to know he did not like it, "What does he hold in confidence, Wolf?"

Wolf broke into a beatific smile, "We should not talk of such things in public. Perhaps I should see if the Tavern keeper has a room."

Sokollu nodded, "An excellent idea."

Wolf excused himself and strode to the bar where a heavy set, mule faced man drew tankards of ale.

Sokollu turned to Burr and tried to repair some of the damage his doppelganger had done. He held up his good hand, "Before you begin allow me to explain my position."

"Sokollu," Burr said between clenched teeth, "I assume you are Sokollu, I am not interested in your position but my own. I had assented to your plan under the assumption that you were a man true to your word and professional. Then you send me a bizarre letter and summon me to meet with you urgently. I comply and find you in the company of one of the dimmest men this land has had the shame to produce, and wonder of wonders that same dullard seems to be an integral part of your machinations."

Sokollu took a deep breath, "I am Sokollu," he said, "and I realize that things are not ideal, as you can see I have met with misfortune, but I can explain if you will hold your temper and listen to me."

Burr nodded stiffly and with some effort said nothing.

Sokollu explained, "This man Wolf. He is the hand that will strike Jefferson down. He is operating under the delusion that Jefferson will betray the United States to Napoleon. He believes that many in the United States government are privy to this conspiracy and that he must proceed in silence. He believes that I am an Italian tired of French rule who is sympathetic to his position. He believes that you are a patriot unaware of Jefferson's treachery. For this plan to succeed he must not be relieved of this delusion."

Burr's face all ready crimson turned purple with rage, "Are you insane? Why have you summoned me? If he shares his plan with me I become a part of his conspiracy. I will be as apt to hang as he will."

"You are all ready a part of the conspiracy, Burr," the Saracen replied, "Besides, Wolf will not live of that I will make certain."

"How?"

"After he slays Jefferson I will kill him myself."

"How?" Burr did not appear reassured.

"He thinks I am an old and dear friend. Slaying him will prove quite simple. He will appear to have committed suicide."

Burr shook his head, "I would have much more confidence in your plan if you killed Jefferson your self."

Sokollu shook his head, "No, it will appear that one of your own statesmen fell under the influence of some depravity or weakness of mind and killed your president. After Jefferson's death you will, of course, be in a position to ensure that Wolf's motives and back ground are not thoroughly investigated."

"Then why do you need to meet with me?"

Sokollu sighed, "It was not my idea but rather the Congressman's. Circumstances have rendered my control over him weaker than I had wished. If things had proceeded smoothly he would have proven more docile."

"What does he wish from me?" Burr looked like a man trapped in a nightmare from which he could not awake.

"He wants to know your allegiance I think. He believes that when he is arrested and taken to trial Jefferson's schemes will be revealed, but he does not believe that the killing will serve the greater good if you are a part of Jefferson's conspiracy."

Burr looked as if he were about to pitch a screaming fit. Then with an act of will few men possessed he composed himself and watched Wolf return to the table.

"We're in luck," Wolf seemed genuinely impressed with himself, "The tavern keeper has a vacant room."

Burr thought he might be physically ill, "Did you happen to introduce yourself to him?"

"Of course."

"I shall remain here, if you wish to retire to a room that is your business."

Wolf frowned, "I don't understand."

"You have called attention to yourself and all those that would meet in secrecy with you. If I join you in your private room the bar keep will count me amongst your friends," if loathing were a weapon Wolf would have been dead.

Wolf thought for a moment before he nodded, "Perhaps you are right. We shouldn't be seen with one another. I have attracted unwanted attention recently and will attract more I am afraid...much more."

"Is there some service that you require of me?" it tied Burr's stomach in knots to ask the question, but he could think of no other method short of shooting Wolf to bring the meeting to a conclusion.

Wolf nodded earnestly, "Darkness has arisen over the land. It will only be defeated by the most extreme measures. Even as I draw my sword and fence with that darkness I ask that you remember that I am an American citizen and a patriot. No matter what is said about me in the months to come all I ask is that I be afforded the same rights and protections as any other American citizen. I trust that the All Mighty will see the truth spoken in the end."

Burr supposed that another would have asked Wolf what the bloody hell he meant, but he did not want to know, "Death to all tyrants and traitors."

Wolf smiled, "Having said that I can think of nothing else to offer," he turned to Sokollu, "Well Theopolis I believe we can be on our way. The Vice President is a busy man and I have duties that require my presence as well."

Sokollu pushed himself away from the table and leaning heavily against Grey's staff limped towards the tavern's door in the congressman's wake.

Burr watched them leave. Then he turned to one of the men that accompanied him, "Rhymes," he said "stop those two outside. Tell the idiot Wolf that I am impressed with his sincerity and offer your services in aid of his cause. Do all that you can to aid him in Jefferson's death, after the President is dead make certain that Wolf and the Saracen die as well. Perhaps we can make this drama's plot tidier."

Rhymes lean face showed no emotion, "But what about the barkeep. He has seen us all with this man."

"Do not fear. Lancaster," Burr nodded towards his second, "will return to this place in the early morning hours with a few men he can trust. They will make certain that the barkeep holds his tongue. Now off with you."

A ghost of a smile creased Rhymes cold features and he pushed himself out of his chair and strode away.

Burr leaned back in his chair. Perhaps meeting the Saracen and Wolf would be a very propitious thing, indeed.

Abdul Sokollu closed the tavern's door and regarded the doppelganger with both doubt and contempt, "Well?"

Wolf gave him an imperious expression, "Well what?"

