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**There are only about 290 or so that are okay to
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**Language and situations described are of a most
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-- OR --

Petre the Peasant's Pleasant Prevarication

by

Fecal Dragon

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Chapter 1: Value Intrinsic

Petre swung open the shutters of his single-room abode and let in the cool, morning air. Noting the grey of predawn light he snuffed the candle that had been flickering in the corner and went back to the window, inhaling deeply. He was tired and felt quite stale, having been awake the entire night, restless and fidgety. Every reason did he have to be so for today was a big day. No – it was THE big day. Years of his own planning and tireless efforts were to culminate in the events about to unfold in the next thirty minutes. Timing was everything; he would not get a second chance.

It was about half past five in the morning and it was time to be off. Petre closed the shutters, quickly donned his work clothes and left his house. Closing the door behind him he headed east down Chalice Avenue, past the Shipwright's house and office and then turned south down the Avenue of the Fellowship.

The jeweled cloak of night was fading rapidly to the west. Soon the sun would be peeking over Trinsic's eastern wall, shining its light down upon what would prove to be a beautiful spring day. But idle matters as these were lost on Petre meditating such as he was on today's activities. The moment was fast approaching and he was mentally reviewing everything he needed to do and everything that was to be accomplished. Over and over again.

It was simply luck that Petre had arrived in Trinsic several years before just as the stables were being put on the market for sale. He had not expected to be able to make a purchase so close to where he needed to be. It was absolutely perfect. So, with much smiling and shaking of hands and the more serious exchange of hard currency, Petre had bought the stable property.

As he walked past the Fellowship Hall the corner of his mouth twitched into a brief smile as he remembered the incredulous look on the face of the previous owner as he'd handed over the deed. It seemed he had been having trouble trying to keep a straight face as though he could not believe he was actually selling the stables for as much as Petre was paying for them. But Petre had not wanted the owner to possibly balk at a lower

offer and change his mind. The value of the stables was intrinsically greater than the previous owner would ever know.

During the term of his residency Petre had gotten to know a few of the townspeople and received more than his fair share of gossip. He, certainly by now, knew what was going on and what to expect. Trinsic was a small enough town wherein it was possible to know what someone would do before they did it. He even had a Gargoyle working for him, helping out around the stables, working for room and board and a little money here and there. Yes, Trinsic had been a comfortable boon. And today would prove whether his labors would bear fruit; whether buying the stables had been a wise move or not.

As he rounded the corner from the Avenue of the Fellowship onto Strand all would be made known in just a few minutes. It was almost six o'clock. He began to whistle a little tune the last few yards to the door of the stables, the iron horse swingling gaily from a post in the wall, pushed by a pleasant breeze toward the sea. Gazing a moment to his right he saw a rather large man with graying hair and beard leaving the Honorable Hound across the street for a morning stroll. Petre waved. The old man saw him and waved back.

As he reached out his hand and swung open the door, a most hideous miasma assaulted Petre. The flow of air from the opening at the stable rear to the now open street side door carried with it the stench of a slaughterhouse. The odor of blood and death.

Petre carefully took a step beyond the threshold and let his eyes adjust to the gloom. The first things he saw were four candles, flickering and dancing, casting shadows on walls spattered with something dark and wet. There on the floor lay a body, spread-eagled, hacked to pieces, and gutted. The presence of the candles and the bucket of captured blood off to the right gave Petre the strong impression that this person had not been simply killed. He had been *tortured* and killed, ritually, *SLOWLY*. It had taken *time*!

The face was contorted into an agonized rictus that attested to the long hours of pain and suffering before death had rushed in to do its final work. Petre gathered enough nerve to peer more closely at the body and nearly decapitated head. Twin milky pools stared back at him.

The face! Petre saw through the veil of blood and suddenly realized: Christopher! The town blacksmith! The man who made the shoes for his horses!

“Gods below,” muttered Petre to himself.

Wide-eyed, he looked across to where there was a tiny back room. The door to it was open.

“Inamo,” he called weakly. No answer.

He cupped his hands around his mouth and said louder, “Inamo!” Still no answer. Petre hesitated a moment, made a decision, and walked carefully around the dismembered corpse to the back of the stables. When he got to the door he peeked in.

And there was Inamo. The wingless gargoyle was hunched forward, pinned to the north wall through the stomach with a pitchfork. The blood dripping down his red skin made it look to Petre as if he were melting. His bag lay at his feet and a single piece of gargoyle jewelry lay on the edge of his cot.

Petre shook his head and glanced to his right as he did so. A trail of bloody footprints led from the body on the floor out of the stables to the stableyard. Petre had seen enough. It was time to act.

He ran out of the stables back out onto the street. He looked around wildly. There, across the street, stretching and strolling around, was the old man. Petre ran over, fell to the old man’s feet, clutched at the hem of his robe and began to babble incoherently. The startled graybeard looked down and, recognizing the man to be the stables caretaker who waved to him a few minutes earlier, raised his eyebrows and his voice and said, “What’s this? Come now, man. Stop thy blubbering and speak!”

The old man reached down and pulled Petre off the ground. He shook him a bit and threatened slapping him on the head if he didn’t take a bloody breath and right this minute.

“Calm down, man. What in heavens is this about? Take deep breaths. Breathe out slowly. Count to ten. There’s a good lad. Now speak what thou wouldst.”

“Murders, m’lord! Two of them!” Petre blurted. “In the stables, m’lord! Awful mangled. ‘Tis horrible!”

“What?” said the old man, shocked, “Murders! In Trinsic?”

“Aye, m’lord. ‘Tis true,” gibbered Petre.

“Oh, you poor fellow. Look, my name is Iolo. What is your name?”

Petre’s terrified dinner-plate eyes opened wider. “Iolo Fitzowen? The bowyer and bard? Thou art a veritable legend, m’lord!” Petre gawped, opening and closing his mouth like some strange fish, no longer able to speak.

Iolo’s eyes rolled up into the air for a moment, but he steadied Petre on his wobbly legs. “Come, Petre, let us see to this situation.” They walked across the street back to the stables, Petre opened the door and covered his mouth as though he were going to retch. He motioned to Iolo at the doorway indicating he should go in. And then indicated very obviously that he, himself, had no intention of going back into the stables for the moment: he threw up.

Iolo stepped into the room. After his eyes adjusted to the dark he stared in horrified shock at the scene before him. “By the Virtues,” whispered Iolo.

He had never once, in all his years, seen anything so nasty and maleficent as this. An act of murder committed in a manner so bizarre and grotesque! He felt faint and steadied himself against the doorjamb. Iolo was speechless and, well, kind of had his lower jaw a bit slack. A peculiar expression that one might best describe as “agape”.

He stepped back out into the fresh air. Petre was on his knees in the middle of the street looking very pale. Iolo went over to him.

“Did you know that man, Petre?”

“Yes, m’lord. He was the town blacksmith, Christopher.” Petre doubled over, head down to the ground. Iolo stepped close and put his hand on Petre’s shoulder.

“There, there...” said Iolo helplessly.

“’Tis horrible!” wailed Petre.

“I know, ‘tis shocking!”

“Who could have done it?”

“I know not...” said Iolo. He shook his head sadly feeling a little lame. He hadn’t the faintest idea what to do about this.

“He had no enemies...” blubbered Petre.

“Poor man.”

“What is to be done?”

“I know not...”

At that moment there came an odd sound, sort of a low droning hum, accompanied by a sensation of electricity in the air. Iolo looked up with a strange look on his face and Petre looked up at Iolo.

Petre gave a puzzled frown. Sniffing he said, “What is it, m’lord?”

Iolo looked to the east down the street toward the gate that led out to the Trinsic docks. Petre was about to repeat the question when Iolo, without looking at him, extended a hand motioning for him to be silent.

The air toward the gate began to crackle and the humming grew louder. Suddenly a strip of red appeared on the ground and then a rectangle of red light sprung from it. It sat there for a moment, filled with a luminescent, swirling mist. Something – no – *someone* emerged from it.

As soon as the figure had stepped clear of the red moongate, for that it obviously was, the thing snapped back down into the earth and the electric tingle in the air went away, the hum dissolving into the sounds of surf beyond the walls of Trinsic and the cries of gulls.

The man that stood now in the street was tall and sported rather long blond hair down just past the shoulders. He was dressed all in leather armor and had a canvas pack slung across his back. His face bore an expression of extreme bewilderment.

Iolo, shocked and dumbfounded, quickly changed his expression to smiling delight as the figure walked toward them.

Petre looked as if he'd seen a ghost. "Iolo! That man did appear from thin air! Help me!"

Iolo waved the peasant back down. "Hush! It will be all right! He's a friend."

Iolo walked quickly to the leather-clad man and gave him a hug. "If I did not trust the infallibility of mine own eyes, I would not believe it! I was just thinking to myself, 'If only the Avatar were here!' Then... Lo and behold! Who says that magic is dying! Here is living proof that it is not! Dost thou realize, Avatar, that it hath been 200 Britannian years since we last met? Why, thou hast not aged at all!" Iolo winked conspiratorially. He whispered, "Due no doubt to the difference in the structure of time in our original homeland and that of Britannia?" He resumed speaking aloud. "I have aged a little, as thou canst see. But, of course, I have stayed here in Britannia all this time. Oh, but Avatar! Wait until I tell the others! They will be happy to see thee! Welcome to Trinsic!"

