

As a stretch goal for one of my game projects, I promised to write a short story incorporating elements from several high-pledging donors. This was a bit of an experiment, as I'm sure the final result shows. I normally do not put myself in stories as a character.

In the Blindness of the Glare

This is the story the grey-haired man told.

“It was a time of great darkness upon the land. Cruelty and privilege seemed, in all places, triumphant. The greatest of the good, the family Glinrow, were dead or lost, or fallen. Those whose strength lay in strengthening others, their numbers were divided one against another. Fierce warriors struck heedlessly, charging at shadows while the sinister shapes casting them moved without fear, their plans ripe at last.

“Who could stand against the proud and the ruthless? Of the seven great families, only two had escaped desperate battle or co-option by the new rulers. Of those two, one was well-intentioned but weak, better fit for celebration in good times than endurance of bad. The other? Musicians, storytellers, mockers and flatterers. What could they do?

“Two of them, one lord known best for his feasts after hunting, one lady admired for her singing voice and lustrous coif, set their mounts to trot south. To the west, the sun burned a sullen orange, and behind them that glow was aped, more fiercely, but the flames of siege.

“In time, their horses slowed to a walk. ‘What if Glinrow should fall?’ the woman asked, her voice quiet. Her blue eyes were tired but wide, and she restlessly shifted their focus from the fires behind them, to day’s dying light, to the darkness in front.

“‘What if it does?’ said the man. ‘Then that babe in your arms will have no ruin to reclaim in ten years’ time or twenty, But at least she’ll live. More than her parents can say. More than you or I, had we stayed.’

“‘Do you think Gale can hold them off?’

“‘The white gates of Glinrow have never been broken, Moit. If anyone can hold them, it’s your lover.’

“The woman’s eyes shifted from their scan of distant worries and landed upon her companion. ‘Jermyn, I don’t...’ she began.

“‘Don’t lie, Moit. Not now. Not anymore.’ He looked down at his saddle. ‘I’ve known for some time.’

“What her next words would have been, no one can say, for at that moment the pair and the infant on her saddle were interrupted by a horrendous cry. The child broke forth in lusty shrieks and Jermyn’s horse reared at the blood-curdling sound from above. ‘Flee!’ he cried to Moit as he fumbled with the sword at his belt. Then

'Guph Kitiak!' he shouted, and the light of the dawning stars and fading sun flared, spreading, eating into shadows and illuminating the descending creature, a lizard with the gaping mouth of an alligator and its squat back legs, but sprouting above the hinges of the jaws were long, coarse-haired, fig-shaped ears. In the place of forelegs, it had great black wings, tufted with fur at the joints. On its back rode Nawry Chaun, one of the men Moit despised most in the world.

“He was plain, slender, with red hair and watery eyes. Nawry was a man of few words, and rather than ask a question or make a statement, he waved a black hickory wand and cast a spell. Fire crackled down, and though Jermyn parried desperately, his horse screamed and was struck. Moit flogged her own mare into a gallop, but the newcomer said *'Ba Stott'* and his quiet words somehow cut through the infant's cries and the steeds' whinnies, drawing her mount to a sudden stop.

“Moit,' Nawry said. 'Give me the child.'

“*'Ipra Schaxu!'* she shouted, only to see her own mage-fire flicker and fade mere inches from his body. Nawry shook his head sadly before responding with *'Kitiak Schaxu,'* a bolt of searing pain that nearly unseated her. As she tumbled from the saddle, only desperate contortions kept the child in her arms, cushioned on her chest as her back slammed into the muddy soil. But bad as the fall was, and the grinding, slowing ache his spell had set through her muscles, the blindness that came with it was worse. Somehow the light he had conjured had darkness at the core, multiplying the evening's shade a thousandfold.

“She couldn't see what happened next. She only heard Jermyn's rough, raw voice as he said, *'Kitiak Niak!'* There was the shuffle of feet, the crying baby in her arms, and then Nawry, chuckling.

“Now? You think now, you can...? *Ba Kitiak!'* But the laughter left his voice as he said again, *'Ba Kitiak! Ba Kitiak Voun!'* A clap like thunder resounded, shaking the needles on the trees.

