



The *Illuminata*

Delving Deep Into The Worlds of Science Fiction and Fantasy

Come Hell and High Water

By Bret Funk

I will begin this article by assuring our readers that all of our editors located in New Orleans (Doug Roper, Charles Gramlich, and me) and our families are alive and well, and of the three of us, it appears that only I suffered catastrophic loss of home and property. Charles' story you will read later in this edition; Doug's is much like everyone else's. Hours of driving, days of waiting and fearing that everything you have is gone and everything you know will never be the same again.

To my closest calculations, I still have between three and six feet of water in my house, protecting my belongings from the mold and mildew growing on the walls. It may be another month before my wife and I (or probably just I) can go back in and see if anything is salvageable and months more before the insurance company decides exactly what percentage of loss three weeks of sewage-and-petrochemical filled water causes to a house. Worse, more than half of Tyrannosaurus Press' inventory is in the house, and only a small portion of home-based business is covered

by standard flood insurance policies. Even worse than that, I spent over an hour carrying boxes of books from my garage into the kitchen to protect them *in case we had a little flooding*. To think of all the effort I could have saved, the sore muscles that could have been spared if I had only known.

Still, not all the news is bad. My wife and I escaped well ahead of the storm, and we had the foresight to take almost everything that I would consider irreplaceable (photo albums, furniture, clothes, and presents for our eight-week-away son, and all the important documents that others are waiting in

hours-long lines to replace). In a stroke of prescient genius, I decided to take my desktop computer at the last minute, just so I could do some work if I happened to be locked out of the city for a few days. So all of my writing, and all of Tyrannosaurus Press' hard work, including the files for our two in-production titles, are safe and sound. My wife is a worrier and an insurance-lover, and for the first time, I'm glad of that fact and the fact that I got tired of the 'discussions' and told her just to get as much insurance as she wanted. The company I work for during the day (in my secret identity as a computer technician) not only survived the storm relatively unscathed, but we are taking the opportunity to expand to a second location in Baton Rouge, so that we may better serve our displaced customers. To bastardize the saying of my favorite hero, "With great disasters come great opportunities."

If I lost my house, well, we hadn't planned on living there the rest of our lives anyway. I'm more upset about all the hard work we put into it to make it look prettier and the new roof we purchased about a month ago. (A roof, I might add, that based on high-resolution satellite photography does not appear to have any damage. If you need a roof, call Augustino Brothers, formerly of Metairie, LA). If I lost my stuff, well, my wife would tell you that most of it was junk and should have been thrown out long ago. She's probably right. If we lost our furniture, hopefully the insurance will cover it, and other than the custom-made entertainment center I built with my grandfather (which probably would not have survived another move), none of it was of particular significance to me. If I lost my collection of leather-bound classics, bound and typeset in period style, well, they can be replaced in time.

Of all the things taken from me, I only mourn the loss of two things: my life in New Orleans and my will to write. The former is gone forever; the latter I hope will return quickly. There is little chance that my wife and I will be moving back to the Crescent City, and I have cherished my time in New Orleans. Many fond memories and many good friendships were made in New Orleans, and while I still have both memories

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Unwieldy Action and Dramatic Devices in RPG's

Continuing the look at problematic elements for RPGs from last month, we now take a look at flashbacks, and what I call Montage Material; those little bursts of activity that so often get clumped together as "time passing" to move the plot along. In these instances, the problems with adapting the element to RPGs can be complex and numerous that it's far better to get a good deal of experience running games before attempting them

Flashbacks

Flashbacks can be a wonderful way to help a larger scale story unfold. I will assume that everyone knows how a flashback operates in a movie or TV show, so I won't go into the basic mechanics. Suffice to say that flashbacks are used to set up the back-story for a current situation. Flashbacks are usually used when the story picks up in the middle of the action, instead of at the beginning. Going back to the *Lord of the Rings* for examples, when Gandalf meets Frodo in Rivendell, the audience learns how he escaped Sauruman through a flashback. Likewise, when Elrond tells Gandalf about how Isildur kept the ring, it's done in a flashback.

To do this in an RPG takes a bit of doing, because there is usually not a chance to start right in the middle of things. Flashbacks in RPGs do not usually involve the player's regular characters. For example, Let's say the PCs are uncovering a magical device of some kind, and they have a telepathic flash of the object's creation, because something important happened during that time that will impact the current game (like a method to activate or destroy the object, whatever the plot needs). Instead of narrating the event from the distant past the GM tries to use a flashback. For the duration of that scene, the Players will take on the characters that lived through the events of the flashback. Obviously the GM will want the characters to uncover the important information in some way, so there usually has to be a small plot for the flashback that the PCs can move through. This is where things get kinda difficult sometimes.

It's hard enough to keep PCs on track with your regular plots, and steps have to be taken to anticipate as many outcomes to a situation as can reasonably be detailed. GMs have to be on their toes for almost any kind of resolution, unless they are very careful. With a flashback, there is usually a singular, highly specific outcome that needs to be reached, and unless the GM smashes the PCs over the head with the correct

course of action, the desired outcome may not be the one the PCs arrive at. If the intent of the flashback is to establish how to destroy the magical doohickey, and in the flashback the PCs learn not only how to destroy it, but how to operate it, what's to stop them from taking this magic-kabob in the real game and zipping off with it to take over the world later on?

There is a trick to working through flashbacks. If the GM allows the Players to know and understand the necessary outcome of the flashback, he can safely set them loose in it confident that they will move in the correct direction. Example: The PCs discover an important device that was supposed to be broken and irreparable, and find it quite fixed and in working order. They mystery is not understanding the device or wondering how it came to be here, it lies in discovering how the object came to be repaired. Here the GM can use a flashback, placing the Players in the shoes of the characters (different characters) to explain how the device was mended.

In this example, and with all successful and easy to do flashbacks, the actual beneficiary of the side-story is the Player, not the Character. After all, the Player is the one the GM is attempting to entertain, so him or her having all the cards is better than the GM stressing over how to allow the character to know everything. Look at books for examples. The audience, the reader, can usually peek in on what the bad guys are doing, and stay up to speed on what different groups of heroes are doing as well. The characters have no knowledge of the happenings a world away, but they don't need to.

Montage Material – Gathering Supplies, Information, Allies or just Training, Training, Training

Films and television do this all the time. It's a device that allows the audience to appreciate how hard the protagonists are working to achieve their goals, and usually establishes a few surprises for the antagonist later, which the audience can anticipate. While it may work (albeit, weakly) for visual media, my advice would be to forget about trying to incorporate it into an RPG.

A GM who is running a game where such a device would even be considered is probably running a fairly complicated game, meaning a higher level of investment from himself and the Players. If the game is that important, many efforts at "realism" will be made, to keep the tone serious and grounded (thereby making the struggles of the characters easier to relate to). If that is the case, and the GM is pushing for realism, he will certainly not want to include all

Con't on page 19

Special Effects: Anthony Mark Viverito Interview Part II

by Terry Crotinger/montanasing

Special effects professionals are true artists (updated from oil and canvas notables of the medieval era). So, it is not surprising people become overwhelmed just attempting to try a an effect like stop-motion animation, though it's probably the easiest for an amateur to try. Many of the special effects pioneers did little but experiment with camera angles, miniatures and blue screen effects long before such techniques were offered in an educational form. These individuals were, as mentioned, pioneers of the craft.

However, today, it is not unusual to find technical processes requiring sophisticated education, often in computer graphics, art, camera and lighting, and in specific software programs like Maya, an incredible graphic program that creates that oh-so-sought after effect called, HyperReal or PhotoReal.

Anthony Mark Viverito, awed at an early age by the effects he saw in movies, decided education would serve him as his springboard into the SFX industry. And besides, it took money and an incredible amount of luck, in the form of "who you know", to break into the special effects industry without it. Armed with he degree from New York Institute of Technology and his on-the-job training from *Troma, Inc.*, he moved back to Puerto Rico in the early 1990s and started looking for opportunities to use his new skills. It came in the form of Captain Ron, a Disney movie being shot in Puerto Rico.

"It was a nasty experience," he recalls. "We had to design the physical effects and props, much of which happen on a boat. We had to figure out how to make the boat tip over, lift and list to the side. It was a big sailboat and we needed weight, lead. But no one in Puerto Rico had lead ingots. So I called a scrap yard and negotiated for several pieces of telephone casing that I would rent for a cheap price. I had it melted down into lead ingots. I would return it in ingot form and the scrap yard could then sell it. We ended up with a ton of lead. You are expecting a semi to pull up with the mountain of lead. Instead, it just covered the floor. It wasn't as much as we thought, physically. We put it in golf carts and put it on the boat and it tilted just fine.

