



The Illuminata

Delving Deep Into The Worlds of Science Fiction and Fantasy

Rules and Grammar: Glorious Tools or Proof That God Hates Writers

By Bret Funk

I'm going to switch gears for a while, shifting from esoteric categorizations and criticisms based solely on my own likes and dislikes, and dive into the nitty-gritty of writing, the boring drone of mechanics, usage, grammar and vocabulary that I'm sure has most readers flipping ahead to the other contributors' articles. As the Illuminations Contest closes and I resume my mantle as *Beacons of Tomorrow* editor, taking our runners-up through the workshopping process, the guidelines for good writing are forefront in my mind. Yet I approach this subject with a mixture of timidity and temerity; I know I'll tread into territory patrolled by those with far more experience (and far harsher opinions), but I also realize that my own writing has benefited from a deepening understanding of the common mistakes made by (and simple rules ignored by) beginning writers.

Beginning writers... Who am I kidding? A fair number of famous (and wealthy) writers make these same mistakes (is it a mistake if you do it on purpose?) in most if not all of their works. I should qualify this series of articles by stating that there is a significant difference between good writing and successful writing. One does not need to write well if one can capture a large enough fan base with a vivid and vital storyline (or if one has a good enough PR Department). My goal with this series is to help improve writing, making it more fetching to the editors, agents, and publishers who determine whether or not a writer has a chance to grow a fan base.

I should also warn my readers of another danger:

as you learn about the rules of strong writing, as you take them to heart, understand them, and make them your own, the enjoyment you receive from reading may suffer. At least in my case, mistakes which once barely caught my eye now glare at me from the page. Weak constructions, dialogue attribution, poor word choice, typos and errors in grammar incite the Editor to battle, and the far more passive Reader sits in the background, reminiscing about the good old days when I could read a novel without a pencil near at hand. I find it difficult to distract the Editor long enough to immerse myself in a book, and a sad consequence of the improvement to my writing (there had better be improvement, for the price I've paid!) is that it now takes effort to capture the magical excitement which once came so easily to me when I held a book.

Where to begin? In the panel discussions I've had, especially those with budding young writers eager to get their stories in print, it amazed me how few thought proper grammar an important element. Most believed the words themselves far outweighed the way those words were presented. "Authors break rules all the time," they told me when pressed on the subject.

It's true, but how do you know when to break a rule if you don't *know* the rule? Though the urge to press against the boundaries set by others is a driving human need, especially in the young, an anarchistic approach to writing won't work. Without structure your writing will be amateurish at best, indecipherable at worst. Some 'rules' beg to be argued (Should I put a comma here, or would it be better there), and some cannot (Should I put a period or a question mark at the end of "Is this a sentence"?). Most rules fall into the nebulous middle, and their use or misuse will be determined as much by the writer's intended style as by the boldfaced type in grammar texts.

Rules, however often we choose to ignore them, remain important to the writer. I'll use punctuation as an example, for I believe that of the structural aspects of writing, punctuation is the one least open to interpretation. Even in dialogue, where it is

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The RPG Corner v6: Reflections on Gaming

by Doug >!< Roper of EPIC Gaming

I've spent most of the last few years talking about what I feel are the core do's and don'ts of Gaming, and I have tried to offer what guidance I can to aspiring game designers and Game Masters to help them achieve what they want with their games, both as authors of original material and as folks hoping to entertain their friends. This month, I'd like to share with my loyal readers (both of them), a bit about why I choose to engage in this activity.

The process of creating a good RPG scenario is similar to creating any substantial writing. RPG scenario design falls somewhere between creating a novel and a play, and like either of those forms or storytelling, it sinks or swims according mainly to the author's understanding of his audience, and his ability to translate his ideas and characters from abstraction to the written word. I believe that RPGs can be just as relevant and important as great books or plays, if the author invests the time and care into the creation of the work.

As I have said many times in the past, RPGs can be as meaningful or as meaningless as the Game Master and Players desire. They can exist as pure pulp entertainment or as tools of self-discovery, depending on taste. For the Game Master who is more inclined to use his games for the latter, he has a powerful tool at his disposal. I am squarely in the latter category; using Role-Playing to explore as much as I can about the nature of whatever issue I feel like inserting into the scenario.

I prefer the **Immersive** Model of Role Playing, meaning that I want the Players to experience and interact with the fictional world solely through the perceptions and knowledge of their Characters. To make this as easy as I can, I as the Game Master, the author of the entire world and everyone in it who is not controlled by a Player, must make the world as detailed and fully realized as possible. This is the main appeal for me as a Game Master. I want to create a believable world for my Players, because the easier it is for them to believe, the easier it is for me to unabashedly tell the stories that I have written. The stories that I write are not merely entertainment. They are the lens I use to focus on things that are important to me personally.

My own games, like many novels nowadays, are platforms for me to offer my own commentary on current events, and wrestle with themes ranging from global to deeply individual. I use my games to place my Players into situations where they, through their Characters, must deal with the issues that are of greatest importance to myself. Seeing them study these problems, and discuss them from within the context of the game often helps me to re-evaluate my own attitudes and opinions on those same issues, allowing me a kind of closed

forum where I can coerce my friends into roundtable discussions for my own benefit. They think that they are playing a game, trying to solve a puzzle or resolve an obstacle, and to be sure they are, but hopefully when the game is over they will keep asking themselves the same questions that were posed to their Characters within the context of the game. The best games always affect the Players as much as the Characters and they can hardly affect the Players unless they are deeply meaningful to the Game Master.

In my most recent game, I tackled many very sticky issues, including the joys and dangers of deep, emotional connections to people (love in this particular example, but deep friendships were tested as well), individual responsibility and accountability, finding the strength within oneself to be the sole dissenting point of view in a world where such things are punishable by death, and above all, courage and honesty. These themes and issues are hard enough to deal with between real people in the real world, why would any one want to deal with them in the context of a *game*? My Players gleefully did so, because I worked very hard to make the issues transparent enough for them to begin to care about them without realizing what it was exactly they were caring about, but mainly it worked because my Players care about those things as much as I do.

It's hard enough to work meaningful issues into a novel or play, but doing it in a Role Playing Game is next to impossible, unless you take the material as seriously as an author takes his book. Gaming can offer a window into a thousand worlds and a thousand thousand ways to reexamine your own. For writers it's a great way to exercise the muscles of creation, and a cheap way to test those creations against a like-minded audience (your Players) to look for flaws, and ways to improve the product. How many authors out there would give an important body part to have the chance to see how their characters would really act in a difficult situation, if they weren't an extension of themselves? Gaming offers that option. It allows for the immediate consumption of the words the author has set down as settings and characters and events, and almost instant feedback from a sampling of the target audience.

For thousands of years, all of our history, all of our most important lessons were passed down through stories. It's one thing to listen to these fables, parables and myths and take what meaning we can from them, but it is another thing entirely to have the opportunity to live through them, and it is exactly the kind of thing the RPGs are best suited to do, in the hands of capable Game Masters and willing Players. This is what I use Gaming for, the exploration of self and of themes

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Woke up this morning a bit startled. I did the math, as we tend to do at the beginning of a new year, and smiled. Five years. That's not an official total. I look at it as if I was earning a degree, attending University of Sci-Fi (USF). I'd guess I'm a senior+ by now. If that's the case, I should be looking towards graduation. But I don't ever want to get a diploma and leave this environment. I want to be a professional student and dabble in everything.

My first *Illuminata* article was in the December 2002 issue, joining the staff after our Editor, Bret Funk's, sci-fi vs. science fiction vs. speculative fiction debate. Re-reading my first fledgling article was rather humbling, like reading my freshman term papers. I vividly remember the interview process when I stumbled onto the Tyrannosaurus Press website and noticed they were looking for staff writers. Not having any idea what a "staff writer" was, I wrote my college entrance paper, crossed my fingers and waited for that fateful letter. What I received was an email from Bret that basically said, "Let's see where this goes..." I boldly (okay, rather timidly) and officially entered the world of science fiction. It was a benchmark, one of many. Like being baptized—and in many ways, I was—now, I had a definite date for the event.

My mouse is a fairy wand, my keyboard, my pad and paper. I get to play in the biggest library in the known universe through my cyber-inbox with writers, actors, animators, fandom, all without getting grit in my eyes or getting too dirty. I've learned so much about life, and living, by rubbing elbows and chatting with the most fascinating people in science fiction circles (sci fi, speculative fiction). The last five years have reminded me how lost I was *before*—when I realized I liked *Star Trek* back in my elementary school days. I was ignorant, uneducated. My only outlet consisted of movies or reading to satisfy my longing for belonging and discovery. Where else could I absorb such heady and varied information on my own?

My science/speculative fiction curriculum includes:
Hard science fact and fiction taught by Mike Miller, Bill Johnson and (gasp!) Joe Haldeman (Physics/Biology)

Animation and special effects with Anthony Mark Viverito, Jim Small, and Doug Hamer (Graphic Arts/Technology)

Art and media techniques from Albrecht, Lee Seed and Larry Price (Art)

Filk with CornFilk and Cee Malm (Music)

Acting classes under Don Pedro Colley (Drama)

Unique composition of Fandom with Scott Maehner, Rusty Hevelin, Gay Haldeman (Sociology/Psychology)

Fandom collecting with Denny Lynch (Humanities)

Master classes from writers David Drake, Tamara Siler Jones and Mickey Zucker Reichert, and screenwriter, Gino Dykstra (English)

Writing/editing and publishing taught by Bret Funk and Mark Phillips (Journalism).

The USF student body of fandom came complete with a mentor and best friend, inventor(s), collectors, rocket scientists (really!), some plain old gals like me, some young bucks and does, and a few obsessive fanboys. I'm having waaaay more fun than I did in graduate school the first time around!

Not all my education has been long-distance-learning (unless you consider traveling to conventions). Some experiences require face-to-face encounters with fandom and SF characters/players. I am a shameless "Creation" convention attendee (the group that offers Star Trek cons). And while being forced to leave my beloved Arizona three years ago, I was transported to Iowa, not far from Riverside, Captain Kirk's birthplace that now sports a new casino. That sad and fateful move allowed me to work with Mindbridge, spawn of Joe Haldeman's brainchild, SFLIS—Science Fiction League of Iowa Students (pronounced "syphilis". Figures, huh?), an organization that sponsored ICON, AnimeIowa and GamaCon. While in Iowa, I joyously discovered all aspects of science fiction. I attended annual conventions, reading groups and started anime and roll playing groups while still keeping my link with *Illuminata* to keep me grounded.

At a recent convention, Rusty Hevelin, a 65+ year science fiction fan, himself a living legend, spoke about his friend Corey Akerman and the people they played with, among them, Robert Heinlein. Corey Akerman is considered to be the ultimate fan of science fiction by many old-timers in this genre, the fan-base of fandom. I've heard the long-timers speak of him and other "first fans" not as if they were god-like, though almost. This kind of experience has to be in person, no cyber substitutes can match the rising goose bumps as history speaks her fragile truths before the speakers die.

The University of Sci-Fi is always changing, ever adding new courses to the curriculum, new faculty and new learning experiences. Sitting in class, in front

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The Fourth Dimension and Time

by Joe Vadalma

You've probably heard it said that the fourth dimension is time. This idea is especially popular with SF authors when writing time travel stories. But what does this mean? And what are the implications?