"Was the meeting with the Vice President satisfactory?"

"Quite," Wolf nodded, "I judge him a fair and temperate man not given to explosions of temper or fits of rage. When the deed is done he will demand a thorough investigation and a fair trial, both of which will exonerate me and tarnish Jefferson."

"If I might ask, sir," Sokollu had grown tired of being Theopolis Pirelli and he had grown weary of this accursed land. He wanted this enterprise over so that he might return home, "have you decided when you will do the deed."

"Indeed, the president receives visitors each morning just after he meets with his cabinet. Congress does not convene until noon. I will meet with the snake himself tomorrow morning. I will carry the pistols you bought in Savannah. I will use one to slay Jefferson and another to ensure that I leave the President's House unmolested."

"Then what?"

"Then I shall make for the Senate with all possible speed. Burr will be presiding there. With any luck I shall surrender myself into his custody before some uninformed but well meaning patriot slays me."

"And what can I do to assist you?" Sokollu hoped he sounded more sincere than he felt.

"In truth you have done more than I could ever ask," Wolf replied, "but if you would consent to travel with me once more I would enjoy your company."

Sokollu forced himself to smile, "Then you shall have it."

"Excellent," Wolf pulled himself into the wagon and took its reins in hand.

Sokollu dragged himself onto the wagon next to Wolf and very nearly laughed. By lunch on the morrow he would be rid of this buffoon and free to plan his escape across the Atlantic to Tripoli. Allah had smiled on him.

Before Wolf could flick the reins and steer the horses into the road one of the men that accompanied Burr stepped out of the tavern and waved to them.

Sokollu's eyes narrowed. He did not like this man. He had the smell of the mercenary about him, and he had never met a mercenary he could trust.

Wolf pulled back on the reins, "Yes?"

The man drew near Wolf so that he might whisper and Sokollu laid his uninjured hand on the butt of his pistol, "The Vice President was impressed with you. He has asked me to accompany you and assist you however I might."

For a moment Wolf was speechless. Sokollu, on the other hand, cursed to himself quite eloquently. Burr had sent this man to accompany them because he did not trust them. He would not have Wolf's best interests or Sokollu's in mind.

Sokollu was about to refuse the offer when finally Wolf spoke, "This is most unexpected and appreciated," a giant grin creased his face, "I fear I will be stepping into very deep water soon and will need all the assistance you can give me," he cocked his head towards Sokollu, "Isn't that true Theopolis?"

"The task you undertake is best accomplished with few men. Two would be a more comfortable fit than three."

"I might agree with you," Wolf replied, "if you were not lame. I wager we will need a man with stout legs and strong arms before we are finished. We will be happy to have you."

"My name is Rhymes," Burr's man extended a hand and Wolf took it.

"Rhymes, I am on the verge of an act that will shake the world to its foundations. I will need your word as a gentleman and patriot that you will be loyal to me and my cause no matter the consequences."

Rhymes nodded, "You can count on me."

Wolf grinned once more, "That's the spirit," he motioned Rhymes to the rear of the wagon while Abdul Sokollu muttered dark curses beneath his breath.

Tina Cezanne arrived in the newly constructed capital after the sun slid beneath the

western horizon. It was cool and blustery. She had ridden too far to fast. She needed sleep, and her body ached so fiercely it brought tears to her eyes.

More than once during the journey she had fallen asleep in her saddle and nearly toppled into the road, but she had persevered, and she had arrived.

It had been a newsworthy day. The Fourth Congress of the United States would upon on the morrow, and a tell tale glow against the inky black sky told her that a large flame burned somewhere on the out skirts of town. Perhaps the town was afire.

Cezanne laughed. A fire in the capital would be a fitting metaphor if she was not very lucky, but thinking about such things was a waste of time. Only God, or the Spirits depending upon which parent she chose to believe, could anticipate what would happen next.

She paid the stable owner to board her horse and asked him if he had heard of a congress man from Georgia named Victor Wolf.

He had never heard of Victor Wolf but he pointed her towards a neighborhood not far removed from the capitol where most Representatives and Senators boarded.

Several discreet questions later she stood in an alley between two ramshackle houses observing the boarding house where Victor Wolf hung his hat. His room was dark. Apparently the Congressman had not made his appearance yet.

She waited and the minutes turned to hours. Her sore body stiffened so that she feared she could not bend over, and her eyes grow heavy. She began to shiver in the cold.

She had begun to fear she would pass out when a wagon pulled into the boarding house's yard. Three men climbed out of the wagon. Two were tall and one of them looked solid and strong. The second was leaner than the other two and walked with an affected grace that could only belong to a politician. He was Victor Wolf.

The fourth was short and broad and touched the ground as lightly as bird before he began to limp towards the house with the aid of a staff. He was the Saracen.

While the big man unhitched and tended to the horses Wolf helped the Saracen up a set of steps on the outside of the house to a door on the second floor. Then they stepped inside.

For a moment all was dark then one of them, she couldn't be certain which, lit a lantern and the second floor of the house was filled with light.

Cezanne turned her attention to the man who tended to the horses. He had big hands and a narrow, vicious countenance and was dressed in simple clothes. Unless she had taken leave of her senses he was a bounder. A man hired to hear nothing and see less... useful in a skirmish, and none to gentle with those that crossed him.

She frowned. What was his purpose? Why had the Saracen hired him? He couldn't fear that she had followed them. For all he knew she had burned to death in Stanislaus Grey's house.

For all he knew his plan was working, if not perfectly, well enough. What did he need with a hired thug?