“*'Umvan Nain,'* Moit muttered and her witchcraft was weak, she could feel a sting as her vision cleared, like the sensation of hair being torn out by the roots only in her eyes, but then she saw, not just the visible, but the magical.

“*'Voun Schaxu!'* Nawry snarled, and watching pure, concentrated evil flow off him at the broken man with the gleaming sword, she knew that death was drawing near, for one of them if not for all.

“Jermyn, the man she didn't love, had never loved, had never taken very seriously... she could see Nawry drinking his life away, not for any gain of his own and, indeed, at cost. Nawry was doing it because it was the most vicious kill. That poor foppish noble whose magic was, at the best of times, mediocre... he wasn't even trying to block it. He was doing something else.

“*Abro...*’ Jermyn croaked, the Word of Shaping, he was trying to make something. He was trying to sculpt enchantment, using his own life and death as hammer and chisel.

“*Voun Schaxu,*’ Nawry said again, quietly this time, and the spiral of destruction pulling the two men together got tighter and harsher. Moit couldn’t take the chance. She had to destroy Nawry and more—she wanted to.

“*Schaxu Vugris.*’

“She had learned the secret Word from her mother, a hidden source of power passed through generations from a darker time, an age when her family had been harder and more cruel. ‘Vugris’ was the Word of Hate and she felt a coursing black path open between her heart and Nawry’s, laying both of them open. Visions, memories, his and her own, flashed through her...

“...Nawry standing before an altar, dagger raised, uncertain but somehow pulled along through the ritual, making something foul and all his own, building a monster he didn’t want but surrounded by his family, unable to shame himself in their eyes...”

“She matched that memory with one of her own, of seeing Nawry so long ago, as children being chosen, he in his shabby shirt, pants bunched at his waist and ending in the middle of his calves. ‘Chaun Chaun, poor Chaun, came to school with rag clothes on!’ she’d taunted and he’d cried, and now she fired that cruelty into the heart of his doubts...

“...he saw Aissa Scath in her elegant glory, black lace on curves too beautiful to be anything but human, her gaze perfectly blank as she asked, ‘And what sort of man is Nawry Chaun?’ Her face, her voice, they could have meant anything and Nawry knew it wasn’t flirtation or admiration but it could be. As long as he said the right thing she wouldn’t reveal what they both knew, that she held him in contempt any time he wasn’t making himself useful. ‘Nawry Chaun is a man of will,’ he said, knowing it was purely the opposite, that he deferred to delay that humiliating confirmation...”

“Against that emasculating shame, Moit was spoiled for a choice of weapons. She chose her rejection of the man dying before her eyes, the man Nawry was killing, because hating Nawry so much was in part hating herself. She’d drawn out her rejection, not to toy with Jermyn, but to keep his friendship, dividing his feelings with hope as she kept his regard and threw his affection aside, could it have been the cruelest thing she’d ever done? She hoped so, hoped that what broke one heart would stop another...

“Nawry screamed and at last he turned to her, his eyes raw and anguished. ‘How is it you are arrayed against us?’ he demanded. ‘You’d die to kill me? Die then! I die, you die, he dies and who shall save the child, here in the wilderness?’

“‘No,’ Jermyn said. His whole face was gone, just blood and white peeks of bone, but still he spoke. ‘Not like that. *Abar.* The child will live. *Niak Kitiak.* The dawn will come in time.’ He was holding aloft the sword of the Glinrows, a spark of purity in the falling night.

“With an oath, Nawry wrenched it from Jermyn’s hands. ‘*Voun,*’ he intoned. ‘You understand nothing. You *are* nothing. Your selfless sacrifice means *nothing*. *Abro*, Glinrow,’ he said, turning to point the sword at the child. ‘Be a beast.’ His eyes were wild as he stroked his own face with the edge, his blood beading on cheek and steel. ‘*Abro...*’

“‘*Gabar Abro!*’ Jermyn cried, lunging to his feet and seizing the sword’s edge. ‘The change will shield you!’