"We also made an anchor out of some of the lead. And, we needed a rounded life ring that would sink instead of float. We cut the ring in half, shaved out a portion and melted the ingot in the trench. Sealed it shut and it sank right away!

"We needed various sizes of inner tubes that the sets were built on. And, we needed special rockers. For instance, there was an engine room and it had to rock. I was the liaison with the companies who made the big,

metal rockers to rock major portions of the set since I was fluent in Spanish. I worked on Captain Ron for over two months doing special effects."

I asked Anthony which movie or effect was his favorite. Without hesitation he responded that What Dreams May Come was the one he was most proud of.

"I think the visual, the painted world came out really amazing. That is the one I thought the effects were the most beautiful. I was the visual text editor on that one and it was very challenging. Why? Because I had only been an Assistant on Star Ship Troopers, doing visual effects editing. I set in light rigging on computers that is used to light up everything; I'd never done that before. I also worked in the modeling department and worked on match moving.

"The next movie after SST was, What Dreams May Come. Half-way through the project, the lead Editor had to leave and it was left to me. I was totally running the whole thing. I had never done that. It was kind of scary and fun at the same time—all these people relying on me. I had to do everything from projecting Dailies to film.

"An editing machine and projector were mounted on a flat bed [truck]. Everyday I had to send Dailies to the lab to get printed for the next day. When they came in the next morning, I had to cut that film and string that up for Dailies. Then, I had to cut that film into a *continuity reel* that we constantly have to keep updating which is a big role of film. And then I had to put the shots on video and make videotapes, and send those tapes to the studio, to the editor, for them to cut it into what they were doing. There was so much to do!"

Anthony Mark Viverito had the education and gained experience by working on movies like Sgt. Kabuki Man, Captain Ron, Star Ship Troopers and When Dreams May Come. When the opportunity to work on the Matrix movies came up, he was prepared to work on various aspects of special effects and being creative in developing them. Anthony patiently explained the cost and how time consuming the details and effects are, educating me on the main graphics programs used in the SFX industry. The main one is called, Maya. This knowledge helped me understand how Matrix special effects were created and gave me insight on how detailed this art form is. Every hair, shadow, and angle can be so convincing with these software programs, that the result is hard, very hard, to distinguish between virtual and reality. But these programs are an education in themselves, and pricey. In October's edition of *Illuminata*, we'll explore his work on the Matrix films and how those amazing effects are done.

Writer's Block: A Writer On The Run

by Charles Gramlich

New Orleans. Arkansas.

Arkansas. New Orleans.

Baton Rouge. Austin.

I'm a writer on the run. And though I know I'm not the only one, that doesn't help a lot.

When the approach of Hurricane Katrina drove us out of New Orleans, we went to that place where they have to take you in. We drove eleven hours north to my mom's house in the little town of Charleston, Arkansas. Like a fool, I failed to bring my computer. I had disks with copies of my files, but halfway to mom's I remembered that there were things on my hard drive that I'd never saved on disk. I'd only emailed copies to my office computer, which was also trapped in New Orleans on the campus of Xavier University.

Why hadn't I brought my home computer? Maybe it was some hybrid of panic and complacency – panic at the thought of a category five hurricane rolling like a blitzkrieg toward us, complacency at the thought of half a dozen previous evacuations that had seen storms bypass us safely to the east. Then this latest storm hit, and the water came in, and I realized we weren't going back to New Orleans anytime soon.

Even without a computer I could have written. It doesn't take technology to create. I had paper and pens. But I didn't have the will. It takes commitment to write, and the only commitment I could give during those days was to the news. I wondered about my apartment and my things, and I watched in vain for pictures of my area. But mostly I wondered and worried about my friends, about whether they had gotten out or not. That worry intensified daily as I saw the agony and insanity that gripped the center of the city.

The local high school librarian was a relative of mine and we were able to use the internet there. I began to hear from a few friends, although there were plenty of others who had not yet checked in. And there was virtually no news about my university. I didn't know if I still had a job, or health care, or if I would get any pay for the fall semester. My fiancé, Lana, was in much the same boat, though not a boat as literal as those plying the streets of a slowly sinking New Orleans.

We could have stayed with my family for a month if need be. But my mom is nearly eighty-nine and she is fragile. She had just lost a daughter – my sister – a month earlier, and I didn't want to put more strain on her just when I should be doing things to ease her worries. Then we heard that they were going to let

people back into the New Orleans area to get some things before closing the city off entirely. Besides my computer, I needed clothes and wanted to get a few books to read. Mostly I wanted to see if there was anything left of our place.

So back to New Orleans we went, scrounging for gas that was nearly impossible to find south of Eudora, Arkansas. To conserve fuel and ease the strain on our 1991 Thunderbird, we drove with the AC off and the windows down. We sweltered but we made it, even though we sat in bumper to bumper traffic for hours as we tried to get into Metairie along the one route the military allowed to us.

I often complain about my bad luck, but I found out just how lucky I could be when we arrived at our apartment and found it intact. While many apartments around ours had roofs torn off, *we* even had electricity and a phone line. But we didn't have water or working toilets and we could not stay.

Even though I had my computer this time, leaving New Orleans again was harder than it had been before. We had no idea when we'd be allowed to return, and we had no true destination to go to. After an aimless few hours on the road, we found – miracle of miracles – a seedy motel on the outskirts of Baton Rouge that had a single room for rent. We took it and that night reached a decision.

Lana had been able to get in touch with her work and they wanted her to come to Austin, Texas. Any permanent relocation to Austin was impossible for me. I'd heard by then that my University would be reopening in the spring, and my son would also be going to school in the city. I had to be with him. But we also needed money and Lana's boss had promised us a place to stay. Even though we were sick of the road and of living out of gym bags, seven hours in the car took us into Austin.

Lana's company put us up at an Extended Stay America, and for the first time in weeks I was able to set up my computer and get internet access. I hoped I might be able to make some money writing, and within a day I was word- slinging again, but only on some non-fiction articles for which I had contracts and deadlines. I found that I couldn't write fiction. I tried. But while non-fiction can be produced with the mind alone, fiction requires something more. It takes heart. It takes emotion. And I'm freshly burned out of those.

Will I get my heart back? I hope I will. I believe I will. I guess we'll see.

Reviews

Blood Red James A. Moore



Earthling, Sept 2005
\$40.00, Hardcover, 331 pp.
ISBN 0976633914
Review by Harriet Klausner

Black Stone Bay is a quaint, affluent town filled with more mansions than regular homes and is the home of two Ivy League universities. Two weeks

before Halloween Jason Soulis moves into the small Rhode Island town and his coming will change Black Stone Bay forever. Soulis is no ordinary man but a vampire with a brilliant mind who knows how to survive and intends to use the inhabitants in his experiments.

College student Maggie Preston pays her tuition by prostituting herself. Soulis hires her through her pimp for the night. He wants her to seduce all the clergy in town which she does quickly and easily. Ben, who lives in the same building as Maggie, loves her even when he discovers her profession. She fears making a commitment while she has been with Soulis. Maggie turns into a vampire during a frat party that turns into a blood bath but Ben cleans her up and cares for her until she wakes up. When they confront Soulis, he explains that exchanging bodily fluids turned Maggie into a thinking vampire like him. On Halloween night, he frees the missing people that were turned into vampires to see what they will do. Ben has won Maggie over so she tries to keep him alive during the feeding frenzy.

BLOOD RED is a complex, imaginative and deep vampire novel that readers will believe will become a classic like Stephen King's SALEM'S LOT. The characters are three dimensional and even the vampires have the personality they had when they were alive instead of becoming two dimensional caricatures. James A. Moore has proven with his latest novel that he is one of the grandmasters of the horror genre.

Crystal Gorge David and Leigh Eddings



Aspect, August 2005
\$25.95, Hardcover, 487 pp.
ISBN 0446532274
Review by Harriet Klausner

Each of the Four Elder Gods controls their own Domain in the land of Dhrall. They walk among their people and interact with them but the Elder Gods are coming to the

end of their 25,000 year cycle and must soon take a "nap". They are exhibiting signs of forgetfulness and senility which is why they raised their children earlier than expected to become Dreamers whose visions of the future come true. They are needed to tell the Elder Gods and their human allies what the insect-like Vlagh will command her servants to do next.

The Vlagh's goal is to eliminate all of humanity but she has already been defeated in the god's Veltan's Domain by a volcano eruption and in the south in Zelana's Domain by a sea of water erupting from the ground. Now the Vlagh is sending her servants to the north to Dahlaine's Domain only this time many of them are in the form of man and they emit a fragrance that makes the tribes fight each other or in some cases plan to overthrow the army of the Elder Gods. These servants also emit a poison into the air that kills humans at an alarming rate. They must be stopped and a group of warriors plan to do just that before the army of the Elder Gods prepares to take their stand in the next battle at Crystal Gorge.