There was only one way to find out, and that was the direct way.

She watched the big man lead the horses into the carriage house behind the main house and return to the steps that led to the second floor.

Then she fingered the handle of the pistol she had shoved into the waist band of her pants and strode out of the darkened alley way and across the street, "Pardon me," she called.

"What," the reply was not polite.

Cezanne pulled the pistol out of her waist band and aimed it at him, "It doesn't cost anything to be nice," she motioned towards the carriage house, "let's go."

"If you're robbing me," Rhymes stepped off the stairway, "You've made a mistake. I have no money."

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" Cezanne gestured towards the carriage house once more, "Move."

"Look" Rhymes stepped away from the stairs, "I work for some important people in this town. If you put that gun away and leave me be I'll be certain you're well compensated."

Cezanne supposed she shouldn't say anything but she couldn't help herself, "You work for a Saracen that claims to be an Italian and a Congressman with the intellect of a grazing animal."

Rhymes' eyes flashed. He might be stupid, but he hadn't sunk so low as to work for Victor Wolf, "I work for Aaron Burr."

"What?" Cezanne couldn't have been any more stunned if Rhymes had punched her in the face.

Rhymes did not reply. Instead, he threw himself at Cezanne.

When his shoulder slammed into her Cezanne cursed her self a fool for dropping her guard and tumbled backwards to the ground and dropped her pistol.

Then she planted one foot in the center of Rhymes stomach and gripped at his lapels and rolled over and tossed him into the air and too the ground.

Rhymes landed heavily and Cezanne scrambled to her feet and leapt for her gun. Her back and legs having absorbed far too much punishment and gone far too long with too little rest knotted painfully. She staggered.

Rhymes clambered to his feet and charged into her and knocked her down once more and fell across her.

Cezanne groaned when the big man's weight punished her damaged ribs and gagged when he wrapped his hands about her throat and began to squeeze the life out of her.

Cezanne reached up and ran her fingers across the back of Rhyme's hands until she gripped at one of his fingers. Then she pulled on it until it snapped.

Rhymes growl liked a wounded bear and Cezanne wedged her feet beneath him and pushed him off of her.

Then she struggled to her feet and drove her fist towards Rhymes' skull.

The big man clenched his injured hand to his chest and ducked the blow and drove his other fist into her side. Cezanne nearly sunk to her knees.

Before she could right herself Rhymes hit her again. Then he slammed a punch into the side of her face that sprawled her on the ground.

Cezanne landed hard and rolled onto her hands and knees. Rhymes drove his foot into her side and rolled her over onto her back.

Cezanne wrapped her arms about her injured ribs and writhed on the ground while Rhymes prepared to drive his boot into the center of her face.

Cursing the pain in her chest Cezanne forced herself to release her hold on her ribs and blocked the boot then twisted it to one side violently and pulled Rhymes off of his feet and too the ground.

Then she rolled to one side and begged herself to stand.

Rhymes was off the ground and upon her before she could straighten up driving a right into her kidneys and following that with a left to her mid-section that knocked the air from her.

Cezanne groaned and tried to defend herself, but she was injured and slow.

Rhymes drove another punch into her that made her ribs pop. Then he dropped her with another right that left her limp on the ground fighting to stay conscious.

Rhymes kicked her in the ribs once more to be certain she would not get up. Then he retrieved her gun and shoved it in the waist band of his pants and hauled Cezanne to her feet.

"Nothing personal love," he surveyed the street and made certain it was deserted, "but now that you know who I work for I'll have to strangle you. I hope you'll understand."

Cezanne wasn't the understanding sort. Having regained her bearings she drove the crown of her head into the middle of Rhymes face and smashed his nose flat.

Then she gripped at his lapels and drove her knee into his groin and watched him curl up on the ground, but when she kicked him onto his back so that she could finish him he pulled the pistol from his waist band, aimed it at her chest and cocked it.

Cezanne wrapped her arms about her aching ribs and fought the urge to sink to her knees, "I was just going to ask for directions?"

Rhymes worked his way to his knees, "I had rather not shoot you here," he said between

clenched teeth, "but if you make me I will. Get up the stairs."

Cezanne staggered towards the steps, "Maybe," she thought, "they won't remember me."

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CJ Burch is a life long speculative fiction fan who has recently turned his hand to writing. He has been previously published on the internet at Aphelion.com and Abby the Wandering Troll Ezine. He has also written *The Iron Maiden: Politics as Usual*, which is listed at <http://www.publishamerica.com/>.

28 Days Later: A Review

Written by Fraser Ronald
fraser.ronald@atfantasy.com

I'm not a huge zombie movie fan. I'm not really a horror movie fan at all. I've seen most of the famous ones. I did see the original and the remake of the *Night of the Living Dead*, but my zombie movie lore extends little beyond that. I saw this movie for two reasons: Danny Boyle and Alex Garland. I've been a fan of Danny Boyle since *Shallow Grave*. I loved Alex Garland's novel *The Beach* (and even though Danny Boyle directed Mr. Garland's adaptation of his own novel, I have yet to see the movie version starring Leonardo di Caprio). When I heard they were working together on a zombie/end of the world movie, I was curious. It seems, though, not curious enough to see it in the theatre.

And I didn't even rent the movie. A friend of mine had the DVD and he was kind enough to lend it to me. I was very pleasantly surprised. Now, I'm not going to say this is a great movie, but it is a good movie. It is most certainly an entertaining movie. I guess it all depends on what one wants from a movie. This movie offered me good characters and good actors playing those characters. It gave me a coherent storyline with a plausible foundation. I had areas that strained my disbelief, but--luckily--the central conceit of the movie, the end of the world situation, was not one of those. Messr.s Boyle and Garland delivered up a movie that while not a classic, is a good, entertaining movie that doesn't, for the most part, talk down to the viewer. That's a fair package these days.