“‘*Tark Nain!*’ Moit found herself standing as well, staggering forward to grab the blade and there was no pain, or perhaps nothing but pain, the three of them struggling and somehow at the same time together, magic pouring out as they spent their lives, the rituals they’d all studied just a pale shadow of this, death and passion and power primeval. Nawry was willing to die to curse the child, the last Glinrow, it would be a beast and no force, dark or light, could break that curse. But Jermyn was dying to keep her alive and with his life, like glittering ink, he wrote a fate of safety and concealment for babe, blade and bloodline. Moit joined her life, her death, with his, and scribed in the world that the Glinrows would return, made from beasts into men once more when the nation needed them most, and the magic sword would be found only by one worthy to hold its power...

“For that moment, together, their souls were interlaced with an intimacy Jermyn could never have understood or hoped for in life. But on the edge of death, they were one. Then the darkness extinguished them.

“The spell’s flare of light and resounding tone left every beast in the forest still, heads turned, ears cocked, staring at a clearing where every stone, every tree, every fallen branch and blade of grass had been struck frost-white and gleaming. In the middle of it, where once there had been three dying enchanters and an infant, there was now a bear cub. Like the fleeing horses and the monster struggling to escape, it was now unblemished white. For a time, it sat and looked around. Then, with the uncomplicated grace of a beast, the Glinrow bear made its way into the undergrowth.”

#

The grey-haired man paused and looked around, then back down at the printout he’d read from. This was the tense part, but he was used to it. He’d handed out the story, read it aloud to the other people in the writers’ group, and now they were marking down their comments, spelling corrections, and criticism. For a while, there was only the sound of pens scratching and the occasional, middle-aged fart.

“Okay,” the moderator said at length. “Who wants to start?”

“I think the fake Latin was really overused,” one writer immediately said.

“Yeah, I found that really hard to follow, though I liked the font,” said another. “When’s this due? Tell us when you can talk.”

One of the group’s rules was that the author couldn’t speak until everyone else had made their points.

“I felt like you were trying to tell me too much at once,” said another. “You say this is... an expansion on something else you already wrote? Do you really have to restate all the backstory for your little fantasy world?”

“No, I liked that,” said the first writer. “I haven’t read any of that stuff and I found it a little hard to follow...”

The grey-haired man, whose name was Greg, winced. It wasn’t the criticism—he’d given enough criticism that he knew they were helping. Rather, he’d just felt, from nowhere, a painful throb in his head. Blinking, he started checking his peripheral vision, all the time listening to the comments. Greg got migraines, and before the pain arrived, the migraines affected his vision. It was subtle at first, a blurring grey distortion, and he wasn’t seeing it but it was elusive...

“Um, thank you very much for your comments,” he said, realizing they were waiting for his response.

His piece had been the meeting’s last, and as the writers extracted themselves from the classroom’s uncomfortable seats, a woman with a lovely, lilting voice turned to him and said, “Are you coming to Lou’s?” Meeting for drinks after—the ‘master class’—was a longstanding tradition.

“I don’t think so. I’ve got a headache coming on. You don’t have a Nuprin on you, by any chance?”

“I’ve got aspirin,” she said, rummaging in her purse.

“Won’t work, it’s gotta be something with ibuprofen.”

A quick canvassing of the group found one writer with the remedy. “Sure, you’ll take my pills but you won’t drink booze with me,” she said, tipping the bottle into Greg’s cupped palms. He smiled shyly. “Thanks.”

He couldn’t remember where he’d parked, but there were only a few places on the campus where free spots could be found. Eventually he got behind the wheel, turned the broad, plastic-clad key, and then...

...then he was somewhere else. He blinked, and the scent of horseflesh filled his nostrils, the animal on which he sat hotter and somehow moister than the arid warmth of the air around him.

He was atop a ridge, a bottle in his hand, nano-pores that could smart-filter out the heavy elements in the streams and ponds of planet Echo, water that looked crystal-clear but could kill you with only a few sips. Even the horses wouldn’t drink it, unless you got a steed specially bioengineered.

