

A Gentle Stroll

November 2025 | Issue #6



Collation File

Front cover ... “In the depth of the ruins there exists an area where electronic recording devices fail and even the physical light is distorted...” Discovery of Forerunner Ruins at Rhukarv on planet Korwar... Jim Eckman 2025 Chinese watercolor.

Collation File ... The Collator Supreme ... 1

The Fox’s Den: A Zine ... N. C. Shapero ... 14

Postscripts from the Phoenix Throne #4 ... Gabriel Roark ... 10

Ronin Engineer ... Jim Eckman ... 4

Death Priest ... Clark B. Timmins ... 4

A Rhodomontadulous Promenade #5 ... George Phillies ... 4

Editorial Note

We are switching over to bimonthly publication. There are too many time demands on your humble collator. The due date of the next issue will be January 2, 2026.

Please email PDFs of your zines to the collator, George Phillies, phillies@4liberty.net. Collation and distribution will occur soon thereafter.

General rules: Publication is bimonthly. Contributors are expected to stay on topic and remain civil to each other. Discussions of contemporary politics and graphic pornography will be rejected. Recall that A Gentle Stroll will appear with our other zines on our web pages, so matters you would not want seen by the public should go elsewhere. You retain all rights to your material, except that the N3F may use your submissions in this magazine, which may be distributed to subscribers and/or N3F members, and will be placed on our web site or other electronic archives.

Subscriptions: For the first some number of issues, A Gentle Stroll is free. After that, unless we end the project, contributors will be charged \$6 per year and be recognized as voting members of N3F (there is no obligation to vote or participate in other N3F activities). Readers are charged nothing. Contributors and readers have to opt-in to receive A Gentle Stroll. Contributors and readers also get to choose: (1) Receive only A Gentle Stroll and a rare issue of our other zines, or (2) Receive all N3F fanzines.

Comments on AGS 4

Joshua Kronengold: “Richard’s” internal voice is that of a early 21st century male, his “external” voice – his word choice – is formal and flowery because he’s learned (through multiple “time-dives” that anything else is likely to get a set of claws slapped across his nose – and his nose in those forms is quite sensitive, thank you!). How does he learn the language? He doesn’t know – “magic” is his explanation.

There is a basis in biology for monogamous males and polygamous females. European red fox males tend to have only one mate over their lives – if the female dies, they will then tend to live solitary lives thereafter. The vixens? If their male mate dies, they will find a new one (raising kits is a two-parent job). In humans ... well ... our females tend to “cheat” as much as the males do, though human females can only birth the child of one male in any given cycle, the ability of women to “cheat” is every bit as great as men – and choosing a “good” male to support and bring up the offspring and a strong/good looking male to father the offspring is a frequent enough pattern in humans.

But why are the Shidran-Kas males expected to be monogamous and females are “allowed” to play around? Societal rules, basically. The level of aggressive hormones in the females tends to be higher than in the males, and as a consequence, the females tend to be a little bit bigger on average, with slightly greater strength, and are somewhat more aggressive. And the societies (each Homeship is, for all intents and purposes, a separate world) are almost uniformly matriarchal (and descent is matrilineal). Their naming system is straightforward – the homeship of the mother, the homeship of the “father of record”, a given name, a “possessed by” particle, and the clan name (e.g. Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan). The female parent is known, but the male parent isn’t necessarily the “partner”.

What you see in the story is what WE would consider sexual harassment. But not much different (reversing the sexes) from what I have seen in the real world in business. (And yes, I have worked at a company where a nepo-baby had a rep for snapping the bras of female employees – and getting away with it.

Jim Eckman/Ronin Engineer rct me: Not the co-author of OTHER SUNS. That was my product (modulo a few contributions that were specifically noted in the first book, and used with the permission of the creators).//And it’s been 31 years since I worked at Industrial Dynamics/Filtec on assorted bottle inspection systems. My work since then has been in defense, medical instrumentation and satellites.

George Phillies/A Rhodomontadulous Promenade: rct me: The numbering system is simply octal, carried to its logical ends. Since we’re talking about creatures with three fingers and a thumb on each hand, it seemed “natural” to go with a base 8 number system. And remember, I’m a software engineer ... I could have used base 16, but that would have required either using a new set of 6 symbols or using the “standard” A-F, which I would have expected to be REALLY confusing for the typical reader.

Comments on AGS 5

Jim Eckman/Ronin Engineer

Re Cmt to Me: All three UNSTUCK IN TIME story segments are part of a larger story, covering Richard Fox’s adventures. THAT novel is unpublished and, in its current form, unpublishable (right now, based on my discussions with publishers and agents, the target length for a novel is 80-90k words – and yes, there are doorstops from well established best selling authors ... but I am at best a “mid-range” author, who must stick closer to the rules).

Number	Title	Author
1	?	?
2	?	?
3	Starship Troopers	Robert Anson Heinlein
4	?	?
5	?	?
6	Glory Road	Robert Anson Heinlein

Gabriel Rourke/Postscripts from the Phoenix Throne #3

Re: Back To School...In a Dream: The background for the extraterrestrial species is a further development of the work done in the SFRPG OTHER SUNS (the L’Drey – using “their name” for themselves, “Shidran-Kas”). I started work on the background for SF stories back in my college days (1978-1972), long before I was playing RPGs. I continued working on them in the decades (yes, decades) since. And the introduction to Richard Charles Fox, for HIS story, ws given in AGS 4, Unstuck in Time. The octal (base 8) system was, in part, the result of my having been a

computer science major who actually had chances to program computers at both SAIL (Stanford Artificial Intelligence Laboratory) and SLAC (Stanford Linear Accelerator Center) when I was in High School in Palo Alto.

Re Mutations: That was an APA devoted to role playing games run by Bill Stoddard out of San Diego that I got involved in back in the 80s, IIRC. It was while I was running what I called my “London Campaign” – the players were to imagine themselves having “funny doors” (portals) opening up in their living rooms, and (differing with what they’d REALLY do) collecting gear and diving through the “funny door” to a magic using pseudo-medieval world, with all manners of different species (elves, dwarves, multiple draconic species, and multiple human magic using pseudo-medieval societies). My contributions mostly consisted of campaign writeups from that campaign, plus writeups from Ed Goto, one of the players in that campaign. Wayne Shaw, and a number of other fairly well known (at the time) TTRPG writers also contributed.

Unstuck in Time is the introduction of Richard Charles Fox to the story that continues (after several other incidents) in BACK TO SCHOOL...IN A DREAM and A SECOND CHANCE.

I GOT WHERE I WASN'T GOING

By Niall “Nicolai” Shapero

Chapter 1: On Approach

I really hate flying. “Spacey”, our group secretary, booked me on flight 008, and it was a 777-ER. I’d have much rather flown in a Boeing Dreamliner, but “Spacey” thought I’d been the one to give her the nickname – and she takes every opportunity to retaliate. Nine hours forty minutes of torture, to be followed up with an eight time zone shift (GMT+9 to GMT-7). I had to go to Tokyo for the biomedical conference and present the latest work we’d done on the BCI – the brain-computer-interface problem. I’m a computer scientist and, of necessity, something of a student of neurobiology. I’d have much rather presented my talk using Skype or Google Hangout, but the gentlemen with the narrow black ties and square jaws who oversee my work prefer a more direct approach. It allows them to go over my talks well in advance, and then carefully “suggest” avoiding any undesired disclosures. The presence of one of their crew in the front row is also a ready reminder of who funds this project. My convenience (or upset stomach and jet lag) is something of little concern to them.

I especially hate turbulence. I thought I was going to dodge the bullet for once, but we were just an hour out from SFO when it hit. Three airsick bags later, I was too groggy and dehydrated to pay attention to the pilot’s announcement. When I’m sick, I don’t tend to pay attention to things.

We landed at SFO, and I felt like I’d been run through the wringer. I gathered up my baggage and staggered out of the plane. Airports are airports, and I wasn’t paying much attention. Until I saw the soldiers standing by the customs entry. I hadn’t seen anything on the net about a terrorist alert before I left Tokyo, but it had been nearly ten hours.

I noticed most of the passengers ahead of me being directed to one side. It didn’t look good – someone must have been in with us. I slowly pulled my passport out and presented it to the customs agent when I got to the head of the line.

“Doctor Shaefer?”

“Yes, that’s my name.”

“Doctor Nicholas Randolph Shaefer?”

“Yes,” I was starting to feel even sicker than I had on the plane. The soldiers were taking a more active interest in me.

“Would you please step aside, Doctor Shaefer?” the agent turned, “Corporal, would you escort Mister Shaefer to Holding, please?”

This was very bad. I didn’t think I’d done anything wrong. I’d gotten the OK to leave the country and my talk was cleared by the DoD a good month before I submitted it to the conference – and that was six months before. I’d stayed on script, as my handler (someone from our Tokyo embassy) could attest, but ... someone somewhere may not have gotten the word. One soldier took my carry-on; the other directed me to the side.

I sat in what I could only assume was an interrogation room for the better part of forty-five minutes, before one of the narrow-black-tie-and-square-jaw set joined me. He looked somehow familiar, but ...

“Good morning, Nick. It’s ... been a while.”

I looked him over; he was wearing a black shirt, black suit jacket and a yellow tie. He looked like a gangster – one with silver white hair and a salt and pepper moustache. But there was something about those steel grey eyes that were familiar.

“Draper? Is that you?”

He nodded.

“What the hell happened to you, Draper? I thought your hair was just starting to go grey – and your moustache was reddish brown when I left for the conference – have you been faking it and dyeing your hair all this time?”

“No, Nick. It’s been almost thirty years since you vanished. There have been just a few changes of late.” He pulled a small tablet out, and set it in front of me. “Your fingerprints are on file...” he nodded in the direction of the tablet.

I put my hand on it; it tickled, and the display lit up a nice green color after a two or three second delay. “That’s good, I hope,” I said.

“Your fingerprints and DNA match with the data on file. Welcome to 2048, Doctor Shaefer.”

“My DNA? Where the heck did you get that...”

“When your return flight disappeared,” Draper interrupted, “we took the liberty of sealing your apartment, and gathering DNA samples – from your hairbrush – in case we needed to identify your body, later.”

“Oh, joy! What did Penny have to say about *that*?”

“Your wife – or should I say, your ex-wife – was ... upset, but she cooperated, of course.”

“Of course...” I managed to say. “But she’s still my wife, isn’t she??”

Draper took a deep breath before replying. “You were declared dead over twenty years ago, Nick. Along with everyone else who was on ANA Flight 008. You’re lucky that you’re still considered an ‘important person’, or you would be held pending further identification, like almost everyone else on your flight.”