Unlike the other two books in The Dreamers series, CRYSTAL GORGE is filled with lots of action, plenty of battle scenes and insights into the different cultures of the various tribes that live in Dhrall. Former enemy tribes come together to form a nation so that acting together they are stronger and the probability of defeating a common enemy is made possible. Readers will like the Elder Gods who seem to be coming to terms with their limitations and are willing to let humans help them in their fight against the Vlagh. This epic fantasy novel is entertaining and highly original.

Reviews

Pyramids (Discworld, 7)

Terry and Lynn Pratchett



ROC, 1989

Harper Collins, 352pgs

ISBN: 0061020656

Reviewed by Terry Crotinger

Though the Discworld series has been in print for more than two decades, it's fun to go back and read some of the earlier stories. The oddest thing to note is that Terry

Pratchett found punctuation along the way from those first books to, well, now. Re-reading the early books is a distraction in that regard. Commas just seem to jump off the page, because I'm sure, like the giant Tortoise that is carrying the discworld on its back, they were there this morning, along with my marmalade.

Because the book has been reprinted with several different cover art selections, it's hard to find an original cover. I suspect the cover by Doug Anderson that has a horse-faced, unlikely looking assassin parting the waters on the cover is a rare find and may be a ROC book club type jacket. There are also audio books available with many of the Discworld series and unusual cover art.

Pratchett writes in satire, jest. (Or is it merely catty?) His wit has a purpose, though it may take reading until the last page to quite understand it. *Pyramids* is no exception. Broken into IV parts, he tells the story of a reluctant King/Pharaoh who is sent to boarding school. Actually, it is Assassin Boarding School and to pass the final, you have to stay alive and actually kill someone. Teppic, the someday king, gets an "A" in the staying alive part, but falters with the killing part. He aims haphazardly, and just like the game "Mouse Trap", somehow ricochets his weapon in fantastic directions and lands it in the middle of his prey, I mean Final Exam. (Luckily, it turns out to be a dummy.) Upon celebrating his passing grades with some buddies, he realizes he is needed back in the land of pyramids and without warning, Pratchett embarks the reader on Book II with the dying of Teppic's father, the King.

Life as a reluctant King is unrewarding for Teppic. Probably because he has to wear a heavy, gold mask all over the place that is severe enough few want to look at him. And, he can't touch anyone or else their hand or body part must be lopped off—tends to keep the mundanes at a discrete distance of several hundred feet. (He learned this the hard way and now employs a one-handed barber.) This is disheartening for Teppic; he just knows the commoner is having a whole lot more fun than he is. But, he plunges on and tries to fulfill his kingly duties of making the sun rise and set and making the best damn pyramid there ever was for his father. Not because he wants to, however. In fact, he's fairly sure his old man didn't want the deluxe model, just a discrete burial at sea would've been fine. But the High Priest "interprets" the new (and very green, really, corn and grass grow under Teppic's feet if he's in the wrong, or right place) king's wishes. Surprisingly, they don't sound anything like what Teppic really had in mind.

A grand Pyramid is started and quickly gets out of hand. Something about cosmic forces that are uncapped, or perhaps it was the quantum theory used by the architects, Ila and Ilb and their dad, Ptaclusp? But it's soon evident when the mummified kings break out of their tombs, along with all the gods, like Hat the Vulture-Headed God, that something is amiss. Never mind that the Pyramid has turned itself around by 90 degrees and that Two-a is flat as a pancake and drifting around like a Flat Stanley on a doldrums kind of day. When the gods come out to play, there is a problem.

Along the way, Teppic discovers a feisty little grape-peeling handmaiden by the name of Ptraci, who turns out to be his sister (after some slight wondering about possible bed-warmers on that cold, cold slab of a bed). But Teppic saves the day (and if I told you how, that'd be cheating), Ptraci gets to do cool stuff as the new Queen, and Teppic goes off into the sunset that had nothing to do with his wishes that it set or not.

The Disc World series is amusing and witty and a steady diet would make one wonder about the future (and your sanity). However, they are fun and harmless. At least I think so, unless you see the mother of all Pyramids. In that case, run.

Reviews

In Stone's Clasp Christie Golden



Luna, Sept 2005
\$13.99, Trade Paper, 400 pp.
ISBN 0373802293
Review by Harriet Klausner

Four times the Shadow came to different worlds and on two occasions the Dancers, along with their Loremasters and Companions have been able to defeat it. The trio is reborn

onto each world and the Loremaster remembers their previous times. Jareth knows nothing about the Shadow but when he was thirteen he became the Spring-Bearer able to change the seasons, allow crops to grow and commune with the earth and the animals. Twenty years, later perpetual winter came and Jareth's powers deserted him. He decides to find the gods and demand that his powers be returned otherwise all of Lamath will die.

Kevla the fire dancer and her companion a dragon know that Jareth is the Stone Dancer. They accompany him on his quest to find the gods, knowing he will find his Companion the tiger to help him accept his true destiny. Before searching for the other Dancers, he must find and destroy the Ice Maiden who blocked his power and stopped spring from returning to Lamath. Working together, Jareth and Kevla find the Ice Maiden and if they are able to stop her they must set out to look for the other Dancers to fight the coming Shadow.

The Dancers are elementals who wield magic that is basic to their nature. Readers will love this romantic fantasy whose happily ever after is not a guarantee and the quest to unite the dancers leads to danger, treachery and romance. There is one enemy who wants to see the Dancers fail. He is the emperor and what he is will be made clear in future books in this series. Christie Golden is a brilliant world builder and her characters are people it is easy to care about.

Pilgrim Sara Douglass



Tor, Sep 2005
\$27.95, Hardcover, 480 pp.
ISBN: 0312873752
Review by Harriet Klausner

The Star Gate has been destroyed allowing the TimeKeeper Demons to enter Tencendor. The land is devastated as these killers destroy anything and

everything whether the deceased was once human or gods. Their fate is the same as this malevolent horde march unstoppable and unstoppable.

Watching from what appears to be the last haven from the invincible demons remains a small group of humans and two former gods; each awaits death feeling hopeless. Yet survivors remain struggling to destroy the Timekeeper Demons before they achieve their objective of bringing back to life their abomination of a leader Qeteb. If he returns Tencendor will be a total wasteland. An octet vows to save the soul of their land before the evil adversaries can reclaim the soul of their master. The humans and the once Gods split up in a race to save a beleaguered land from the abyss.

This epic fantasy is a terrific tale starring more of an ensemble cast than usually found in the sub-genre. This enhances the feel that the land is about to be run over by dark forces. The collapse of the gate and several other elements bring a science fiction mix that further makes the fantasy rudiments seem genuine. Throw in the metamorphosis of life, death and rebirth inside a strong exhilarating story line and fans will totally enjoy a fabulous Wayfarer Redemption tale that will leave newcomers on a crusade to find previous tales and fans of Sara Douglass euphoric while awaiting the next installment.

Those at T-Press and The Illuminata send their thoughts and prayers to all of the others affected by Hurricane Katrina.

Original Fiction

Since When Did Epic Become an Adjective?

By Erik Goodwyn

Part One: The Feiry Hand of the Mighty God of Doom

Buttercup was raised on a small farm in the country of Floren.

No, no that's not it.

It was a dark and stormy night.

'Hey, haven't those lines been used before?' asked Zimja, Warrior Queen of Sparrock.

Well, I suppose they have. Anyway, Zimja was sitting upon her throne of gold and silver, high in the throne room of the mighty fortress of—

'And exactly what does Warrior Queen mean, anyway?' asked Zimja.

What?

'I mean, I guess it's supposed to sound cool or whatever, but what the heck does it really mean? Am I really supposed to go to battle with all those sweaty swordsmen in this getup? Go ahead, tell them what you've got me wearing.'

Since you insist... Zimja surveyed her vast domain of Sparrock in the traditional war-garb of her ancient kin, which was light but strong chain-mesh that lovingly caressed her smooth curves, and revealed the soft skin of her—

'Oh please, give me a break. It's a flippin' chainmail thong, that's what it is. Hmf, men. Well it ain't exactly comfortable, if you get my drift, and exactly what kind of protection does this really offer anyway, the shirt has this plunging neckline and all. Why don't you just paint a bullseye on my chest! And what's with this sword? It's so big it would take two of me to swing it at anything. You're telling me I can actually use this double-bladed anvil?'

Shh! You aren't supposed to talk to the Narrator!