Forgetting about time for a while, in ordinary life we deal with three dimensions: left-right, forward-back and up-down. What this means is that every material object and every location in the universe can be described mathematically using only three numbers. When we measure a material object, its width, length and height are called its *dimensions*. If we want to describe the location of an airplane, we give its coordinates as latitude, longitude and altitude. Longitude is the distance from an imaginary line cutting through Greenwich England, latitude is the distance from the equator and altitude is its distance above the earth; in other words, the three dimensions of its location. For objects located on the surface of the earth, only two dimensions are required since altitude is not considered because from a human viewpoint, the earth is a relatively flat surface as long as we don't consider such features as mountains and tall buildings.

In mathematics, the number of dimensions is shown by a superscript. For example, a cube exactly 2 inches at each dimension can be said a 2^3 inch cube (a two cubic inch cube). A two-inch line is a one dimensional object and can be written as 2^1 inch line. A two-inch square drawn on a sheet of paper would be 2^2 inch square (two square inch square). This also shows that objects of one, two or three dimensions can be illustrated by simple drawings or models. But, what about an object with four or more dimension? They can be shown mathematically by using superscripts (sometimes called powers) of 4, 5, or any number. But how do you illustrate such an object? For example, in a fourth dimensional object, how do you show a dimension at right angles to the other three?

Before I attempt to give an answer to the questions in the last paragraph, let's consider the attributes of objects in the lower dimensions. Imagine an infinite flat surface. On this surface, there is a line of infinite length. Let's say that there are number of points that live on that line. They can move left or right on that line but have no concept of the other dimensions. A point can never pass another point. Another race living on the surface are the Flatlanders. They can move left-right and forward-back but have no concept of up-down. A Flatlander could take one of the points and move it through the mysterious second dimension and put it on the other side of a fellow point. However, to the Flatlander, the line is an impassable barrier.

Now, as a three dimensional being, I have magical properties to the Flatlander. If I put my five fingers on the sheet of paper, the Flatlander sees me as five small blobs. If I remove a flat object into the third dimension, I can reverse it. The Flatlander first sees the object disappear and then returned reversed, an impossibility from his standpoint. I have other powers that Flatlanders are in awe of. I can appear and disappear within a closed space. I can see inside objects, including the Flatlanders' bodies. I can pick up a Flatlander and carry him across the barrier line. From this you can see that a fourth dimensional being would have similar extraordinary powers in our three dimensional world.

To get back to the question of illustrating a fourth dimensional object, we can show a three-dimensional object in two dimensions by opening it up. For example, a cube has six surfaces. If we unfold these surfaces into the form of a cross, we show the cube in two dimensions. The equivalent fourth dimensional object is called a hypercube and consists of eight cubes connected in four dimensions. If we unfold this into a three dimensional object, we would see eight cubes, four stacked on top of each other and the other four attached to one of the cubes in the stack, one on each side.

Time as the Fourth Dimension

Now it is debatable whether time is actually a fourth dimension. But, for sake of argument, let's assume that is. The implications of this are threefold. One is that all time, past, present, and future exist together in some way and that what we consider time passing is really only our traveling along a fourth dimension from past to present to future. It also seems to imply the possibility of travel in the reverse direction from the present to the past or speeding up our travel forward into the future. Thirdly, from the foregoing you can only come to conclusion that the future is predetermined, since it already exists and cannot be changed.

If you could view the fourth dimension (if it is time), you would see yourself extending to the point where you were born in one direction and up to the point of your death in the future. The same with everything around you. If not too distant in the fourth dimension, you could view any object from the point of its origin to its dissolution and all the changes that occurred to it.

Now a person who could travel into time would have some of the powers of a fourth dimensional being. He could appear in a locked room simply by

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The Writer's Block: Rest in Peace, Short Story!

by Charles Gramlich

Every once in a while you'll hear it. The short story is dead. Even the thought makes me mourn. I like short stories. I like to read them and I like to write them. They are a very different kind of art form than novels, and sometimes they are the *perfect* form.

No novel could express so well the ideas behind Tom Godwin's "The Cold Equations," Lester Del Rey's "Helen O'Loy," or Arthur C. Clarke's "The Nine Billion Names of God." No novel could maintain the absolute horror that suffuses the entire length of Joe Lansdale's "The Steel Valentine." John D. MacDonald's "Hangover" tells a story that could never be sustained at novel length, and yet it ends with—to me—the most horrific moment in all of literature. And there are reasons why "Flowers for Algernon" by Daniel Keyes and "Nightfall" by Isaac Asimov work better as stories than when expanded to novels.

We humans live our days as moments. Just as novels are made up of scenes, so too are our lives. Even if our lives are epic, we don't experience them that way, we don't know they were epic until—usually after we're dead—someone writes about us. And none of us are ever going to be trilogies. The short story reflects the reality of how we live. We lose it at the risk of losing ourselves.

Fortunately, I don't believe the short story form is quite dead, although I do think it's hurting. In the 1930s Robert E. Howard made a good living from writing short stories. James Sallis has talked of earning pretty good money from short stories in the 1970s, money that he could not get for those stories today. He writes novels almost exclusively now because there is no economic incentive to do otherwise. Heck, I made more money myself from short stories in the 1990s than I do now, which is part of the reason I'm writing a lot more non-fiction these days.

There *are* markets for stories today, of course, but the circulation for most fiction magazines is down, money is tighter, and many magazines are cutting back on fiction, leaving a lot of competition for the remaining slots. If you want to give your stories away for nothing you can find places on the net that might take them, although even there you'll find competition. But I don't believe any writer just starting out could make a living from short stories. I don't believe even an established writer could make a living unless, perhaps, they were picking up royalty checks on a lot of older stories and collections.

What does all this mean for those of you who still

want to write short stories? Well, it means that you need to write them for other reasons than just to make money. And it means you need to be creative in finding outlets for them.

A lot of small online magazines run a mix of stories and poetry, and I often find them by checking the links to other writers' blogs. Entering contests is another way to find possible markets, and newsletters like *The Illuminata*, local newspapers, and supplemental magazines sometimes use fiction. Or join online writers' groups and work with other members to put together a contest or publish a group anthology. Maybe some of you even have what it takes to start your own magazine. Do the things that connect you with other writers, and through those connections you'll find opportunities.

Finally, remember that if you love writing short fiction you need to support it wherever it appears. At the risk of sounding a little harsh, those of you who only read novels and never think about short stories (or poetry) should perhaps consider the following paraphrase of a rather famous quote.

First they came for the poets, but I wasn't a poet so I did nothing. Then they came for writers of short stories, but I never read or wrote stories and so I did nothing. Then they came for the novelists and the readers of novels, and I was one of those. But by that time there wasn't anyone left to do anything.

Illuminations Contest Closed

As of December 31st, the 2006 Illuminations SF Writing Contest is closed, and no entries received postmarked after that date will be considered for the contest. Our multi-national panel of judges is hard at work reading and rating the stories, and we hope to have the winning entry announced by the April edition. Authors of stories that score high enough for definite inclusion, or who qualify as runners-up will be contacted as the story scores are tabulated.

I'm happy to report that this contest was significantly more successful than the last, possibly ensuring that future contest/anthologies will become a staple of Tyrannosaurus Press. The sampling of stories I have read show promising talent, and I look forward to putting together a second collection of undiscovered talent.

Reviews

Rebel Fay

Barb & J.C. Hendee

Roc, Jan 2007

\$23.95, Hardcover, 384 pgs.

ISBN 0451461215

Review by Harriet Klausner

Ever since he found the skulls of his grandmother and father and learned that his mother was being held prisoner by the elfin caste of Anmaglahk (Assassins) Leesil is obsessed with going into Elven Territories and rescuing her. His lover Dhampire Magiere, the sage Wynn, and the dog Chap, a Fay taking mortal form accompany him. He knows none of them will be welcome in the Elven lands because Mortangel Father hates humans and is doing his best to set them against each other in their own lands.

Caught in a blizzard, something guides them to a labyrinth of caves and sets them on an underground path that leads to the Elven Territories. Before they can go to look for Leesil's mother, Most Aged Father tells Leesil that he will free her if he finds out the names of the rebels who are trying to free themselves from his rule. Leesil refuses and Chap leads him to his mother who due to magic cannot leave the area. When Magiere's Dhampire nature surfaces, she is put on trial and only Leesil can save her if the land and the ancestors accept his half-elven heritage.

Rebel Fay brings readers one step closer to understanding why Leesil's mother trained him as an assassin, a weapon to be used against the unknown enemy of the elves and why Magiere was created with the blood of the five races running through her veins. Filled with plenty of action, romance and elven intrigue, Magiere and Leesil work together against their common enemies to free the latter's mother and cast doubts on Most Aged Father's ability to lead.

Only enemies speak the truth; friends and lovers lie endlessly, caught in the web of duty.

— Stephen King

Feast of Souls

C.S. Freidman

Daw, Jan 2007

\$25.95, Hardcover

ISBN: 0756404320

Review by Harriet Klausner

King Danton Aurelius calls the immortal sorcerer Magisters to his castle because his third son, Prince Andovan, is wasting away from a devastating illness. Magister Colivar immediately knows Andovan is dying from the incurable Wasting, a self inflicted lifestyle disease in which a Magister uses the life essence of a consort until that person dies. No one knows who wasted the prince.

Meanwhile Kamala, a sorcerer witch with no consort, wants to become the first female Magister, but no one will train her, as women are not deemed strong enough to become a Magister. Kamala pursues her dream, hiding her poorly-controlled power behind the face of a lowly witch. Colivar realizes that an unknown woman somehow has broken the gender barrier to become a Magister and has used Andovan as her consort. Andovan, with Colivar's, help fakes a suicide in order to go undercover to uncover the identity of the woman who gave him the wasting disease. An irate Danton fires his Royal Magister Ramirus and replaces him with evil Kostas, who also hunts down the source of the wasting.

The first tale of the Magister trilogy is a fascinating fantasy built upon the premise that the source of magic is throwaway people; society, especially the royals, accepts the premise that the Magisters use someone's essence to fuel their power. Readers will feel for Andovan, though he previously did not blink when someone else suffered from the wasting (mindful of some stem cell research born-again supporters who become vocal advocates when someone they love might be helped with a cure). Readers will appreciate this opening tale that provides a deep look at a society that condones the source of magic in spite of the cost being the death of others.

Reviews

The Morgaine Chronicles by Joe Vadalma

What if a thousand-year-old sorcerer disguised as an astrologer and psychic, and his former mistress, a powerful sorceress, lived today? Pity poor Melody Trent who falls in love with the sorcerer and is drawn into his strange magical world. The first two books in this series, *Morgaine and Michael* and *Morgaine and Melody*, tells her story. A tale of black magic, love, sex, demons and dark jealousy. In Book 3, *Morgaine and Raven*, Michael the sorcerer disappears. Melody hires a paranormal detective, Raven Lenore, to find him. Raven, however, gets more than she bargained with as she encounters Morgaine the witch, a demon, a robot, a maniacal Colonel out to steal the robot and many dangerous secrets of the sorcerer. In Book 4, *Morgaine and Gretchen*, we learn the witch's secret. It tells the story of how she became a sorceress and later a demon. In Book 5, *Morgaine and Asmodeus*, Melody, Michael and Raven must fight against one of the lords of the underworld. In Book 6, *Morgaine and Armageddon*, Morgaine and Asmodeus have a plan to bring about the end of the world. In Book 7, *Morgaine and Moonwood*, a young couple move into Michael's abandoned mansion and encounter ghosts, demons and the witch/demon Morgaine. Morgaine and Asmodeus have another diabolic plan to take over the world.