The opening of the movie was--for me--the most effective section. The sense of isolation begins quickly and efficiently. The setup at the movie's beginning and the scenes of chaos offer up a jolt



of energy at the outset, a jolt that suddenly seems alien when confronted with the main character's solitude in a world devoid of life. The emptiness of London was astounding. The images and story entranced me and truly drew me in. The viewer is provided glimpses of utter isolation, soon followed by confused terror, staggering grief and fragile hope. I became totally invested in the movie.

The storyline--for those who don't know--relates how a young man wakes up in hospital 28 days after a plague causing unbridled anger is released in England. He awakes to an empty London. As he searches for answers, Jim--the young man--stumbles across a horde of zombies. He is saved by a man and a woman. They join him when he returns to his home, hoping to learn the fate of his family. Soon, only Jim and Selena--the woman who saved him--are alive and they find a father and daughter holed up in a high-rise. Running low on fresh water, the group decide to heed a radio signal sent from--apparently--a military unit with an answer to the plague. The four journey north to the military base, but find unexpected danger awaiting them.

Now the acting, for the most part, is all top-notch. I thought, of the characters offered before the story reached the military base, Selena was the most stereotypical. However, given the strong acting, it is difficult to fault any of the characters, even the military characters. The soldiers all seem a little too "stock." Again, I find it difficult to fault the characters because the acting is excellent, however, many of the soldiers fall into a certain pattern one might expect to see. I won't mention anything more, because I don't want to ruin any part of the movie, and while I had expected the twist, I had hoped Boyle and Garland wouldn't go there.

My enjoyment of the movie flagged after Jim and company meet the soldiers. There were a few episodes that seemed a little too contrived. As I have said, the soldiers themselves are part of the problem, but there are other situations, leading up to the climax, that stretched my willing suspension of disbelief. The ending itself, the movement to the climax, was one of the contrived sequences that really bothered me, and so by that point, I had lost much of the interest I had built up. The movie, in the end, let me down. Still, I enjoyed it. I even watched it a second time a little later, and then a third time listening to the director's commentary.

Some director's commentaries are useless. Some are just plain a waste of time. As much as I enjoyed hearing Guy Ritchie's joking around through the commentary of *Snatch*, it was completely unnecessary. I really didn't learn anything and I quickly grew bored. The commentary on *28 Days Later* was good. It kept my interest and didn't drift off. Too often, the commentators get so involved in watching the movie they forget to comment on it. The other extras on the DVD, like the deleted scenes were good, but nothing really stood out. I enjoyed the obligatory "Making of . . ." documentary as well. Overall, while the extras were good, there was nothing jaw-droppingly cool.

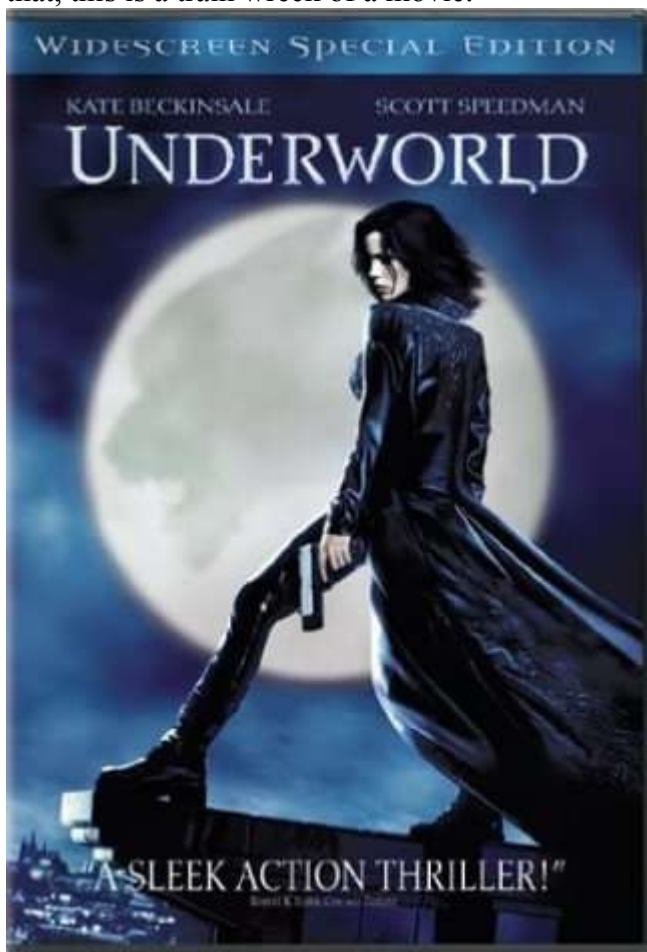
Basically, the military section of the movie just seemed a little too contrived. I got into it still, because of the continuing atmosphere that clothes the whole movie, but there were a few moments in which my willing suspension of disbelief was overrun. Overall, I enjoyed

the movie. I watched the deleted scenes and the director's commentary, which was quite good. I certainly think the movie is worth a watch, especially for zombie movie aficionados.

Underworld: A Review

Written by Fraser Ronald
fraser.ronald@atfantasy.com

Underworld. What can I say about the movie that I didn't say about the book? Well, I have a couple of nice things to say about Kate Beckinsdale--she gives far and away the best performance in the movie and she looks really good in skin-tight leather. Other than that, this is a train wreck of a movie.