Snapping out of his own apparent shock, the distraught Petre interrupted Iolo. "Show him the stables m'lord. 'Tis horrible!"

Iolo nodded, his joy faded quickly as he was reminded of the reason he was standing there in the first place. "Ah, yes. Our friend Petre here discovered something truly ghastly this morning. Take a look inside the stables. I shall accompany thee."

“Christ, Iolo!” said the Avatar, who before now had not spoken a word, “I just got here! Give me a moment to get my bearings! Something strange is going on here. That moongate...”

Before the Avatar could finish the three of them were thrown to the ground as a massive concussion quaked through the earth under their feet. Another ripple followed and then a great tremor remained for several moments before finally dwindling away.

“What the fuck was that?” exclaimed the Avatar.

“All is not right in Britannia,” said Iolo, “perhaps Lord British will know the reason behind this tremor.”

As they picked themselves up off the ground the Avatar was opening up his mouth to say something else when a long stream of curses came from the end of Strand where it met the Avenue of the Fellowship. They watched as a blue-robed nobleman scrambled up from the dirty cobblestones and, brushing off furiously, began walking quickly in their direction.

The Avatar looked sideways at Iolo. “Thou shouldst not worry, Avatar, it’s just Finnigan, the Mayor of Trinsic. He’s a good friend of mine. He was coming down to meet me for breakfast at The Honorable Hound.”

Finnigan approached and stopped a pace or two away from the group. “Iolo! Who is this stranger?”

“Canst thou believe it? May I introduce thee? This is Finnigan, the Town Mayor. And this is the Avatar! I simply cannot believe he is here!”

The Mayor stepped close and and looked the Avatar up and down, not sure if he should believe Iolo or not. He looked at Iolo skeptically.

“I swear to thee, it is the Avatar!”

“I am not certain that I believe it,” remarked Finnigan. He looked at the Avatar again, scrutinizing every pore on his face. Suddenly, he let out an impatient sigh, stepped back a moment, and paused. Finally he smiled and said, “Welcome, Avatar.”

The Avatar was about to extend his hand and say to Finnigan many thanks and if he might join them for breakfast and wasn't Trinsic just a knock-out lovely city, but he never got the chance. Finnigan's face was just as suddenly stern.

"A horrible murder has occurred. If thou art truly the Avatar, perhaps thou canst help us solve it. I would feel better if thou takest this matter into thine hands. Thou shalt be handsomely rewarded if thou dost discover the name of the killer. Dost thou accept?" Finnigan was already tapping his foot impatiently.

"Yes, of course I—" began the Avatar.

"Good. Petre here knows something about all of this. 'Twas his babbling overheard by one of the town guards that got this to my attention to begin with. So, speak up man."

"I discovered poor Christopher and the Gargoyle Inamo early this mor—" sniffled Petre, but again Finnigan interrupted.

"Petre, the stables caretaker, discovered poor Christopher and Inamo early this morning. Hast thou searched the stables?" Finnigan asked the Avatar.

"Of course, not, m'lord, I jus—"

"Then I suggest that thou lookest inside and talkest to me again."

At that, Finnigan simply turned on his heel and headed back up the street.

Iolo mopped his brow. "Whew! What a damnable bloody morning this has been."

The Avatar looked around checking to make certain nobody had anything else to say. "So, what the hell is going on Iolo?"

"I'm terribly sorry about Finnigan, Avatar. I mean, there is no doubt that *thou* art the Avatar, but thou mayest have some trouble convincing those who do not know thy face. Of course, thou *shouldst* be safe around thy

friends! After all, thou hast been gone for 200 years! Most of those who would recognize thee are long gone! Sorry to be blunt and all, my friend, but there it is.”

“I’m not talking about that, Iolo. I want to know what the HELL IS GOING ON! Murders? Earthquakes? My being summoned here by a red moongate? Who put out the call for it? Why am I here? To act as a town guard and investigate a homicide?”

Iolo raised up both of his hands placatingly. “I’m sorry my friend. I think you should speak to Petre here. He’s the one who found them.”

The Avatar turned to Petre. “Found who?”

Petre stood there still wide-eyed with shock. “Art thou really the Avatar?”

The Avatar rolled his eyes up to the sky. He sighed. “Yes. I am the Avatar.”

Petre hastily bowed. “Milord.”

“So, you’re Petre?” asked the Avatar, impatiently waving the peasant to get off the ground.

“Yes,” Petre sniffed.

“And you’re the stables caretaker?”

“Yes,” he sniffed again.

“What did you find here?” asked the Avatar indicating the stables.

“I discovered Christopher and Inamo earlier this morning. I did not touch a thing. Made me sick, it did!”

“Who was Christopher?”

“Nice man. He made the shoes for mine horses.”

“Blacksmith?”

“Yes.”

“And Inamo?”

“He worked for very little money. Did basic chores around the stables and the pub. I let him sleep in the little back room. He must have been in the wrong place at the wrong time.” Petre shuffled his feet and looked nervously toward the stables.

“Come on, Iolo, let’s go check it out.”

The Avatar and Iolo went inside. Petre stayed outside looking as though he were going to be sick again.

“Jesus Christ,” muttered the Avatar quietly.

“What dost thou think,” asked Iolo.

“Looks like something right out of a murder scene in L.A. or New York. My God this is fucked up!”

“Thou dost utter precisely mine own sentiments,” said Iolo.

The Avatar went about investigating the bodies. Iolo was half-heartedly helping but was starting to feel too queasy to be of much use.

“You know,” the Avatar said, as he was poking around Inamo’s corpse, “for such nice fellows as they guys most certainly must have been, they sure died the kind of deaths one usually reserves for the most despicable and hated. Are you positive these guys weren’t Nazis or something? Spreading around a little genocide and Zyklon B in between cleaning horse shit and making fire pokers?”

“Is that virtuous Avatar?” exclaimed Iolo, shocked.

“Look, I’m kidding. Just trying to lighten up the fuckin’ mood. The air in here’s thick enough as it is without dwelling unduly and tripping out.”

“The stench, m’lord,” commented Iolo humorlessly.

“Right,” said the Avatar, and went back to what he was doing.

“Wait a minute,” he said curiously, “what’s this?” He reached down over Christopher’s hacked-up form and retrieved a little golden key.”

“It looks like it goes to a chest,” Iolo said peering over the Avatar’s shoulder.

“Any chests in here?”

“Nay, Avatar, not one.”

“Those footprints go anywhere?”

“They leave the stables, out into the yard and then turn right around the corner. The footprints are then lost by the time they reach a stack of wood by the fence. I imagine this is how the killer evacuated the building after committing these heinous crimes. The villain!”

“All right. I think I’ve got about all I’m going to get here for the time being. Shall we?”

“Certainly, Avatar.”

Petre was still milling about outside. He walked timidly up to Iolo and the Avatar as they emerged from the stables. “What dost thou think?”

“I think we’re done here at the stables for the moment. But, I wouldn’t clean anything up yet, just in case. We’re going to go see the Mayor now, so sit tight.” The Avatar gave Petre a pat on the shoulder. Petre winced.

The Avatar was about to move off when Petre called out, “Wait! I shalt go with thee. I must needs speak with the Mayor about what to do about mine stables. `Tis mine livelihood thou knowest?”

So, all three shambled off to the Town Hall. When they arrived, they found Finnigan seated at a long table, polishing off his third bottle of wine.

His hands were shaking and it didn't look like he was going to remain conscious much longer.

“Rest,” he was muttering, “Just a little shut eye. A snore or two, that's all.”

“Finnigan?” Iolo prodded.

“What? Oh, yes. Thou didst wish to see me, yes? Oh, right, yes, I told you to come see me. What didst thou uncover?”

The Avatar stepped forward. “We found this key, m'lord.:

“A key, yes, yes.” Finnigan's brow furrowed, chin buried in hand as if he were trying to keep his head from falling off.

“Finnigan,” Iolo said quietly, “thou dost not look well. The Avatar and I have this situation in hand. Thou shouldst rest.”

Wearily, Finnigan nodded. Staring off into space, however, he spoke. “Trinsic was once the city of Honor. I suppose it still is. Our Rune of Honor was taken many years ago by one who claimed he was the Avatar. I believe it now resides in the Royal Museum in Britain, yet the empty pedestal still remains in the center of town. I feel this is symbolic of the town itself. It is rather empty – of people, of life, and of honor. 'Tis sad, really. Then there is this murder, of course. We have temporarily closed the gates of the city and require a password to get in or out.”

Finnigan rubbed his face and bloodshot eyes. He sighed deeply. Iolo shuffled about uncomfortably, glancing at the Avatar from time to time as if in apology.

“You must understand,” said Finnigan pleadingly, “A crime like this has never happened in Trinsic before. I cannot believe this happened to Christopher and Inamo. Please – explore the town! Be sure to ask everyone in town about the murder. After speaking with Christopher's son, thou mightest next want to speak with Gilberto, the guard on watch at the dock last night. He was struck from behind early this morning and was knocked senseless. Johnson, the morning watch, found him unconscious. He is

recuperating at Chantu the healer's house on the west side of town. I would appreciate it if thou wouldst bring me a report on thy progress."

"Ah, yes," interjected the Avatar, "a report. Well we found this key on Christopher's body..."