Morgaine and Michael: The story of Melody Trent, a modern woman who falls in love with Michael Ellul, a thousand year old sorcerer, and is drawn into his strange and dangerous world of the occult.

Morgaine and Melody: Morgaine Fabiano, a modern day witch, wishes to sacrifice Melody Trent to Asmodeus in order to give Michael Ellul another thousand years of life.

Morgaine and Raven: Several years after the events described in *Morgaine and Melody*, Raven Lenore, a private investigator, is hired by Melody Trent Ellul, who is now middle-aged, to find her missing husband, Michael. However, what starts out as a simple missing person case, turns out to be a dangerous mission involved with the occult and evil demonic forces.

Morgaine and Gretchen: The story of how Morgaine Fabiano became first a sorceress and then a demon

Morgaine and Asmodeus: Morgaine uses black magic to save Michael from the archdemon Asmodeus and gain his love back from Melody.

Morgaine at Doomsday. Can Michael, Melody and Raven save the world from the Apocalypse? And what part does the demon witch Morgaine play in the End of Days?

Morgaine and Moonwood. What happens when a young couple move into the abandoned mansion. Morgaine and Asmodeus are using them as pawns in a dangerous game to rule the world.

These Ebooks are available at <http://pageturners.com>, <http://www.fictionwise.com>, and ebooks.com. My web site, The Fantastic World of Papa Joe, is: <http://fantasticworld.cafe150.com>

Airs Beneath The Moon Toby Bishop

Ace, Jan 2007

\$6.99, Mass Market, 336 pgs.

ISBN 0441014623

Review by Harriet Klausner

On Deeping Farm in the uplands, Larkyn Hamley finds a horse in rundown condition and nurses it back to health without realizing it is pregnant. Char goes into labor and gives birth to Tup who has wings and is therefore the property of the Duke of Oc. The winged mares are the duchy's only defense if war ever comes to the land. Larkyn isn't thinking of politics as she cares for and bonds with Tup until the Horse Mistress Philippa Winter comes to the farm.

Winter knows at first glance that Tup and Larkyn are imprinted and nothing short of death can part them. Both must go to the Academy of Air to train, which will be hard on Larkyn because the girls in training will see her as a country bumpkin and Tup looks like a mongrel of different types of flying horses. When they arrive at the Academy, the duke's son takes a special interest in Tup, an ill omen because the diabolical heir wants something and with his father dying very few will be able to say no to him. Larkyn plans to outwit him once she figures out what it is he plans.

Toby Bishop, known to her fans as Louise Marley, has written a classic fantasy with an evil duke vs. a pretty strong-willed female, who with allies helping her outwits her enemies. There is plenty of action in this sweet adult fairy tale and teens that like fantasy will also enjoy this great story.

Reviews

Soldier of Sidon

Gene Wolfe

Tor, 2006

\$24.95, Hardcover, 319 pgs.

ISBN 0-765-31664-1

Reviewed by D. L. Parker

What is it that makes Wolfe's 'Soldier' series, featuring the forgetful Latro, my least favorite of his works? I mean, I *adore* the man's writing, for the most part. If I ever meet Mr. Wolfe in person, I shall either be dumbstruck with awe, or gabble something disjointed and drooling and stupid while I feverishly wring his hand, the way fans do the world over, when they finally meet The Man in the flesh. At his best, I don't compare Gene Wolfe unfavorably to *any* author. Every university literature department should hand out their own Gene Wolfe classics to the dewy-eyed hopeful coeds, right along with all those dusty tomes written by dead white heroes. Move over, C. S. Lewis, Thomas Mann, Herman Hesse, and the rest of you who purport to write great metaphysical literature! There's a serious competitor out there who just might swipe your mantels right off your shoulders.

I suppose that part of the problem is that Latro, the narrator of 'Soldier of Sidon' and its prequels, is handicapped in a particularly difficult way. You see, Latro has a memory problem. He wakes up every morning from sleep a clean-swiped plate, without even the knowledge of his name. Fortunately, he doesn't forget how to write, and so he commits his personal history to a scroll, so he can read it the next morning. The story we read, of course, is that scroll, and every day we follow the adventures of this broken vessel, whose personal history leaks out of him every night, in a little death more deathly than most of us dream.

As if to compensate for this problem, Latro sees the supernatural world around him, unlike ordinary mortals. Gods, demons, supernatural beetles, and yellow-eyed, advise-dispensing black panthers, not to mention a bloodthirsty pseudo-woman (who hints of the vampires of Wolfe's earlier science fiction series), all make themselves comfortable in his presence. *All* of them seem to have some hidden designs upon our hero, even if it's only to bless him.

And I guess, this is where I start to have a problem. Latro himself is perfectly a-ok with these visitations (and ancient Egypt, site of his current outing, must be perfectly *overstuffed* with the supernatural, to judge by how they keep poor Latro awake).

But give us a *hint* here, Mr. Wolfe. Do we take these visitors on their own terms, the way straight man, ever-respectful Latro himself does? Just because a cow-headed creature *says* she's a god, do we take her word for it? What *is* a god, *exactly*? How come the Egyptians can imagine the sun arriving on a boat, and the Hellenes, as a fiery chariot driven by pretty Phoebus, and Latro can see either version of good old Sol? Are the gods merely meant to be manifestations of a collective cultural consciousness, or is there some science fiction explanation (that we have yet to encounter in the series) for all these varied divinities and supernatural beings?

So that's the problem. I'm just hanging on, hoping some future installment will help me make sense of Latro's visions, too modern and too cynical to just take it on faith, the way the narrator does, that indeed There Be Gods With Cow and Jackal Heads. The narrator's far too sensible (described by one and all as a good, brave, and honest man) for me to believe him crazy. Latro's telling the truth as he sees it, but... well, I'm reminded of an interview with John C. Wright that I once read. Mr. Wright (another author I highly recommend) commented that he found Gene Wolfe a little "too deep" for him. Mr. Wolfe, I've followed you faithfully from the Old Sun to the New Sun to the Long and Short of it, but I'm thrashing here, *really* thrashing. In the next installment of Latro's adventures, you need to give this poor dumb (bottle) blonde a hint! What the heck is going *on* in this story?

Wolfe's *Soldier* series has been compared to the fantastic historical works of Mary Renault, so I have to end this review with a recommendation. If you haven't ever read Mary Renault, check out *The Bull From the Sea* and *The King Must Die* right now, and dive in as soon as possible. It's not easy to compare Mr. Wolfe unfavorably to any other writer, but I would put Renault's best work on my shelf ahead of Wolfe's dive into the same myth-drenched, classical soil.

For one reason, Renault's story *moves*... I guess that's how I'd describe it... in a way that Wolfe's, with its introspective, inward-focused Latro, lack of external, real-time action, diary-like "*we went here, and we went there*" prose, and sincere believer take (*so far*) on the gods, does not. Not to mention that there's a key mystery (which is not resolved) in *Soldier of Sidon*, but you may still be scratching your head about just what the mystery even *is*, by the end of this book...

While I'm on my soapbox, another work I recommend is Marguerite Yourcenar's *The Memoirs of*

Reviews

Hadrian (interestingly, two of our best writers about the classical/mythical era happen to be lesbians). Not that it matters – Renault, Yourcenar, and Wolfe, happily heterosexually married minority that he is, are all awe-inspiring writers. Read all three!

Just don't let *Soldier of Sidon* be the first – or the last – Gene Wolfe book you read. He's done better. I'm hanging on, Mr. Wolfe, *just a-hangin' on*, by these short pink fingernails...

Hell to Pay

Simon R. Green

Ace, Jan 2007

\$6.99, Mass Market, 272 pgs.

ISBN 0441014607

Review by Harriet Klausner

The Nightside is a realm within London only certain people know about. It is a place where darkness never ends, and good and evil exist side by side (although Heaven and Hell can not interfere directly with the people who live there). Anything or anyone can be bought or sold there for the right price: creatures of myth and legend, and people from the future or other dimensions. Now that the Lilith war is over and PI John Tyler won the hostilities but refused the crown, he is in need of funds.

Jeremiah Griffin and his family are among the few human immortals in the Nightside. He changed his will leaving everything to his granddaughter Melissa, but someone kidnapped her from the mundane and magically-projected Griffin home. Griffin calls on John to find her with in twenty four hours as he needs her to sign some papers before she is eighteen. However, a powerful force is blocking John's Sight, which allows him to find anyone; thus he must search the old fashioned way and hope he can find her without getting anyone, including himself killed.

A new story arc has begun now that the Lilith war is over, which brings with it freshness and an audience wondering how Simon R. Green will match the previous arc. Walker is in charge, even though the authorities that gave him power have disappeared. Change is coming, but John is more interested in solving his case than in taking over the Nightside or becoming part of the new world order. Mr. Green writes dark fantasy with lighthearted moments, with John living life leaping out of the proverbial boiling pot.

Why Asimov's Three Laws Won't Work by Joe Vadalma

In Science Fiction, the Three Laws of Robotics are a set of three rules written by Isaacw Asimov, which most robots that appear in his fiction must obey. Introduced in his 1942 short story "Runaround," the Laws state the following:

A robot may not harm a human being, or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.

A robot must obey the orders given to it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.

A robot must protect its own existence, as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.

If we could actually build robots who are intelligent enough to be self-aware, would these laws actually make sense. I propose not. Take the first law. In the first place, how could the robot tell a human being from another robot that looked like a human being or from a hologram of a human being. You might say, so what. As long as the robot cannot harm a human being or anything that resembles a human being, that is all to the good. But what if a humanoid robot or hologram and a real human being are both in danger. How would the robot know which one to save? As far as that goes, if two human beings are in danger at the same time, how does a robot know which one to save. (Note: this exact situation is shown in the movie I, Robot. In the movie the robot made the wrong choice.)

For certain uses, a manufacturer would not want to apply the Laws in that order. For example, suppose the robots are to be used for military purposes. In this case, the Laws built into the robot might go something like this:

A robot must obey the orders given to it by his superior officer.

A robot must protect its own existence, and those of other soldier robot, except where such orders conflict with the First Law.

A robot may only harm those human beings or robots designated as "The Enemy," by its superior officer and only if not under a flag of truce, surrendering or designated as "Prisoners of War."

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In my novel, *The Isaac Project*, the situation of the military wanting to change the Three Laws provides part of the conflict in the book.

One error that Isaac Asimov made was that he assumed that the intelligence of the robot would somehow be in its electronic circuitry. Actually, we know now that the intelligence of a robot would more likely be in its software. This changes the situation quite a bit, since software can have errors in it that are not always detected during testing. Also, it can be modified. Depending upon how the software is installed, it might be subjected to viruses, worms, and other sorts of malicious software tricks by unscrupulous hackers, such as our computers are now.