'Oh, fine, then. Servants!' said Zimja, clapping her slender hands together. 'My queenly robes!' As she descended from her mighty throne, several nameless slaves approached and placed the mantle of Sparrock upon her shoulders. The graceful cape and robes gently stroked her thighs amorously and the gentle breeze wafted up along the length of her—

'Ahem, that will do, thank you!' she said abruptly, a disgusted look on her face. She turned to a servant. 'So what news from the kingdom? From what I can see, this throne room is just a big drafty marble-halled place high in the mountains. Where are my subjects?'

'In the background, your majesty, with rarely anything useful or important to say but to affirm your place as supreme heroic Queen.'

'Oh. Well I guess I should have expected that. So, what's going on these days in Sparrock?'

'Your royal vizier wishes to speak with you of a great task to be done.'

'Oh really? Well that doesn't sound so bad. Where is he?'

Suddenly the sky darkened, and the burning urns in the vast corners flickered ominously. A great cloud of purple smoke arose from the center of the room. Zimja turned from the balcony that overlooked the kingdom to see bolts of flickering lightening twirl about the cloud as dramatic music swelled from somewhere, and the flashes of light fell upon her sensuous and delicate features. They especially lit very romantically the exquisite curves of her lustily cupped . . .

Zimja tapped her feet and glared at the sky impatiently.

Ahem, anyway, the flashes eventually died down, and the smoke cleared, revealing the mighty Grand Igandar, Royal Vizier of Sparrock, clad in a flowing and very impressive blue and white wizard's cloak. He turned his intense features to Zimja and bowed his white head before her.

'Hail, your majesty,' he said in a deep, old voice, 'I bring troublesome tidings to your grace. Permit me to reveal my secrets to you that we might thwart the menace which threatens our fair kingdom.'

Original Fiction

Zimja shrugged. 'Cool. Lay it on me, Grand wizard.'

Igandar stood up and stomped his foot. 'Your highness! How many times must I implore you not to speak in that manner of tongue!'

Zimja cleared her throat, slightly embarrassed. 'Oh, sorry. Er, I mean, Greetings Grand Igandar, what ill news hast thou to bestow upon me?'

'Much better, your grace,' he sniffed. 'Now, you must know that your arch foe Komozarr has sworn to take over Sparrock.'

Zimja scratched her head, accidentally stubbing her finger on her huge silver crown. 'Ouch! Um,' she said rubbing her finger, 'Komozarr?'

'Yes, your majesty, you know, Komozarr, the Deep Dark Lord of Dread Doom, Emperor of MuchMore-dor.'

'You mean Neville?'

Igandar straightened in frustration, his expression looking as if he might explode. 'Not Neville! Blast it all, my queen, that is not his name! It is Lord Komozarr! He is threatening our kingdom with evil deep darkness and doom! We must go on a quest to defeat him!'

'All right, all right, already. Don't have a cow—er—I mean do not overexcite yourself, exalted master of sorcery. Tell me what must be done in order to counter this evil.'

Igandar calmed himself and waved his hand majestically, and a great map appeared before Zimja, astonishing the many nameless servants in the background. 'Verily, I speak sooth, your majesty, that the only way to defeat Komozarr's evil is to travel the lands far and wide, taking a band of brave, bold heroes (including myself) to the enchanted land of Mysticalness... Mysticalness?' Igandar looked up at the sky and placed his ancient hands on his hips. 'What kind of a stupid name is that?'

I am the Narrator. I am Omniscient. Don't argue with me.

Igandar muttered something under his breath and continued. 'Fine, the Enchanted land of Mysticalness, where we must unite the Magic Crystal Gem Ring Sword of Power Necklace Belt, which will gain for you the Precious Blade of Zandar, and the Shield of Darzan, to face the Evil Lord in his lair.'

Zimja raised a thin eyebrow. 'That sounds ludicrous.'

'Argh!' blustered Igandar. 'Of course it is ludicrous your majesty; it is fantasy! It is supposed to be ludicrous, that is the point! I mean I realize that the genre has gone downhill since the Song of Roland or the Tales of Gilgamesh, but well, you know, it is mythic resonance that makes fantasy so great when done well. I realize that these days it has gotten screwed up with a lot of nonsense and has hardly improved from the days when it used to be about a lot of big bare-chested guys (that always seemed to have shaved their armpits in the paintings) hacking through thousands of enemies with naught but their swords, and now it is all about the dark and intense hero, who must avenge and kill lots of things, and look very menacing all the time, but that is not what it is supposed to be about! I mean—'

'All right, Igandar, that will do.'

'Ahem, yes your majesty. Sorry, I got carried away again. Shall we embark upon our quest?'

'Yes, let's get this over with. Lead the way.'

And so, with much fanfare, the daring pair marched through several paragraphs of narrative description until finally they were at the borders of Sparrock. There they boldly entered the Fire-swamp, where very large rodents lurked.

'Wait a moment,' said Igandar, 'it cannot be the Fire-swamp, that has been used already.'

Er, how about . . . "Mirkwood".

'Nope.'

The Gorge of Eternal Peril?

'Taken.'

Oh, I know, how about the Forest of Dark Silver Mist.

'Oh, that sounds like fun,' said the wizard, 'I shall alight my staff with a spell, that we might find our way through yon borderlands.'

Zimja shrugged. 'All right, if you say so.'

Original Fiction

Igandar smiled. 'Yes, your majesty, now this is more like it! Adventure into the mysterious unknown. Here we go.' The old wizard said something that sounded very much like 'alakazam' and in an instant, the tip of his staff glowed with blue light, barely penetrating the impenetrable gloom, where the silvery shapes of shadowy willows formed a twisted maze before them. Mist breathed from the midnight forest, and the whorled branches reached out oddly to them, as if half warning them, half stalking them. They entered bravely, their footwear padding the only sound in the musty air.

'Igandar,' Zimja muttered as they pressed on, alert and anxious, 'just how far is this sword belt thingy anyway, that idiot Narrator has me wearing high-heels in this mud.'

'It is yet many miles, your majesty,' replied the wizard as they descended a natural stairway of roots into a dark glade where fireflies wisped in the distance.

'Hmf,' said Zimja, 'well this whole thing had better be worth it. I mean, I'm not sure why I got into this business in the first place. My bust isn't big enough for me to be a video game babe. And I'm not tall and skinny enough for Fantasy Channel movie babe. I'm not much of an actor (not that it matters much these days). I just found this ad in the newspaper, and...'

'Your majesty,' groaned Igandar, 'must you go on about that sort of thing? It is ruining the whole mood of this scene!'

'Oh, sorry, sorry. Ahem, what lies beyond that mythical glen, master sorcerer? Perhaps it is the brethren we seek to continue our quest to the... um... magical items we seek.'

'Indeed,' Igandar snorted. 'The winds of magic tell me that the next brave soul awaits us in the tower just ahead,' he said mysteriously.

'Tower? What tower?'

'Anon, your majesty, for see yon dark tower that rises above the woodlands!' He pointed upward, and Zimja's eyes beheld a dark tower that rose above the woodlands. The bricks were of iron impregnated stone, and upon them were numerous skulls and horned demons of all horrible shapes imaginable. And at the foot of it was a mighty doorway of black steel, with lots of spikes and red-eyed demonic fanged faces and other nasty things.

'Boy is this place overdone,' muttered Zimja.

'Hear us, Oh Prince Sy,' said Igandar with an important air, 'from the mighty tower of Klockem, that we might call upon your aid in this most holy of quests!'

They waited there for several tense moments, whereupon Zimja was searching through her pack for a pair of sneakers to replace her nifty high-heeled patent leather combat boots with. But she was unsuccessful, heh, heh.

Zimja glared at the sky.

Then, with a great rattling noise that echoed through the haunted glen, the door opened. Zimja and Igandar looked intently at the shadowy tunnel before them, as the monstrous door rose. Finally after much tense waiting they saw him... Prince Sy of Klockem Tower.

He stood at least five foot five, and was garbed in a black t-shirt with skulls on it, and he had grungy jeans that were at least three sizes too big. He was of teen age, rather gangly, and had an unusually large adam's apple, and his hair was shaggy and unkempt, but he seemed to think it made him look wild and untamed. He placed his fists on his hips and puffed up.

'I am Prince Sy, uh, Grimblood . . . er . . . Von DeathKnell, yea, that sounds cool. Sy Grimblood Von DeathKnell, Lord of the Dark Tower, come to aid you on your quest.'

Zimja stifled a chuckle and looked at Igandar. 'Who's this dork?'

'Your majesty,' Igandar moaned.