"Yes, indeed. Perhaps if thou dost ask Christopher's son about it, he may know what it is for."

"And by what name dost thou call him?" queried Iolo.

"Christopher's son is called Spark. Their house is in the northwest of town."

"Thank you, Mayor, you've been most helpful. I can assure you that this matter will be handled in short order. We bid you good day."

At that the Avatar made a short bow and left, gesturing to Iolo with his thumb to follow.

"He's in pretty bad shape," said the Avatar to Iolo when they were out of earshot.

"Indeed," said Iolo thoughtfully. "I had not thought he wouldst take this tragedy so hard. Very bad," he said, shaking his head, "very bad. He is a good man. I doth hate to see him in such a state."

"Well," said the Avatar, "let's get on with this. Christopher's house is in the north-west part of town. Do you know how to get there?"

"I'll take you there, Avatar," said Petre.

"You're still here?" The Avatar raised an eyebrow. "I thought you were going to ask the mayor about your stable?"

"Upon seeing the mayor all in shambles, as it were, I didst think it best that I speaketh with him later. Until then I wouldst rather not be near the place. It dost make me too ill." Petre grimaced.

"Well, all right then. Lead on."

Petre led them north along the Street of Honor, took a shortcut through the little park near the Town Hall, and came out on Heroe's Way. As they walked, the Avatar looked sideways at Iolo. "So, how's LB?" he asked, referring to Lord British.

"Well, between thee and me, I think that he hath aged much more than I! Full of information, that chap, but he never seems to leave Britain anymore. My liege will be enormously pleased to see thee. We should travel to Britain post haste. I am sure he can give thee some valuable information and update thee on much of what thou hast missed in the 200 years of thine absence."

"Dupre and Shamino still about?"

"Shamino is still in Britain. He has a girlfriend employed as an actress at the Royal Theatre. Dupre, on the other hand, is off somewhere. Last I heard, he was in Jhelom. Didst thou know he was knighted?"

"Dupre?" said the Avatar with a smirk. "My, my, I *have* been away for a while, haven't I? LB will knight anybody these days, won't he?"

Iolo barked a laugh. "Yes. Dupre, a knight. Hard to believe is it not?"

"I'll say."

They turned right on Paladin's Path, walked across some grass and around to the front of a narrow, two-story building.

"This is the place," said Petre. He knocked on the door. They waited for several moments. Petre knocked again. And again they waited. "It appears no one is about. I hope Spark is all right. He's a good lad."

They turned around and started walking away from the house when the door cracked open a bit. Petre glanced back and noticed it. "Spark? Is that you? It's all right, lad. You have some visitors."

The door opened the rest of the way. Standing in the opening was a small boy of perhaps thirteen or fourteen years of age, dirty and unkempt, and eyes red with tears. He had a blowgun in his hand.

“Who art thou and what dost thou want?” he demanded.

“I am the Avatar,” said the Avatar with a slight bow.

Spark raised up the blowgun almost to his lips. “The last time I heard *that* one I fell off a prehistoric creature from Eodon!” Spark looked as if he was about to slam the door shut on them, but then Iolo spoke up.

“Boy, this *is* the Avatar! Upon my word he is! He has come to help thee!”

The boy narrowed his eyes, studying the Avatar for several moments. He slowly lowered his weapon, ready to act in case it was a trap.

Spark stared at the Avatar. The Avatar stared at Spark. Finally, the boy nodded his head and seemed to relax a little.

“All right,” Spark said, “I believe thee. Thou dost look like paintings I have seen. I am sorry, Avatar. Please come in.”

Spark stepped inside so they could go in. After they had all passed over the threshold Spark looked quickly up and down the street and then closed and bolted the door. He did not put down his blowgun.

“I admire your obvious experience in dealing with strangers, Spark,” said the Avatar.

“In light of recent events I dost consider it best to be cautious,” Spark replied.

The Avatar took the key he’d taken off of Christopher’s body out of his pocket and held it before Spark’s face.

“Recognize this?”

“That looks like the key to my father’s chest. I wondered where it was!”

“Would you mind, Spark, if we just took a little look at the contents of that chest?” the Avatar requested, “It might be important.”

“No, not at all. It’s upstairs.”

Spark ran up the stairs, beckoning the trio to follow him. Iolo went first and then the Avatar. As he looked behind him to see if Petre was still in tow he caught the oaf with his forefinger in his nose. The Avatar halted.

“Do you mind?” said the Avatar, glaring.

Petre, startled, looked up at the Avatar, checked himself, and removed the offending digit from his nostril. He gave a sheepish smile and shuffled and sniffed, darting his eyes anywhere but at the Avatar who, at last, trudged up the stairs grumbling something about “ignorant peasantry” and “why me”.

The upstairs room was sparsely furnished, consisting of only a bed and the chest. The Avatar fit the key into the lock and turned it. He opened the chest and began to examine the items inside. Meanwhile, Iolo was looking around the room. He noted two bricked up sections in the north and south walls that had once been windows. He turned around and saw a trapdoor over the staircase. The lock was fitted to the side that, when closed, would effectively lock the occupant in this upstairs room. More like a prison than a room. Something unsettling edged in on the fringes of Iolo’s awareness.

Iolo was just about to comment on the windows when he felt a sting on the back of his neck. He quickly reached back and pulled out a dart. He turned around and saw Spark standing there bringing the blowgun back down from his lips. Iolo tried to ask Spark what he’d done that for when he discovered he couldn’t speak. He couldn’t move his mouth. And then there was a cold sensation that spread out from his neck to the rest of his body. Poison!

But Iolo had no time for misgivings or anger at the youth who stood smug and unsmiling in front of him. He fell, face forward, to the floor. He

was dead before he hit. The Avatar looked up from the scroll he'd been reading.

“What the fuck?” The Avatar saw Iolo fall, saw the boy and his blowgun. He looked to his left. There was Petre with a handful of blue powder, held up to his mouth. He blew it out of his hand – and into the Avatar's face! The Avatar fell over immediately, out cold, onto Iolo's poisoned corpse.

Chapter 2: Avatarnished

“Well done, Spark,” said Petre. He at once abandoned his sniveling mien and took on a more commanding posture. He removed the spongy filters he had put in his nose when the Avatar thought he was being vulgar scraping nostril dirt with an unmanicured fingernail.

“So, this is the bastard that stole our Rune of Honor?” Spark said with a look of disgust.

“Correct, lad. And I’m fairly certain he hast had a hand in thy father’s death as well.”

Spark fought back new tears and stifled a small scream. He bent over the prone form of the Avatar and spat right into his sleeping face. And then he kicked him in the spine with all his might.

“The bastard!”

“Steady, Spark. Our revenge will be complete soon enough. Now, there is work to be done and arrangements to be made. I will secure the prisoner. I need you to go to the docks and ready the crew on our ship. Captain Robin will know what to do.”

Spark made as if to go then stopped. “When are we going to meet the *real* Avatar?”

“Soon,” said Petre as he tied the limbs of the Avatar lying at his feet. “We will catch up with him in Britain after our next port of call.”

Spark stared at the Avatar on the floor with such hatred that Petre considered for a moment that he might have actually overdone Spark’s education a bit. Then he left. Petre stared after him until he was gone and then got back to work.

He removed a panel in the wall, took out two rings and a leather case hidden there, and put the items in his pocket. Then he checked the Avatar’s bindings. He sat down on the edge of the bed and waited. There wasn’t

much time before the sleeping powder wore off and he couldn't finish this up until two more steps in the process were completed.

The door opened. Footsteps thumped on the stairs.

“My word, Petre, if only I were a town guard. How utterly damning this little scene wouldst be.”

“No time for humor, Sullivan. Sit,” Petre sprang up and indicated the bed.

“Peasant hospitality is always so heart-warming,” said Sullivan, but he sat where Petre's finger pointed.

Petre took one of the rings from his pocket and handed one to Sullivan. “Hold this in front of your face until I ask for it back.” Sullivan accepted the proffered jewelry and did as instructed. Petre took out the other ring and did the same peculiar thing to the Avatar's unconscious mug.

Sullivan nudged the snoozing Avatar with his toe. “So this is the great and powerful Avatar, eh?” he said, looking as though he'd just found an interesting, but gross, insect. “Not much is he?”

“Not really, I suppose. From what I've gathered about the place he comes from he is employed as something they call a ‘computer geek’.”

“What's that?” asked Sullivan with a raised eyebrow.

“Well, they tend to have rather pasty complexions, eat sugar by the gallon, and walkest about aimlessly mumbling obscure bits of information that nobody comprehends or cares about. Pretty useless, actually.” What Petre had not mentioned was the fact that one of those “computer geeks”, in the place the Avatar came from, had managed to become the richest man in the world.

“Indeed. Pasty. I must say I don't really lookest like him at all. I bear a far more striking aspect. How will I ever fool his friends I dost wonder?”

“I'm taking care of that right now,” said Petre. “Give me your ring.”

Sullivan handed it over. Petre exchanged it for the one he had been holding over the Avatar.

“Put that one on thy finger and never takest it off.” Petre gave him a small hand-held mirror. “Go ahead, take a look.”

Sullivan stared incredulously at what he beheld. “Why, Petre! I dost look like him! Heavens! If I’d only had this pretty bauble long ago. I canst now act the part of the Avatar and graft with impunity! Where, on earth, didst thou acquire these?”