Emperor

Stephen Baxter

Ace, Jan 2007

\$24.95, Hardcover

ISBN: 0441014666

Review by Harriet Klausner

In 4 BC, Brica struggles with a difficult labor; when the baby finally emerges, the weakened woman babbles in Latin, a tongue she does not know. A druid, the only non-kin attending the birth writes down her words that claim in the future three emperors from Rome will visit the island. Nectovelin is born while his mother dies. Brica's words live on after her known as the Prophecy".

In 43 AD, Roman General Vespasian invades Britain. Nectovelin tries to make his mother's words come true, but fails in an attempt to assassinate Emperor Claudius. However, Nectovelin's descendents remain diligent, waiting for the moment to ensure the family Prophecy. In 314, they may have their opportunity as Constantine the Great visits Britannia, but instead of murder, Thalius and others plead with the Emperor to embrace the Christianity of the first century. By 418, the Roman armies have left the island leaving a vacuum in which British warlords fight one another and the invading Saxons.

Emperor is an interesting historical fiction that spans four centuries, so no character seems fully developed as events supersede people—especially after Nectovelin fails at fulfilling the Prophecy. The twist of having Brica's descendents needing to make sure the Prophecy happens is a fascinating spin to the actual occurrences. Still somewhat overwhelming with over four hundred years of Britannia passing by in under four hundred pages, readers will marvel at Stephen Baxter's opening epic in the Time Tapestry series.

4th Dimension and Time (con't)

going back in time when the room was not locked. He could disappear and appear somewhere else. He could predict the future.

In a previous paragraph, I stated that if time is the fourth dimension, our future is predetermined. This would also hold for the past. Thus, a time traveler who went to the past would not have a choice. He would by necessity have to have arrived from the future at the exact time of his arrival. This implies no free will, that even our thoughts are predetermined. To get around this problem and other paradoxes involved with time travel, one must conjecture other dimensions in which one can travel at right angles from not only to the usual three but from the fourth time dimension. This introduces the concept of *parallel time*.

The concept of *parallel time* is that starting from the beginning of the universe, each moment introduces infinite possibilities and each possibility exists somewhere (possibly in a fifth or higher dimension). So, if I go back in time and prevent my mother from meeting my father, two universes exist, one where I did not prevent my parents from meeting and one where I did. When I return to what I consider my own present, I actually return to a different universe from the one where I started from, one in which I was never born.

I hope this essay throws a little light on a confusing subject.

In [science fiction's] aim it is bound, by its extrapolation of science and its use of dramatic plot, to view man and his machines and his environment as a three-fold whole, the machine being the hyphen. It also views man's psyche, man's physique and the entire life process as also a threefold interacting unit. Science fiction is the prophetic... the apocalyptic literature of our particular culminating epoch of crisis.

— Gerald Heard

Original Fiction

Gary William is one of the runners-up from the 2006 Illuminations SF Writing Contest and a sometimes contributor to this newsletter. He has the following to say about his short story, *Wholly Human*:

“What if? In elementary school a dentist came in and told us the proper way to brush our teeth was up and down. Ten years later, it was side to side and twelve years after that, circular. Our Solar System had nine planets (definitely!)—but then it was ten and now it might be eight. One and one is always two...unless you're dealing with light quantum's. What if everything we've been taught and told is simply a temporary judgment call?”

Wholly Human by Gary William

Long before the lost civilizations of Lemuria and Mu—when angels still walked with men in the garden—the Asian and African continents were not, and in their stead was a much smaller continent, called by its inhabitants Askotia. It was here that all humanity was centered, for the Americas were a mere collection of barren islands, and what is now known as Europe and Russia was a dark continent: a vast, forbidding and inaccessible jungle, full of strange creatures and unknown terrors.

The inhabitants of Askotia were slender people, long-lived, with highly developed senses, sapphire eyes and dark, ringleted hair. Like the trees within their lush rain forests, they had grown tall in order to suitably compete with other organisms for light and sweetened air. Their skin, as a result of the impregnation of their pigments by a still intensely hot sun, was a rich blue-black—which glistened with violet whenever a shaft of sunlight robed their forms. They were a race pleasing to the eye, with a moral and spiritual maturity matched only by the demigods of the lesser heavens.

The continent was divided into eleven provinces, with the major cities surrounded by gardens, the gardens surrounded by thriving towns and villages, the towns and villages surrounded by fertile farms and the farms surrounded by exuberant forest.

Although Askotia was a democratic society, they had but one ruler—chosen for life—whose residence was a citadel placed atop a hill and overlooking the vast ocean. It was sturdily built in order to withstand the tropical storms that occasionally battered the shoreline and large enough to house the many offices and living quarters of the Ministers of State. Neither president nor king, the ruler's title was simply, Guardian of the People. The greatest of these, the seventy-seventh Guardian of Askotia, was exceptionally wise and his judgments and pronouncements were accepted throughout the realm as being the most just and far-reaching,

It was during his reign that the incursion occurred.

They came across the ocean as a thick mist, with seductive whirlwind voices and threatening growls; rolling like a spreading fog when they reached the shore. Feeders! Seeking to ensnare the entire land with their insidious murmurings and cravings. Spectral locusts—intelligent and malevolent—that rose from the bowels of the Dark Continent every thousand years and ravaged the land until the hundred-year winds blew them into the sea. Only this time the winds blew them into the currents of a colossal typhoon, which drove them towards fair Askotia.

Feeders feasted on awareness—the stems of identity and buds of self-knowing— which they saw as small etheric horns protruding from the heads of the beasts and flying things that flourished in the jungles. It was meager fare, for such creatures have little sense of self, residing for the most part in the group essence of their species. Thus the Feeders had learned how to force what little awareness was available by thrusting them into agitated states: heightened fear, fiery rage, prolonged rut and estrus ... for lost in the hormonal responses of negative emotions, all beings are intensely aware of only themselves.

What ecstasy arose within these voracious phantoms, these gluttonous ghouls, when they discovered creatures of another sort. Creatures whose awareness of self loomed like antlers before the Feeders' sight. Beings

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that promised feasts undreamed of... that unlike the beasts they knew would not die from the devouring, but were ever-fertile fields that could be cultivated, seeded, and harvested again and again. Beings possessing such a refined response to stimuli that it honeyed their awareness like velvet on an Elk's rack. No longer were fear, rage, and prolonged rut the only means of agitation. There was shame, blame, guilt, greed, self-pity, revenge, hatred, lust, perversion: a cornucopia of possibilities hidden beneath the calm, rational behavior of these new and exciting repasts. The Feeders had entered into a banquet that would last forever! No more the stem and bud, they had come upon the blossom itself: Ego, unfettered by instinct, freed from the constraints of nature.

But they would not feed yet! They would go into the deep of the forest, gnawing on the puny awareness of the abundant wildlife, while they studied this new bounty, imbibed their psychic energies from afar, learning the language of their thoughts, the flow of their emotions. Then—when there would be a crop so plentiful even tens of tens of thousands of Feeders could never be filled—then, they would leave behind the tasteless nubs of lesser things and feast upon the most glorious of prey.

The Guardian had watched the gray mist long before it reached the shores of Askotia, and ever more closely as it moved over the land; noting the deepened shadows that moved within it, listening to the moans and shrieks, the murmurs and whisperings. When he no longer doubted the danger, he locked himself in the Sanctuary—a place of prayer, meditation and study—and allowed none, neither attendant nor friend to enter. For a fortnight he fasted, replacing his silken robes with the ascetic itching of coarse wool. Sleeping little more than an hour a night, he spent the first week studying the seventy-six volumes of *The Chronicles of Guardians*, and the second rehearsing what he had read, before sitting in utter silence—unmoving, unblinking—while he sent his consciousness across the realm. So it came to pass, as he stormed the heavens for understanding, for inspiration—for a means to remove a threat none among men could remember facing—that he understood what the threat entailed and what must be done to soften its effects.

At dawn the next morn, he passed beyond the doors of the Sanctuary and called to the first servant he saw. "Good citizen, make ready a bath and a meal ... and bring my finest clothes."

"Yes, Guardian," the servant answered, with no small amount of joy. All those within the palace had been sorely worried about the Guardian while he was entombed within the Sanctuary, and now the honor of being the first to tell of his resurrection had fallen to him. It could only bode well for his hope to rise to a higher station, and (contemplating a desire that had only recently entered his heart) afford him numbing power over those who had snubbed him in past.

"One more wish," the Guardian continued, interrupting the servant's musing. "Do inform Councilor Omida to join me at the table." The Council of Advisors was made up of twelve Empaths—sensitives gifted with a highly evolved empathy, able to identify with and understand the motives, circumstances and feelings of others—but among them Councilor Omida was the finest.

"Even as you ask, Guardian," the servant hastily agreed; quickly setting out to fulfill his newfound duties and herald the good news.

"Councilor Omida," the Guardian rose from his seat and greeted his First Advisor. "Please sit with me and share my sup."

"Thank you, sire, but I would not interrupt you while you enjoy the breaking of fast. I will stand until you finish."

"This is no time for nonsensical formalities, Councilor Omida. Sit. Eat or not as you wish, but I have need of information and I am confident you will have it."

Humbled and gladdened, Omida sat and waited on the Guardian's words.

"What news of the fog?" he asked, looking up from the plate and still chewing on a juicy bite of pear.

"It continued moving swiftly, without pause, over the inhabited areas, sire, and then gathered itself into the forest, forming a great shadow that hides the very sun. The Minister of Science suggested we send a team to investigate and I agreed. Yesterday, when they returned, I spoke with the team leader. He reported the woods were littered with the corpses of animal and bird, and yet upon examination could discover no reasons for their deaths. No sign of disease, nor a single mark to indicate injury."

"What do you make of that, Councilor?" the Guardian asked.

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"My guess is that the fog is suffocating them. Either that or else there is some chemical within the cloud that affects the animals' nervous system. While it moved across the populated areas it was more a disseminating mist than a thick fog, so the people were unharmed."

"Reasonable guesses," the Guardian said, "considering the seeming lack of convincing evidence to the contrary. But I assume you would have mentioned if any member of the group fell seriously ill or died while on the expedition, or since their return. How then could it be the result of suffocation or chemistry? Are the bodies of men so different than those of animals?"

The Councilor nodded before answering, "Yes sire, I noted that anomaly myself. But as you have said, there does not at this time appear to be any readily available answer, so in justification of my guesses I added the factor of time. It took four days travel to reach the outer boundary of the fog-cloud and they spent but a few hours beneath its shadow."

"An eight day round trip and they only bothered to remain half a day? Why?" the Guardian's voice rose with concern.

"I, too, asked that very question. The leader seemed reluctant to answer and when he did it was a nervous jumble of unlikely reasons. Nevertheless, after careful prodding, it appears that they returned simply because the men felt uneasy. I took that as meaning they were frightened. I reprimanded the man ... and regrettably shamed him in the doing."

"Perhaps instead of reprimand, congratulations were in order."

Unable to hide either her bewilderment or alarm, the Councilor barely waited for the Guardian to finish his sentence before blurting out her own. "How so, sire? she questioned—(feeling a great and newly acquired need to defend herself before she was wrongfully accused of dereliction of duty). "I can see no reason for commendation in what fell a grass blade shy of out and out negligence!"

"I said 'perhaps,' Omida. Perhaps I am right, perhaps I am not. In any case, it was not something you could have possibly foreseen."