I couldn’t help but laugh; for once, all that security nonsense had worked in my favor. “Do I still have a job? Or should I say, *will* I have a job?”

“Given that you’ve been ... away ... for thirty years, it may take a little while to straighten out some of the paperwork – you were declared legally dead, after all. Your clearance, not to mention your passport, was rendered...”

“Inactive,” I finished for him. I sighed, and shook my head. “If I’ve somehow ‘jumped’ three decades into the future, yes, I can understand that the paperwork might take just a little while to straighten out.” Some things, it was clear, didn’t change.

“We’ll have to take you to one of our suites in company housing...and we’ll see about you getting a citizen-basic allowance until your status is ... revised. You may have to catch up with some of the changes since you ... ah ... left.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle as I rose from my seat. “Well, then, ‘lay on MacDuff, and cursed be he that first cries hold, enough!’.”

“Still the same, after all these years?”

“For you, it may have been thirty years,” I said, as Draper led me out of “holding”, “but please remember that for me, it’s only been a few hours. I’ll need to get a new driver’s license for one thing...”

Draper stopped cold, and I nearly rear-ended him. “Whatever for? We’ll see to it that your passport is renewed.”

I waved to him to resume walking. “I do like the mobility that a driver’s license provides. Besides, do I need to carry my passport around all the time for identification? I need...”

“No one needs to drive anymore.”

“Why?” I asked, as Draper led me out of the airport concourse.

“Almost all the new cars are self-driving. And no one has built a new gasoline powered car in fifteen years. Another ten or so years, and the older gas guzzlers will all be off the road. The air is already noticeably cleaner of at least some of the pollutants that were around before you ... ah ... ‘left’.”

I took a deep breath. “I don’t suppose anyone makes cars with stick shifts?” I was clearly going to miss some things – I’d always enjoyed the feeling of greater control a manual transmission gave me.

Draper laughed. “Most cars don’t even have steering wheels, Nick.”

I stopped. “And our carbon emissions? What’s happened with climate change?”

Draper sighed and urged me to resume walking. “We’re ... getting by. There have been a few other ... ah ... changes ... since you left. There was a war...”

“Another one? The war in Afghanistan was in its sixteenth or seventeenth year when I went to Japan...are we still stuck in ‘the graveyard of empires’?”

“No, Nick,” Draper said. “But another war started in 2020. It ended thirteen years ago.”

“So, we’re at peace, at last? After another ...” I did a quick calculation, “fifteen year long war?”

“In a manner of speaking, we are at peace.”

“In a manner of speaking? Come on, man, either we’re at peace or not...”

“There have been a few other changes,” Draper said. “Before you exit the airport, you’ll need this,” he handed me a small badge.

“A dosimeter? What the hell...”

“It’s nothing serious – everyone has one. We’re on the coast, and when the wind blows in from the sea, well ... you never can tell ...”

“What the hell happened? Another Fukushima?”

Draper looked at me like I’d just stepped out of another dimension, which, to be honest, I had. “The War, man? Oh, right, you didn’t live through it...”

“We had a nukewar? With whom?”

Draper shook his head. “Right. I still find it a bit hard to believe that you just stepped across thirty years. The war started two years after your disappearance...”

“WW III?”

“Some people are calling it that – the French and the Germans went at it – for one last time. It was right after the EU broke up. The French started it, the Germans finished it – back in ’35, with their destruction of Paris. That one blew out windows in London.”

“Thirteen years ago, and people...”

“Rad-dust got thrown up, and it got ‘spread around’. All Class A citizens wear dosimeters to indicate if or when they have to ‘go to ground’.”

“Go to ground?” I asked.

“Go to a secure, filtered air, sealed facility. Class A citizens are then provided with ...”

“‘Class A’?”

“Those people who are deemed vital to the continued functioning of society. Your social rating is an important factor these days. You’re going to be put into Class A in all likelihood. You’re too intelligent, and you’re likely not gene-damaged by either bio, nano, or radiological poisoning from the war. Your living quarters will have filtered air...”

“Dare I ask what class you fall into?”

"I'm in Class B – critical security personnel. I'm past the age to father a child, so my exposure limits are higher, and my willingness to perform riskier ..."

"Good God, man! You've got to be ..." I did a quick calculation, "at least 76 years old."

"Close, Nick," he said, and chuckled. "My seventy-ninth birthday is this November – November 5th in fact."

I put the dosimeter on and couldn't help shuddering. "Any other 'minor details' that I need to know about what's happened in the last thirty years?"

"Just a moment." Draper stopped, his eyes unfocused, and stood stock still for perhaps five or ten seconds.

"Ah, what's the matter?"

"Just checking. The 28th, 29th, and 30th amendments have been passed since you 'left'. I just 'googled' – I couldn't remember if the 28th was passed shortly before or shortly after you went on your little 'time hop'."

"I'll get to the content of those amendments later. But how did you just ... ah ... 'google' it?"

"Oh, I got a Shaefer-Hiranuma implant six years ago – I tied into the GIG and ..."

"A WHAT?"

"An implant. Based on your work thirty years ago, and working with the rest of your team, Hiranuma Senji developed the first implantable BCI eighteen years ago..."

"Little 'Neko' made the breakthrough?" A wave of professional jealousy broke over me.

"He insisted that your name go first – and he's now a senior technical fellow, not that it should be a surprise to you."

"He was ..." I stopped. Adding twelve years to his age when I'd left, 'Neko' as we all called him, would have been thirty-seven years old when his breakthrough came. Adding another eighteen years, and he'd be fourteen years older than me. It would definitely take a bit of adjustment – the bouncy little youngster had turned into another old master – and if he'd managed to solve the problems that I'd just begun to resolve...well...he deserves my respect. Then it hit me.

"He named the implant the 'Shaefer-Hiranuma' implant?"

"Yes, he insisted that without your earlier work, he would have never completed the project."

I sighed and realized that 'Neko' had grown up in more ways than one. Maybe I could match him for maturity, if I tried hard enough. I'd have to catch up with him at the first opportunity.

"What else has happened in the last thirty years that I need to know *right now*?" I asked, as we continued walking.

"Your BCI work has given sight back to a few hundred thousand people..."

"Sight? You mean Mikhailov..."

"Applied the Shaefer-Hiranuma breakthrough to the artificial eyes that he was developing when you left. The key, after all, was interfacing the electronics to the optic nerve..."

"Which relied upon solving the basic brain-computer-interface problem," I finished for Draper. It was definitely going to take some time to really grasp all the ramifications of "my" work. "I suppose that Mikhailov is a director by now?"

"No, I'm afraid not. He died of pancreatic cancer three years ago. But he did see his discovery help people. Though there's a significant fraction of the blind community that has been objecting to the 'electronic eyes implants'," Draper said.

I shook my head and sighed. "Just like people in the deaf community objected to cochlear implants, I suppose?"

"Similar arguments," Draper replied, just as we reached the curb; the door to the car opened as we walked up.

I looked around; there were other people with baggage, but no one rushing towards the open car. "Yours?"

Draper laughed. "Heavens, no! I just summoned one through the GIG."

“The ... GIG?”

“Global Information Grid. Think of it as the Internet version 2.0. You’ll get used to it – the interface is pretty much the same as the World Wide Web was in your day. But it’s a lot faster – the typical tie-in is a TBS...”

“Terabit per second?”

“Terabyte per second. But that’s just the typical user link. The trunks run at closer to a hundred petabytes per second on each trunk line. Multiple trunks so...”

I slid into the car; there was no steering wheel – nor was there the ‘old style’ seating – all the seats faced inward. “And this seat arrangement is safe?” I’d seated myself facing forward.

Draper seated himself facing me, his back towards the front of the vehicle. “Safer than when most cars were driven by people. Last year there were fewer than three thousand highway fatalities – almost all of them were human driven vehicles. I think you’ll like the place the Company has prepared for you...”

“A company suite, you said?”

“Yes, it seemed the least we could do. You are, after all, likely going to end up as a senior technical fellow – you’ll need time to adjust, and you’ll need to ‘train up’ again, but there’s no doubt that you’ll be a valuable contributor. Heck, just your name associated with the Company is of considerable PR value. ‘Doctor Nicholas Shaefer, the man responsible for solving the BCI problem...’”

“Hold! Wait a minute! I didn’t solve the problem – from what you just told me, ‘Neko’ was the one...”

“Remember The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance?” Draper asked.

“Oh, ye gods and little fishes! ‘When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.’ So the legend is that I solved it? Then what do people think Senji did?”

“What he *said* he did. He was the engineer who developed the technology to implement your genius-level solution.”

“But Senji was never an engineer, he was a...”

“He was honoring his mentor – you. And it’s not as though he really likes the limelight all that much. Easier to blame the breakthrough on you – and then he could stay in his lab and work on new ideas...”

Again, I couldn’t help but laugh. “So Senji pulled a fast one on everybody.” That was the ‘kitten’ that I’d known. And with further years of uninterrupted research, I could just imagine what he’d likely accomplished.

“You’ll need to schedule implant surgery yourself,” Draper said.

“Please ... like I need *another* hole in my head? Didn’t Senji finish my work on the neural-web-interface?”

“No, actually, he discarded that approach as ... ‘suboptimal’. Doctor Blakely did develop a working system based on your original design, though. I used one while I was saving up for my implant surgery. You won’t have to wait – the Company will pay for your surgery,” Draper said.

I sighed. “I suppose Jim dropped the neural-web approach...”

“No, actually, he kept working on it until...” Draper stopped abruptly.

“He died? When?”

It was Draper’s turn to sigh. “Five years ago, of a neuroblastoma. He couldn’t do any backups, thanks to the cancer...”

“Backups?”

“Oh, yeah, that would be new to you. Anyone with an implant can back themselves up to the GIG. Takes about an hour the first time with an implant – it’s closer to a day to do with just the neural web. You’ll want to make a backup as soon as you can. The Company can’t afford to lose talents like yours...”

“Make a copy?”

“No, it’s really ‘you’. You set your implant to do a ‘continuous backup’, and all your sensory impressions, thoughts, everything is backed up to the GIG. That way, if something happens to your body, we can ‘resume’ you from the backed up data...”

“But what about my body ... would you grow me a new one?”

“It’s a simple matter – cloned and you ‘resume’ once the body has been force-grown to maturity...”

“Ye Gods and little fishes! Human cloning was illegal...”

“In 2018, ok, yeah. Now? It’s been legal for ‘resumes’ for several years now. There’s talk of a new Constitutional amendment – to grant ‘personhood’ and voting rights to disembodied resumes while they wait for their clones to be grown.”