'Hey, I thought my name was pretty cool,' complained Sy. 'It's sort of like the half evil hero of issue #145 of X-treme comics, you know about the hellion vampire zombie martian dude who faces bloody death and deals with his dark soul. Dude, did I tell you I like almost beat the fourth level of Krimson Deth III—for the Nentindo Box—here, I'll show you the cheat codes I got off the Zu-Gi-Ug cards I bought yesterday at the mall.'

'AGH!' shouted Igandar to the sky, 'what is this moron doing in this story?'

Zimja sighed, 'all I know is I'd better get the lousy fifty bucks I was promised for this job.'

'Like woah,' said Sy, 'who's the babe? I mean, she's like pretty hot—not like Lara Croft or anything—but

Original Fiction

she's majorly babe-a-licious!'

'Can we get on with this story?' shouted Igandar.

I told you I am the Narrator and I can do whatever I want.

'I can't believe,' said Zimja wandering off, 'I gave up a job as a romance character for this. Really, at least then I would get the hunky guy at the end. All I have to do there is be feisty and yet weak-kneed. What do I have to be in this nutty place? Oh, wow, I'm the great super-babe Queen...'

Igandar threw his hands in the air and sputtered.

'So, like wizard, can I bring my hand-held Game-Dude™ on this quest? Oh wait, before we go, you've got to see the latest issue of Blood-X Komix, it's like so cool.'

'...but then at least as a fantasy warrior-babe,' continued Zimja to herself, 'your hair always looks fabulous and you can't get pregnant, no matter how many times you—'

And so the Narrator, having gotten fed up with the main heroes and their complaining, decided to switch viewpoints.

For deep in the foul, black and really quite awful depths of MuchMore-dor, there was a massive fortress of red smoking iron wherein dwelt Lord Komozarr. Wall after wall of iron gargoyles, spikes, and clouds of noxious vapors surrounded the Inner Sanctum of MuchMore-dor, and in a cavernous chamber of chains where hung rotting skeletons, there was a black throne of iron. All about the throne toiled numerous Gruesome Minions in foul smelling skins and plates of hammered iron, hunched over and snarling, uh, gruesomely.

And upon this throne of darkness reclined Lord Komozarr, resting his head on his hand and lounging lazily, wearing a Hawaiian t-shirt and playing with a yoyo.

Ahem, I said, lounging lazily in a t-shirt when he is supposed to be *ruling*.

Suddenly Komozarr jumped and rubbed the sleep out of his eyes, then tossed the yoyo, accidentally knocking out one of the Gruesome Minions. Then he smiled sheepishly. 'Oh yeah,' he said, putting on the really impressive and really heavy Black Mantle of the Deep Dark Lord of Dread Doom. He then cleared his throat.

'Attention Gruesome Minions!' said Komozarr. 'All of you guys pay attention.'

Suddenly dozens of his Minions saluted him and stood at attention. Still others toiled on.

'Hey, that means you back there,' said Komozarr. 'Stop all that vague toiling and pay attention now, the Narrator's here and I need to issue a few decrees!'

A great deal of nodding and cackling commenced.

'What be your next foul and evil deed, Your Evilness?' asked Yuk, chieftain and right hand man to Lord Komozarr.

'Er,' said Komozarr, 'victory is at hand, my subjects.'

'Yes, my lord,' said some.

'Victory!' shouted others.

'Hey, I think your fly is open,' muttered someone.

'Right. Victory,' said Komozarr. He stepped down off his throne dais and nearly avoided tripping. Once he recovered, he stood straight and raised his chin proudly, strutting before the rows and rows of Gruesome Minions, taking care not to let the orange and yellow shirt show under his Mantle of Pure Evil.

'Yes,' he continued. 'Now, my spies tell me that our arch enemy, the hated Queen Zimja of Sparrock is questing toward us in an attempt to thwart our Evil Plans!'

'No!' shouted some.

'We must stop her!' shouted others.

'Oops, my shoe is untied,' said somebody.

Then Komozarr suddenly had a puzzled look on his face, and he scratched his blond head for a moment.

Yuk approached gruesomely. 'What is it, oh Great Doer of Badness?'

'Actually I was just wondering something, Yuk.'

'Yes, High Master of Rotten Things?'

'Er... just why is it that we hate Zimja so much? I mean, she seems like a nice enough girl to me. After all, it's not her fault that she has to wear those goofy getups all the time. Look at what I'm wearing.'

Original Fiction

'Because,' rasped Yuk crazily, 'My Lord of All Things Cruel and Nasty, she threatens to thwart our Evil Plans!'

'Ahhhh,' said Komozar nodding. Then he paused, still puzzled. 'And... what exactly are those again?'

'To conquer the world!' said Yuk amidst much cackling and hissing from the Gruesome Minions.

Komozar shook his head and sighed. 'All right, but I really don't understand what the point of it is. After all, if I conquer the world, then what am I supposed to do with it?'

This caused much confused murmuring. 'Hmm,' muttered some, 'what *will* we do with it?'

'I dunno, never happened before,' said others.

'Darn. I can't find my shoelaces,' said somebody.

'Erm,' said Yuk, 'we'll get back with you on that, Your Horribleness.'

'Sheesh, I didn't think it was such a difficult question,' muttered Komozarr under his breath.

Meanwhile, far away, the brave, bold and daring heroes, the most brave and bold of which was Prince Sy—

'Says who?' asked Igandar, leading the three of them along the floor of the jagged Cliffs of Eternity. 'Who says Sy was the most brave and bold of us?'

Says the Narrator.

'Oh, fine,' he grumbled. 'Get on with it; we've been here for days.'

'Yeah, and like my Game-Dude™ is like running out of batteries,' said Sy.

'Thank the Gods!' exclaimed Zimja, readjusting her very uncomfortable, yet very alluring armor, yet again. 'You've been yammering on incessantly about that idiotic thing since we left!'

'But I'm about to unlock a secret character in Bloody Flaming Skulls Part XII!'

'If you don't shut up,' growled Zimja, 'I'm going to turn you into a bloody skull with this overgrown meat-cleaver I'm carrying.'

Sy glanced at Zimja. 'Boy you look just like the Demoness from Kruddy Comix Vs Saberdeath collectors issue #159 when you're mad.' He looked over her outfit. 'Well, except that she's got a lot bigger—'

Zimja placed the tip of her insanely large sword up against Sy's adam's apple. 'I didn't get the job of comic book babe either,' she snarled. 'And one more comment like that and I'll aim a lot lower with this sword.'

'Silence!' said Igandar, 'we are approaching the borders of MuchMore-dor!'

Suddenly a great wall rose above the three of them, towering into the sky with great black bricks, and barring their passage was a massive steel gate, locked and reinforced, and upon the gate was emblazoned the words 'Get Lost'.

'Hmm,' said Zimja, 'Komozarr isn't much for company. Something tells me we are going to have to do something amazing in order to get in there.'

'Yes, indeed,' said Igandar, stroking his beard thoughtfully. 'I must devise a spell to achieve egress into yon gate.'

Zimja looked at Sy.

He was grinning, his nose in a comic entitled *Naked Kamikazi Cannibal Bimbos From Jupiter. Vol 9*. Zimja raised an eyebrow. 'Uh, Sy, you're starting to piss me off. Lose that silly crap and help us figure a way in!'

Sy snickered and sidled up to Zimja. 'Boy, look at this. I mean, check her out, Zimja. Is she hot or what?'

Zimja glowered at him. 'Well, that just about exceeds my tolerance level,' she said before drawing her sword and chopping Sy in half.

Hey! You can't do that! Sy is very important to this story, you can't just up and kill him like that. Igandar, tell her!

'Hmf,' said the wizard, 'good riddance.'

You aren't going to get away with this, said the Narrator sulkily.

'Oh, whatever,' said Igandar, 'alakazam!'

Suddenly with a loud and colorful display of magical type pyrotechnics that will be very expensive when this story is made into a movie, the iron door and the two so-called heroes entered MuchMor-dor.

Zimja stifled a grin and glanced sidelong at Igandar.

'I think he is mad at us,' whispered the wizard.

Original Fiction

'Yeah, me too. He even forgot that we're supposed to find the magical mumbo-jumbo thingy and the sword and shield of whatever-it-is.'

'It was stupid anyway.'

Oh shut up, you two.

After several hours of sulking, the heroes continued their quest into the dark and forbidding lands of Komozarr.

'It was you that was doing the sulking,' muttered Zimja, 'not us.'

'Aye, watch those dangling modifiers,' added Igandar.

Ok, suddenly the heroes found themselves surrounded by thousands of Gruesome Minions upon the barren plains of MuchMor-dor.

'Well that's just snotty,' said Zimja, referring to the sudden appearance of countless enemies. She brandished her ludicrously large sword and prepared for battle, as Igandar raised his mighty staff in preparation.