“Just a little something I picked up in my travels,” said Petre. “But, thou shouldst worry not, Sullivan, for thou wilt soon have something far more valuable.”

“Ah, yes. Indeed, Petre, thou art correct.” He smiled and gave Petre a knowing look. “What art thou doing now?”

Petre was fishing around in his pockets. He pulled out a leather case and opened it, revealing two small vials. Each had labels. One was red and the other green. Petre put the ring that Sullivan had held on the Avatar’s left ring finger and applied a drop of fluid from the vial marked red onto it.

Sullivan, meanwhile, was watching these activities with much interest. Then Petre heard a sharp intake of breath. He looked up at Sullivan who was staring at the Avatar’s face.

“He doth look like me!” he exclaimed.

“Of course,” said Petre matter-of-factly. “We have to throw “you” back in that Fellowship dungeon. And now that you are him and he is you the situation is handled quite easily.”

“Genius, man!” Sullivan was looking at Petre with a certain measure of awe. “Thou art truly a competent master of thy trade.” Then his brow furrowed in puzzlement. “But will he not be able to simply removest the ring and conjurest up some tale of a prisoner mix-up?”

“That’s what the liquid in the vial was for. It possesseth magical properties that doth adhere the ring to his finger. Short of cutting his finger off completely he shalt never be able to remove it.”

Sullivan chortled with delight. “My, Petre, thou hast thought of everything. What now?”

“Now you leave Trinsic. Here is the deed to the horse and carriage outside the north gate. You are to go to Britain. The day after tomorrow, toward evening, we will arrive. Meet us at the Blue Boar.”

“We?” queried Sullivan.

“Yes. I will introduce you to Spark then.”

“Ah, yes. The boy you spoke of. A true blue scalawag from what thou hast told me. I dost look forward to meeting him.”

“Indeed. Now, then. Attend! There are a couple of things I need you to do when you arrive in Britain. With your new identity thou shouldst be able to pull it off. Just keep your wits about you and remember: you are the Avatar.” Petre then gave Sullivan his instructions whose smile grew wider and wider with each word.

“Thou canst count on me, Petre.”

“Good. Now away with thee! The others wilt be back any moment!”

Sullivan left, whistling happily. Petre got a sack out from under the bed and opened it. He pulled out some cloth and tied a gag around the Avatar’s mouth and a blindfold over his eyes. Then he put the sack over the Avatar’s head and cinched it closed with some cord.

Petre sighed. Things were going neatly so far without a hitch. The most dangerous part of this operation was passed: incapacitating the Avatar. Petre knew that when the Avatar came back to Britannia from Earth his powers were always weak and he had to retrain himself to maximum capacity. His initial arrival, therefore, was the most logically appropriate time to do what he’d just done. If it had gotten fouled up, however, and the

Avatar escaped, it could have spelled disaster for Petre's plans. This had been most sensitive and critical.

The downstairs door opened. Footsteps clomped up the steps. "And now," said Petre to himself, "we can finish it up."

The scarred, rough-looking visages of two pirates came into view, led by Spark. They were each carrying a wooden barrel.

"Battles. Leavell," Petre addressed the pirates, nodding.

"We gots yer barrels for ye, Master Petre," said Battles. "Just like ye ordered 'em. All special like." The two rogues set the barrels down and Petre went over to inspect. One barrel had small round holes cut into its top and sides at intervals with a lid that was held closed with clasps that locked. The other had similar locking clasps, but had no holes and was specially sealed inside to hold liquid. Battles and Leavell went back downstairs and soon returned with a heavy crate. When they got it opened it had several sealed jugs inside.

"Well, all be, Master Petre, we's havin' a party?" asked Leavell expectantly.

Petre barked a laugh. "I think thou wouldst find this drink quite unpalatable, Leavell. Now, do me a favor and divest that old man of his robes. He shalt no longer be needing them, methinks."

The two cutthroats set to work stripping the corpse of Iolo, one-time bowyer and fellow adventurer to the Avatar.

"A nice crossbow be this," exclaimed Battles as he rifled the backpack. "Canst I keep it, Master Petre?"

Suddenly, Leavell stood bolt upright, looking at the prone figure of the old man. "Master Petre! Coulst this be Iolo? The great bowyer? Why, he's known all throughout the land he is! And we be rollin' him like a drunk we be! Didst thou send him off harpin' with the angels, Master Petre?" Leavell looked at Petre wide-eyed and a bit awe-struck. Battles dropped the crossbow as though it had suddenly become hot.

“Just load him into that specially sealed barrel, Leavell. The less you know the less you have to tell LB when he tortures you.”

Leavell visibly gulped and smacked Battles out of his daze so he could help him pick Iolo up and drop him into the barrel. That done Petre started opening jugs and pouring their contents into the barrel on top of the corpse.

“Gads, Master Petre,” said Battles, holding his nose. “What be that foul concoction?”

“Formaldehyde,” said Petre simply.

“Firmil-what?”

“Nothing, Battles. Just a preservative.”

“Oh, like me peach marmalade I have with me toast?”

The other body on the floor began to shift slightly. A faint moan emanated from the sack. Spark was standing over it. He looked down and was about to kick it, but paused for a moment as if in thought. Then he smiled. He opened up his trousers and urinated all over the sack, twirled the stream over the rest of the body a few times for good measure and then stood there gloating, satisfied in more ways than one.

Battles jabbed a thumb at Spark. “Kid’s got a vicious streak in ‘im don’t he?”

“Indeed. Put that putrid filth into the other barrel.”

The pirates gingerly picked up the soiled Avatar and dumped him unceremoniously into the perforated barrel, slammed the lid on top and closed and locked all the clasps.

By now, Petre was finished with what he was doing. He put the lid on Iolo’s barrel as well and locked it up in the same manner. He held out his hand for the key to the Avatar’s barrel and Leavell gave it to him.

“We’re almost done,” he said. “Take that barrel that dost smell of piss downstairs and load it up into the cart.

The pirates did as they were told. Spark and Petre followed behind, and when they were below the top of the stairs, Petre pulled a cord lowering the trapdoor. He locked it up with a third key hanging around his neck and walked the rest of the way downstairs.

Battles and Leavell had the barrel tied down to the back of the horse cart and were only waiting for Spark and Petre to get in. Then they were off to the docks. As they passed the east gate, Petre thanked Johnson, the guard, for his cooperation and suggested that it probably would not be necessary to log their departure.

“Always at the service of the Fellowship,” said Johnson, glancing at the Fellowship medallion that Petre had let hang outside his shirt collar. “Thou shouldst not worry.” Johnson gave a salute and they were off to the ship.

It was called ‘The Beast’ and Petre owned it. Battles and Leavell hoisted the barrel into the hold as Petre and Spark were welcomed aboard by Robin, the hired captain of this vessel.

“How fares thee,” hailed Robin with proffered hand.

“Extraordinarily well, Robin,” said Petre shaking it.

“Ah, the young lad thou hast mentioned,” remarked Robin.

“His name is Spark.”

“Welcome aboard, Spark,” said Robin jovially. “Later I canst give thee a tour of the wheelhouse. Until then I must be off to see to mine captainly duties.” Robin departed, and Petre breathed another sigh, relaxing some of his tension. Within a half-hour they were sailing off to Buccaneer’s Den. He was actually going to pull this off!

* * * *

Meanwhile, Sullivan had left Trinsic on a horse and cart, heading north. The day was beautiful, birds were chirping happily and when he passed by a brook he laughed gaily at the sound of its tinkling and bubbling. What a wonderful thing to be the Avatar, he thought to himself. No more stealing artifacts of dubious value or blankets from inns. Petty thievery was for the dogs. He was the AVATAR! HE COULD DO NO WRONG! He had seen the vast smorgasboard of opportunities that had been placed before him immediately and couldn't imagine having found better employment. This was just too rich! What luck! He could barely keep himself on the cart he had begun to laugh so violently.

After a while his raucous lack of control subsided and gave over to intermittent fits of giggling. He began to notice his surroundings as if for the first time, hardly having to direct the horses at all who seemed to know the way.

Far up ahead there was a bend in the road and then a kind of green cloud of vapor that could only be the swamps. Ugh! How nasty! And then he heard a sound of voices and some music. He stopped the cart and listened. It was up ahead and to the right. Sullivan twitched the reins and the horses trotted on.

The source of the voices soon became apparent. There was a kind of gypsy wagon by the roadside with a stage built out front with some benches turned toward it. And on the stage were some people, obviously actors, practicing their lines. Sullivan couldn't resist. He had to investigate.

He slowed the pace of the horses and brought them to a halt near the wagon and got down from the cart. He sauntered up to the stage and said hello. Smiling, the actors said hello in return and asked him who he was.

"I am the Avatar," he intoned regally.

The actors beamed and crooned with pleasure. "Oh, the Avatar!" they said, "We had heard that thou hast arrived!"

Sullivan was a bit taken aback by this. After all, how would they have known already? He asked them this and they said the story was in all the papers. Sullivan prodded further and they produced a copy. It was the "Britannian Herald".