“Foresight? The population has grown up, then.” Would wonders never cease, I thought. “But if this ‘backup’ is possible, why didn’t Mikhailov...”

“He said, ‘one life is enough for me – I’ve lived a long and useful life, and now I’m just tired’. We couldn’t force him – there’s still freedom to refuse.”

“Does anyone have to die anymore?”

Draper shrugged. “If you can afford the implant surgery, and you can adapt successfully, and can afford the storage costs...”

“How much does it cost?”

“Enough. Only the top twenty-five percent of the population can afford the surgery and the ‘other’ costs. Worldwide? Nowhere near that percentage. How many will be able to afford repeated ‘resumes’? I don’t know, and I don’t think anyone does. We’ll likely find out – but it will take us just a bit longer to see all the side effects.”

“When have I heard that before?”

Draper laughed. “That’s the Dr. Shaefer that I knew and loved – always the pessimist. But the world is getting better.”

“And World War III?”

“We’re working on healing the damage of that one. What with the fusion power plants coming on-line – thanks, by the way, to the groupthink solutions available courtesy your...”

“Groupthink?”

“Oh, yes,” Draper chuckled. I was beginning to really dislike that sound. “Link in to the mindcloud on the GIG with your implant, and ... think with others, I suppose you could call it. Superfast brainstorming with the best and brightest. The air is cleaner, we’re using more renewable resources – we could do better, but did you expect humans to change completely overnight?”

“So all these changes derive from the BCI solution?”

“Second or third order, maybe. But most trace back to improved intelligence and cooperation. It’s really hard to lie mind-to-mind...”

“So the BCI solution...”

“Lead to effective telepathy, yes. *Hitchhiker* notwithstanding, it’s been a significant improvement. At least at the leadership level; no more screw ups like...”

“You don’t have to remind me – I voted for the alternative. But no lies? Not even social white lies among those with the implants?”

“Not in the mindcloud. I can still ‘fib’ – just so long as I limit it to the spoken word. And there are no TruthTellers around – we’ll get to *that* change later. Read the new amendments, and it might make more sense. One thing we’ve learned as a society, though, is that truth can be a really addictive habit. You’ll understand better once you’ve had your own surgery...”

“I don’t know ... no money ...”

“The Company will pay for it. You’ll be a significant contributor, based on past experience. And if you never make more than your original one set of discoveries ... well ... you’ll still be a good public face.”

“A ‘fellow emeritus’, then, if nothing else?”

“Don’t you think you deserve a little support? And the Company is perfectly willing to bet on you – based on past performance, there should be another few discoveries, once you’re ‘up to speed’ again,” Draper leaned back in the seat and grinned.

“Where do I sign up?” At least I wouldn’t have to worry about money ... and it would be nice to try out the perfected version of my “dream” machine.

“Just say, ‘I want my job back’.”

“You’ve got it, ‘I want my job back’. Did you record that, or transmit it to HR?”

“Both. The look on your face was – and is – priceless. I think that this is the beginning of a wonderful friendship.”

I couldn’t help laughing. If I survived it, this new day was going to be ... one heck of a thrill ride. And now I think I finally understood what dad used to refer to as an “E-ticket ride”.

Chapter 2: Getting There

The Company supplied apartment was spacious – easily twenty-five hundred square feet. There was a large kitchen, with a preparation island, a living room, a dining room, a video room, three bedrooms, two baths (one with a step-in bathtub), a large library and a combined home office/den. No outside windows – one couldn’t have everything, it seems – but the screens on most of the walls could be programmed to either display paintings or live video from remote cameras.

I’d always been afraid of heights, so after a few experiments involving live streamed images from the edge of the Grand Canyon looking down, and images from the top of the TransAmerica Pyramid (also looking down), I switched all but two of the panes to show old favorite pieces of art. Munch’s “The Scream”, several pieces from my old collection (now at the Eaton – Penny donated them, per my will), along with a few Bonestell pieces I’d always liked and several Kelly Freas pieces that I’d never been able to afford.

The first night was actually better than I could have hoped – someone had finally designed a bed that I could sleep in comfortably, with pillows that were *just right*. I didn’t have to fluff the pillows up, nor double them up to get just the right support. Someone had even provided ones that would “close up” over my ears and completely cradle my head. It was a sign that whatever else had happened, the Company was at least intent on making me comfortable (or, at the very least, not *unintentionally* making me uncomfortable).

The Company gave me an apartment located in what had been Old Town in Palo Alto – East of Middlefield and a bit North of University. When I’d been in the SF Bay Area working for them before, I’d had to live a good many miles South in Morgan Hill. This apartment was in what *had* been “rich folks territory”. In 2018, I’d never have been able to afford an apartment, let alone a luxury apartment like this one anywhere near this location. But thirty years change more than just technology. Or, perhaps I should say, in part because of technology.

I found this out the hard way when I left my apartment and headed down to the gym in the basement of the complex. There, working the free weights, was someone in what looked like a top quality fursuit. A lupine fur suit – and a good one. There was even a tongue that hung out of the open mouth.

I nodded in greeting (my first thought was that the wearer must have cold packs or a hidden quiet fan or three) and the eyes tracked my movement as the “suiter” continued doing curls. I set up on one of the cycles, managed to figure out the GUI well enough to start a ride up the Embarcadero to South SF.

I’d been peddling for about half an hour, glancing over at the “suiter” every few minutes. It seemed impossible to believe that he was actually keeping up his exercise program without risking heat stroke. He finished his own exercise program and walked over to my station. I was perspiring heavily by then; I noticed something that hadn’t been obvious when I’d first spotted the “fursuiter” – the tongue was moist and dripping saliva. I stopped pedaling and noticed (finally) that the “fursuiter” was panting – and he sounded much as one would expect a giant wolf would sound doing so.

“Welcome to the Bunker, Doctor Shaefer,” he said, in a strangely accented English. The muzzle added a certain nasalization to his pronunciation that I find hard to transcribe. And it made the facts clear – this was no fursuiter, this

was someone whose fur was “home grown”. I continued panting myself, and I could smell him – and it wasn't a human smell.

“Ah...” I managed to avoid falling off the stationary bike.

“No problem, Doctor Shaefer, I'm part of security here – I know that my kind are ... ‘unfamiliar’ to you. I'm third gen – third generation. Biological uplift.” He held out a hand – fur covered on one side, pads on the other, stubby claws instead of nails on each finger.

I'd always liked dogs ... and he (I assumed the gender) was being polite, so the only proper response was to be polite in turn. I reached out and took his hand; “I'm afraid that you have the advantage of me, sir,” I said.

He laughed; it was a strange huffing sound. “Joseph Lupus. If you want to be really formal about it, Joseph Michael Lupus. Our last names come from the name of the species we were uplifted from.”

“Canis Lupus,” I said. “It must make for confusing relations...”

“Not among us, Doctor Shaefer. We know our relatives – by scent if not by name and citizen numbers.”

I decided to look up “citizen numbers” later. “If you're head of Security here, you can call me Nicholas – or if you wish to be equally formal, Nicholas Randolph Shaefer.”

Chapter 3: Wheels Down

I opened the door to my apartment and smelled something odd – I'd not been much of a “cat” person since my college days. I knew that smell. And the smell of bacon frying.

“Do you like your bacon crispy, or almost blackened?” the voice from the kitchen called out. “Your file didn't say which.”

“Crispy – stiff – so you'll need to drain and ...” I stopped as I reached the kitchen. The cat was barely an inch shorter than me – and as the cat was wearing a rather saucy French maid's uniform, I assumed that it was a female. “Ah...” I took a deep breath.

“I'm a feline uplift – Abyssinian breed line. My name is Lee Ann Abyssi,” the feline said, as she set the bacon on the rack, covered it with a paper towel and began patting it down. “I'm your personal assistant. I'll be handling your appointments, cooking, cleaning, and ... whatever other tasks you need done.”

“Ah...”

She turned, looked me over the way cats will, and smiled, giving me a clear view of her two centimeter fangs. “And despite appearances, I don't bite,” she said, and purred. It sounded a bit like the rumble you might expect from a 250 cc motorcycle idling.

“Ok,” I finally managed to say.

Lee Ann turned back to the bacon and put it onto a plate. It looked like eight or ten slices. “That's a bit much for me right now; perhaps you'd be willing to eat some of them?”

The rumbling purr grew louder. “That's *very* nice of you, Doctor Shaefer,” she said as she set the plate down on the kitchen nook table. I sat down opposite and shifted the plate so that it was midway between us.

A few bites in, I couldn't help but comment, “this is cooked perfectly. Thank you.”

“You're very welcome, Doctor Shaefer,” she said.

“Ah, perhaps you'll call me Nick? If we're going to be working together...”

“I work *for* you Nick ... you're an E-10, I'm just an E-2. Management thought that you'd be happier with an assistant who had engineering training...”

“Hold up a second,” I interrupted. “Info dump – I don't know what you mean by an E-10, or an E-2. Help?”

“Oh! Ok, An E-2 is a straight engineer – I have a BS degree in Computer Science, I graduated from Berkeley two years ago – I'm twenty years old. An E-6 is a Principal Engineer, an E-7 is a Senior Principal Engineer, an E-8 is an Associate Technical Fellow, then E-9s and E-10s are Technical and Senior Technical Fellows. There aren't very many E-10s in the Company right now.”

“So ... I’m some sort of high-muckety-muck now?”

“As the PI – Principal Investigator – on the old BCI project, yes. The Company thought that you’d be happier with someone who had a chance of understanding your work as a personal assistant. They said that you liked cats, and since they knew you wouldn’t be allergic to me...”

I couldn’t help but chuckle. “Yes, that would be a bit of a problem if a personal assistant made me sick.”

“Well, I’d *hope* that I don’t affect your health. I will also live longer than the cats you had when *you* were in college.”

“Well, losing those two fluffballs was part of the reason I didn’t adopt any others. Hurt too much to lose them.”

“I don’t plan on playing in the street – and while no one is sure how long my kind can expect to live, the people who designed my line were trying for human-range lifespans. Puberty was at age fourteen for me, so ... I’m guessing that the Creators managed to hit close to the mark of a seventy to ninety year lifespan.”

I looked her over carefully. There was no dosimeter on her maid uniform. “Ah...” I managed, and tapped my dosimeter.

She grinned wider, “wolfed” down a half slice of bacon, and laughed. “I don’t wear mine indoors – or, at least, not in a filtered air apartment. I’m class A just like you. Green carded right now, but I like people, and I’ve not gotten into any trouble, so ... I’ll likely be upgraded to plus card status before long.”