"My ignorance, Sire, stands squarely before my understanding. Please explain to me what, exactly, you are speaking of."

"In my readings of the Chronicles," the Guardian began, "I came across the phrase, 'the pests of dissidence,' in reference to the voyages across the sea that the ancient Guardians eventually deemed too full of peril and waste—meaning cost, I would think—for so little return."

"You are referring to the explorations of the great landmass to the North, are you not?"

"None other," said the Guardian. "I originally believed the phrase indicated that black mark in our otherwise unblemished history, when the sailors aboard the Starcradle came to near-mutiny."

Like all Askotians, Omida grimaced at the reminder. Although it supposedly occurred over a millennium ago, the thought of any Askotian threatening to harm another was too much to be borne. "Sire, surely you could not possibly believe that myth? It is naught but a nightmare adolescents tell to scare the younger children."

"It is mentioned in the Chronicles of the sixtieth Guardian as having actually occurred," the Guardian answered firmly. "Besides," he went on with kinder tone, "even if in some miraculous way a Copier during one of the Chronicle Preservations did get away with placing an untruth within the Chronicle, it matters not. It was the wording that sent me searching in a new direction. A direction that led me to make the other statement you found so disconcerting you felt the need to quickly admonish me."

Shamefaced, Omida lowered her eyes. "I do most sincerely and humbly apologize, sire. It was utterly disrespectful of me both now and when you spoke of congratulating the team leader. I can only say that I was troubled over your well-being during your time in the Sanctuary and these concerns worried out my unpardonable remarks."

"Don't get maudlin with me, Omida. We have known each other for decades and have no time to waste on foolish customs better left to those who choose to think of the Guardians as other than men."

Omida outwardly nodded her agreement, while inwardly she fought to shake off the strange and disheartening feeling that the Guardian found something wrong in everything she said or did.

Still in the perceptive state achieved during his final week in the Sanctuary, the Guardian noted the disturbance within his Councilor—adding it to his growing store of information—and continued with his narration. "As I

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was saying: as I contemplated our present circumstances I recalled the mention of these 'pests of dissidence' and it changed my perspective. I now believe that the word 'dissidence' was not afforded its normal definition of being a differing of opinions, but rather a more severe interpretation, meaning, 'entirely different feelings.'

"To what end?" Omidia asked.

"This I believe we will discover after a further talk with the team leader and the dispatch of a second team to the area; for despite the considerable amount of that of which I am unsure, there is one thing I am certain of."

"What's that, sire?"

Finished with his meal, the Guardian rose from his seat. "That the cloud is alive ... and, as all living things, it eats. What and how it eats is what we must determine."

Councilor Omidia, unable to call up a single response, respectfully waited until the Guardian left the room before she, herself, headed to the Sanctuary.

Four days later the Guardian was handed a letter sealed with the Councilor's imprint:

Most Respected Guardian of the People,

Following your orders I spoke again with the team leader. As a result, I went a step further and interviewed all the members of the original group. It was eye-opening to say the least. There seemed to be an air of distrust and unruliness, bordering on belligerence, among the lot of them. I am sure that this, and not some detailed intelligence report, is what you wanted me to ascertain.

Having understood this, I felt it imperative that I lead the second inspection of the cloud. I intend to stay there for six days, during which time I will send three men in for five hours twice a day; interviewing them immediately upon their return.

I shall appear before you, barring the unexpected, in two weeks time.

Always At Your Service,

Omidia

When she entered the Library ten days later, it was evening and the Guardian was staring out the large west window. Without turning he said: "It's quite beautiful in appearance isn't it, Omidia? The moving mist seems to enhance the colors of sunset's brilliance." He turned to face her. "This, Councilor, worries me to distraction!"

"As it does me," she answered, recognizing the Guardian had seen it through her eyes. "For I now understand what you meant by entirely different feelings. Even when we were miles from reaching our destination I noticed an increased agitation of emotion in the members of our outing. But what bothered me most were the feelings and corresponding thoughts that arose within myself. During our stay it was almost unbearable for the whole of us.

"When we noticed the cloud was thinning and spreading we hurried back as quickly as possible."

The Guardian gave a faint smile and said, "I am glad you did. Now, besides what you have already pointed out, did you discover anything else of value before you were forced to leave?"

Omidia nodded. "Yes, I believe we did. All of the men who were actually sent into the cloud became violently ill upon returning."

"Have any died?" the Guardian fairly shouted.

"No sire," Omidia said. "There is no need for your concern on that part. All mended after a few hours rest. What is a concern, however, is how they described their initial symptoms. They all remarked on a throbbing headache located at the very crown of their heads. An unusual spot for a headache, I would say. Yet, what was most revealing was in their words and actions. Each one was so inordinately willing to cast disparaging remarks and blame on the others, myself, and even you, sire, for their present condition, that I would have thought it incomprehensible, had I not," the Councilor blushed as her eyes welled with tears, "also found myself strongly pushed towards the same accusations."

The Guardian moved towards her, lightly touching her shoulder. "Do not extend the feeling by embracing it, Omidia, You have done well! I do not think a single feeling or thought that passed through you or the others had any real place in the heart."

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Omidra raised her eyes and stared into his. "You knew from the start, didn't you, sire? This fog or whatever it is incites the worst passions, because it feeds on them. Isn't that so?"

"I was not completely sure until this moment. Although I do not think these cloud-creatures—for the cloud is not one creature, but many, acting as one—actually utilize the energy of passion as their sustenance. I believe it's what that energy does to the individual that they feed upon."

"You mean their actions? If that's so, we can starve it by simply not reacting to any outrageous thoughts or feelings," Omidra said hopefully.

"No, I think it is not our actions ... and in this we are fortunate. After all, could everyone truly have so great a self-control? It is not that. What occurs within the person, and I have had some slight experience with what you have gone through, is an intense sense of self, an overwhelming awareness of our own existence—very often at the expense of anyone else's."

Omidra stepped back, startled. "They eat our minds! Our souls!"

"No, Councilor, I don't believe they can touch the seat of our individuality. It is too deeply rooted in us. It isn't the essence of ourselves they feed on. It's the exaggerated sense of self-worth—which makes one believe their wants and needs are of greater importance than any other's—that they feast upon."

"How can such a thing be possible? What they eat has no energy, no real existence!" Omidra loudly voiced her objection

"Not so, my trusted friend," the Guardian replied with the kindest tone, in order to soften the edge of her reproach and return her to her full mind. "Such feelings engender both neural and hormonal responses. We do not know what etheric forces these workings may produce. Our doctors and scholars study only that which they can touch, watch, and weigh with their vials and apparatus. Who can weigh egotism on a scale, or measure vanity with a reed? As an Empath you found it easy to accept that the cloud could devour the vigor of passion and psyche, because you are aware such energies exist. Our bodies take the nutrients of what we digest and cast out the rest; yet, flies and other insects find substance from this waste. This spreading fog can be likened to a swarm of flies. Egomani is the waste product of individual awareness. It is that 'defecated' awareness they feed and possibly breed on."

"How can you be so sure, sire?"

"Because when first the fog appeared I felt a nibbling on the outer boundaries of my awareness. A subtle sensation that nevertheless left a trace of disgust, like a fly alighting on one's skin. It is why I began my stay in the Sanctuary."

"If you already knew," Omidra asked, "why didn't you say so at the start, so we could defend ourselves?"

"I had first to discover a means of defending ourselves! And afterwards, I needed to be absolutely sure it wasn't a subjective sensation. I needed you for that, Omidra, because you, from among all of the Empaths who advise me, have the highest sensitivity. If you, who so easily understand the inner workings of others' motives and feelings, did not come to the same conclusion as I, then surely I was mistaken. But you have... and we can proceed with my plans."

Omidra wanted to tell him that he was greater than any Empath. That he could cast his consciousness beyond the confines of self and embrace the essence of all. But, there was no time for compliments, even if it was the truth. And besides, she reminded herself, he would simply brush it aside with the wave of a hand and scowl at her for dwelling on the trivial. Instead she said, "What are these plans, sire?"

"The first step is to rid ourselves of them," he answered, "without letting the populace know that the mist is a living thing; for it is far too frightening a concept. Only then can we move to the second: that of remedying the aftereffects of their presence." The Guardian fell silent, waiting for Omidra to speak.

"And just how do we get rid of them?"

"The simplest way," he said, unable to hide the sorrow in his eyes. "With flypaper."

Omidra stood motionless, staring at him until the meaning of what he had said sunk in. Sitting down on the nearest chair, she pursed her lips and nodded in acquiescence.

Original Fiction

“Honored Councilors and Ministers of Askotia,” Omida began, “I have convened this Convention of Ministers at the request of the Guardian. Two months have passed since I returned from my own investigation of what is now an overshadowing mist. At that time, it had just begun to spread itself, but as we are all acutely aware, has since moved into the populated portion of that province. I would like you to hear the reports from our Ministers of the Interior and Exterior first. Thereafter, Councilor Mamink will take the floor. I thank you all for coming and for your patience. Please pay careful attention to what our respected constituents have to say. The Guardian has, if you have not already guessed, declared a State of Emergency.”

Few among the group were surprised by this, although some murmured exclamations were heard before the Minister of the Interior took the podium. “Let me bypass introduction and formalities and get directly to the point,” he began. “In accordance with the Council’s wishes, my staff and I, in conjunction with the Minister of Welfare and her staff, began an intensive study as to whether or not this mist has brought about any apparent changes in the mood or actions of our people... and ourselves. I am presuming that everyone present has read the Minister of Health’s informative description of the physical effects upon the populace that first encountered the mist. He, as I, was able to study the situation extensively once the mist moved on to other regions. We have both, since then, followed behind its path, interviewing, examining and closely studying those recently subjected to its influence. In the Minister of Health’s report he made it quite clear that the physical response in all those examined was the same. A brief period of violent vomiting, then exhaustion, followed by a seemingly complete recovery; along with identical descriptions of inordinate headaches beginning at the crown, which preceded the sickness. He used the phrase ‘seemingly full recovery’ because on further examination his staff noticed increased activity in the neural and endocrine systems, which, while not causing any measurable damage to the organism, cannot be discounted. He has asked me to inform you that these symptoms have been verified in everyone examined up to this point.”

Pausing a moment, the speaker looked towards the Minister of Health to register his tacit agreement. “I will try to be as brief and concise as he, in presenting our findings. In so doing I will be forced to simply state the conclusions we came to. You are aware of the pile of bound paperwork placed before you. In one of these collections you will find a detailed and charted account of the methods we used to reach them.” At this, a great rustling of shuffling and shifting paper flooded the Hall.

“Citizens,” the Minister of Interior shouted angrily, “don’t bother reading these reports now! This is not the time for a pretense of courtesy! Within that mound you will find similar accountings by the Ministers of the Exterior, Welfare, Health, Education, Science, Sanctuaries, and those of the Council—each of which you can read at the end of this gathering!”