Underworld is about a war between the Vampires (when one of the Werewolves called the Vampires 'Bloods' I was expecting the Werewolves to be the 'Crips') and the Lycans--Lycanthropes . . . Werewolves. Do you need to know more than that? Well, no. While the movie certainly does try to play like it has big ideas, I didn't see anything more than vacuous attempts. Everything in this movie has been done before, and better. Should we give points for adapting all these elements to this story? If it had been done well, by all means--it worked wonderfully in *Brotherhood of the Wolf*, which was able to include so many seemingly incongruous elements into a very entertaining and coherent movie. Unfortunately, while the filmmakers may have seen and admired the ideas and themes they have adapted, apparently they didn't understand the purpose or importance.

None of these elements are so wildly diverse as French historical romance and Wuxia/Wire Fu--which *Brotherhood of the Wolf* somehow was able to combine--but this movie still is unable to completely digest anything, so all I saw were superficial attempts to mimic the cool tropes of other movies.

The characters in this movie never rise above the stereotypical. The love between the Vampire and the soon-to-be Werewolf is so superficial that it lacks any dramatic impact. Why do these two fall in love? Well, because they are both beautiful, of course! What event allows them to see that they are forever bound together as soul-mates? Er, surviving a car crash? No, wait, maybe it's at the end, when they . . . well, that would spoil it. Leave it to say that I didn't see any "love" as I understand the term. Love at first sight, to me, equals lust. Love is about more than what one sees. And what kind of character betrays all that she believes in over lust? A pretty damn shallow one. Ah, well, perfect for this shallow movie then.

And the action is okay, but certainly not spectacular. The gunfights seem so . . . static. Also, while the Vampires know that once a Lycan changes into its Wolf form, it is nigh unstoppable, the Vampires in the movie seem to have no compunction about standing around staring at the Lycan doing just that. You know, you could maybe shoot the damn thing! And there are few 'physical' confrontations until the Elder Vampire decides to end the war once and for all. The big fight has a couple of moments, but nothing that offered anything but the bare modicum of excitement.

The plot, as I mentioned above, doesn't seem to really gel. I don't think the filmmakers really had a clear direction in mind and so it came out a muddled mess. It takes itself far too seriously. One honestly can't be expected to emotionally invest in a movie with such transparent plot devices. There is the true love of a pair that never really even talk, the arrogant yet ineffective leader who only the hero realizes is ineffective--even with rather obvious displays--and the villain who's not really a villain because 'they' started it. Any of these elements might have worked in the hands of a capable writer or good director. Unfortunately, talent is another thing this movie lacks.

I can't really blame the actors for their poor performances. I mean, even the best actors can look wooden with a bad director (as the equation Ewan MacGregor + George Lucas = Attack of the Clowns amply demonstrates). Maybe some of these actors are great. The only one that is able to pull it off while retaining any dignity is Kate Beckinsdale. I already knew she was a good actor, and I was frankly shocked to hear that she was in this movie, that is until I found out her husband wrote it.

So, let me get this straight, this dude is married to this gorgeous, talented woman and to show his love for her, he gets her to star in this? And wear skin-tight leather throughout (am I fixated on that)? Oh man, there is something dreadfully wrong with this picture . . . and the movie as well.

In the end, I have to admit I am being overly critical of this movie. It isn't the worst movie ever. I can think of a heck of a lot of movies that I'd rather watch instead of this one, but if it's a choice between network TV or this movie, I figure this movie is a pretty fair bet. Expect nothing original, nothing moving and nothing exciting and you might just enjoy it.