Ah, yes, of course they would know, he thought. He had forgotten that Petre had invented a thing called a printing press that could make numerous copies of a single document very fast, and had started circulating these “newspapers” around Britannia, eventually culminating in a state-sanctioned press headquartered in Britain. Many more presses had been built and there were now newspaper publishers in every Britannian city, complete with offices, pressmen, and people called “reporters” who went about uncovering news to print in the papers. Petre himself was the owner and unspoken editor-in-chief. That meant they would print what he told them to print. He had already used this “media” (as he called it) to influence public thinking (yet another term -- “public relations” – that Petre had coined) during Patterson’s campaign for mayor. His success was privately known to have been largely due to the coverage he received from the Herald. The paper had also been used on numerous occasions to advance programs sponsored by the Fellowship. It was a very effective tool and Sullivan admired it.

He chatted with the actors about this and that and got the full round of introductions. The two men were named Paul and Dustin and the woman was Meryl. As Sullivan took her hand and kissed it in his gentlemanly way, he eyed her figure appraisingly. She was quite a pretty lady; middle-aged, but unblemished, with firm breasts and tight, wonderfully-shaped buttocks. The dress she wore certainly did not detract or attempt to conceal these facts of natural beauty. A weird glint twinkled in Sullivan’s eyes. Meryl, a perceptive girl, noted it and withdrew her hand hastily, becoming a bit uncomfortable under his gaze.

But, smiling, he continued to chat amiably with them about matters of no import in his usual charming way. They informed him that they were a lone band of actors that traveled the countryside putting on Passion Plays about the Fellowship. This was music to Sullivan’s ears! He heard opportunity pounding on his door. For the price of merely two gold coins they would perform for him.

Sullivan, naturally, said that he would be delighted and handed them the money. They told him to take a seat on one of the benches and they would begin. Obliging, he did so.

Donning masks, the trio set about acting their parts. Sullivan had to suppress a yawn. It was, of course, all the usual claptrap extolling the virtues of the Fellowship's basic tenets. Sullivan quietly chortled at his own unintended pun. However, he knew better than anyone present just how false the Fellowship's publicly declared image of benign good works really was. He had spent enough time in the Fellowship dungeon on Buccaneer's Den to know the truth. As he watched, he found the actors quite a bit wanting in skill at their chosen craft. It was all rather banal and shabby, but when they were finished and bowing he leapt up off the bench and clapped vigorously smiling and cheering. Apparently they didn't get such rave reviews (well, thought Sullivan, trees, rocks and empty benches aren't very receptive to artistic expression) and their grins grew wider and their faces glowed. Gods were they happy!

Sullivan walked up onto the stage and shook all their hands and raved about their superior acting skills and how he nearly cried in the sad parts by virtue of their infallible execution of emotional expression. He had them floating on air. He told them he would go to the Britannian Herald at once and have them print up reviews of their performance lauding them as probably the greatest budding talent Britannia had yet seen. And then he would go to the Royal Theatre and try his best to talk the directors there into giving them a commission.

The trio of actors, by now, might just as well have been licking between his toes. Pausing a moment he found that thought rather titillating, but no matter. He told them that he was so impressed that he felt encouraged enough to share a little act of his own. A nothing, really. Just something he'd picked up along the way.

They were so ecstatic that they quickly agreed to let him have the stage a moment and show them. Sullivan told them he was going to do a juggling act, but he would need a partner. Of course, in all such juggling acts he preferred the assistance of a female helper. The two men quickly agreed and went down to sit on the benches.

Sullivan told them not to be alarmed. It was a knife-juggling act, but he promised no one would get hurt. He handed Meryl an apple as he explained. She would stand out of the way while he juggled the knives. When he gave her the command she was to throw the apple into the fray and Sullivan would cut it up and start juggling the knives and the apple pieces,

then eat the pieces as they were in mid-air without pausing or dropping anything. They all thought this was wonderful and couldn't wait to see this amazing feat of dexterity. Imagine! Being entertained by the Avatar himself, and soon they would all be famous!

Smiling, Sullivan took two throwing knives out of their sheaths on his belt and held them as if in preparation to toss them up in the air and begin.

One! Two! The knives sizzled through the air! Straight between the eyes of Paul and Dustin. They were killed instantly. Both slid on the bench until they were leaning up against each other, eyes staring vacantly, blood streaming down their faces.

Meryl turned white with terror. The apple dropped to the stage floor. Before she could scream, Sullivan grabbed her and pulled her forcefully into the wagon.

“Thou canst scream all thou dost want, but there is no one about,” said Sullivan calmly. “All I dost want is a little action, my dear. Let me have mine way and thou shalt live, I dost promise.” He smiled at her most sweetly.

Meryl screamed. Sullivan laughed and grabbed the top of her dress. With a yank he tore the thin material off her body. He gazed at her form appreciatively. She screamed again. He grabbed her by the hair, pulled her head back and slapped her across the face. She stopped screaming long enough for him to turn her around, get her on her knees, and bend her over a bed. With one hand he held her down while he undid his trousers with the other. No preparation or warming up would be needed. His member was already quite attentive. He pushed her legs apart with his foot, crouched slightly and found the place he was searching for, driving it home. He grabbed her breasts and felt her nipples as he invaded her with wild abandon, bucking crazily like a wild, sex-starved animal. The slap of flesh against flesh was loud and rapid, Meryls screams died down to choking sobs.

Then he slowed down a bit. He pushed his finger into that neighboring door and spit upon it. He did this for a while as he maintained his member's activities elsewhere. Then he withdrew his finger and replaced it, slowly, with his slippery companion. Gods was it tight in there!

Meryl's screams resumed and as his movement became faster and more intense the screaming raised itself to a fevered pitch.

But, sodomizing the poor girl was not enough for Sullivan. He pulled a poisoned green blade out of his boot sheath and grazed the back of Meryl's neck with it. Her screams were more than desperate now as she felt the cold metal touch her skin. She was screeching as though she had completely gone mad with horror.

And then, suddenly, her screams died and she began to gurgle and spit froth from her mouth. Her whole body shuddered and racked. And then, her last throes of death were upon her and she gave in to a fit of violent jerking and muscle contractions. Sullivan, who had not stopped assaulting her posterior with his enraged serpent during all of this, went into spasms himself as he climaxed at the moment of her wild thrashing and clenching.

He collapsed, exhausted and spent, on her corpse. Breathing heavy, sweating, he felt utterly satiated. As he stood, he patted her rump. The flesh quivered like jelly. He turned her over. Sightless eyes peered at the ceiling. Her large breasts jiggled. His evil little friend had regained his altitude. Hell, why not. He assaulted her again, face up so he could look at her and watch her breasts bounce around. Just before he climaxed he pulled out and slipped himself into her mouth. Ah, he thought. Not as good as the first but, oh, how satisfying.

After a while, when he was done toying with her, Sullivan dressed, retrieved the knives from Dustin's and Paul's craniums, and pondered what to do next. He dragged the bodies of the two men into the wagon, found a torch and set the wagon on fire. Then he noticed that the wagon was very close to the woods. He shrugged again. Why not? He began collecting branches and brush, throwing it on and near the burning wagon until it made a little path to a big pile of brush in the middle of the closest stand of trees.

Rape, murder, and a forest fire. Not bad for a day's work, thought Sullivan. Whistling merrily, he got back up on the cart, twitched the reins of the horses who were already shifting about nervously because of the encroaching fire, and continued on his way up the road. Death, terror and devastation lay behind him.

Chapter 3: Swashbuckler's Spit

The pirate plunked the mug down on the bar top, sloshing its contents to the brink of spilling.

“What did you say it was?” Spark asked the pirate, looking suspicious.

“Swashbuckler's Spit it be, lad. Finest brew in the land. That'll be four gold.” Spark fished around in the bag Petre had left him with and handed over the coins. He took a sip of the grog and coughed, gagged, and blew Spit all over the counter and the pirate's sleeve.

The pirate laughed. “Drink up, lad. 'Tis right proper stuff. Milk and cookies merely stunt yer growth. After a month on a restricted diet of this fine and heady mixture ye be well on yer way to piratehood.” The pirate got himself a pint and quaffed it in one swallow.

Spark stared at him aghast, then looked back down at his mug of Spit. He decided right then and there that pirating was for him, closed his eyes, and gulped down the grog, not coming up for air until the mug was empty of all but a few suds. He slammed it down on the counter and, in a tight, strained voice said, “Gimme another, barkeep!”

The bartender chuckled. “Ho! There be the spirit, lad! That'll be five gold.” Another mug of Swashbuckler's Spit was slid down the bar at Spark who caught it and consumed it greedily. Coins clinked.

“Barkeep! Another!”

* * * * *

Battles and Leavell, panting and sweating, dropped the barrel on the floor of the dungeon cell. They stood there a moment catching their breath.

“Well? Open it, thou stinking vermin!” shrieked Elizabeth.

Battles glanced at Leavell tiredly and they did as they were ordered. Abraham stepped into the cell and slammed it shut with a crash.

The two pirates heaved at the body inside and dropped it on the floor.

“Stand aside, dogs!” Elizabeth screeched. She strode over to where the figure lay and savagely tore the sack off the head and undid the blindfold and gag. She peered closely at the face that was all blinking eyes that hurt even in the dimness of this torchlight.

She pointed at Leavell. “Scum! A torch! Now!”

Leavell went over to a wall sconce and hurried over to her with the guttering flame. Elizabeth snatched it and held it very close to the face. It was that of Sullivan.