“Green card? Plus card?”

“Oh, right! Green card is authorized to breed, but I have to be genetically screened and any tom that I’m interested in would have to be screened and our expected offspring analyzed for viability. Plus card means unlimited breeding authorization, which is nice, but ... it means I’d have to go in for egg donations on a regular basis. That’s a bit messy, and the induced ‘heat’ is a bit rough to handle psychologically. But I’d be more than willing to put up with the minor indignity for the added status.”

I shook my head. I couldn’t help but stare at the being opposite me, crunching on bacon. “I can see that there are just more than a few adaptations I’m going to have to make to this brave new world.”

Lee Ann laughed. “You’re not the Savage, and this isn’t a world made by Aldous Huxley,” she said.

“You’ve read *that* old novel?”

“I read a lot of science fiction – most of the newer stuff is pretty awful, I’ll admit, but the better stories and novels from the 1940s through the mid-1960s are pretty good. My favorite from the 1960s was **The Moon Is A Harsh Mistress**. And despite his obvious speciesism, I rather liked John W. Campbell’s editorials, and he managed to train some really neat authors. Anderson, Asimov, Silverberg, Piper...”

“You’ve read H. Beam Piper?”

“I loved **Space Viking** and **Lord Kalvan of Otherwhen**. I enjoyed the whole **Paratime** series of his, but the racism of his ‘First Level’ types was a bit much. Understandable, given his time, but ... you can understand?”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “I can just imagine. Have you read any of Cordwainer Smith’s stories?”

It was Lee Ann’s turn to laugh. “Do you mean **The Boy Who Bought Old Earth**, or **The Ballad of Lost C’Mell**? ‘Where is the which of the what she did...’”

“I give up. You’ll have to point me to the better ‘new stuff’.”

“Well, remember that 90% of Science Fiction is crap...”

“Sturgeon’s Law?”

“It dates to last century, but it’s still a good rule of thumb. There are some really nice novels by Radenoure and Pitt that you might like. **The Last Sweet Sound**, their first novel, was published in 2025 and it won both Hugo and Nebula awards. Their latest novel is more of a tech-thriller than SF, but **For The Ashes of Our Fathers** is still a great read.”

“If you’re as good an assistant as a literary reference, I’m sure that this is going to be the beginning of a wonderful friendship.”

“And if you call me ‘Louie’, I *will* scratch you,” she said, but her grin and the sparkle in her eyes took any sting out of the comment. “Don’t worry, I’ve got some films queued up that will make you feel almost at home – **African Queen, The Caine Mutiny, Casablanca, and Treasure of the Sierra Madre.**”

“Are you a Bogie fan as well?” I asked.

“You are, which is the point, isn’t it? I’ve set up your office in the den, you’re set up for a private connect to the Company’s servers, and your study schedule is set up in your daytimer...”

“My ... daytimer? I’d think everyone would be on computer by now. The ‘paperless office’, remember?”

Lee Ann snorted. “I’ll believe in it when I see it. But *your* way of doing things always involved using a daytimer. So...”

“The Company seems to have thought of everything,” I said.

“We’ll see. Once you’re finished with breakfast, you’ll want to get to work. You’ve got a lot of catching up to do, you know. Think, **The Door Into Summer,**”

“Only I don’t have a drinking problem, no one’s stolen ‘my’ company from me, nor my fiancée – though I lost a wife in this crazy business, it wasn’t as if she turned on me. She thought I was dead,” I said, and shook my head. Was there nothing that this cat – this “Uplift” – hadn’t read from my old favorites?

“The Company gave me a copy of key sections of your personnel file and security interviews to review as soon as they selected me for this position,” Lee Ann said.

“Did they engineer telepathy into your kind as well?”

“No ... but think about it for a moment.” She turned her head and tapped a spot just below the mastoid process. There was a bald spot, where the fur had either been shaved or simply refused to grow. “My implant. Makes for quick studying. There are a *lot* of things that I’ll be able to help you with.”

I took a deep breath, in through the nose and out through the mouth. A calming breath. “Okay...perhaps I’d better start work now,” I said, pushing away from the table.

#

The papers that Lee Ann (or some anonymous Company engineer) had laid out for my study were ... interesting. “Neko” had been busy over the last thirty years; he averaged six papers a year – and from the looks of it, at least three papers per year were referenced by upwards of twenty other papers by other researchers over time. After eight hours of hard work, I managed to outline my “plan of attack” and muddle through one recent paper and read a dozen papers from around the time of my departure. After another hour, I had a rough estimate as to how long it would take me to (at least) read through what everyone in my former field thought were the most important research areas “today”. Ten months work, assuming I only took off one day a week.

The sound and smells of cooking interrupted my work around 1900 hours; Lee Ann was making something with ground turkey.

“Ah, what is that?” I said, pointing at the mixture of ground turkey and assorted tomatoes, mushrooms, and less recognizable vegetables.

“Glop. It’s pretty much the recipe that you had...”

“On my laptop,” I said, shaking my head. “Does it still exist? The laptop, that is?”

The Uplifted cat made a sound remarkably close to a human chuckle. “After thirty years? Your company laptop was recovered from your luggage, but your personal laptop? It was recycled years ago, after your wife downloaded all the data. She posted most of the recipes to the net and ...”

“Whatever gets on the net stays FOREVER. Well, at least I won’t have to reconstruct everything. Is Facebook still around? I don’t know about my old account, but ...”

“They were ‘eaten’ by Google-Amazon about six years ago. But after thirty years, your account *has* to have been declared inactive and purged. Of course, the Wayback Machine might be able to recover your posts.”

I couldn't help but laugh. “Ok, what else has changed while I was ‘gone’?”

“Well, there's rationing of electricity ... even for Class A's. The power's needed to heat the streets.”

“Why? And rationing?”

“To keep back the glaciers. At least in the monad – melt the ice so that it moves *around* the monad instead of over it. We don't want to end up like Chicago.”

“What happened to Chicago?”

“Went under the Central Glacier eight years ago. Most of the key facilities have been relocated to New Chicago. It will be a while before *that* place is more than just an arcology and a fusion power plant, though. They still have to connect all the subshuttle links before you can get there except with a priority travel authorization.”

“Maybe I should get an implant, so that the Company can dump all these changes directly into my brain,” I said.

“It does make things easier,” Lee Ann said, and, sniffing at the mixture on the stove, began ladling the mixture into two bowls. “No beer, I'm afraid. With all the meat, there weren't enough ration points left over...”

“Ration points? Food is rationed?”

“The War, after all. Once the vertical farms all come on line, we should be able to get off rationing.”

I shook my head and sighed. I picked up the bowl of glop and headed over to the kitchen nook. Lee Ann followed me and handed me a spoon and a glass of water. “It's been filtered, so it should be safe,” she said.

“From radiological contamination?”

“Yes, and from biohazards. Perfectly drinkable.”

The rest of the meal was in silence. After clearing the dishes (apparently, my “personal assistant” was also chief bottle washer as well), Lee Ann called up an e-mail notice on one of the wall displays. Heating was to be shut down at 2100 hours, due to power required to deal with a worse than predicted polar vortex due to hit the Bay Area.

“Why?”

“So that energy can be used to heat the streets. We don't want to go the way of Chicago...”

I shuddered. “Not as much the utopia as I might have hoped for, nor as dark a world as I might have feared,” I said.

“A quote?” Lee Ann asked.

“Something from a friend's RPG write-up, many years ago.” I shook my head. “Anything else I need to know tonight?”

“It's going to get cold tonight – this apartment is well insulated, but ... it's going to be *really* cold out tonight and tomorrow. You'll really need a bed warmer tonight.” She had a funny expression on her muzzle, and I thought that I'd really need to read up on Uplift expressions.

“Then ‘make it so’,” I said, and began preparing for an early bedtime. After I'd finished my business in the bathroom, Lee Ann was nowhere to be seen. “She must have headed out for her own apartment,” I said to myself as I checked the door; it was locked, and the deadbolt set. She had a key, so she must have just locked up for me. It was going to take a bit getting used to having a “personal assistant”.

“Someone” had put out a pair of pajamas for me – someone who looked like a bipedal mountain lion, I thought. I changed, and slipped into the bed, and bumped into that same “someone”

“I'm your bed warmer. My body temperature is nearly a degree higher than yours, so with the comforter, we should both stay cozy. Good night, Doctor Shaefer,” Lee Ann said.

It is definitely going to take some time to get used to the new state of affairs, Shaefer thought.

Chapter 4: The Other Side

“LAC-4941, sitrep,” the eyes regarding me over the reddish orange furred muzzle were black, and the voice held all the expression of a computer. The voop wore the uniform of the KGB, the sword and shield emblem on his collar tabs.

“My *name*, is Lee Ann...” I began.

“You do not have a name. Your ident number is LAC-4941. Model L, series A, feline – Cat – Uplift, number 4941 of that series,” the Vulpine Uplift interrupted me. “Do not get *uppity* with me, *kittycat*, or I will see you on the next bus to Bakersfield.” He didn’t raise his voice, save for those two words.

I managed to keep my fur from standing on end. *God, but I hate the attitude these Benji’s have about everyone else but their own overseer breed.* I bowed my head, a nice “obedient” underperson. “The subject, Doctor Nicholas Randolph Shaefer, knows me by the name, ‘Lee Ann Abyss’’. If I am addressed by that name, the probability that I will ‘slip’ and use my proper ident designation is reduced. If I am to provide the necessary...”

“Acknowledged. For the purpose of maintaining cover, then, we will permit the use of this ‘name’. What progress have you made with respect to emotional stabilization of the subject?”

Have to be careful. Tell the truth, but be careful what truth is told. “Doctor Shaefer responded to the initial contact, as predicted, with friendly gestures. He offered me food – bacon, to be precise.”

“Is that the full extent of your progress?”

“I warmed his bed for him when the power was cut to the A-class apartments in our block. After his initial shock, he was able to ‘adapt’ to the situation.”

“To what extent did you ‘warm his bed’? You were to provide an emotional connection to permit later leverage...”

“He’s a Human, and from before the public disclosure of the existence of my kind. ‘Softly, softly, catchee monkee’...”

“You were expected...”

“I know what I was expected to do. But if I were to just jump into bed and lift my tail, he would have balked!”

“You overlook the unpleasant alternative of punishment, *kittycat*.”

Again, the hated pejorative. Gods, how I hate voops and all Benjis! “If I just start rolling on the floor in front of him, it will either scare him off or disgust him.”

“Your kind were made to be ‘companions’. If you cannot fulfill your designated function...”