A stunned silence filled the Hall. Composing himself as best he was able, the Minister of Interior placed a trembling hand on the podium and began again. “I, um ... I wish to sincerely apologize for my atrocious behavior. Er hmm,” he cleared his voice and went on, “and to thank you for your willingness to be rude.” He smiled as a smothered chuckling ensued. “However, as inappropriate as my reaction was, it does, rather conveniently, bring me to the crux of my investigation. There is none among us this day who can honestly say they have not been assailed by alien and disturbing, untoward thoughts and emotions. Yet, for the majority here, the single contact with the mist was when it first swept in from the sea and swiftly headed for the deep of the forest. Let me put you at ease about that. Those of us who have followed its wake have struggled with far worse thoughts and feelings—as can be attested to by my recent and regrettable outburst.” A low moan was heard from one of the delegates. Turning to look, the Minister caught her eye. “Ismilian, you mustn’t feel that anything you have felt or said is your fault.”

Ismilian moaned again. “My child,” her voice faltered through the words. “I have so terribly berated my child. Ohh,” she wept as she spoke, “I’ve hurt my little boy!”

The silence in the Hall deepened to stillness so complete that one could practically hear Ismilian’s tears slip over her cheeks.

After a respectful wait, the Minister of Interior cleared his voice a second time. “Er hmm. Unlike mine and most assuredly Ismilian’s, within the men, women and, yes, children—as young as two years old—who were

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among those caught within the mist as it began its return from the forest, the uprising of such thoughts and emotions is fierce. I can find no better, or more frightening, word to describe it!"

He paused for a considerable time, obviously in the midst of a great inner struggle. "I, um, I," he began again. "Forgive me, good citizens. I had intended to move from this point to a more detailed accounting of my findings, but discover that I cannot. You can, as I said before, find that information in my written report. In conclusion, let me say that this mist, fog, cloud, whichever you name it, is attacking us. Arousing manifestations of what can only be bestial thoughts and feelings, which by our very nature we have never encountered. We are most definitely in danger!

"I now yield the floor to our Minister of the Exterior."

The Minister of Exterior stepped up to the podium, clearly moved by the situation. "I will be brief and colloquial. Any clarity or precision lacking in my description is available in the paperwork before you.

"According to our Minister of Science, the mist is a sort of anti-inhibitor, an antagonist preventing the natural inhibitors within our bodies from functioning properly. As a result, hormonal and neural reactions normally held to a balanced exchange become 'overheated,' allowing for exaggerated responses to stimulus of any kind. In the most extreme cases, these responses can become so inclusive that everything else is forgotten. After careful study of the thousands of bird and animal corpses found within our forests, it was discovered that the actual cause of death was a form of induced suicide. They simply forgot how to breathe!"

When a loud exclamation rose from the listeners, the Minister raised her voice and hands to calm them. "This is not the case with the people of Askotia! Please! You have already heard the briefing on the Minister of Health's examination. It is not mass deaths we are facing; it is a catastrophic loss of self-control! And this," she spoke more softly, "I think we will all agree, is a much greater calamity. For if we cannot contain it, the future of Askotia and humanity itself will be forever changed.

"Thank you for your time. Councilor Mamink will now make the closing statements."

The Councilor stood, not bothering to go to the podium. "When you leave the Hall, carefully read through each of the reports. The Guardian of the People has presented the Council with a plan for dealing with the problem before us and we have approved it. Once you have finished, follow the example set today. Note that the Minister of the Interior joined his findings with that of the Minister of Welfare and of Health, the Minister of the Exterior with that of Science. Gather yourself in committees of like needs in accordance with your understanding of the readings. A Councilor will join each committee to present the Guardian's plan and explain what is expected from you. This is a very serious situation. Waste no time!"

"Good morning, Councilor Omida," the Guardian, who had fairly cloistered himself in his room, faintly smiled at her as she entered the Library. A month had passed since the Convention of Ministers and the mist had already passed over the first and entered a second province. "I asked to meet you here because I thought I should take another look at the Chronicles to see if there was anything I may have missed. We are running out of time. How fares the plan?"

"Progress has been made. Our masons have employed hundreds of laborers and are already at work on the massive furnaces you ordered built. There was considerable difficulty providing an adequate foundation for the welldiggers on the shoreline, but it was eventually solved by the burying of timber crossbeams beneath the sand. There have also been mishaps, due in large part to the infestation: acts of negligence, mysterious loss of materials, arguing among the workers, and deliberate delays due to power struggles between the supervisors and construction managers. "

"It will get worse," the Guardian replied. "What has been done to secure the governing body before the mist reaches the Palace?"

"The Sanctuary has been expanded into both the Banquet Room and Hall of Meetings, by means of arched doorways and halls. It's in the process of being sealed now, with filter systems designed by the Minister of Engineering, which should keep out a majority of the mist.

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"Also," she added, "I thought you would be glad to know that the committees have chosen the best among their staffs to accompany the other eleven Councilors to their respective Provinces. They leave within the week."

"Watch closely over the Ministers and especially over the other members of the Council when they return from their journeys, Councilor. If one among them succumbs to the prodding of the mist, the rehabilitation of Askotia could be in dire jeopardy."

"I have been acutely aware of that, sire. I try to keep my heart and mind open at all times. Sometimes it feels as though I contact so many and receive so much that my gift will either explode or come within shouting distance of your own ability," Omida said, smiling at the Guardian. "But never closer than that. None can match you."

He waved the compliment aside. "I am sorry to have put such a burden on you. I would not have if it could have been avoided."

"I know that, sire," she said, her eyes wet from stifled emotion

The Guardian looked away, turning towards one of the hundreds of bookshelves. "I have a little reading to do. Thank you, Councilor, for coming."

Omida frowned before saying, "I look forward to speaking to you soon, sire. Keep well." Quietly, she turned and walked out of the room.

"I have missed you too, Omida," the Guardian whispered to the walls.

Councilor Mamink reached the furthestmost province in six days. Doing his best to shelter the members of the expedition from the worst of the mist they passed through, he had still pushed them to keep moving night and day. The other ten Councilors would do the same to reach their assigned Provinces. He knew this because he trusted them implicitly and—as each of them were also Empaths—by the shiver of their combined haste that ran up his spine. Already the members of his expedition were posting instructions among the nearest villages, towns and cities, setting up rehabilitation centers, providing counseling, and preparing leaders for the upcoming difficulties. From there they would work their way deeper into the Province, employing others in the work, while he scouted each area for a few hidden Empaths who were as yet unaware of their ability. He had already felt two radiating the gift like the fragrance of an orchid. The male was merely a child, no older than six, and he had doubts the Guardian would be willing to accept him, but the female, a weaver of cloth in the village of Dimadin, had long since reached maturity. Tomorrow he would seek their whereabouts. The Guardian's wish was that he and the other Councilors insure the continued labors of their expedition and each return with a least two candidates within a few months. If those he had felt really were true sensitives, he might even be able to return sooner.

"Good news, sire," Omida again greeted the Guardian in the Library. They had met only twice over the past four months, and that but briefly. "All the Councilors have returned!"

"That is indeed good news. The monsoon season is fast approaching and there is still a great deal to do. Those structures must be completed in six weeks. They have yet to be tested," the Guardian said, his words entering Omida's ears as though they had traveled a far distance before arriving. "Have the Councilors found sufficient candidates?"

"Councilor Mamink returned with four, sire. The others were not as fortunate, although none returned empty-handed. We will have twenty-three to choose from. I doubt more than ten will complete the training, but that's more than enough."

"That depends, Councilor," he answered, "on the cloud-creatures and the courage of the Councilors. It may be one is more than enough."

"Sire, do you believe some of the Councilors may recant?"

The Guardian stared at her. "Have you forgotten that their promise was made without full knowledge? Can either of us find fault if, once they have heard the whole of it, they do?"

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"No, sire, but they are sworn to uphold the welfare of the people before all else. I find it difficult to believe that we cannot find six of them willing to make any sacrifice to uphold it."

"The world has changed during these past eight months, Councilor. We have changed. But you are correct in one thing: the welfare of the people depends on the success of this plan."

"Maybe," Omida said, "it might be wiser to inform them now, rather than wait until the last moment as originally thought."

"I'm not sure I agree," the Guardian shook his head as he spoke. "They need the time to fully comprehend the immensity of the situation and see the danger clearly before them. Revealing it weeks ahead would make it so much harder for them not to succumb to the baser thoughts and feelings the cloud-creatures engender."

"You're right, of course," Omida kept her eyes glued to the floor. "And you are right about us changing. I've changed. I tremble with fear every night. During the days I keep myself constantly busy so the truth cannot creep in. It was selfishness that led me to suggest it. I thought if the others knew, they could bolster me in my own waning courage. I am sorry, sire, I put my own needs before the success of Askotia's only hope."

Omida was openly crying. The Guardian moved towards her, his arms outstretched before he caught himself and stopped short. "Councilor," he said, causing Omida to remove her hands from her face and look at him. "You will not fail. Your true self has not changed. You are still the only one in the realm I would trust to bear so heavy a weight. You have never betrayed it. Go. Get some rest. I will speak with you again, soon."

"Thank you, sire," she said, hesitating a moment before hastily placing her hand on his and as quickly turning to leave.

"Thank you," the Guardian said, loud enough for her to hear as she passed through the doorway.

During the following four weeks, news of the infested Provinces trickled in. Simple disagreements between merchants and consumers had turned into small riots, numerous thefts and acts of domestic violence had been reported and former respected members of the cities, towns and villages had been ostracized and eventually exiled. Among those who had accompanied the Councilors, more than a few had relinquished the duties placed upon them and instead set themselves up in positions of power and prestige. The mist had reached the Province of the Guardian and was moving with great speed towards the City of the Guardian and the Palace itself. In the face of this, the Guardian requested Omida to ask the Council to join him in the expanded Sanctuary. It was time.

While the Banquet Room and the Hall of Meetings were luxurious—filled with heavily cushioned chairs, fine paintings and artifacts, large arching stained-glass windows, and sculptured fountains—the section that had been the Sanctuary was chapel-sized and stark. Simple wooden chairs, kneeling pads, and two plain tables were all that adorned it. The windows had been bricked over in preparation for the mist's arrival, but even before they had been nothing more than six inch wide slits in the walls. Hundreds of candles kept the Sanctuary well-lit, yet the flickering flames and shifting shadows they affected clearly remarked on the gravity of the meeting.

Thirteen chairs had been placed in a circle in the middle of the room, where Omida and the Guardian sat, greeting the Councilors as they entered. When everyone was present and the obligatory courtesies were finished, Omida began.

"According to the mist's speed of travel, it should be upon the City of the Guardian within six days and upon the Palace by mid-afternoon of the sixth. I have called you here to reiterate what is intended to be done and to inform you of certain important details that the Guardian thought should be withheld until this moment."

The eleven, taken aback at the thought they had not been fully informed, looked at one another to see if they, alone, had been considered unsuited to be told the whole of it. When it was clear to each that they were not, they turned their undivided attention back to Omida.

"As we had hoped, you were able to set qualified members of the various Ministries—for the purpose of providing reconstructive and rehabilitative aid after the immediate threat has been removed—in each of the eleven Provinces. Of more importance at the present time, you also returned with twenty-three possible Empaths.

"Councilor Mamink, I believe that you are in charge of the training and testing of these gifted individuals. I would appreciate it if you brought us up to date on their current status."

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Mamink looked over at the Guardian, then towards the other Councilors before answering. "Certainly. But I feel obligated to make mention of a dissatisfaction with the Guardian's decision not to include us in every detail of his plan. Apparently, Omida, you were informed! While I recognize that your emphatic ability is noticeably beyond the rest of us," he moved his arm to include the other ten Councilors, "are we to be any less trusted?"