'Hahahaha!' said Komozarr from his floating steed of Darkness, 'I have you now, heroes. Now you will fall victim to my Gruesome Minions, and I will then be able to... to... what is it again?'

'Conquer the world, Your Dastardliness,' whispered Yuk.

'Yes, conquer the world! Get them!'

All at once thousands of Gruesome Minions drew their maces, swords and axes and attacked. Zimja, hardened Warrior Queen of many battles, readied herself, and dramatic music swelled from somewhere—Carl Orff's *O Fortuna*, yeah, that's good.

Then, just as Zimja was about to attack and show off her amazing skills with the sword, Prince Sy jumped out of nowhere and plowed into the thick of battle, severing limbs and spraying blood all about with his glowing sword, impressing many onlookers with his outstanding abilities that happened to be much better than Zimja's.

'Wait a minute,' said the Warrior Queen, 'I thought I killed him...what's going on here?'

Nevertheless, Prince Sy continued to whirl about, spinning in mid-air and doing that Matrix/John Woo thing in slow-motion, slaughtering endless enemies without so much as getting scratched.

'Now just one moment,' said Igandar, 'this is idiotic. He's dead! He was cut in half for pity's sake! Where did he come from?'

Then a huge army of Gruesome Minions attacked from another flank, causing Igandar to forget complaining about the Narration.

'Egad! More Minions from the flank!' he said. He rose forth his staff, and spoke the incantation for an amazing spell, preparing to save his beloved Queen by doing what wizard's do best—blast the bad guys into oblivion.

'Yes!' he said smiling, his eyes wide with anticipation, 'now take this you doers of evil!'

But before he could do anything, Sy jumped in the way and slashed his way through the enemies, many of which looked computer generated, pausing to flex his less than impressive muscles before finishing them off, blocking every attack as if he knew what they were going to do before they did.

'Hey,' protested Igandar, 'you're stealing my thunder. Literally!'

Zimja looked at all of this with tremendous incredulity. She looked up at Komozarr. He was lounging on his steed, resting his back on the beast's great neck, making paper airplanes.

'Psst,' she said, 'Neville!'

He turned and squinted at her. 'Betty? Is that you? I thought I recognized you.'

'Hey, you two,' said Igandar, 'you are supposed to be mortal enemies. And Sy, you're supposed to be dead. And you Minions—what good are you anyway? You're a disgrace to the forces of evil. In fact, this whole story is turning into a ridiculous farce!'

Komozarr looked at Igandar. 'I'll fix this,' said the Deep Dark Lord of Dread Doom. He pointed at Sy and paralyzed him with a crackly beam of black energy.

'Gak!' said Sy. 'Dude, you're like not supposed to be able to do that.'

Komozarr chuckled. 'You've heard of a *deus ex machina*? Well this is like, the opposite of that. I'm taking over now, and showing you all that I, the Lord of Evil, am truly master here.'

Original Fiction

'But, you can't do that,' said Sy.

'Yes I can,' said Komozarr. 'I got special permission. Right before you arrived.'

'What?' complained the Prince. 'Who gave you special permission?'

I did, said The Author.

At which point the Narrator, who was not the Author, panicked.

'Oh, I get it,' said Zimja. 'It was you, wasn't it?' she said pointing at Sy. 'You have been the Narrator this whole time! I should have known it was you. The silly outfits, the crazy sword, all that inane mumbo jumbo, and you coming back out of nowhere when I killed you.'

I apologize, all of you, said the Author, it is obvious that I will have to change the password to my computer. Sy hacked into it again and was wreaking havoc with my fantasy novels.

Sy...

'Yes, Oh like Great and Gracious and Merciful Author?'

Can it. You're banished to the back of a notebook until I say otherwise.

'Oh dude, like thank you, thank you, thank you,' said Sy, before disappearing into oblivion.

Hmf. Grimblood Von Deathknell. Boy, that is bad.

'Yeah,' said Igandar, 'and what was up with that whole "Part One" nonsense? The title didn't even have anything to do with this story.'

That is true, Grand Igandar.

'And there is another thing I don't understand.'

Yes?

'If he was the Narrator, then how come Zimja could kill him? Shouldn't he have been able to control everything?'

Well, I guess normally, yes. But I like to give my characters a life of their own independent of the plot. I'm funny that way.

'Ooooooh,' said Igandar slowly nodding.

'Er, excuse me, sir,' said Yuk, 'but does that mean the forces of evil are thwarted again?'

I am afraid it does, Yuk. But don't worry, there's always next time. Now begone.

Yuk and his Gruesome Minions fled into the trash can, and Komozarr fell unceremoniously from the sky, his floating steed having disappeared. He got up and dusted off his Hawaiian t-shirt. He looked at Zimja and smiled.

'Hey, Betty—er I mean Zimja—so it looks like we don't have to be mortal enemies now.'

'Yes,' she said with a smile.

Now, would you folks like to get out of this...place... and enter a *real* fantasy world?

'Definitely!' said Igandar. 'And for God's sake, man, but that poor girl in some reasonable clothes won't you?'

I certainly will. Poof.

Then, with a wave of my hand, a magical doorway opened suddenly, leading to Mytheria, a world of ancient secrets, troubled gods, and strange cultures that span a thousand realms.

'Oh, that sounds pretty neat,' said Igandar excitedly. 'Come on, guys!'

Zimja and Komozarr held hands and smiled at one another, and the three of them entered the portal into another place and another time, where the child's heart is never gone.

The End.

Ahem.

That's it. Why are you still reading?

I mean, what are you waiting for, end credits or something?

Written by
Erik Goodwyn

Ok, so there you go.
Now, go home!

Original Fiction

Lucretia's New Mattress

by Danielle Parker

First printed in Bewildering Stories

"Dmitri," said my wife, with that Certain Tone all husbands learn to dread, "We have to TALK."

I suppose the sinking stomach effect is purely psychological in a vampire. I felt it all the same. It wasn't a sensation I'd anticipated this evening. The night had begun just fine. I'd had an especially tasty breakfast, served by my wife's own dainty white hand, of soufflé a la Debutante, followed by a warm chaser of vintage (pre-smoking) Marlboro Man, a richly masculine libation my wife knows I am especially fond of when I retire to the recliner. I had about half an hour before I departed for my nightly stint at the hospital laboratory, and the night ahead looked good. The Las Vegas Vampire Chronicle was open on my knee and my wife perched lovingly on the arm of my chair, running her fingers through my hair, and – well, obviously it was Too Good To Last.

I folded my newspaper in resignation. "What is it now, sweetie?" I said indulgently. "You want a new dress for that dinner with the Paleys? You know, frost-face," and here I tickled her delightfully thin ribs with my finger, "I haven't got that raise yet, but we can afford a new dress. Take the checkbook and go down to Madame Ghoul's and buy whatever catches your fancy, hmm?"

I was still getting kisses, which, although I'd have enjoyed their effect normally, were beginning to cause my heart to palpitate nervously (I speak figuratively, of course). My Beloved Spouse giggled.

"You're a sweetie as always, hubbykins," she said, playfully piercing my ear. I had to shudder with the sheer thrill, although I was getting a little apprehensive. "But I can get by without a new dress, honey."

It was going to be bad. I began tapping my fingers on the free chair arm. "Alright, Lucretia," I said. "What is it this time?"

Lucretia instantly abandoned the chair arm for a Pose in front of the fireplace. I stared. I honestly wasn't sure *what* was coming now. That's why I love the gal, I suppose – every century's a surprise.

"Look at me," she commanded. "Just look at me, dear. Don't I look – tired?"

I looked. I'd taken about a century to get used to the latest look, actually. It isn't easy to perm and color a vampire's hair, given that it isn't really growing, so I'd complained about the expensive orange curls a few times – but Lucretia liked it. The carmine lips were natural, of course. Really, I couldn't see anything that hadn't been there since at least 1955, but I said what husbands always say in these situations. "Um – no. You look nice, honey. Nice."

It was the wrong answer. The fangs flashed, and the claws (bright red and expensive too, as I ought to know) came out. "I look *tired*," she hissed. "*Exhausted*, to be exact. What else would you expect after 208 years on the same dirt?" She drew a deep breath (we've never lost the habit, I'm afraid) and leaned down to spell it out for Stupid. "MATTRESSES, Dmitri. We need new MATTRESSES."