“Think of the waste of resources! I know what I was ‘made’ for, and I know what I can do. Don’t tell me how to do my job – you tell me *what* I am to do, but you lack my training so *please* do not tell me *how* to do it.”

“It is necessary that Doctor Shaefer develop an emotional bond with you – with Humans with a psychological profile similar to his, the most effective way of doing so is through sexual activity.”

I swallowed back bile. “He’s a nice person...”

“Who has to be made ... malleable. Controlled.”

“It takes *time*. If I try to rush matters, you’ll have to use someone else. I’ll have ruined any chance that he’ll develop an emotional connection with me. And he is quite intelligent. He may well see through the Company’s plan.”

“Unlikely, ‘Lee Ann’. Doctor Shaefer has been carefully isolated from any ‘dissident’ contacts.”

“Please, do *not* underestimate the man. He is a genius. Without his work...”

“The Company is aware of how intelligent Doctor Shaefer is. But it is a limited intelligence. He does not see beneath the surface, when there are sufficient ‘distractions’. You are to provide one such ‘distraction’. If you cannot do so...”

I bowed my head again and exposed my throat. Submissive gestures, that might help placate my handler. “I will continue my efforts. It will take time, but Doctor Shaefer is already beginning to see me as a ‘person’ rather than an ‘animal’, and I will be able to achieve the objective *if I am given sufficient time.*”

“How much time do you believe would be ‘sufficient’, given his lack of prior exposure to Uplifts?”

“I cannot be certain, but I will keep you apprised as matters develop.”

“See to it that you do. Dismissed,” he said, and turned away.

POSTSCRIPTS FROM THE PHOENIX THRONE #4

WHERE ROLEPLAYING GAMES ARE THE CENTER OF ATTENTION

FOR A GENTLE STROLL #6

GABRIEL ROARK
RANCHO CORDOVA, CALIFORNIA
gabrielroark@gmail.com

OCTOBER 28, 2025

FROM THE HERALD'S SCROLL

Lastish, I wrote that I might explain the title of this zine, namely, what the Phoenix Throne is. Here goes. About the time that George announced *A Gentle Stroll*, I was reading a bevy of *Troika!* roleplaying books from the Melsonian Arts Council (www.melsonia.com). The *Troika!* rulebook describes a player character background (lansquenet) as a former “mercenary retained in the exclusive service of the Phoenix Throne” (page 15). A rumor table in the volume’s starting adventure, “The Blancmange & Thistle,” mentions “Enforcers of the Phoenix Throne” making an arrest at a party (page 127). Phoenix Throne sounds cool & mysterious. The phoenix is the my daughter’s high school’s mascot, too. Finally, “Postscripts from the Phoenix Throne” has a pleasing, alternating double alliteration to it.

TROIKA!, BY DANIEL SELL

What sort of RPG is *Troika!*? (sorry, didn’t mean to shout.) The author

describes it as a science fantasy game & a reimagining of Britain’s most famous gamebook system, *Advanced Fighting Fantasy*. The game is its own beast, but if you have played Steve Jackson’s *Sorcery!* (again with the shouting) gamebooks series or *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain* (Steve Jackson & Ian Livingstone), *Troika!*’s systematic chassis is plainly evident.

Said chassis is quotidian & solid. It is a 2d6/1d66 system with simple character generation. Three ability scores trace your PC’s capabilities or potential: Skill (4–6), Stamina (14–24), & Luck (7–12). After recording this information, one records the PC’s basic possessions, including starting money.

Next, the player throws d66 (like percentile, but with cubes) to determine their PC’s background. One can be a knight (as in our lansquenet example), a Poorly Made Dwarf, or Gremlin Catcher, among others. The backgrounds represent what your PC was “before you came

along” (page 5). Each background consists of an evocative description, one or more Advanced Skills, Possessions, & sometimes special rules. Background descriptions contain much of Troika’s implied setting.

Speaking of Troika’s implied setting, the reader will not find lengthy infodumps. Setting is hinted in Backgrounds, Rules, Spells, Items, & bestiary (Enemies). The introduction suggests plane (sphere)-hopping adventures beginning in the sphere of the never-ending city of Troika. Magic is commonplace here, as is fantastical technology.

Where the referee perceives doubt in the success of some character’s endeavor, they call for a Skill roll on 2d6: roll under for uncontested actions or roll high for contested activities. If a character has an Advanced Skill relevant to the activity in question, they may add its value to their Skill score for purposes of the roll.

Stamina reflects a character’s life force & endurance (generally, hit points). Provisions, rest, & magic restore Stamina. If a character drops to zero Stamina, they are on death’s door & require immediate healing or stabilization. If a character falls below zero Stamina, they immediately die.

The third character attribute, and one that only PCs possess, is Luck. Various circumstances in a game of Troika! can prompt the referee to have a PC test their luck by rolling under their current Luck value on 2d6. This use of Luck essentially acts as a saving throw. Each time a PC tests their luck, however, their Luck score is reduced by one. Ample rest restores Luck. PCs may also elect to test their luck in combat to break ties or increase their damage rolls.

PCs never improve their Skill, Stamina, or Luck. They may, however, improve their Advanced Skills. Players place check marks next to successfully used skills & when the referee decides that a suitable interval for reflection has passed, PCs may roll against up to three Advanced Skills (roll over). If the roll is “failed”, the PC increases that Advanced Skill by one point.

Whether a PC initially uses magic spells depends entirely on their background. Spells have a Stamina cost to cast, so spellcasting increases one’s physical vulnerability for a time. Careful!

You might already have surmised that combat in Troika is full of contested (roll over) rolls, & you would be correct. What is most novel about Troikan combat is the initiative system. The referee takes different colored chits, stones,

beads, dice, whatever, and assigns colors to each PC combatant and to the enemies. A single token of distinct color is placed in the box or bag that contains the “initiative stack” to signify the end of round. The referee draws a token & the appropriate character acts. Although a round represents 6–10 seconds, numerous actions may occur, so long as the end-of-round token is not drawn. It is worth noting that whoever wins a melee combat role does damage. Thus, one character might initiate an attack & take damage rather than simply missing their opponent. Combat is risky indeed.

Encumbrance is also novel. A typical PC can carry up to 12 items without slowing down (very small or light items are grouped on the character sheet as one item). Bulky or heavy items (such as two-handed weapons, heavy armor, or mothers-in-law) might take two or more item slots. If a character wants to use an item not immediately to hand during combat or other time-sensitive occasions, one rolls 2d6 & tries to score higher than the encumbrance slot housing the desired item. If the roll is successful, the character may draw the item & use it in the current round. If the roll fails, it takes one’s entire action to ready the item. Pack your arrows & healing potions at the top of your equipment list!

Those are the rules in brief. Very simple, fun game.

COMMENTS ON *A GENTLE STROLL* #5

Ooze #1 (Clark B. Timmins)

I think this is my favorite of your monster designs so far. Anthony M. Rud gave you helpful material with which to work, as Rud attempted scientific grounding for his creature. Your use of the source material & its presentation are both evocative without the D&D 5e game stats. When the reader gets to them, it is a simple matter to understand how you derived the ability scores & other qualities of the Ooze. All said & done, your treatment of the Ooze presents a foe that has a knowable origin (even if only to the referee) & a believable ethology, within the realm of science fiction. Well done!

A Rhodomontadulous Promenade #5 (George)

RYCT Joshua Kronengold (“Random Hopscotch”): “There was also some discussion of how spells might change things, e.g., growth of plants as a spell made wheat fields vastly more productive.” These are fun thought experiments & the application of magic to more mundane enterprises like agriculture can have significant consequences in game worlds. I am reminded of my (alas!) long-paused Arduin Grimoire campaign, in which the party’s human magic-user

Connor McGill had been using *continual light* on small stones to create portable, concealable light sources for underground & nighttime exploration. McGill then had the bright idea to rent or purchase a shop in the party's town of residence to open "McGill's Illuminaries". McGill spent considerable time developing a stock of light stones to sell & erected a sign outside that was lit with numerous continual light stones. Because continual light produces daylight-strength illumination, McGill's neighbors complained about his sign, which lit up the street at night as though it was high noon. McGill solved this problem by purchasing a dark, heavy, oiled tarp to cover the sign at night. McGill's troubles were only just beginning about the time the COVID-19 pandemic knocked our campaign off track: guilds regulating lamplighters, chandlers, & similar were preparing to take legal action against McGill for subverting their business without guild membership.

I appreciate the details about standing night watches. I had never thought about sentries needing to remain still so that their movement does not give them away.

The Fox's Den (Shapero & Cole)

Ishri's death & Richard's temporary maiming were sad affairs. The appearance of the Hounds surprised

me. Should the reader have expected this turn of events in advance? I read your previous installment hastily enough that I wonder whether I missed some foreshadowing of this event.

DISPATCHES FROM THE FIELD: FINNEGAN TARREGA'S UNAUTHORIZED INVESTIGATIONS INTO MATTERS ANCIENT AND ARCAINE

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Dispatch 3: Götterdämmerung

In which an agent of the Smithsonian Institution's Special Acquisitions Section tracks the thief Balázs Andres to Arizona Territory's first, second, and third levels of Hell, more colloquially known by the name of Holbrook. My two previous dispatches ("Something's Rotten in Sikyatki" and "Agarrar a un Ladrón") relate the agent's rendezvous with Bureau of American Ethnology's Archeological Expedition to Arizona Territory and initial exploration of the ancient, razed Hopi village of Sikyatki. Amidst the gleaning of archaeological and ethnological insights of the investigation, the Special Acquisitions archaeologist learns that Andres stole sacred artifacts from Hopi villages and witnesses a mass exodus of local fauna from the vicinity of Sikyatki.

Yours very truly,
Finnegan Tarrega

August 11, 1895

I arrived in Holbrook at full night and just ahead of a calamitous-looking monsoon. My presence piques no curiosity on the locals' part; wanderers of all stripes have been commonplace here since the Atlanta and Pacific Railroad's advent. The atmosphere was charged with static; the air seemed to pull at one's skin like webs. The town's denizens were likewise electric with frenetic activity. My horse and I picked our way through a labyrinth of loose dogs, bestial cowpokes, neglected carts, and women who were loose but not neglected this night. We located a stable just off the main road. I paid extra for an air-dried stable on account of the oncoming storm.