The Guardian's response was short and pointed. "My reasons will soon be apparent. This, however, is no time for futile indulgences. What was done is done."

Mamink nodded and went on. "My apologies, sire. I, too, shall soon move to more important matters, but I believe I spoke for all the Council of Advisors, save Omida, concerning your unwillingness to include us." While there were no open signs of agreement with his statement, there were none of disagreement.

Omida could not contain herself: "Councilor, are we here to listen to petty grievances when Askotia is on the brink of ruin! I asked you for vital information. If you are not going to give it, then I shall ask another."

"You're quite right," Mamink accepted the scolding with dignity. "I blundered into an eddy of foolishness and will cease from this moment. As to what you've requested: among those I've tested in these few weeks, I have found just seven who truly possess enough of the gift to help us attract the mist in the manner proposed by the Guardian. Although one has shown exceptional capabilities, he is a mere child of six and I am not sure the Guardian would accept one so young for so dangerous an enterprise. I believe, however, if he and the entire Council were to add the six remaining candidates to our joint expansion of mind and heart, we should have little problem in attracting the whole of the mist in whichever direction we gather."

"Thank you Councilor," Omida nodded respectfully, "your candor and help is greatly appreciated. Regarding this, I believe Councilor Tarsite has been in charge of keeping track of the construction of both the furnaces and the extended welldiggers and would ask him to give us brief description of its progress and workings."

"It's really quite incredible," Tarsite stated with a certain amount of pride. "The furnaces, as you cannot possibly have missed, are massive. Sixty-eight of them have been built strategically around the designated area. They are stoked and ready. According to the trail runs, they will be raging infernos in fifteen minutes' time and send up so fixed a thermal draft as to create a virtual wall. If the mist does indeed take the bait, I strongly doubt a single particle will be able to reverse direction. As to the welldiggers: they are amazing feats of engineering. I know," he said quickly, before anyone contradicted him, "they are commonplace devices, but the size alone—twenty times the norm—is incredible! Imagine, please, the work it took to build fifteen of these on the shifting sands of our shores, notwithstanding the setting of such large gears in place, while still making it practical for the oxen to drive! Then to not only reverse the process so that the bit moves upward toward the sky, rather than into the earth, but to also place workable joints, large elbows that can turn one hundred and eighty degrees, ten feet before its tip. Amazing. This morning the wide-angled propellers, which look like gigantic flat kites, are being hammered onto the bits' ends to complete the structures. These will be tested this afternoon and I would encourage anyone who can spare a few moments time, to come watch. I have no doubt they will work smoothly and be up to the task at hand."

"Thank you," Omida took Tarsite's intake of breath as an excuse to interrupt. "We are glad it was you who was chosen to oversee the work and are confident that everything will function as expected."

"You're quite welcome, Councilor," he said, unsure if this meant he could no longer continue. There were still some very intriguing aspects of the work he would like to comment on.

"I'd like to make a suggestion, if I could," Councilor Mamink ended Tarsite's hopes. "As I said, of the twenty-three possible candidates there are only seven capable of fulfilling the task we had in mind. It might be wise to have the other sixteen oversee the running of those welldiggers. They are still sensitives and thus used to an influx of contradictory thoughts and emotions, so less apt to be as easily distracted by the effects of the mist than those lacking that experience."

"An excellent idea," the Guardian said, "one we shall assuredly employ." Mamink smiled and bowed his head in the Guardian's direction, who nodded in return and then addressed the group. "Before it is explained to you what and why I withheld information, perhaps it would be best to finish going over the initial plan. According to what I proposed, we were to seek out other possible Empaths for the purpose of baiting the mist, which is attracted to our sense of self. It matters little whether the facts and assumptions that have been

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submitted as to the why of it are correct. What we have concluded correctly is the fact of that attraction. I do not need to explain to you that Empaths are able to draw into their minds and hearts the motives, feelings, and general thought patterns of others. Therefore, it seemed logical that gathering such gifted people," he smiled at them as he spoke, "and encouraging them to make a conscious effort to empathize with as many others as each possibly could, would present such an amalgamation of what attracts it that the mist would be unable to resist. By keeping the other members of our governing body within an area where their emanations would be less noticeable and placing ourselves on the westernmost stone jetty, the mist would presumably follow.

"When this occurred the furnaces would be fully fired, causing, as Councilor Tarsite explained, a thermal wall to prevent its reversal. This action was timed to coincide with the monsoon season, when tropical storms would be working their way across the seas beyond our shores. Then, when the mist had balled itself into a cloud to overshadow us, the welldiggers would send forth a great rush of man-made wind to blow it out to sea and into the far more powerful natural winds. Once the mist had been ejected, the reconstruction and rehabilitation would begin. Programs both this Council of Advisors and our Ministers of State have designed would immediately go into effect. A new Ministry, headed by the former Minister of Education, Ismilian, would be instated. It would be called the Ministry of Peace, with the members being entrusted with maintaining peace throughout Askotia, until that time when any lingering effects of the mist have dissipated. They would be overseen by the Council, as would each of the provisional departments and newly enacted Ministries.

"Up to this point there has been nothing left out. If you would bear with me, I would like to ask Councilor Omida to fill you in on what I decided was best to leave unmentioned until now."

The Councilors as a whole leaned forward in their chairs, staring intently at Omida.

"Fellow Councilors," she said nervously. "Our Guardian of the People spent many long hours contemplating the threat that has come upon us and did not believe that the plan he proposed would work as readily as he presented it. He is sure that even given the mist follows us out to the jetty and is unable to force its way through the thermal wall, our welldiggers could not produce sufficient force to thrust it out to sea. In fact, he conceived the use of the welldiggers not for that purpose, but as a means of preventing the return of any portion of the mist once it is well beyond our shores."

Councilor Tarsite opened his mouth to speak, but instantly thought better of it. The others were so thoroughly disheartened that none could think to speak. Omida, having given them pause to digest what had been said, went on. "With this in mind, the Guardian had a twofold purpose in sending you out to the eleven Provinces. The first was clear: to set up a system for future rehabilitation and reconstruction and search for suitable candidates. The second must be evident to all of you—although it is doubtful it was a consideration in the midst of our predicament. In order to conduct the search for sensitives in so great an area, while constantly moving, being bombarded by the aftereffects of the mist and being witness, inwardly and outwardly, to what it was doing to your fellow Askotians, you were forced to dive deeper, concentrate more intensely, and bring your clarity into exacting focus. By this action, you were attracting the mist, causing it to slow its journey towards the Province of the Guardian until the monsoon season was upon us. But more importantly, you were exercising your empathic 'muscles' every moment of your journey. The result of this is no different than what occurs to your physical body if you lift heavy weights every day. Your talents are greater, more far-reaching; stronger!"

As one the Councilors agreed, with Councilors Urisi and Eron comparing notes on their increased abilities and remarking on the ingenuity of the Guardian's plan.

Omida put an abrupt end to it by saying, "You are forgetting the welldiggers will not accomplish what you believed they would! I am sure you're thinking that having strengthened you, the Guardian was insuring the mist would indeed follow us out to the jetty. What good would that do?"

"Sire," Mamink said brusquely to the Guardian, "What exactly do you have in mind?"

"The only possible hope we have," the Guardian stood and looked around at his Advisors, "is to force the mist to follow us out to sea and directly into a storm. The only way to force it is to first attract its attention, which we shall, and then to hold it there by merging our awareness of self with its own, gluing it to ourselves."

"So instead of remaining on the jetty, we board a sailing ship and hope there is a storm nearby?" Mamink said sardonically. "And if there is, and we sail into it, how are we to unglue it?"

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Omidia answered, rather than force the Guardian to say what he had planned all along. “We don’t,” she looked sternly into the Advisors’ amazed faces. “What is done with flypaper when there’s no room for any more flies? It’s discarded! We sacrifice our lives for the sake of Askotia and our people. We continue sailing until we hit a full-scale storm or, if finding none, we sink the boat ourselves.”

Councilor Urisi rose from her seat, but the others were motionless. “Sire,” she asked the Guardian, “why didn’t you tell us beforehand, so we could prepare ourselves, notify our families and friends? Why thrust this upon us days before it happens?”

“Because,” Omidia took it upon herself to answer, “it is unbearable! I have known all these many months. I cannot so much as look at friends and family without weeping, much less say goodbye. Each night I shiver with fear, each day I remonstrate myself for my lack of courage, my lack of love for our people. I am shattered by the realization of my weakness and selfishness. How could you have performed your work—with the mist so nearby—and been able to complete it, been able to accept the end goal? I tell you: it was far more merciful to keep such knowledge from you.”

“Guardian,” Mamink pointed at him, “you spoke of the Council overseeing the rehabilitation and reconstruction, the new departments and Ministries, and yet you propose we drown ourselves! Are these seven candidates to be your new Advisors?”

“Not all the Council will be necessary, Councilor Mamink,” he replied softly. “Your gift is among the strongest. If you and two others were to accept this burden, it could be done.”

“I will not!” Mamink screamed. “You are correct, sire; besides Omidia, my gift is the strongest. Who will be able to adequately select and train the candidates to take the place of the Advisors who are gone? You have always relied on us, especially Omidia, for the faithful governing of Askotia. With her gone, you will have need of my counsel. It is,” Mamink continued his noble excuse for an ignoble act, “for the good of Askotia that I refuse.”

“Omidia misunderstood me, Councilor Mamink,” the Guardian looked directly at her. “She is not going. I am.”

Omidia jumped up from her seat. “No! You cannot, sire. Without your guidance Askotia will never recover!”

“My plans for returning Askotia to its former self are well detailed and I am leaving them in very capable hands. I declared an official State of Emergency. That gives me the authority to appoint a successor until the election of the seventy-eight Guardian can be held. You, Councilor Omidia, are my successor. You have passed through a trial of fire and barely flinched. I trust you completely.”

“Sire,” she caught her breath and squeezed out the words, “I honestly don’t think I can go on without your being here!”

Placing his arms around her, the Guardian whispered in her ear, “I will be near, dear Omidia. In your heart and mind, in your acts and words. Can’t you see that we are not a shout away; merely a whisper.”

While Omidia sought to control the conflicting emotions of joy and sorrow, Councilor Tarsite said, “I will go with you, sire.”

“And I,” said Councilor Raner.

The Guardian looked over at Mamink, who shook his head. “Then Councilor Mamink, be sure you are a help to Omidia and not a hindrance.”

“I will serve her as though she is the very incarnation of you, sire. I give you my word.”

“Well said, Councilor,” he answered, then turned to Tarsite and Raner. “Come with me, I will teach you some new techniques. We three as one. Together we shall save our land and our people.”

On the morning of the sixth day the Feeders rushed over the Palace, scouring the nooks and crannies for the feast that had called for them since they entered the city, following the pull of its promise to the stone jetty, where the remaining ten Advisors and seven candidates had awaited them since dawn. The Feeders screamed in delight: for here were antlers of awareness vibrating like tuning forks. The furnaces scorched the sky with their heat, but the Feeders, lost in their gluttonous rapture, never noticed.