He wiped his mouth with his neckerchief and looked at the copse of trees below. Winter was the growing season on Echo, and as it got hotter the scarlet color of the foliage drained away, not vanishing like the green leaves on earth, but sinking to the bottom of the thick, pendulous fronds these plants used to catch sunlight. The red left behind a clouded clarity, like cellophane, each leaf like

a deflated plastic baggie with a crimson crescent smile at the bottom. Through the yellow and silver and rust, he saw movement, and he sighed. He'd hoped Big Jed would take the north pass, the one Thelonious was watching. No such luck.

His phone was on a bandoleer, along with spare energy cells, and he thumbed it on. "Call Big Jed," he said, voice resigned. He got voice mail as he watched the bandit creep through the woods, hesitate, then break cover and start towards the next pass in the hills.

"Jed. Pick up. I know where you are Jed. I'm looking at you right now."

He saw Jed hunch in the saddle, peering around, and then he was looking straight up at the ridge. Greg lifted his hat in a mock salute.

"Come quietly Jed. You know it's for the best."

Instead, Jed drew a laser from his hip-sling, and Greg mimicked his movements. Both men pawed the backs of the guns, calling up a holographically projected targeting sight, and both kicked their horses into higher speed.

Greg was crashing down the hill, seeing Jed under 10x magnification. He pulled the trigger and watched turf and undergrowth puff into black smoke as his shot went wide. Jed was firing too, but shooting from the back of a galloping palomino was no easier on uneven ground than it was charging straight down a stony slope. Greg was wondering whose horse was wearier, whose the better mount and he continued to fire but his heart wasn't in it. He wanted to catch Jed, not cut him in half. He'd seen what a Searles & Hambry reciprocating laser would do to a man and he wasn't eager to have it happen on his watch. But he'd do it before he let Jed get away, he told himself.

The narrow pass and twisting course through it broke up their fire for a few blessed moments, Greg was drawing closer and praying he'd made up enough distance, that Jed wouldn't have time to get through, pull up, aim and wait for him to emerge, but as he rounded the last curve of stone there was a hellish flare and he knew that, exactly, had happened, he didn't even scream as his head broke apart...

...with a click, the seatbelt engaged. Greg blinked, hard. He was on the street where he lived. He'd slammed on the brakes (he supposed) right by the fire hydrant in front of the house next door.

For a moment, he just sat. The hybrid engine clicked over from the rumble of gas to silent electricity. Clearly, he'd driven back. He was home now, in the car, he must have driven. He pressed the garage-door opener and started to pull in.

Everything had taken on a crystal quality as he paced through the dark house, brushed his teeth without waking his wife, changed into the thermal underwear he used as pajamas in the winter. His self-editing had been switched off, somehow, leaving him like a somnambulist. He acted, but did not consider his actions. He had no resources left to wonder how he'd managed to drive without thinking of driving. That was in the past. He did not consider his remarkable hallucination, because that part of him which considered the distinction between real and imaginary was already fast asleep.

#

“Damn, you’re a good looking woman,” he said.

“You know what you were getting when you married me,” she replied.

“You’re not my wife,” he said back.

“Sure I am.” She was dressed in gold and yellow harlequin diamonds, a flowing kind of pantsuit that ratched up over the outside of her exquisite ankles in a fashion he thought of as vaguely Middle Eastern. A Hollywood harem fantasy, all forced exoticism.

“Have I seen you on the internet?” he asked.

“Oh, probably. Listen, you’re going to need some help.”

“Okay,” Greg said, readily.

“The problem is, I can’t tell you what’s going on.”

“Oh.”

“For one thing, I don’t know. For another, I know. But if I let you know, you’ll probably panic and that won’t help anything.”

“I’d like to think I wouldn’t panic,” he said, “But it’s a possibility. Hey, where are we?”

“Monkey habitat at the Brookfield,” she said, and of course, it was true.

“Right. Naturally.” He looked out over the sweeping valley of greenery as a black and white tufted primate the size of his forearm leaped from branch to branch, tail curled like a question mark. It got right over their heads, though he couldn’t be sure if it was because there was a wire mesh above them, or if it was just the trees and the zookeepers trusted its instincts to keep it away from grabby patrons.

“Hey. Focus.”

He turned back and saw her patting a seat next to her on a bench.