I jumped out of my comfortable recliner in agitation. "Now look, Lucy—"

For my pains I got a needle fingernail stab in my chest. "I've slept on the same bed so long it's growing fresh body hair," she hissed. "The dirt's *stale*. We've *got* to replace it. Mina Paley just redecorated, and I have to admit, the place looks good. *She* looks good. No wonder. *She* gets a decent day's rest—"

"The Paleys were vampirized in New York City in 1932," I yelled, dancing from foot to foot and accidentally knocking over my mug of Marlboro Man into the carpet. I couldn't help thinking I only had two bottles left, which made me really bad-tempered. "*They're* native Americans. Dirt's *easy* for them to replace! *We're* going to have to go back to the Old Country. Do you have any idea how much it's going to *cost* to take a trip to Transylvania?"

"I won't have that nouveau nosferato queening it over me," my wife snarled. She must have realized from my expression that something stronger was still needed. Her face screwed up, and there it came – the WAIL...

I knew when I was finished. "Make the reservations," I said hollowly, racing for my lab coat and car keys. "We can do it next month if we save every penny. Goodnight, dear. I'm off to work."

I was so agitated that I forgot my lunch and had to cadge a few spoiled lab samples from work. But by the time I got back, exhausted and starving, my favorite blood pudding was waiting for me. And Lucy was purring like a vampire turned loose in the blood bank. It was done. We were on our way to Transylvania next month.

Original Fiction

The last time I traveled from the Old World to the New (although this was the other direction this time) had been on a wooden sailing ship, and though Lucretia was still annoyingly nostalgic about that brawny sailor on the quarterdeck, I remembered the aftertaste of weevils and salt pork all too well myself. Thank goodness for the modern day instead! We traveled light, the first time we'd ever left home without Home Comforts (in the form of those boxes that ensure a good day's rest). But we were touching down on Home Soil, so I figured the opportunities for resting should be pretty good.

I had to admit, even I was getting excited by the time the plane landed. But I couldn't show it much, for Lucy (a delectable child, even at her age, which I'd better not mention here if I value my UnDeath) was squealing like one of those mechanical puppies in the toy shop. I got her calmed down enough to disembark, and we bumbled into the passenger terminal with our six carry-on bags (I told you she gets carried away) and the sack of stuff she'd bought while waiting for our plane. I was sure I looked like an ambulatory luggage cart already.

Something went off in my eyes then and nearly blinded me. Lucy let out a shriek. I had a bad moment myself, thinking I'd miscalculated the time difference and landed us in daylight...but no. It was a flashbulb. I could hear an unctuous voice, sounding a lot like my local funeral director, and my name somewhere there in the suavity.

"Aston Yelena welcomes Count and Countess Tepes to their ancestral home of Transylvania," the voice oozed. Something hot and sticky clasped my hand, which, as I came out of my daze, resolved itself into a sense of a human (breathing variety) hand. "Live for Channel 13!"

I dropped all the bags. Actually it wasn't my fault, because Aston Yelena, a tall, portly, aftershave and perspiration scented gentleman who looked like he needed a good bloodletting to lower his cholesterol, squeezed in between myself and my wife and got both thick arms around us. I still wince when I think of the newspaper photo that came out the next day. Lucy had her mouth open in a silly round O, and somehow I was hanging in midair, pinned helplessly against Aston Yelena's sweaty side...and we both looked like Deer Trapped in Headlights. It was an apt metaphor. Modern Day Transylvania was about to hit us.

Everything that happened between the airport and (finally) the hotel room is still pretty jumbled in my mind. I could glimpse faces – in between flashes. Some of them were fleshy pink, and lots of them were thin dead whites. The flashbulbs kept going off and blinding me. There were cheers and a sort of odd, synchronized clapping – and in fact, when the madly popping strobes would let me, I could see official looking badges pinned on a lot of shirt and dress fronts. There was no doubt about it. The Transylvanian Office of Tourism had turned out in force for us.

I was losing it. Lucy was responding to Mr. Yelena's sticky hand and syrupy flattery with the most outrageous lies (and giggles) I'd heard since our courtship. I didn't entirely blame her for the wild stories, though. Who'd want to admit on national television that the prodigals had returned home only to dig up fresh dirt? But the giggles and the handholding had to stop. It was time I showed my fangs.

I put my hand in the middle of the Don Juan's chest and shoved him back into the arms of the nearest TV cameraman. There was a gasp from the crowd. "Ve Are Exhausted," I said regally. "Ve Must Rest. And – if you keep handling my wife I'm going to rip your throat out. *Savvy*, buster?"

The intended effect was spoiled by the fact I was still seeing mostly red flashes, and almost fell over the nearest dropped flight bag as I leaned threateningly forward. Someone with a badge pinned on her chest got my arm and guided me soothingly forward. I could see enough that I could recognize a face that was plastered everywhere – even on that badge. It was old Dracula himself, my elderly Uncle Vlad, as glam as a twenties lounge lizard, holding various temptingly arched damsels in his lustful arms.

He was EVERYWHERE. By the time I reached the limousine I was wincing. Couldn't they have left that disgusting old lecher off the walls? I mean, the amount of vampirizing he did and still does, he's an embarrassment. Ever wonder why so many vampires are female? Uncle Vlad. He was the original Bad, Bad Boy. I felt like sinking into the floor, especially with Lucy beside me – he's on *my* side of the family, worse luck. I'd had a hard time convincing her that the taste didn't run in the blood in the first place.

I thought we'd manage to get some peace and quiet in the hotel room, but no. The room was as tasteful as home – Las Vegas, that is. The beds were overdone, ornate coffins, and there on the walls was – You Know Who. The black and red décor hurt my eyes. And worse yet, when I went to the bar and poured Lucy and myself a much needed drink – there was something wrong with the blood. Really, *really* wrong.

My wife spat, sending flying red goblets everywhere. "What on earth is this?" she shrieked. "Dmitri, are you trying to *poison* me?"

Original Fiction

I tasted my own cautiously. It looked like the real stuff, but when I got it in my mouth – nada. Whatever they had fed this donor on, it wasn't real food. It didn't taste like anyone I knew, for sure.

The truth slowly dawned on me. "Lucy," I said, "This is – synthetic. This is *synthetic* blood!"

It was too much for Lucretia. I really wish she would learn not to cry so noisily, but I could understand the feeling. I made the helpless and desperate sounds that husbands always make at such time and did a lot of back patting. After a while we both calmed down.

"I'm exhausted," I said grimly, ripping the curtains closed as I spoke. "Let's skip the meal and go to bed. How many *hours* were we on that plane?" I staggered off to the bathroom. "You can have the shower, honey. I'm going to hit that coffin right now."

Lucy felt the same way. We got right to bed. Only...well, I hated to say it, but the dirt didn't feel right. Oh it was clean enough. In fact there was this vaguely medicinal, antiseptic smell...they'd found some way of fumigating it, I suppose. It didn't feel right. It wasn't like home. But neither of us said anything. We lay side by side in stony silence, and the day wore on somehow. It was the worst day of sleep I'd had since I'd missed my plane and spent six hours lurking in the Atlanta terminal.

It looked better in the evening. We still got the same synthetic for breakfast, but there was no help for it. I wanted to complain, but Lucy wouldn't let me. She thought we'd upset our waiter, and since he was a fresh-faced young thing glowing beneath his white vampire paint and cute little black uniform (with an Uncle Vlad high collar), she was a little soft on him. Instead I thought longingly of just how close fresh stuff was, in the form of that grease-painted young throat, but of course there are laws now...one just can't Refresh Oneself without consent anymore. I just wished someone had made a law about Uncle Vlad.

"Alright," I said grumpily, getting out the map and tourist guide (dauntingly detailed) that we'd been handed by Mr. Aston Yelena, pre-push. "Let's see about getting that fresh dirt. I want to go home already."

But it wasn't going to be easy. The whole town had changed. The little village on the edge of the river I remembered, with its piney forests and baying wolves in the dusk...I stared at the map with that (figurative, of course) sinking feeling again. Even the name had changed. Draculopsis was what it was now, and it must have had a million people in it...dead or Undead, from the look of the street and plaza names, all involved with the Big Business of Vampirism.

It was at that moment that a flash went off. I knocked over my mug of synthetic (no loss, there) in agitation. It was another news reporter. I got up and lunged, with Lucy hanging off my sleeve and screeching stop at the top of her lungs, and then the flashes started in earnest – I wouldn't look at that photo when it came out next day. But I'm sure I was there, with every fang showing and my wife latched on for dear UnLife.

I had had it. We escaped upstairs, with the hotel management running interference for us, and I had a serious talk with my wife.

"Look," I said. "This isn't what we wanted. We've got to get out of this city – I'm going to starve on this synthetic stuff, and I couldn't sleep last day. Real Dirt, Lucy. We've got to find *Real Dirt*. Let's hire a car and escape."