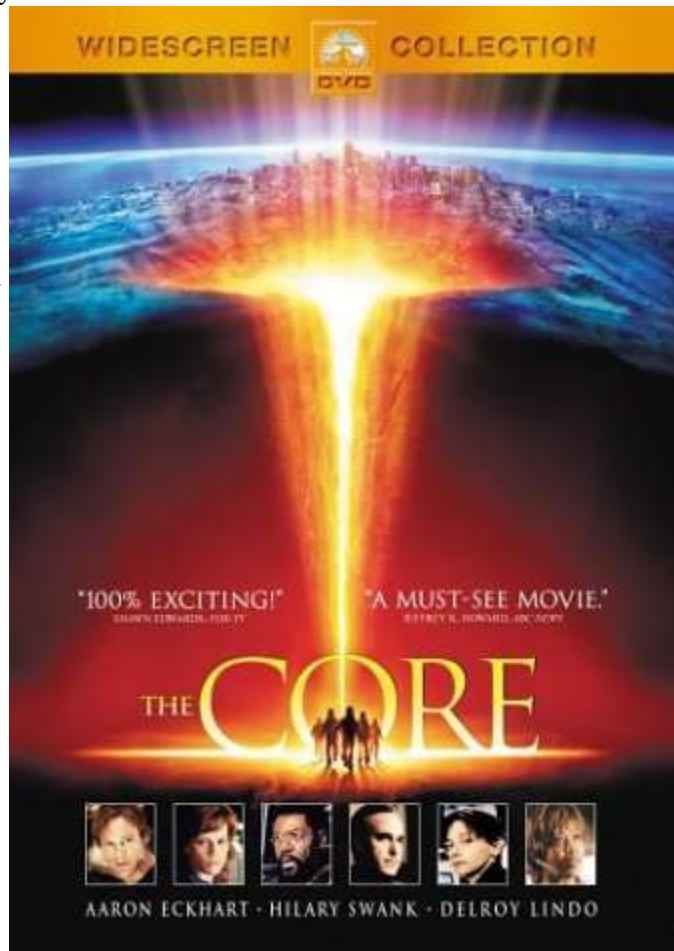
The Core: A Review

Written by Fraser Ronald
fraser.ronald@atfantasy.com

I recently made a DVD purchase sight unseen. The local video store was having a sale, and I saw *the Core* was included. I had always been interested in this movie, but had never seen when it was in the theatres. I figured, what the heck. I couldn't say why, exactly, but a lot of it had to do with what I had read about the movie--both the bad and the good--and the dream cast of the film. I mean, Hilary Swank, Delroy Lindo, Tcheke Karyo and Bruce Greenwood all in the same movie, and a science fiction movie at that. That just sounded too good to pass by.

Well, I not only don't regret my purchase, I have to admit that I've watched it already four times. Once, I watched it for the director's commentary, but the other three times, I watched it because I enjoyed it that much. I've read some of the criticism of this movie and it really makes me wonder if my tastes are really that idiosyncratic. I have read criticism of the acting and the writing, two of the features which I found incredibly strong. I honestly can't fathom it.

And that's the thing, I appreciate movies with good writing and I really expect good acting, even in "action" or "blockbuster" movies. Looking at the cast, one should expect that this movie is going to have good acting. I mentioned three of the leads above, but the movie also includes Stanley Tucci and Aaron Eckhart. These are not hacks, and when a group of such fine actors assemble on a project, the whole is often much greater than the parts.



Now, this is a science fiction movie, so maybe someone's going to ask me about the scientist. Well, I honestly don't know. It sounded plausible to me--not plausible in an "I'm going to read about this in a science journal" way, rather in a willing suspension of disbelief way. And, honestly, if I can sit through *Braveheart*, and actually enjoy it as entertainment--regardless of the huge steaming pile of sh . . . stuff it dumps all over the history and even the myths of the Scots Wars of Independence--those people who know something about geophysics should be able to get past whatever problems with science this movie has and enjoy it as entertainment.

That is pretty much what one should expect out of this movie--entertainment. This movie has an overall sense of fun and adventure. Perhaps it was this atmosphere that seduced me. The movie isn't all just light-hearted fun here, and it serves up heroic sacrifice aplenty, but it does not mire itself in that, nor does it try to hide itself behind technobabble. The heart of this movie are the characters, and the characters are enjoyable. This is a movie about people that has good special effects not a movie about good special effects that has people in it.

The extras on the DVD are par for what one expects. There is the standard "Making of . . ." documentary, which was pretty good. Some of the deleted scenes are really great at adding extra colour. These are the kind of scenes that would not have detracted from the movie as a whole, but obviously were removed to meet some artistic vision or--more likely--trim the time down. DVDs are great in that we can finally see what we are missing, and we can see some of the backstory that has been lost. Also, I really liked the director's commentary. I found it--mostly--informative and interesting. Granted, sometimes the director goes off on a tangent, or gets caught up explaining minutiae, but overall it's a good commentary.

So, the bottom line for me is that this is a fun, exciting movie with great writing and great acting. Is it one of my top ten movies of all time? No. It is, however, a worthy purchase, and it is a movie that I can watch often and continue to enjoy even after multiple viewings.

Ars Magica: A Review

Written by Fraser Ronald
fraser.ronald@atfantasy.com

Author: Judith Tarr
Type: Hardcover 210 pages
Publisher: Bantam Spectra.
ISBN: ?
Price: out of print

I had heard about this book for many years--*Ars Magica*, a fantasy based in the Dark Ages of our world. I had read *Aleppo* many years back, in high school or early university, which was also a fantasy set in real history. The funny thing is I had bought *Ars Magica* while I was in university and it sat on my bookshelf until now. Why I never read it, I can't say, there always seemed to be something else in my to read list ahead of it. Well, this year I finally got around to reading. I'm glad I did.

Ars Magica is the story of Gerbert, a farmer's son who becomes monk, then a Bishop and finally Pope. Oddly enough, it's a fairly accurate biography--more accurate than say, *Braveheart*--but with magic thrown in. Considering some of the liberties taken in books and movies with real historical figures, tossing in a bit of magic isn't as big of a stretch as one might think. The book is infused with as atmosphere of reality and a potent sense of place.

Not only is the book infused with realism, it is infused with magic. The magic, while termed an art in the title is an art like science is an art. This is not the art of paintings or sculpting, this is the art of skill, craftsmanship and ability. It seemed to me that the magic of the book could have as easily been called knowledge. It is interesting that Gerbert's first teacher is a Muslim, as the Muslim culture maintained knowledge lost to western civilization--such as the Greek philosophers--through Europe's darkest days. Gerbert does not use his magic to become a powerful wizard, rather he dreams of teaching, he works toward making a safe enclave in which students can study magic, and he uses it in the service of his emperor to protect the nation. While the magic is used as magic within the book, I could see a deeper meaning behind. Whether that meaning was the intent of the writer or not, it gave the book an added poignancy for me.

This book is not a long read. It is quite short by the standards of today's multi-volume epic, filled with tomes that could easily be used as deadly weapons. To me, that added to this book's charm. So much is encapsulated so concisely, I can't help but think that those writers who fill so many books with so many words could learn a thing or two about writing from this story. It is entertaining, it is filled with great characters, great action and a sweeping plot, it spans the entire life of a character, and it does so in just over 200 pages. Astounding.