I immediately regretted leaving the stable, having not proceeded more than a quarter of a block when a gust hit Holbrook like a titan's wet belch. Rain spattered board-and-batten and windowpanes, and somewhere a shutter slammed. Across the street, a bent wire of a man leaned over a balcony railing, his consort for the night grasping his bracers lest the fool pitch over before she could be paid. Another blast buffeted the town, propelling me closer to the main drag. "Fuck

you!" the man yelled into the wind and thrust his forefinger westward, "I killed Proteus and you can't come in here—I'm the king!" The rummy monarch high-stepped around in a circle and bore his whisky bottle like a scepter. A fine rain infused with desert grit peppered the balcony, creating russet patches on his clothing. The prostitute smiled and crowned her client with a garter before leading him inside. Hanging beneath the balcony swung the garish identification badge for this establishment: The Bucket of Blood Saloon.

I leaned against a hitching post and surveyed the bedlam of desperate souls shoving and clamoring to reach shelter. The rain was an intermittent wheezing hiss on the air, still light and smelling of earth. I donned my night-vision spectacles to have a clear look at the dispersing crowd. There were only two faces that I was fixing to see that night, the comedic virtues of the "King" and his sweet Sally MacLannan notwithstanding. After a few minutes, I spied the young man who spoke against the Bureau's objective nearly a month ago, portending imprecations if we persisted. I did not think it coincidence that this man, Andres, and troubled natural phenomena had congealed in the contested grounds of Arizona Territory.

The doomsday prophet of Holbrook walked north, away from me, arms crossed, the better to cut through the rising gale. I had begun to tail him when the night went from black to purple-hued white. I cursed and ripped the specs from my face. A passer-by knocked me sprawling into the mud, the sound of my fall arrested by a thunderclap. I grabbed someone's leg and hauled myself upright, folded the night specs flush with my hat brim, and waited for the blindness to pass.

When I could see again, I glanced up the road to where I had last seen the madman; he was conversing with a couple of ranch hands under the cover of a porch. Still a little disoriented, I shook my head and looked over at the Bucket of Blood. Left of the swinging cafe doors out front was a large window. Silhouetted against the saloon's ruddy glow, a thin-lipped man sat at table alone, eating. The madman would have to wait.

I stepped into the saloon, keeping another entering patron on my left, between me and the window table. I had but a few moments to take in the crowded environs: scarlet wallpaper, an automaton banging out a rag on the piano, two-storey open common room, mahogany bar, wood stair to the right leading to a balcony—on which painted ladies preened and enticed—that circled

above the common room. I watched Balázs Andres in the bar mirror as I approached and elbowed between two Mexican ranch hands.

The barkeep nodded, "What can I do ya for, friend?"

"How about a bottle of whiskey—Irish—and two glasses?"

"No can do on the Irish, Paddy. Kentuckian sit alright with you?"

"All right."

The barman slapped two shot glasses on the counter and slid out a heavy stoneware bottle, "That'll be eight bits, Irish."

I laid out three eagles, kept the heel of my palm on the third, and replied, "There're an extra eight bits in it for you if you can give me the dirt on one of your customers."

The barman twirled his heavy moustache and examined the first two coins before dropping them in his cotton apron, "Hmmm. Who ya lookin for?"

"Fellow in the khaki suit, topper on the table next to his plate, window facing south. I want to know where he's staying and how many came in here with him."

"Oh, sure, I know some things about him. At least two things, actually," he glanced at my hand, "What did you do with the fourth dollar there, Irish?"

I smirked and pulled another coin from my waistcoat, “My mistake; I asked for two pieces of information, didn’t I?”

“Yessir, you did. Now that’s better. The foreigner is staying up at La Señora. He came in alone, but looked like he was with a couple fellows that kept goin,” the barkeep jerked his thumb northward, “when the foreigner walked in.”

“Much obliged, mister.” I handed over the coins and grabbed bottle and glasses, “Keep this up, and you’ll have to rechristen the place, ‘Bucket of Bits.’”

Andres sat, engrossed in the consumption of his stew. His sandy hair was cut and plastered to his head in a center part. His bowl danced when I thumped the heavy bottle onto the table, “Balázs Andres...”

Andres dabbed his mouth with the napkin tucked in his shirt, “Ah, Herr Tarrega. Wie geht’s mit dir? Bitte, sitz, sitz!”

I took the chair across from Andres. “Vielen dank, Andres. Naja, was machst du hier, denn?”

The Magyar smiled, uncorked the whiskey, and poured shots. “I come to eat and share a drink with an old friend. You know, the cook here, he makes a fine goulyas. Most

remarkable, all the way in this country! You must try it some time.”

I sipped the rough liquor and replied, “I didn’t come here to speak with you about Holbrook’s culinary pleasures, Andres. There are reports all over the three mesas that you made off with some katcinas.”

Andres made a disapproving sound against his palate, “That is always the problem with you, Mr. Finnegan; you never make any time for simple pleasures. You travel, you dig, you find the treasures of a thousand cultures, and send them away to molder in government warehouses—what for?”

“Posterity; antiquities belong first to the cultures and societies that produced them, secondarily to the public and scholarly world.”

“Bah!” Andres grimaced after taking his shot of whiskey. “You cloak your collecting in academic pretensions. Meanwhile, you remove artifacts from sites, same as me, and put them away, safe where no one can take them from you or the Smithsonian. How is it that I am the ‘bad guy’ here?”

I finished my shot and poured us both another, “You don’t ask permission from the living descendants or landowners to take antiquities. You don’t report your findings—not that you record your field methods anyway—in journals or public venues, so nobody’s

knowledge of the past is bettered by your collecting.”

Andres feigned a yawn and leaned back in his chair, “I don’t know what you are on about, Mr. Tarrega...I think you misunderstand my *modus operandi*. I asked the Hopi for permission to view and collect their artifacts, for instance. How can you find fault with that?”

“I couldn’t—if you hadn’t bait-and-switched baskets for *katcinas*!”

“It is most regrettable that people point the finger when they cannot keep track of their own things,” Andres sighed, “All the more reason that one should not begrudge the artifacts coming into the hands of a true aficionado...”

My temporal muscles tightened and I found myself gripping the edge of the table. Such an arrogant bastard! Talking with him is a pointless errand—I should go search his hotel room, right after I improve his looks.

Andres watched me as a one might watch a dog after it had ceased being an amusement. Outside, thunder growled and the sky hurled moisture against the west facing of Holbrook, a horizontal waterfall. The din was punctuated by a muffled shout. Through a window in the western façade of the Bucket of Blood, I could make out three yellow flashes in rapid succession.

I stood up and upended the table toward Andres. He moved to stand and reach for his sidearm but fumbled when the still-hot goulash spilled over his gun hand and pants. The Magyar howled. Throughout the saloon, patrons variously pulled iron, ducked, or sat at cards and cigarettes nonplussed at the upset of Andres’s supper. “This interview is at an end, *mein Herr*,” I spat while stepping onto the chair to my left and spring-boarded from it through the south-facing window that earlier brought the artifact-thief into my view.

Outside, all was gray deluge while broken glass tinkled around me. Inertia carried me against the horse hitch across the sidewalk from the saloon. The hollering from inside the establishment was swallowed up in the cacophony of wind, wet, and thunder. I rushed around the corner to the north, where I had seen the muzzle flashes. A little more than half a block distant a crumpled form lay in the mire, a figure bent over it. A second man was struggling to free his horse’s hooves from the muck. I dropped to one knee next to a rain barrel and unslung the Hydra carbine from my back. Unnoticed by the men, I lined up my shot: I would need to first take out the assailant in hopes that the madman was still alive and then bring down the horseman. In this weather, the two

shots would have to be made in rapid succession.

A squeeze of the trigger activated the Hydra's internal striking mechanism. Flash-heated steam propelled the gun's payload toward the stooping man. I brought the Hydra up and fired at the midsection of the horseman. In the poor visibility conditions, the first shot went wide to the left and struck the horse in the neck. The equine reared on hind legs and kicked my original target in the back. The crunching of ribs or spine was audible even in the hail that had kicked up. The man gurgled in the mud, contorted. The second shot had stayed true and hit the ranch hand in the gut. The man staggered, hand straying to his revolver, then fell onto his side.

The horse slogged down the street while I approached the bodies. "Kicking Horse" still writhed in the mire, cycling his legs. He looked up at me with fierce anger, "You made that horse break my back, you son of a bitch!"

I levelled the Hydra at him without turning my head, "Stop that crying, boy. That fine animal just busted up your ribs, is all. Think you'd be kicking and squalling with your spine snapped?"

The man quieted, "What in hellfire do you want from me, mister?"

"Hands on your head ought to do for now," I replied, and walked to the other prone assailant. I kept the Hydra trained on Kicking Horse and toed his friend's side; he was limp, fast asleep. I turned my attention to the madman's still form. Lightning flashed. The scene was illuminated long enough to reveal tendrils of gore in the muddied street. I could hear shouts from the Bucket of Blood. Running out of time. I rifled through the deceased prophet's coat and located a leather-bound book, a dollar or two, and a busted pocket watch. I held the journal up to the conscious ranch hand, "This what you boys were after?"

The man wore a stubborn aspect but saw persuasiveness in the steaming carbine's bores. He nodded twice. I stood and, seeing two men approaching warily with shotguns in hand, backed toward the nearest alley. The horse finally succumbed to Hydra's tranquilizers and lay down, drawing the attention of gunmen. "Be seeing you, friend," I said in a low voice, and melted into the shadows.

Nota bene: Finnegan Tarrega's Dispatches from the Field are faithfully presented by Gabriel Roark, who works as an archaeologist and cultural resources manager. Finnegan's exploits are fictional, albeit cast in real-world archaeological and social contexts. Representations of historic persons

are attempted with the utmost respect; fictional contrivances might not fare so well.

ICESCAPADES

Since PPT #3 (AGS #5), my elbow has healed & did not prevent Celeste & I from returning to the ice. Having my own ice skates is much better than relying on the beat-up rentals. We took a four-week group skating class on Wednesdays this month. Even though each class was but 30 minutes, it gave us specific skills to practice during Friday or Saturday public skates, so we are both advancing more quickly. On November 1, we will begin a 13-week group course. The only downside that I see is that classes are on Saturday mornings, meaning we won't have the benefit of a midweek/weekend cadence.

SALUDES

That is all I have to say for this. My best to you all & I look forward to AGS #6. Apologies for the Taylor Swift parking on the right side of the page.

Ronin Engineer for A Gentle Stroll #6

by Jim Eckman,
Mountain View, CA
alarum@roninengineer.com

Notes

Portions of this zine appeared in E&A #5, skip to Worlds of Wonder for new content.

IRL

I've been busy preparing paintings for my club's artshow along with my book clubs and other activities. Had a fun 'no kings' day.