Elizabeth struck him with the torch repeatedly until his face was scorched and the sleeves of his arms were on fire from being upraised in defense. The torch finally went out, but Elizabeth kept on hitting him with the fury of Hells behind each stroke.

“Vile thief! Scrofulous anti-establishmentist! How dare thee steal Fellowship funds! How dare thee attempt to escape from us and avoid thy right and due torture! Thou wilt pay! Thou wilt pay with every stinking exhalation of thy breath emitted from thy screams of utter agony! Grod wilst torture thee daily! Morning! Noon! Night! It wilst be years before thou shalt die a horrible, pain-filled, drawn-out death! Thou art filth!”

The face and arms were now bloody from the blows, the nose was broken, and the skin around the eyes was cut and bleeding. A feeble voice was shouting for her to stop. Then came some babbling about a mistake and that he was the Avatar.

Elizabeth laughed hideously and spat on him. “Avatar, indeed! Nothing but a petty pickpocket and smuggler of courtesy items from inns! Thou art pathetic!”

She hurled the spent torch at the Avatar/Sullivan and kicked the side of his head. There came a groan and he writhed on the floor, blood dripping from a new head wound. She stormed out of the cell and looked about. Spying Grod whipping another prisoner across the torture chamber she stalked over to the troll, grabbed his whip hand, bending it back until he

screamed from the pain and struck him across the face. Then she dragged him by his collar into the cell. She swiftly moved her hand around, gripping Grod in a chokehold and stood in front of him. She stabbed her finger at the beaten body on the floor and screamed into his face.

“Thou wilt stop everything thou art doing this very instant and do nothing except torture this prisoner until I doth say otherwise! Dost thou hear me? If thou dost not receive word from me thou wilt keep torturing this pile of fetid dung until thou dost die of old age! Dost thou understand?” Elizabeth was screaming at the top of her lungs, face contorted in an insane furor, lips curled back in a snarl. Grod, the troll, could do nothing but numbly nod his head in assent.

Elizabeth threw him down to the ground, kicked him and left the chamber in a seething rage.

Petre, meanwhile, had been standing in the corner. Abraham walked over to him. “It appears, surprisingly, that thou hast done well, peasant,” sneered Abraham. “Thou hast proven thyself worthy...for now.”

Abraham turned to leave. He opened the cell door and, without looking back, said, “We will expect your report on the Avatar’s whereabouts and status soon. Don’t fail, peasant.” And then he was gone.

Grod leaped to his feet, grabbed a handful of the Avatar’s hair and dragged him from the cell. He quickly had him chained into a rack and set to work on him. Grod was tailor-made for this job. He loved his work.

“Gads, Master Petre! What a scurvy bitch she is!” said Battles.

“Indeed, Battles, but our task here is done. Thou shouldst enjoy thyself at the Baths or the House of Games whilst we are here. We dost leave at sunrise tomorrow for Britain.”

“Aye, aye, Cap’n Petre,” said Leavell. The two miscreants sauntered away. Petre lingered for a little while to catch some screams from the Avatar and was not disappointed. It was such a joy to watch a master tradesman at his craft.

* * * * *

“Washmucker’s what?”

Sullivan cleared his throat, “Swashbuckler’s Spit, madam. Dost thou have any? ‘Tis a popular beverage.”

“Apparently not around here it isn’t,” said Lucy. “Look, I must needs get back to the kitchen. If thou dost want anything, ask my barmaid Jeanette.” She pointed across the room at a sexy little brunette taking orders.

Sullivan had arrived in Britain. The day’s activities worked him up an appetite. He couldn’t risk being seen yet, as it was too early in the evening and he wanted to retain his element of surprise and superior positioning. And he definitely didn’t want to get caught in a situation that would cause him to have to talk with someone who knew the Avatar well and be desirous of a little old-times chit-chat. He had stolen a cloak and hood and now sat in a dark little corner of the Blue Boar, eyeing the customers and the girlish, nymph-like figure of Jeanette. At last, having unloaded her tray of appetizers she saw him and came over.

“Anything thou wouldst like?”

“Yes, m’lady. I wouldst like some mutton...a Silverleaf meal...a carafe of thy finest vintage...and thou.”

She looked at him uncomprehendingly. “It’s a bit loud in here. What was that last thing thou didst mention?”

“And a towel,” said Sullivan, “so that I might wash mine face and hands. Weary with travel I am.”

“Right away, sir,” she said, perkily. And off she went, buttocks shifting delightfully from side to side. Sullivan shook his head and merely made her a mental note of something to get back to later. He had more pressing business tonight that he needed to attend.

After his meal he simply left without paying when no one was looking and walked the city streets, waiting for the night to grow just a little older. A night watchman was lighting lamps and a few city folk were strolling hither and yon, going about their leisurely business, paying him no heed. He

kept the hood of his cloak drawn tight around his head and, hearing the watchman call out the hour, started making his way to the first target.

He walked straight down Avatar Avenue from the Blue Boar to Hazle-Lane. He looked to his right and found the building he was looking for. The sign on the door simply said TRAINER.

He tried the door and found it unlocked. Without knocking he pushed it open and crept inside. The training area was dark and quiet. There was no noise. Silently he walked into the center of the room. The light from street lamps streamed in through an open window.

Sullivan looked about and saw a door to his right. He slowly went over to it and was about to push it open when the tip of a sword was suddenly pressed against his throat. He froze. A match was struck. A torch was lit. A voice, steady and commanding spoke.

“Turn about slowly and perhaps no harm will come to thee.”

Sullivan turned around. The sword tip raised and pushed back the hood.

“Avatar! ‘Tis thee!” The torch was put up in a wall sconce and the person who was Senti set to lighting more in the room.

“I am so glad thou hast chosen to stop and visit! I did read of thy coming in the Herald! This is a glorious time! I thought I wouldst not see thee again it hast been so long!”

Sullivan smiled his most winning smile and said, “I am glad to be back, Senti.” He had wondered since the ring had, by illusion, changed his facial features to those of the Avatar if it would change his voice as well. Apparently this seemed to be the case, as Senti did not remark upon it.

Senti, finished with lighting torches, came back and stood before him. The sword he had held lay on a table by a practice dummy.

“So, what dost bringest thee to Britain?”

“I’m sorry to say, Senti, that I dost not bring good tidings. There hast been a horrible murder near Trinsic and I believe that the killer hast fled to this fair city. If I could, I wouldst enlist thine aid in capturing this villain and bringing him to justice.”

Senti frowned in thought. “Hmmm,” he said, “dost thou have any evidence regarding this individual?”

“Indeed,” said Sullivan in low, conspiratorial tones. “I found something very strange at the site of the murder. But I am afraid it may implicate someone we both know very well. This is very bad, Senti.” Sullivan drew forth a small bag from his tunic pocket. “Let me show this to thee in better light.”

Sullivan walked over to a wall sconce that hung above the little table. “Now thou shouldst remember, Senti, that I dost take thee into the strictest of confidence that thou shalt not reveal this information prematurely. The killer may catch wind of my search and flee yet again.”

“Thou knowest that thou dost always have mine word,” said Senti, a bit miffed at even the hint that his honor might be in doubt.

“Art thou expecting visitors?” asked Sullivan apprehensively looking at the door. Senti shook his head.

“Then who couldst that be?”

Senti turned. When he saw no one he turned back. Strange! His head seemed to be whipping around involuntarily! It spun! Then a crack as he sensed getting hit on the head by – no, that wasn’t right. It was the floor. His head had hit the floor. Now he had rolled to the side and saw a body lying on the floor. It looked very familiar. The Avatar was standing above the body with a sword in his hand. Hmmm. That sword looked familiar, too. Was there an intruder in the room after all? Had the Avatar killed an assailant? Senti felt very unusual and was just beginning to wonder why he couldn’t move when darkness overcame him and he was no more.

Sullivan stood there for a moment and thought, leaning on Senti’s bloody sword. His creative juices were revitalized and flowing. He

considered himself something of an artist and felt simply leaving a decapitated body lolling about on the floor was rather dull.

And then inspiration! He chuckled. He rummaged around for a sack and, finding one, set to work with the sword hacking the body to easily transportable chunks. Piece by piece he would toss fingers, toes, chunks of arms and legs, organs and bones. He made a special and swiftly executed circumcision and then walked over to the head. Picking it up he stared into Senti's face, still scowling in puzzlement, and then dumped it into the sack.

He raided Senti's bedroom for a change of clothes. Changed, and with a new cloak, he picked up his burden with a grunt and made a bee-line straight for the Blue Boar.

It seemed that a play at the Royal Theatre had just finished, so the place was packed with late night revelers. Sullivan went to the side door that entered straight into the kitchen and opened it a crack. There was Lucy sweating and cursing over a boiling cauldron of stew. She was madly ladling stew into bowls and rushing out to serve the waiting hordes. On a table behind her was a prepared tray featuring a very large bowl filled with pudding, apparently intended for a large party of customers.

Sullivan chortled with delight. Too perfect! He waited for her to rush out with the bowls. He quickly fished out the head and flaccid member and went into the kitchen. He pushed the head into the bottom of the pudding bowl and lay Senti's manly organ under a prepared Silverleaf meal. He ran back out, hauled up the sack, rushed back into the kitchen, and dumped its gory contents into the cauldron. He dashed for the exit and pulled the door partly closed just as Lucy ran back in to fill more bowls. Jeanette came in to help her and grabbed the platter of pudding and Silverleaf.