“Sorry.” As she started unbuttoning her purple-and-blue diamond shirt, he asked “Did that just change colors?”

“Don’t worry about small details, it’s time for you to nurse.”

“But—no offense—your breast is all withered and shrunken. You haven’t aged well at all.”

“It’s been a tough five minutes here with you.”

“I hope I haven’t been poor company.”

“No, it’s just that, when you consider what a large percentage of my life has been spent here, it’s not surprising I’m now an ancient crone. Look out for that monkey!”

He turned and saw a massive gorilla making a major league pitching motion. “Oh no!” He knew monkeys, in nature, do not throw baseballs.

The impact felt like his head was exploding.

#

Where does the mind go, when the brain is under pressure and the personality has been all squeezed out?

Imagine Polynesia, islands on the ring of fire, plagued by megafauna—something like dinosaurs, something to make the Komodo Dragon look like a wide-eyed kitten. There are people on the islands, but they're constantly on the move, scavenging what they can while incessantly fleeing their dumber, stronger, hungry predator lizards.

Then one day, God's fist falls from heaven.

Or perhaps it's the sky's divine semen, raining down into a fertile Earth. Religions vary, in time, clashing with one another over what exactly it was that rained death on their oppressors and opened up the world to mankind. Something roared down, cracked the mountain, ash made a night that lasted a month, but the cunning island people could survive it, could hunker down with their food caches and start fires. The lizards, huge and ignorant, weren't so fortunate. Some swam to the island where the smoke still boiled, lightning striking again and again in an incessant storm, but the falling star had cracked the very skin of the earth. Fire from heaven married to the flames within, burning those beasts that did not freeze.

What brave priests came to the island next? They entered the crater, the caldera, marveling at the lava flows, feeling the force of the steam where the lava hit the sea, and finding at its heart a black stone. A stone heavier than they'd ever known, a stone that melted in the lava and reformed as night-colored metal.

All the pieces were in place. The priests of the flame married the stone from the sky with the fire of the earth, and their reward was iron, strong and sharp. The sand of the island, made glassy with lava, that too became part of the ceremonies. Canoes grew ramming tips and the Cult of the Sky Fire spread conquest.

Three generations in, the mountain spoke again, and this time the priestess whose beauty was scalded into grotesquery had fever dreams of the power of the steam. At her words, they channeled it, turned wheels, drove hammers, felled trees for their boilers as their canoes became ships with paddle wheels. Still catamarans, but now linked with chain and rod to keep their hulls aligned, combing the waves for new islands to take, new countries to conquer.

For conquest was the new doctrine. The rites demanded unshaped iron, but the seed from the sky was shrinking, was almost gone, and so the Cult roamed and searched and came at last to a land that would have been named Australia...

#

The doctor was younger than the woman in his office, though she was by no means old. The gray in her hair looked dignified and confident, clashing with her red-rimmed eyes.

“How soon can I see him?” she asked.

“Soon,” the brain surgeon said. “When we finish here.”

“The insurance...”

“All in order.” He shook his head. “I want to try and prepare you.”

“Oh God,” she said, and started to cry anew.

“It’s not hopeless,” he said. “In a strange way, it’s lucky he got hit.”

She blinked and stared.

“His... the paramedics said the car fractured his skull...”

“Yes it, it did. But why did he wander out into a busy street in the first place? He was wearing his pajamas, right?”

“Thermal underwear,” she murmured.

“The car accident is, in the bigger picture, another symptom,” he said, leaning in. “Mubotic brain fever comes on quickly, and your husband’s brain was already swelling in his skull.”

“He didn’t wake me up last night,” she said. “He usually does. I mean, I usually wake up when he comes home. If we’d known sooner...”

“It wouldn’t have made any difference,” he replied, so firmly that she suspected he was lying. “Wandering out and getting hit alleviated the pressure. Without that, his frontal lobes would have simply collapsed. Anything you think of as ‘him’ would be gone. This way, there may be some impairment, but...”

She looked up at him with a naked mix of hope and terror. At that moment, a nurse knocked on the door.

“Mrs. Stolze? Martha? Your husband’s awake. He’s asking for you.”