Worldbuilding

One standby of classic SF is the Empire and why current SF has a tendency to look at Rome or Byzantium, early China has some interesting issues as well.

The Early Chinese Empires: Qin and Han by Mark Edward Lewis

This book gives a high level overview of the Qin and Han dynasties, about one third of the text is about political and military history while the rest deals with life, religion and other subjects. See the GR description for more.

This book gave me fresh insights on why the Qin and the Han dynasties failed, in the case of the Qin, once they had won, they didn't know what to do next. They were the first after all.

The fall of the Han was a bit more complicated. Early on in the dynasty, they stopped drafting peasants into the army, a change that was carried on until modern times. While I'm sure this made it easier to suppress rural uprisings, it radically reduced the number of potential recruits as well. To make up the loss, they wound up sentencing criminals to serve as well as hiring foreign mercenaries.

This worked OK at first, in the early days of the Han, they managed to keep their enemies busy fighting each other but that eventually ended and the slow, small scale invasion of Western Han started. This also was about the same time as the rise of the literati in government drove what few military leaders they had left out of power reducing the Han army to almost nothing.

This left outposts of criminals and outcasts and the estates of great families as the defenders of the west, which they did by making truces or allying with the invaders. The smack-down was pretty horrible, it's estimated that up to 100 million died during a fifty year period, one of the worst catastrophes in human history.

One problem that China had was a method of absorbing foreigners into its empire. There wasn't the concept of citizen like the Romans had, Non-Han were always outsiders.

This book also has a decent bibliography, an excellent read.

Why are you in this book/game?

While not all characters need a tragic back story, I think they are more interesting to play or read about. One thing that's missing most games is a growing up phase, a good place to insert reasons behind a characters quirks. This could be as simple a table or could include, special events and mini solo adventures.

1) RAH The Moon is a Harsh Mistress, 2) AN Judgment on Janus 3) RAH Starship Troopers 4) AN The Beast Master 5) AN Ice Crown 6) RAH Glory Road

Worlds of Wonder

In addition to having a character generation system that's flexible, you need a way of describing worlds that can handle a broad range of details without getting overloaded. An automated fueling stop next to a gas giant may not need much detail at all while they made a GURPS supplement out of Jack Vance's *Tschai – Planet of Adventure*. Having run *Tschai* as an arc in one of my campaigns was fun, I haven't read the GURPS supplement, but its probably a nice addition for GURPS Space even if you wind up not running it. So a world might just be a paragraph or 128 pages, that's a wide range and I doubt that most of us want to write up 128 pages for what winds up to be a fuel stop.

The way I normally design my basic filler worlds is simple, a name and location, a brief physical description and then an overview of what you might run into on the average.

Baden-Powell X, Y, Z

This planet was originally settled by a group of highly idealistic humans that set out to find a planet that would allow them to implement their code of honor. No inhabited planet naturally wanted to change theirs, so the settlers discovered one instead. The code that these people follow is based upon the Old Earth Boy Scout organization and the people of Baden-Powell have changed the name to the Scouts so as to avoid sexist overtones.

Baden-Powell is possibly one of the most pleasant planets that exist in human space. When the original settlers found this world the climate and geography combined to make the planet very unpleasant. By the use of elementary weather control and some nuclear mining, they soon had the climate under control, and then turned it into one giant park and forest reserve.

Baden-Powell weathered the collapse of the Terran Imperium with few issues, they were prepared. Locally they have the best technology and their academies and libraries are famous.

So long as a visitor is pleasant and well mannered the Scouts will welcome them with open arms. (this left out a couple of PCs)

There is one unique custom. Scouts often wear small badges that show mastery of academic studies and vocational skills.

I was hoping that this planet would become a resource like Miskatonic University in COC, the players visited a couple of times to exchange some information but didn't make any serious connections. I would make this world sound a bit sinister if I used it in the future, more like L.E. Modesitt's Ecolitan center.

Grrrowli X, Y, Z

This world is similar to the Rockies of Olde Earth and is inhabited by a colony of Ursoids. Not much else is known of this planet.

One player was running two Ursoids, Fluffy and Buttercup, and wanted a planet that they could claim to be the exiled rulers of. They then tried to convince the party to help them retake the throne. Midst the outburst of profanity, the least profane was "A planet full of people like you? Do I look @#%-ING stupid?" We were using Space Opera, a furry friendly game system where all the furry folk had more build points than humans. A long time ago I asked one of the designers? Beta testers? why humans are so sucky and they commented that "Humans are the cockroaches of the universe".

This world was never used.

Prison Planet (unnamed) X, Y, Z

This was a disposable world, with a one line description. It wound up sucking up about six weeks of play. The story created on the fly is that the prisoners were followers of an obscure cult leader from 20th century Earth named Ayn Rand. Much silliness ensued.

Next issue

Read more on current SF RPGs, finish sorting and scanning Wanderer.

Reactions to Issue #5

Black Dragon Steed at Water's Edge, Tiffanie Gray - I like your cover, the red flowers contrast nicely against the background, framing the critter. Also what font are you using?

Ooze, Clark B Timmins – Love the old covers and monsters. E-zines do have some advantages.

The Fox's Den: A Zine N. C. Shapero – Furry isekais are certainly a rare bird, another friend has written a couple. Also I was bit confused at the end was there a second incarnation involved? I also like the Thorne Smith reference.

Postscripts from the Phoenix Throne #3, Gabriel Roark – That's a nasty looking elbow, hope you will be writing more in the future. Re: Legacy, yes that's it, but not by Barker. Nice game material. Barker wrote some anti-semitic books for a nasty organization he was a member of. That's his legacy.

A Rhodomontadulous Promenade #5, George Phillies – RAEBNC



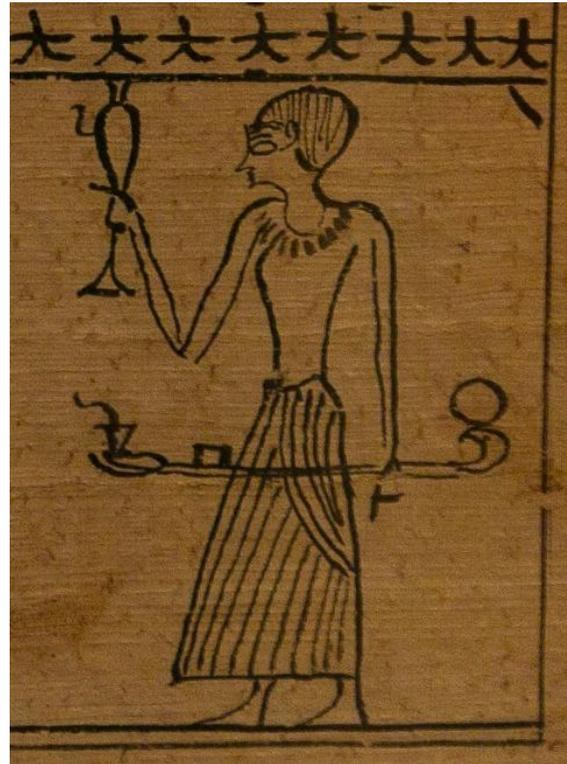
Figure 1: The Crater detail 4x



Figure 2: *The Crater* by Jim Eckman

Death Priest

The undead priests (an “untouchable” class) of an ancient death cult were entrusted with the disposal of the mortal remains of worshippers. While the civilization is long gone and the temple lies in ruins, the immortal death priests still attend to their duties. The death priests do not leave their “lair” (the temple surrounding a crematorium) voluntarily. They exhibit little interest in anything that happens beyond their temple. However, any corpse or body that enters the temple ground is considered inviolably sacred by the death priests who will not allow it to be removed except through their own procedure. Generally, death priests ignore anyone in their temple except for looters, vandals, offensive persons, users or



recipients of healing or curative magic, etc. – these will be attacked. They will also seek to destroy any healing or curative magic items of which they become aware.

Bodies are placed into a tight fetal position and secured with cords. The mouth is secured closed with cord. Bodies are then pierced through several times with a Death Spetum to prevent bloating from gasses and then placed into the crematorium on their backs, with the head turned toward the rising sun. On periodic cremation days (religiously determined by *Divination*, about 7-14 days apart) all the corpses are cremated at once using cut wood and coal, and magical flame. The commencement of the cremation is announced by the death priests by sounding their Death Whistles. These cremations are attended by friends and families of the deceased, who throw offerings (usually grains and fragrances) into the crematoria before it is set aflame. The fire burns for about twelve hours. The bodies’ state of cremation differs, which is considered normal. The incompletely cremated remains are later extracted by the death priests, disjointed and partially crushed as minimally as necessary, and placed into funerary urns (provided by the temple’s patrons). The urns are stone or ceramic

containers about six inches in diameter and two feet in length. Wealthier decedents receive larger, heavy stone urns decorated with all manner of carvings and paints. Poorer decedents receive smaller ceramic urns. For the poorest classes, multiple decedents may be placed into a single familial urn. The urn may also include gifts for the afterlife (usually grains and baked clay tokens that are a type of symbolic funerary money). Once sealed, the death priests place the urns at the entrance of the temple.

Death Priest

Medium Undead, lawful evil

Armor Class 17 (natural armor)

Hit Points 97 (13d8 + 39)

Speed 30 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
18 (+4, +4)	10 (+0, +0)	17 (+3, +8)	11 (+0, +8)	18 (+4, +9)	16 (+3, +3)

Skills History +5, Religion +5

Resistances Acid, Lightning, Thunder

Immunities Fire, Necrotic*, Poison; Bludgeoning, Piercing, and Slashing from nonmagical attacks; Charmed, Exhaustion, Frightened, Paralyzed, Petrified, Poisoned

Senses Darkvision 60 ft., Passive Perception 14

Languages the (ancient) languages it knew in life

CR 15 (XP 13,000; PB +5)

TRAITS

From the Ashes. If destroyed within its lair, the Death Priest reforms in 1d10 days, reviving with all its Hit Points. The new body appears in an unoccupied space within the Death Priest's lair.

Legendary Resistance (3/Day in Lair). If the Death Priest fails a saving throw, it can choose to succeed instead.

Magic Resistance. The Death Priest has advantage on saving throws against spells and other magical effects.

Necrotic Resurgence. Whenever the Death Priest is subjected to Necrotic damage, it takes no damage and instead regains a number of Hit Points equal to the Necrotic damage dealt.