Sullivan could barely contain himself. He skipped across the street to hide behind a well, but found it bathed in light from a street lamp overhead. Easily remedied, he climbed up and extinguished the flame. Sliding back down, properly enshrouded in darkness, he sat on the edge of the well and waited.

Soon there were exclamations! A girl screamed! A man shouted in anger! More screams! The sounds of chairs falling over as people stood up indignantly or in shock! Chaos! Mobs of people were tripping over

themselves to get out of the door. Many of them were doubled over and vomiting. Most were in a panic, utterly horrified. Two children fell to the ground right in the threshold and were stepped on by their wild-eyed parents. Jeanette and Lucy ran out the kitchen door. Lucy was looking for a town guard and Jeanette just dropped to her knees, sobbing.

In all of the screaming and disorder, Sullivan walked calmly over to Jeanette, bent down on one knee and placed his hand on her shoulder.

“Art thou all right, m’lady?” Sullivan asked. He risked the brief exposure and threw back his hood so as to appear benign.

Jeanette looked up briefly and threw her arms around him, her body wracking with explosions of tears.

“Tut, tut, child,” said Sullivan mildly. Come over here by the well. I will draw up some water and you can tell me what this is all about. I see some town guards arriving. Let us allow them to do their work, shall we?”

Jeanette, unresponsive but agreeable, let herself be led across the street to the dark well. Sullivan made as if to lower the bucket down to the water. Jeanette, sobbing some more, leaned over the well. Sullivan pulled a cloth out of his pocket, came up behind her, slipped it over her head and mouth and cinched it tight. Her hands came up to claw at his but he grabbed them. Holding them both with one hand he used his free hand to snatch the rope that held the bucket. He wrapped it several times around her wrists and knotted it. Then he turned the crank, pulling her up so her torso was hung out over the well.

Sullivan glanced across the street at the babbling crowd and irate guards. Jeanette’s screams were sufficiently muffled. He fumbled at his trousers, lifted her skirt and plunged, forcing an entrance into her exit as it were. And there he was rutting like a mad dog with town guardsmen mere yards away. The excitement sent a thrill through him.

He reached around and laid bare her breasts, twiddling her nipples with his fingers. And then he looked across the street. An attractive woman in a mouse costume, one of the theatre performers, was walking rapidly from the scene. She turned onto Lord British Lane and then turned right where

Avatar Avenue continued. She was heading toward East-End Avenue and to a house that was just a block from him. Ah! His quarry!

Without finishing, Sullivan pulled his poison dagger out, shoved the knife into the back of Jeanette's neck, cut the rope and simply dumped her into the well. Adjusting his trousers and flipping the hood back over his head he followed like a cat after the mouse.

* * * * *

Shamino was just dozing off when the door slammed open and Amber, his girlfriend, burst into the bedchamber, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Shamino! Something terrible hath just happened tonight at the Blue Boar!”

Shamino sat bolt upright in the bed as Amber clambered into his arms, mouse costume and all.

“What, in the name of Lord British, is going on?” asked Shamino.

Between shuddering gasps for air, Amber told him of the incident in all its gory detail. How Candice, the Royal Museum curator, stabbed a fork into her Silverleaf meal and, distracted by conversation, did not realize that she was trying to stuff a rather large penis into her mouth. How the people at the table next to hers were attacking a communal bowl of pudding and found a head staring at them from the bottom of it. How two small children started eating their bowls of stew when one of their parents saw them gnawing on human fingers and toes. The chaos that abruptly followed. The death of one of the children from being trampled underfoot by throngs of panicked customers. Insanity!

Shamino was getting more and more nauseated as Amber related the events that had transpired and this became intermixed with a growing anger. Who could have done this? What psychotic maniac could have done something so despicably twisted and sick?

There was a knock at the door. Amber started up in alarm. Shamino jumped out of his bed and grabbed his sword. He went cautiously to the door and asked who it was.

“It is the Avatar, Shamino, open the door.”

Shamino opened the door a bit and saw it was true. He flung it open and embraced the man who stood there. “Avatar! How glad I am to see thee! And thou art just in time! Something terrible hath just happened!”

“Here, too?” asked the Avatar.

“What dost thou mean?” frowned Shamino.

“I’ve only just arrived from Trinsic. A horrible murder took place there early this morning. I hath been following the killer’s trail and it hath led me to Britain. It doth appear I am on the right path!”

“Indeed,” said Shamino, a bit rattled. “But come in. ‘Tis not safe out here. The guards do not know thee and may mistake thee for a suspect. Quickly! Into the house!”

The Avatar stepped inside and Shamino closed and bolted the door. Amber nervously peeked into the room. “Who is this, Shamino?”

“This, my dear, is the Avatar,” said Shamino with a flourish.

“Oh! I didst not recognize thee! Shamino has told me much of thy adventures! I never thought I wouldst ever actually meet thee in the flesh.”

“What leads dost thou have on this fiend?” asked Shamino.

“Well, it is rather sensitive and I don’t really wish to say...” said the Avatar in a leading manner.

“I see,” said Shamino, comprehending. “My dear, couldst thou excuse us for just a moment, please?”

“Certainly, Shamino. But doth not be too long. ‘Tis lonely here in the bedroom and I am scared half to death.”

“I promise I shant be long, my dear.”

Amber closed the door to the bedroom. Shamino turned back and immediately drifted into a powdery blue, dreamless sleep.

When he awoke he was tied to a chair right next to the bed. And on the bed lay Amber, hands tied to the bedposts and the lower half of her mouse costume had been cut to accommodate access to her private regions. The Avatar naked and on top of her, probing those regions with his own. The bed was creaking rhythmically. Amber was just whimpering, taking it all very stoically, hoping that once the Avatar’s lust was satisfied he would just go away.

Shamino surged with rage. “By the Virtues, Avatar! What is this treachery!”

The Avatar ignored him and kept at Amber. He groped her whole body, feeling everything. He drew back and lifted her legs high, holding them together at the ankles. He inserted himself in that most unnatural place. Amber yelped with pain and humiliation. Shamino, shocked, stared open-mouthed at what the Avatar was doing to his woman.

The Avatar bucked more violently than ever before. Amber was screaming with pain. Shamino was purple with anger. Here he was, right next to a man he thought was his friend who was anally raping his girlfriend and, by the close-up look on his face, was enormously pleased with that fact.

“Damn you Avatar! I will have thine head!”

“Oh, you will?” breathed the Avatar. “Now that’s interesting,” he gasped.

He unsheathed his engorged weapon from out of Amber, stood up and shoved it into Shamino’s face.

“Have it then, Shammy!” smiled the Avatar.

“WHAT? Thou dost sicken me! Thou art the vilest criminal, Avatar!”

“Thou asked for mine head, Sham,” the Avatar said holding his poisoned blade above Amber between two fingers. If he let go it would fall and pierce her abdomen. “I suggest that thou dost take it! This blade is poisoned.”

“Thou cannot do this!”

“Oh, but I can and will if thou dost not comply. Thou dost see, it was I that put the dead man in the food at the Blue Boar.”

Shamino’s eyes went round in yet another profound shock. “By the power of the Virtues! By Lord British! Thou must not harm Amber!” Anger ebbed away into true fear as Shamino realized that he was dealing with a man who would be willing to go any length. Horror stacked upon horror.

“Then comply!” yelled the Avatar. He thrust himself again into Shamino’s face. The knife dangled dangerously between the Avatar’s fingers.

Slowly, against all and everything that Shamino was and stood for, he closed his eyes and parted his trembling lips. His mouth was suddenly filled. He choked and gagged. He opened his eyes briefly and found that it wasn’t the Avatar at all. He had thrust something else in his mouth. It was soft and smelled awful. He moved his mouth and tongue and felt it squish and turn to a sloppy mush in his mouth. It was a turd. He instantly began to vomit and didn’t stop for a very long time. The Avatar just laughed but soon left Shamino to his retching to reacquaint himself with Amber’s rectum.

Dazed and sickened, Shamino could only watch, mouth open and drooling, as the Avatar sodomized Amber and culminated in spoiling her face with his evil seed. Shamino wondered when this nightmare would be over, but the Avatar lingered. He watched and watched and mentally grew more detached as the Avatar raped her three more times.

As the grey light of dawn crept into the bedroom window, he watched again as the Avatar untied Amber from the bedpost. Thinking that this evil was coming to a close his heart sank as the Avatar positioned her weak and

listless form so that she was standing, bent over, arms tied around Shamino's neck. She stared into his vomit and feces-strewn face. He stared into hers.

At once, the Avatar was upon her again. She grimaced and closed her eyes. The force of the Avatar's attack pushed her repeatedly into Shamino. The Avatar sliced her back with the dagger. Paroxysms of death followed. Shamino screamed and then wept.

At last it was over. He was certain that the Avatar was going to kill him next, but he didn't. He untied Amber and dumped her on the floor like a sack of worthless garbage. Unperturbed, he left Shamino tied there, changed his clothes, and left the house.