So we did. I called down to the desk and made the arrangements, and in a few hours, wrapped in shawls and looking like two ill-fed peasant women, we crept down the service stairs to the back parking lot. The car, kindly provided by the hotel (I had almost forgiven them for those beds) was waiting at the curb. Our luggage was already in it, and as we slammed the doors and gunned into the night (as best as we could: it wasn't an American model car, and seemed to be smoking a little) I could feel my spirits rising. No flashes. No oily representatives of the press. Best of all, no more plastic versions of Uncle Vlad. We were heading for the real Transylvania.

My mood dipped a little after we'd driven for a few hours. First of all, it seemed like we just couldn't get out of the city. And then we got into some kind of industrial area, with inefficient Soviet era factories belching smoke and worse into the night. I turned the car's direction south. Once upon a time...long, long ago...we'd actually had a castle here. Well, ok, it was Uncle Vlad's. But I'd grown up there, before sweet Cousin Anastasia vampirized me (the details of which I never really explained to Lucretia, but let's say there were some good memories there still). Like the fish swimming upstream, I was returning home, and hoping I wouldn't die before I got a good day's sleep.

Four hours later, the car topped a rise. The sky was beginning to lighten, but I couldn't feel too much fear. For

Original Fiction

over that hill, just as it had been centuries ago, was a castle. The Castle. I stopped the car and just stared, letting the view sink in. Home. It looked like home.

For a few minutes anyway. There was a pause. Lucretia said, "Honey...was that parking lot there in your day?"

I started the car. "Look, Lucy, do you have to spoil everything? At least, I can't see Uncle Vlad yet, and when we get close enough...don't point him out, ok?"

She was a sweetie. She didn't say a word. We pulled into the parking lot, next to the rest of the tourist cars, and got out. There was a sound of hammering and saws and the like wafting from inside on the soft early morning air.

I walked in. The entrance hall had been changed, and there he was...the hugest, most lurid, most annoying representation of my uncle I'd ever seen, larger than UnLife size and twice as lustful and stereotypical. They'd made a complete plastic statue of him, and I can tell you he really isn't seven feet tall, like he was in that...that Idol. There were tourists around him of course, a few simpering girls and one dreamy eyed black haired teenager who would have had Uncle Vlad's fangs pressed into instant service (I've warned him that this underage thing is going to get him into trouble one of these days, but then, when you're as old as he is, everyone's underage).

I kept walking. The entrance hall had been Touristerized, but as we climbed the stairs it was clear they hadn't yet managed to finish the job. The sounds of the saws and the hammering and a man singing off-key came louder. As I got to the landing an official sort with a Transylvanian Tourist Office badge rushed out officiously.

"Here," he shouted, "This part's not open to the public. You'll have to stay below!"

I drew myself up and fixed him with my most mesmerizing stare (and according to Lucy, it's a doozy). "I am Count Dmitri Alexander Tepes," I intoned threateningly. "How *dare* you bar me from my own ancestral home!"

The victim gasped and tried to take hold of my hand (falling upon one knee to do so). I held the desired appendage up out of his reach and stirred him with my foot.

"Up, base servant," I said. "Um...what's your name?"

"Anton Rochovak, Your Highness," he blubbered, getting up with great difficulty (it seemed most of the breathers in Transylvania could have used a little bleeding now and then for their health). "W...what can I do for you?"

The title wasn't quite right, but I didn't correct him. "We want to see the castle," I told him. "Lead the way."

The first, second, and third floors were a ruin. Everything was ripped up and getting renovated. My heart sank. Not only was Uncle Vlad unfairly (copiously) represented, but there was a statue and portrait of myself, looking much better than my uncle of course, on the stairs to the East Wing and in the Long Hall on the third floor. I could feel my throat tighten, all the same. It was...I don't know how to explain it. I felt like a ghost, seeing everything around me changed over time. There was no place for me here. And it looked like we weren't even going to find a place to sleep.

"That's it, Your Highness," said our (by now exhausted) guide, stopping at last. "There's just the attic."

I saw Lucy stop fidgeting. "The attic?" she said.

Anton Rochovak shrugged. "Hasn't been renovated yet," he said. "The dust in that place!" He shuddered. "We're not sure it's worth cleaning up, to tell the truth. The dungeons, now. Tourists love dungeons. I suppose we'll do the attic eventually, bring in a few bats, who knows. But it's not worth climbing for now."

I didn't know where Lucy was going with this, but I saw her eyes get a certain mad gleam that I recognized. "Dust," she said. "Hasn't been renovated. Lots of dust?"

Anton Rochovak blinked in surprise. "Lots of dust, yes."

I suddenly got it. "Lead on," I commanded. "We want to see this attic!"

"It's a pretty steep climb," he said doubtfully. "I've just had my uniform dry-cleaned."

I seized the candle out of his hand. "We'll see it ourselves. Wait here."

I helped Lucy up the stairs. With bated breath we pushed up the opening...and it was just as Anton had said. There was dust. Bags of it, barrels of it, shining silvery dust, undisturbed for the centuries.

Lucy turned to me in ecstasy. "Dmitri," she breathed, "The best of beds...like feathers! *Get some plastic bags!*"

So that is how we got Lucretia's New Mattress. And mine, too, of course. I have to admit the trip was worth it. I never slept on a bed so soft, so scented of home – home's not *there* anymore, of course. But we brought what was left of it back with us.

But it was the last vacation I agreed to take for another seventy-five years. And for some reason, Lucy didn't ask.

RPG Corner (con't)

the little efforts and tasks the heroes will need to do to prepare, because it's *boring*. Why do you think directors and screenwriters squeeze it all into a 30 second amalgamation set to music? Real training, real library research and real fabrication of weapons and toys is tedious, monotonous and uninteresting for action and drama oriented games, and should be left out of RPGs.

Well that's about it for this rant. Next month I'll have something all new to complain about. Excited, aren't you? Yeah, me neither.

Come Hell (con't)

and friends to take pleasure in, the closing of a chapter in one's life is rarely anything other than bittersweet, and knowing that I can never go back, that it will never be the way it was before, makes me sad.

To capture the experiences, the moment, I have tried to put my thoughts to paper (virtual paper) but have found my will lacking. Ideas abound, and the vague outlines of a dozen stories now litter my computer, but I don't have the strength to flesh them out. I have been relegated to the role of editor, taking solace in the rules and structure of grammar and usage (which is more fortuitous than one might think... T-Press has two in-production titles and I have promised several people that I'd read and review their works but have not been able to find the time until now!)

Rest assured, my craft will return. Like Superman in the presence of Kryptonite, I have lost my powers, but that loss is transient, and my stories will return now that the storm is gone. Boundaries will continue to fall and Jonny Cougar will have more adventures. Other worlds will spring forth from me and from all the other writers affected by this tragedy. We just need time.

For those who have expressed an interest in helping out; your kind offers and prayers are appreciated. The best way to help is to continue to support T-Press and other local authors and independent publishers. If you need some recommendations (other than our books), I suggest Andrew Fox's *Fat White Vampire Blues* and the works of Robert Aspirin. Keep reading the *Illuminata* and tell your friends to read it too.

Release of T-Press' two in-production titles, *Jewel of Truth* (Boundary's Fall, 3) and *Beacons of Tomorrow*, the short fiction anthology, have been delayed but not cancelled. With a little luck, both stories will be released close to their originally planned dates. I was going to take this month off from the *Illuminata* as well but decided that it would not be right to let a little life-altering storm ruin this newsletter's third birthday party. Happy Birthday *Illuminata*

I have to say, honestly, that when I started writing for *The Illuminata* I never thought it would last three years. My doubts had nothing to do with the quality of the newsletter or with the commitment of its editor and publisher, Bret Funk. Both were outstanding. No, my doubts had to do with years of experience in watching newsletters come and go like pumpkins on Halloween. I'm very glad that I was wrong, and I've greatly enjoyed my time doing the Writer's Block column here. I wish the newsletter and Bret the best. I look forward to more years and more columns. Happy birthday, *Illuminata*. Happy birthday, Bret.

— Charles Gramlich

Facts and a concern with change are the stuff that science fiction is made of; science fiction that ignores facts and change can be made less frightening and more popular, but inasmuch as it is superficial, stupid, false-to-fact, timid, foolish or dull, it is minor in another and more important way, and it is certainly bad as science fiction. ... [science fiction's] attraction lies ... in the unique opportunity it offers for placing familiar things in unfamiliar contexts, and unfamiliar things in familiar contexts, thereby yielding fresh insights and perspective.

—Alexi Panshin

Here's to the *Illuminata* and her waterlogged editors, who had the spunk to shrug off the floods... may the show go on for many happier birthdays!

— Danielle Parker