Spellcasting. The Death Priest is a 10th-level spellcaster. Its spellcasting ability is Wisdom (spell save DC 17, +9 to hit with spell attacks). The Death Priest has the following cleric spells prepared:

Cantrips (at will): Fire Bolt, Produce Flame, Sacred Flame

1st Level (4 slots): Burning Hands, Hellish Rebuke, Hunter's Mark, Inflict Wounds

2nd Level (3 slots): Calm Emotions, Gentle Repose, Scorching Ray

3rd Level (3 slots): Speak with Dead, Spirit Guardians, Stinking Cloud

4th Level (3 slots): Death Ward, Divination, Wall of Fire

5th Level (2 slots): Flame Strike (x2)

6th Level (1 slot): Harm

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The Death Priest attacks twice with *Death Spetum* or *Death Whistle* in any combination.

Death Spetum: *Melee Weapon Attack:* +5 to hit, reach 10 ft., one target. *Hit:* 10 (1d10 + 5) piercing damage and 6 (1d10 + 1) necrotic damage. The *Death Priest* uses the mastery property (Topple) of the *Death Spetum*.

Death Spetum: Weapon (Spetum), Rare (Requires Attunement) [1d10 Piercing; Heavy, Reach, Two-Handed; Mastery Topple; 6 lb.], +1/+3 vs. Undead, does 1d10 Piercing damage to target on any hit and 1d10 Necrotic damage to target *and* wielder on any hit.

Death Whistle: The Death Priests blows its *Death Whistle*.

Death Whistle: Wondrous Item, Rare (Requires Attunement) This large, magical whistle is about three inches across and is manufactured from the undead head of a large venomous snake. Touching the Death Whistle causes 5 (1d10) Necrotic damage and 5 (d10) Poison damage and inflicts the Poisoned condition. When sounded, each creature within a 10-foot Emanation originating from the whistle

must make a DC 15 Constitution saving throw. Undead succeed on the save automatically.

On a failed save, a creature takes 5 (d10) Necrotic damage and 5 (d10) Poison damage and receives the Deafened and Poisoned conditions. The creature repeats the save at the end of each of its turns, ending the effect on itself on a success.

Consume Life: As a bonus action, the Death Priest can target one creature it can see within 5 feet of it that has 0 hit points and is still alive. The target must succeed on a DC 18 Constitution saving throw against this magic or die. If the target dies, the Death Priest regains 10 (3d6) hit points.

– Clark B. Timmins
Death Priest
November 2025



The Rhodomontadulous Promenade #5

George Phillies
phillies@4liberty.net

Comments

Ronin Engineer: I recognize a reasonable number of the stories you describe, though I don't think that's exactly how I would've described Starship Troopers, assuming that was the novel you were referring to. Why should a novel have well-to-do characters? If you have reached *Skylark of Space*, and want to build a spaceship, you probably have to be reasonably well-to-do, since you can't build one for cheap. I could probably research the history of the Spartan, since I do have many of the SICL magazines in my collection, but it would take time that I simply do not have. There is a very strange tale about the fate of the SICL, which I will not put into print, since some people might dispute my description of the financial outcomes.

Clark Timmins – The Ooze: the very early issues of *Weird Tales* had some remarkable stories in them. Confining the creature with a brick wall, which apparently did not have a doorway in it, and letting it starve to death, does make some sense. Your character assignments and your description of powers is very clever and matches well what you said of the story.

The Fox' Den: I well thought out description of behavior among members of the different species, the species with very different physical arrangements. There were a lot of details, but they all seemed to be consistent with each other. One might wonder what is going on that there are killing machines wandering about on decks of the spaceship. You begin in media res and leave us to fill in details of what the culture and science are. Apparently their medical revival and repair schemes are quite impressive.

Postscripts from the Phoenix Throne: sympathies on your ice-skating adventure. I did ice skate, Once upon a time, but that was more than a half-century ago. And I started when I was a graduate student. Grandoon does indeed have a puzzle on his hands, but it will be the other end of the novel before he learns the solution.

Dispatches from the Field: IIS, tale told a series of letters by a participant. Very well written indeed.

No Tears for a Princess

To Grandoon's inner eye, the archers' memories appeared faded, bleached by some outside force, so the men barely remembered Elaine. A week after the siege, her presence in their midst had been forgotten. Grandoon could find no trace of any spell affecting the archer's minds. More surprising still, no one had noticed her before she met the archers. She had traveled busy roads. Any competent mage should have noted the peculiarity of her aura, but no one had marked her passage.

Elaine's armor was well-forged, but quite free of inlaid spells. Only her clothing was touched with the Presence. It was an Irrilesi weave, the sea-elves' enchantments making it both self-cleaning and self-repairing. Out of Irrilesi hands, the cloak was a rarity, though one only a skilled magician would recognize. Elaine claimed the cloak to be a gift from a friend.

Elaine's feats in battle were almost beyond belief, at least for one without thaumaturgic aid. Without magical armaments, how could she fight two men at once, let alone five? Most swordswomen depended on speed and skill to compensate for superior male weight; she seemed to have passed to some higher level of talent. If she could teach others her skill with the sword, it would put a definite crimp in the sale of enchanted blades, hurting Grandoon himself -- not to mention the Academy -- in the pocketbook.

He had tried crystomancy, looking back in time to watch her fight. The gatetower eluded him. Of her encounter this afternoon, only her swim across the Tressin could be visualized clearly. Perhaps a very strong man could do what she had done, and be no more than a little tired afterwards. However, only the greatest of swordsmen -- all men whom Grandoon could name -- could fight five competent opponents at once and have a victory. In the tower, Elaine had done that, more than once. But great swordsmen were seldom interested in the details of magecraft, in the differences between naming a rune, calling a rune, and becoming a rune -- taking an aspect of a rune into one's being. Elaine was curious about all of those things, at a technically sophisticated level. Grandoon let his puzzlement fade as he thought of other things. Soon he would return to the Academy, to re-enter the rationality of academic politics based on unlimited tenure without retirement for age.

CHAPTER TWO (Mages, Elaine, Men)

The next evening found them well away from Arburg. Grandoon grimaced when he recalled the afternoon's events. He had spent hours improving his clockwork, a pleasure for which he recently had had less and less time. Elaine occasionally interrupted him to ask about Treganth. *{\em Elementary Principles in Symbolics}* was at best a subtle text. Treganth was reputed to have made only a single mistake in all his written work, that a trivial one which Treganth himself had corrected. It was also reputed that in all Treganth's work only a single sentence was easy to understand, that being his acknowledgement to his printer's sponsors. To Grandoon's dismay, Elaine reserved her questions for the most obscure parts of Treganth's commentary.

Their discussion of Treganth had been interrupted by the arrival of Earl Yoog, a ferret-eyed sycophant of the Duke's. The Earl brought with him two gifts: an enchanted sword, and a prophecy from the local sybil, swearing that Elaine's fortune was best sought to the North. Elaine was rigidly and precisely polite. The Earl took her politeness as a series of veiled attacks on his liege's generosity, and departed in a fuming rage. Elaine told Grandoon that it was time to go. He grumphed and harrumphed about traveling, though he knew that a Duke who hated Elaine might not be pleased with her companions.

Grandoon's thoughts returned to the present. The twin moon Tegel-La was well above the horizon. The north highway, faced with gray-white limestone, was a barely seen ribbon, fading into the woods ahead. Elaine kept to the side of the road, quietly slipping from tree to tree, from shadow to shadow. Grandoon marched boldly down the road's center, as though the night could hold no danger for him.

He gestured for her to stop. He wrapped himself in shadow, and bound the air around them in silence. A few passes of his hands formed the illusion of the two of them standing side by side, brilliantly lit by

a sorcerer's staff. A final wave sent the illusions marching down the road. Satisfied with his work, he followed, preceded at a hundred paces by the images he had created. Let thieves and cutpurses strike; they would only reveal themselves to his wrath.

Our Adventurers March

An Ancient D&D Recreation

Our adventurers set out for Archmage Sandra's Tower, their speed set by the oxen pulling Master Rifstaffel's wagons. They advanced at a slow walk, stopping every few hours so that their hooves could be checked, stopping for the evening after a short day. Regularly as a town hall's clockwork, at the end of the twelfth mile a major waystation beckoned.

“Under the First Empire,” Brian Northwindson observed, “these were the stopping points for Imperial Legions. The Legion would do its standard march, fortify for the night with lines of stakes and a wall, and in the morning tear down the wall, dig up the stakes, and resume its march. Those large fields opposite to the waystation are where encampments were built, the exact locations being rotated over the extent of the field. Of course, for most of the Empire's history, a road might in a year see only one or two legions marching by, going hither or thither. Now those fields, carefully tended, provide the forage for our beasts and the grain for bread for us.”

The outer walls on those way stations may be low, but they're quite long,” Sandra observed. “I've learned about a lot of things, but the old Imperial roads? Please tell me more about them. We didn't have them where I grew up.”

“Where was that?” Brian asked.

“North Pariesin.” Memories rose in Sandra's mind. She smiled. “Every spring the swamps around us would flood, so the Empire couldn't build roads to the central heights. The stone would just sink into the ground. And the families who ran the area, back then, made a deal with the Empires. We faithfully paid our taxes and sent them men-at-arms, and the Empires would leave the swamps alone.”

“In any event,” Brian said, “Second Empire, the legions would march to a way station, encamp behind the walls, have no need to build a fortified camp every night. That worked fine until the Legions got lazy, quit building fortified camps even when beyond the Pale, and one fine day one of the barbarian kingdoms made surprise night attacks and killed half of the Imperial Army. The Empire never recovered.”

“Very bad camp discipline,” Sandra said. “If Grand-dad caught a Legion commander not fortifying at night, he'd have had the man flogged. To death.”

“But there's something that puzzles me,” Brian said. “I dutifully paid for the baths the third day, after the dreadful bit of rain, but when I asked about forage beyond what Rijstaffel pays, I was told we'd paid in full. But I don't recall anything happening to our common treasury.”

“That's because you were in the taproom, nursing your near-beer and listening to travelers talk about what they encountered ahead, while Sister Jennifer was in the fields offering her prayers to her Goddess, The Corn Snake Lady, She of the Polychrome Raiment, blessing the corn snakes in the fields will thrive and the mice, grasshoppers, and other eaters of crops would be their nutriment. A well-cast

set of prayers will easily save enough grain – and then some – to feed us.”

“She was out, alone in the dark, in those fields?” Brian said.

“As it happens, I was there,” Sandra said, “as was Vincent or Emmanuel. They're perfectly competent at stupefying the sort of ghoulies usually found at night. And most of the human sort of troublemaker does less well fighting in the dark when their opponent can see them clearly.”

“You have a seeing spell?” Brian asked.

“I have a very interesting choice of ancestors,” Sandra answered. “You might have noticed my hair color, or what happened when we grappled.”