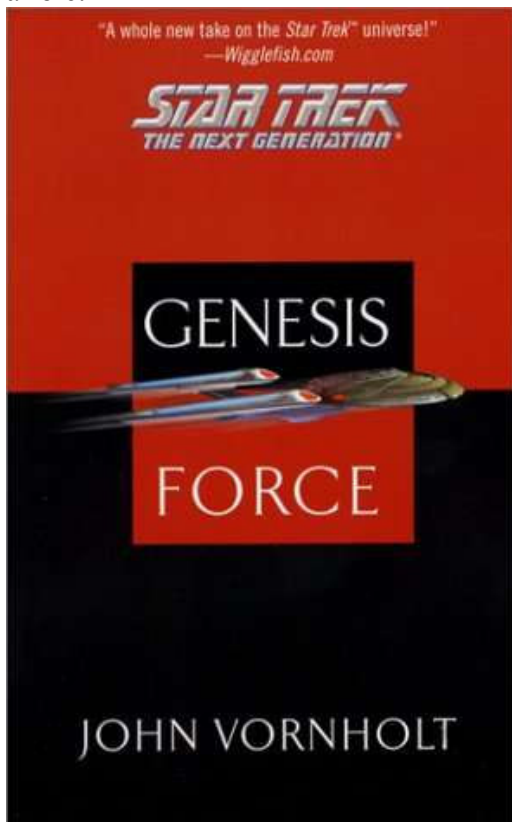
Overall, I believe most fans of fantasy fiction will enjoy this novel. It really is a quick read in comparison to most of the books out there right now and it's also a better read than most of the books out there right now. There are reasons why some books become classics, and I would venture that *Ars Magica* has become a classic of the fantasy genre.

Star Trek: The Next Generation - Genesis Force: A Review

Written by Fraser Ronald
fraser.ronald@atfantasy.com

Author: John Vornholt
Type: Hardcover 309 pages
Publisher: Simon & Schuster Inc.
ISBN: 0-7434-6501-6
Price: \$23.95 (US) Cover Price

To call this book a Star Trek book is a bit of a misnomer. The Federation certainly instigates the prime plot trigger, but this is done off stage. Worf and his two sons, Alexander and adopted Jeremy Aster, are involved more than any other character from the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (TNG) TV series and movies, but even they play supporting roles rather than starring. Not even the Star Trek universe itself plays much of a role.



This book is part of a series, though I have not read the others in the series and, quite honestly, have no intention of doing so. Somehow, the Genesis Device has been resurrected, or re-developed, or something, and evil moss creatures--yes, that's right, evil moss creatures--are trying to remake worlds in their own image. It's never explained in this book, though maybe it is elsewhere, how these moss creatures were able to make the Genesis device create sentient life. In the movie *Star Trek: The Wrath of Khan*, lifeforms evolved later, at a substantially accelerated rate, and since evolution is not fixed but rather has a large element of chance and chaos involved, one would not expect--or at least I did not expect--Genesis planets to end up with exactly the same flora and fauna, especially intelligent fauna.

In any case, this book focuses on one planet and a cast of characters based on that planet. The book opens with a scene of Worf evacuating another

Genesis planet, and I assumed--given that this is marketed as a TNG novel--that Worf and his former crewmates on the Enterprise would command centre stage. As it became more and more obvious that they would be relegated to secondary status--and in the case of the Enterprise, pretty much window dressing rather than actually affecting the plot in any way--I became more and more disenchanted.

If the characters had been engaging or the writing vibrant or the plot complex and arresting, I might have been less disappointed. Unfortunately, the characters were poorly developed and too stereotypical, the writing workmanlike at best and clumsy at worst and the plot pedestrian. I would have honestly given up on this book much sooner if I had not agreed to review it. As it is, I read two other books while slogging through this one.

This book is rife with problems; aspects that made me alternately shake my head and scratch it. Very important events happen off-stage. A main character has been affected by the dreaded brain-altering fungus, and I expected a certain amount of drama when this was discovered, possibly even some kind of conflict in which she does not believe this or struggles against the inoculation to cure her. Later, as her actions become less and less rational, or even characteristic, I expected that the cure had never been administered, why else would it be done off-stage? It turns out, it was just poor writing.

There is also a lot of hand-waving in this book. Inexplicable things happen that later need a character to explain it. The explanations are such that there is no clue previous that such a thing could or would happen. It seems, to me, to be just lazy writing. At the end--which I won't spoil for you, though I honestly don't recommend reading this book--there is a technical explanation for a particular sacrifice that makes no sense. It is glossed over without even the usual amount of techno-babble inherent in this genre.

Further, those characters I know from TNG acted in completely uncharacteristic fashions. I can't explain too much without using spoilers for very late in the book, but Alexander Rozenkho, Worf's son, is in charge of a murder investigation, and he allows the investigation to be suborned by local politics, without argument. Data allows an individual to knowingly commit suicide--granted, a noble sacrifice-type suicide--without any attempt to dissuade them or find another solution to the problem that leads to the sacrifice.

Also, as soon as power is lost on the Enterprise, it is abandoned. There have been plenty of instances in which the Enterprise has lost power for extended periods of time and there has been no call to abandon it. The explanation involves warp core containment, but again, the Enterprise has been in similar situations without the threat of containment failure. Further, the Klingon vessel also in the vicinity is unaffected as it had its shields up, meaning that the Federation's containment equipment and processes are so lax that something shields could withstand utterly destroys the containment system. Apparently, the Federation has no redundant systems, no special protection, nothing that a simple power failure can't circumvent. That seemed ridiculous.