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While they bundled up above their prey like the thick whirling of a tornado, the Guardian, Tarsite and Raner sat upon the deck of the sloop, Atlantis, unblinking and motionless, expanding their consciousness to such heights that their awareness rose like trees in the eyes of the Feeders. Yet the Feeders, wise in their generation, swayed towards them, but would not be tempted further. Councilors Urisi and Eron, heads throbbing and hearts thumping loud enough to hear, saw that the plan was failing, and without thinking ran through the shallow waters, swam to the anchored sloop and clambered aboard, joining the Guardian in his work. Ten minutes later the swirling Feeders changed direction in a single motion and were upon them. Lost in their ghostly gnawing, the Feeders too late discovered they were unable to leave.

Councilor Mamink, freed from the horrendous downpour of Feeders, watched the five, convulsed with twitches and tremors, struggle, in spite of the unimaginable agony of being fed upon by the ravenous specters, to raise anchor, set sail and fight against the rushing waves that thrashed the waters.

“O Guardian of the People, forgive me!” he yelled in wavering voice, before collapsing on the stones and retching.

Neither the Guardian nor the others could hear him. It took all their concentration to function, for the Feeders ached to return and that ache was shared by them. Calling on strength greater than the sum of their parts, the five miraculously managed to maneuver the small sailboat through the crashing waves. For this the welldiggers might well be given credit. Perchance it was that persistent current of air that helped push the sloop beyond those incoming waves and into the fullness of the sea—sailing ever further from the shores of Askotia and allowing the Guardian and his faithful friends to eventually find peace in the ocean’s depths.

The Guardian’s plan called for a reeducation of the population, reminding them of the peace and camaraderie Askotia had enjoyed since time immemorial; trusting that once that was accomplished, the finer details of reconstruction and rehabilitation would be undertaken by the people themselves. To this end Empaths were sent to each Province to oversee the rebuilding of hope and beatitude in a society so swiftly decimated. Trained sensitives were installed in the countless Sanctuaries, which had once been simply places of rest and contemplation, to call the people back to their true nature: instilling in them the need for self-control and inner discipline that they might regain the noble qualities that once flowed through Askotians as naturally as rivers down a mountainside. But the havoc and confusion left behind by the Feeders’ eating and seeding was far greater than expected. Within a few short years, mayhem and murder, robbery and thuggery, rape and atrocity abounded. Under Omida’s guiding hand the Minister of Peace began the decade-long rounding up of the worst offenders; for whenever it seemed the majority of the offenders had been detained, a larger, meaner group of insurgents arose and the detaining began anew. Kept in buildings specifically constructed for this purpose, those found guilty awaited the final judgment of a newly formed Tribunal. When at last, it was decided the most wretched had been apprehended, they were brought before the Tribunal, which, upon hearing the deeds and infectious state of each, sentenced them to exile. As successor to the Guardian of the People, it was left to Omida to approve or veto the Tribunal’s decision. For weeks she grieved over the fate of these Askotians who, in truth, were themselves victims of something too mysterious for them to fathom. Yet it was clear that whatever the cause of their initial insanity, they could not remain on Askotia.

They were taken in specially built vessels to the shores of the Dark Continent. There they were deposited with a year’s worth of dried food, seeds, farming implements, tools, extra clothing and seventy barrels of inflammable fluid.

With the majority of the truly callous offenders gone, continual indoctrination, and the constant roaming through the Provinces of the Empaths, headway was being made. Councilor Mamink was true to his word. He served Omida with respect and obedience, his guilt and shame driving him to spend most of his time shaping and shifting the motives of the populace back into their original pristine forms, giving of himself, his time and his wealth for the benefit of Askotia. When Omida was near death and the elections were called for, he was voted in as the seventy-eight Guardian of the People.

Original Fiction

Under his Guardianship, Askotia slowly edged towards normalcy and balance, although still a universe away from its former glory. Yet within him still burned his shame and guilt. Surrendering to the lingering hints of his bout with the Feeders, he eventually had the Chronicles of the seventy-seventh Guardian expunged of any references to his refusal and the Guardian's direct choice of Omida over himself. The doer of the deed was the six year old child, now full grown, who Mamink took under his wing and treated as a son. When Mamink, too, passed away, it was no surprise that his adopted son was elected as the seventy-ninth Guardian.

Over the following years the seventy-ninth Guardian became increasingly confident that the problem had been sufficiently overcome and Askotia would again become the hope of the Earth. In honor of his stepfather, he had many details of the battle with the mist removed from the Chronicles. Later, having twice now changed the sacred history of the Guardians, he found it easy to convince himself that the best way to save Askotia from the horror of remembering the mass exile was to delete from the Chronicles all reference to them—assured in the knowledge that those criminals were long dead.

Unbeknownst to him, far away on the Dark Continent, the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of those exiled prisoners had left behind the ways of an agrarian culture and, using the few remaining tools and farming implements as weapons, had begun hunting for food and warring between themselves, forming tight clans of like kinds. Promiscuity was acute and procreation abundant and with each generation their population doubled and tripled. The clothes worn out decades ago, they had taken to wearing the skins of animals. The barrels of inflammable liquid had been quickly spent at the first and the knowledge of how to combine and liquefy the sulfur, tar and other ingredients were lost, so they made but one communal fire deep within large caves, and in them each clan sat before their own, warming themselves and preparing for the next day's slaughter.

In time the seventy-ninth Guardian of the People went the way of all mortals, as did the eightieth. His successor, neither knowing nor caring, removed all reports of the old Tribunal. Still, the continent of Askotia flourished, enjoying some of its old beauty, dignity, and grace—the tinges of the old battle hardly recalled. By the time the eighty-fourth Guardian had been elected, the people no longer remembered when they were different than they were now: the petty jealousies, hatreds, prejudices, robberies, assaults, and occasional killings seemed to them to be the natural outcome of inherent human frailties.

But on the Dark Continent, the forgotten 'devil's island,' things had degenerated even more, for the old ways were washed from their minds. Their tools ages ago rusted and gone, weapons were formed from rocks and sticks, and fires were found only among those clans fortunate and courageous enough to grab the branch of a tree struck and ignited by lightning. Even the clans were not as they once were, but had been pared down to large family groups. During those hundreds of years since the exile of their forefathers, they became increasingly like the jungle creatures they hunted, spreading, as they foraged across their continent, until they spottily populated the whole of it.

When the Planetary Catastrophe occurred—the titanic shifting of tectonic plates raising up entire continents worth of new earth and sending mountain-sized tidal waves to scour or devour the old—none of the inhabitants of Askotia survived, sinking with their continent to join their seventy-seventh Guardian beneath the sea. But of the more widely separated and smaller-populated clans, a great many survived and continued to multiply, moving nomadically, like the migratory creatures they feasted upon ... until no landmass upon the face of the earth was without the presence of these ignorant cave-dwellers.

In 1913, after over four hundred Neanderthal skeletons had been uncovered, Marcellin Boule, the French paleontologist, ended his examination of the most complete of these remains and declared that Neanderthals, being unable to extend their legs, walked stooped over, with heads thrust forward. This 'advanced apes' theory was the accepted image until 1957, when researchers, re-examining the skeleton Boule had inspected, concluded that Neanderthals walked upright and the stooped posture of Marcellin Boule's specimen was due to old age and the presence of arthritis. Abundant evidence from a variety of digs have since shown that the Neanderthal used simple tools, wore body ornaments, practiced religious rites and ceremoniously buried their dead. No longer considered *Homo erectus*, today he is classified as *Homo sapien*: wholly human.

Grammar (con't)

almost universally accepted that poor grammar and bad spelling may exist with no onus on the writer, improper use of punctuation serve to make the author, rather than his characters, look ignorant.

Punctuation functions to make writing clear; to separate phrases, clauses, sentences and paragraphs; and to put proper emphasis in the proper places, thus making the concepts in the work easily understandable. If the rules governing the use of periods, commas and their ilk are bent or broken at a writer's whim, how can punctuation clarify anything? Randomly using punctuation, replacing one mark with another, or doing away with punctuation altogether can't help but make writing awkward and illegible. If you want your writing to stand out, I suggest finding a better way than swearing off the use of quotation marks. Readers may remember the incomprehensible seventeen page conversation at the pivotal point of your story, but they won't remember it fondly.

I don't mean to imply that punctuation is immutable, or that all writers agree upon its usage. All forms of punctuation have advocates and detractors, with extremists deciding that one mark or another should be stricken from the language entirely. Commas in particular are the subject of much debate, though my research leads me to believe the majority of good writers feel they are overused (a theory supported by my high school English teachers, if memories of my term papers serve). Other forms of punctuation (colons, semi-colons, ellipses, etc.) have more definite rules governing their use, which makes misuse and abuse more glaring to the trained eye.

In the coming months, I intend to share some of what I've learned about writing, citing other texts when I can, and trusting you to realize that any un-referenced idea is not an epiphany on my part, but the result of hard work on the part of one or more writers whose passion for writing remains firmly in my mind even though the webpage or book I found it in does not.

Rather than a systematic approach, starting with punctuation, pounding through grammar, and then delving into more stylistic and subjective usages and errors, I'll likely dance back and forth, meandering between subtopics as whimsy and the current focus of my own editing processes take me. Why? Because I find grammar and usage as boring as the rest of you, and the thought of six or more months writing about nothing but punctuation doesn't make me eager to read February's *Illuminata*.

RPG Corner (con't)

and issues of weight and relevance to everyone; all wrapped in the sugar coating of socialization and recreation with friends. How perfect is that?

Having said (or rather, written) all of that, it was with a small pang of regret, and no small amount of satisfaction that I announce that the RPG Corner is going on indefinite hiatus. Over the past four years and change, I've said my piece about Gaming and Game Mastering, without getting too deep into details and minutia. Lest I begin to repeat myself, I think it is time for me to put the column down, and move into other issues of speculative fiction and writing which interest me. Sooner or later I will probably come back to Gaming as a subject for articles, because Gaming is never far from my thoughts, but for the time being I think it's a good time for me to stop. I do hope that those of you who have stuck with me (both of you), enjoyed the column, and if I am incredibly fortunate, that you learned something from it.

Good Gaming to all.

Univ. of SF (con't)

of a monitor or on the cell, my sci-fi buddies and I plan our next group class adventure. It may be for roll playing, or a panel at a convention. I may be doing my own private research for an *Illuminata* article. Doesn't matter; it's good. I want the Cheesy-poufs, the not so wonderful www, the terrible puns and fanboys. I want to experience it all. I'm an existentialist, at heart.

Thinking of that year with *Illuminata* as I lay in my bed, recounting time-gone-by, Bret and I used to haggle over commas, mostly. Content for my articles is a developing process as I didn't really have a niche and was a neophyte writer when I signed up for his class. He's put up with a lot, but always steers me graciously. Our *Illuminata* staff is gracious, as well. We rejoiced with the birth of his first child and the publishing of his own *Boundary's Fall* series. We ached with him when he sent pictures of how high the water came in his home in the summer of 2005. His business and life-style was devastated by Hurricane Katrina. And yet, he has not given up. A heart-lesson I experience through technology.

What stuns me about my early waking experience is that it seems like I've had a faculty and friend pen-pal all this time, thanks to technology. We've spoken real-time once; I've never met him in person. Someday, I'd like to meet my Editor. Thank you, Bret, for my baptism date.

In February, I examine some of the lessons learned from USF and how the faculty and student body has enriched my education and my life.