So, basically, this book is not really a TNG novel (unless any appearance by the cast of

TNG, whether they actually do anything or not, makes a book a TNG novel), it has a pedestrian plot filled with hand-waving and lazy characterization. I have not outlined all the problems I found with the book, and there were plenty. I cannot recommend this book, even to TNG fans. Who would want to read a book in which the supposed stars (TNG crew) are mere window-dressing while all the real action is taken by new characters? Think of an episode in which the Enterprise goes to a planet with a huge, global problem, but the crew are in the background and everything important is done by that episode's 'guest stars' and you've got the basis for this novel.

Be afraid. Be very afraid.

Grim-N-Gritty Combat and Hit Point Rules . . . Revised!

Written by Fraser Ronald
fraser.ronald@atfantasy.com

Well, much to my joy and surprise, Ken Hood has released a revised and rules-light version of Grim-N-Gritty rules. Mr. Hood has once again distributed these rules free over the internet, and has basically issued a carte blanche for people to host them . . . so I did! You can download the rules from <http://www.swordsedge.net/Grim-n-GrittyRevised.doc> and you can join in a discussion of these rules over at EN World, at <http://www.enworld.org/forums/showthread.php?t=82837>.

Have a look at them. There are a few changes. In the previous version of the rules--we'll just call them GnG for short--the HP progression of the classes was limited to make fights more dangerous. This new version uses a life bar and--if I understand it correctly--everyone has the same amount of pips/points.

I can't say I like the idea of everyone having the same points or pips, but, to be honest, hit points are no longer my big concern. Using the Massive Damage Threshold from d20 Modern has allowed me to model both the deadliness of fighting--with Massive Damage Saves--and the heroic character that can continue on, despite all the hits he's taken. Given that, I wasn't interested in the life bar, however, I still use the injury levels as represented in the original GnG and updated in GnG Revised.

The injury levels, to me, model something very important that is absent even in the Wound/Vitality points that some games use. Injury levels allow for a deterioration of characters' abilities based on the damage they have taken. This, along with the Massive Damage rule, gives me the mixture of threat and heroism that I want in my games.

The injury levels in GnG Revised are not as punitive as those in the original GnG. Having used the original GnG penalties to good effect, I find the lower penalties imposed in GnG Revised are not a strong enough deterrant for those players who believe kicking the crap out of something is the best way to resolve a situation.

Protection from the original GnG has become "Soak" in GnG Revised. It's a good name for a new mechanic. Constitution now plays a part in what is essentially Damage Reduction. I like the idea of the high-CON character ignoring non-Lethal damage, maybe even shrugging off low-damage bash attacks, but I have a hard time equating toughness with the ability to withstand a sword-stroke better than the average person. Two people, without armour, both hit by a sword are going to suffer the same.

Once again I come down on the side of the original GnG. I'm starting to sound like some

kind of Luddite. It's not that I dislike anything new--I was immediately enthusiastic when I found the original GnG rules and immediately altered my campaign to include them--but GnG Revised does not suit my style as a DM while the original GnG did quite well.

Okay, on to Defence, and here Mr. Hood has created a much more elegant solution than create a new stat or rating. Rather, he has borrowed a stat already used and applies it to Defence. I like this a lot. One of the problems with new rules are new modifiers that players who are comfortable with existing rules shy away from. The Revised Defence rules maintain all that was right with the old Defence rules yet still simplify their application.

I'm definitely in the corner of the Revised Defence.

The method of attack and defence remain the same. The opposed die rolls that first caught my interest in the original GnG rules are still used, and I think this active defence is a boon for the players and for the DM. Players usually like to feel they are involved, and in RPGs, that often means rolling dice. Players that feel more involved are usually happier and thus running the game is easier for the DM. At least, that's my experience. Plus, I believe opposed rolls better model how attack and defence really works. Just as a warrior would be actively engaged in trying to hit an opponent, that warrior is also actively engaged in trying not to be hit.

Damage is still based on dice per weapon, but there is a modifier based on the score to hit--the higher your score, the more damage you do. I think this is a good, but I'm a little hazy on something. There is a modifier based on the size, and I believe that means the size of the weapon, but it isn't really made clear. This needs to be more clearly defined. I think the effort to make the rules streamlined and quick have left many of the mechanics without examples to help clarify them.

Critical Threat Ranges have been changed to from static scores to fluid scores based on the opposed combat rolls. This not only makes sense, it is necessary considering how the GnG rules change combat. Also, criticals can now also have special outcomes. These are really good and are made even better by the fact that the player is able to choose the effect--though the better effects have penalties to the critical confirmation test.

Healing has been changed as is necessary by the introduction of the life bars. As I didn't use the life bars, I can't really comment on the application of the rules, but they do seem, on reading, to be well-considered and easily applicable.

Some of the variants that are offered at the tail end of GnG Revised include DEX based combat modifiers--using DEX rather than STR in melee--and an attendant feat, maximum damage dice--given the lethal nature damage in GnG--and a rule for sneak attacks.

All in all, this is a very interesting supplement, and I applaud Ken Hood for both his creativity and his dedication--actually getting these rules done and out in public. I will say that, for the most part, I prefer the original GnG. That said, a few friends who run another game are fans of GnG Revised. It's really all about the DM style and what both the players and the DM want out of the game.

Considering that the rules are free, I would suggest that anyone interested in alternate combat rules for d20 download the rules and have a look through them. They are short and concise. If you like what you read, give them a shot in a game. I think you might be surprised with how things turn out.