Shamino tried everything he could to break free of his bonds but couldn't. He wept again. It was an hour later when the Avatar came back. He was clean-shaven, groomed, and immaculately dressed. He hummed to himself as he prepared a meal from viands purchased at the Farmers' Market.

He sat down on the edge of the bed in silence, eating his breakfast. He offered a morsel to Shamino, but Shamino merely looked at him. A sound escaped his lips. The Avatar leaned forward a bit. "Eh? What's that? Oh! Thou dost want to know why! Well, I suppose, since I'm going to kill thee anyway I could tell thee and let thee pass from this world with at least the satisfaction of knowing."

The Avatar chomped down the last of his breakfast, washed it down with some wine, and stood up. "But," he said, "I won't."

He turned around and went outside, coming back in shortly with a crate. He stuffed Amber's body in it and hammered the lid on. Then he dragged the thing outside and, with some difficulty, raised it up onto the back of his cart.

That done, he went back into the house, bolted the door, walked right up to Shamino and hit him such a blow that he blacked out instantly.

He never woke up again as the Avatar's blow was followed with a scratch of his knife.

‘The Beast’ docked, without incident, at Britain’s harbor and disgorged its two charges onto the mainland. It was near evening and Petre was walking quickly to get to their destination, Spark lagged behind moaning and holding his head.

Petre had found him, the night before, lolling about with a bunch of wenches at the Baths, completely inebriated and cross at Petre’s interruption of his rather clumsy, but apparently successful, attempt at fornication. Petre had looked into the bag of coins he had given the boy and found it quite empty.

After much cajoling and slaps on the face, Petre got Spark out of there and to his room where he went instantly to sleep. The next day and all through the teetering sea-journey to Britain, Spark discovered what a pirate must feel like most of the time. His dreams of marauding and pillaging were suddenly in doubt, and Petre made no attempt to disabuse him of this revelation. He had other, more important, uses for the boy.

They turned onto Avatar Avenue and were soon standing in front of the Blue Boar, Petre utterly astounded by what he saw. It was a sign stating simply that the Blue Boar was temporarily closed. Two guards stood on either side of the door barring any attempts at entry. For as long as anyone could remember the Blue Boar had never in its history ever closed its doors.

Petre addressed one of the guards, “What is this all about?”

“Go on about thy business! There ain’t nuttin’ to see here!”

Petre did not press the issue. “Come, Spark, let us be off.”

They continued walking down the street until they came to an intersection. Petre heard a whistle and turned around. There was Sullivan leaning against a wall. His hand was raised to his mouth in an exaggerated attempt to stifle a yawn. He was checking a pocketwatch. “Thou art on time, thank the Gods. I was hoping to quench mine parched throat with a stout ale at the pub yonder and instead found myself waiting on a street corner like a homeless mongrel. Now that thou art here we can go somewhere more civilized to fill our bellies.

“What hast happened here, Avatar?” said Petre, eyeing Sullivan suspiciously.

“I know not, Master Petre, but I hast completed mine duties in this fair city.”

“Avatar! Thou art the Avatar? The real Avatar?” said Spark, eyes going round.

“Why, yes, my boy,” said Sullivan with his charming smile, “and who art thou?”

“I am Spark,” said Spark.

“Well ‘tis certainly good to meet thee, Spark. Any friend of Petre is a friend of mine. I welcome thee to our august party. Thou wilt find much responsibility laid upon thy young shoulders quite often. But, I promise thee, thou wilt also experience the highest of adventure that can be found in the land.”

Spark liked the sound of that and was already taking a liking to this fellow when, peering through his hangover, he stepped back with a start. “Wait a moment! Thou dost look just like that fiend Petre and I laid waste in Trinsic!”

“Of course he does, lad,” said Petre smoothly. “This is the *real* Avatar. The other was an imposter. I wilt take you to him later. He is currently languishing in a dungeon being tortured. Rest assured, stripped of his magical disguise he no longer looks a bit like the Avatar.” Petre smiled as Spark nodded thoughtfully and grinned when Petre had mentioned torture.

“Well, then,” said Spark, “it is good to meet thee, Avatar.” He stuck out his hand and Sullivan shook it warmly, beaming like a politician.

“Spark,” said Petre, “go down to the Farmer’s Market and acquire some food. Meet us back at the docks in two hours. The Avatar and I have a few things we need to do and I’m certain we’ll all soon be famished.”

Petre gave Spark a bag of coins, admonished him against spending it all on alcohol, and sent him scampering off.

“A good lad, if a bit impetuous,” said Petre.

“Ah, youth,” sighed Sullivan with a faraway look in his eyes. “But, to business, Petre. I doubt you had me standing on this street corner all afternoon to attract prospective customers. Let us be off.”

Together they walked back to Shamino’s house. Sullivan looked about, unlocked the door and locked it behind them when they were inside. There was Shamino still tied to the chair. Always the consummate professional, Sullivan had taken to cleaning up the body and making it look presentable. A product to be sold.

“Excellent, Sullivan. And what about Senti?”

“Thou didst tell me only that thou didst want the *three* to be preserved. I disposed of Senti’s corpse expertly.”

“Good. I will have Battles and Leavell come by here and pick up this offal later and take it to Trinsic to be added to the collection. Give me the key.” Sullivan handed over the house key.

“I must say, Master Petre, but this disguise is *ingenious*. Shamino and Senti were taken in like children. Positively glad to see me they were. Veritable lickspittles.”

“I am certainly pleased to hear that the disguise is working, Sullivan, but thou art not out of the woods yet. There is one more major hurdle to overcome. If we are lucky then we will be able to eliminate the rest of the Avatar’s friends and go on with the plan without further uncertainty.”

Sullivan looked a bit downcast. “What hurdle dost thou speak of?”

“The one where thou must go see Lord British.”

“Oh. I see.” Sullivan glanced apprehensively in the direction of the castle.

“Thou shouldst not worry, Sullivan. I will go over the details now. Thou wilt be very well prepared for thy visit.”

“When dost thou want me to see him?”

“Tomorrow morning. I will go with thee to help reacquaint thee with thine ‘old friend’. Once thou art past the rocky part I hope to be able to slip away and have a look around.”

“All right, then, let’s get on with it. But this certainly would be better on mine nerves if I couldst have but a sip of Swashbuckler’s Spit. Dost thou know that these primitives have never even heard of it? Of all things!”

Petre swung his pack off his shoulder. “I just happen to have come prepared with Buccaneer’s Den’s finest.”

“Ah, clever fellow,” said Sullivan with relief.

And so Petre began his briefing.

Chapter 4: The Royal Bitch

At sunrise Petre and Sullivan were off to the castle. Spark had been sent off on an errand to the ship. Sullivan was chewing his lower lip. Petre was humming a little tune.

They were able to pass within the stronghold without trouble. Sullivan quietly commented on this, a little amazed, but Petre reminded him of the Britannian Herald. Everyone, by now, knew of his coming.

As they passed through the foyer Chuckles the Jester ambled up to them in his usual ridiculous fashion. Petre quickly whispered to Sullivan, “Always answer him in single syllable words.”

“Hi, Chuck!” said Sullivan, feigning cheerfulness.

Chuckles smiled and said, “Hi there! Wouldst thou like to play the Game?”

“Not now, Chuck. We must go see Lord B.”

“Ah, he dost wait for thee, eh?”

“Yes, Chuck. We must be quick and see him now!”

“I see. Come back some time soon and I shall give thee a clue!” He winked at Sullivan and shuffled off in an odd walk looking something like a multicolored monkey.

“What a droll little man,” said Sullivan a bit contemptuously. He had minimal use for such canned humor and no use at all for the pathetic sods that made a living at it.

“Indeed, but no matter. We have to focus and get this over with.” Petre pushed open the double doors in front of them and led Sullivan into a beautiful courtyard, verdant with trees and grass and a gushing fountain in the center. An old man wearing the robes of a mage was idly walking around bumping into things.

“Art thou sure he is not the Jester?” asked Sullivan.

“That’s Nystul. Ever since magic stopped working right he’s been quite loony.”

Nystul looked over at them and waved. Sullivan waved back, but Nystul was suddenly distracted by a crack in the wall and became engaged in a serious conversation with it, every once in a while gesturing at it and shaking his finger at the sky.

They walked right past him to another set of double doors, opened these, and passed into the throne room. It was a long hall with blue floor coverings fringed with gold, blue and gold wall hangings, decorated pillars and stained glass windows. It was all very regal and majestic. An array of guards on either side stood at attention. Sullivan found it all very impressive. He yawned.

At the end of the hall was a raised dais upon which rested the Ankh Throne. And on it sat Lord British himself; unsurpassed monarch of all Britannia.

As they approached, Lord British’s eyes twinkled and his mouth crinkled with a smile. He rose, stepped down from the throne and embraced Sullivan.

“For two hundred years I have awaited thee Avatar. For two hundred years I have missed thy presence in these halls and our fair land. My friend, we have much to discuss. But, first, I must know what brought thee here. As far as I am aware, Britannia has never been more at peace. Never have we been more prosperous. It seems a strange time indeed to see thee, so often art thou bound to arrive when some great evil stirs in the world.”

“My liege, I am uncertain as to my purpose here. A red moongate simply appeared and I was drawn into it. But upon my arrival in Trinsic I was thrown to the ground in a great tremor. Dost thou know of its origins?”

“Ah, indeed,” said Lord British. “The Isle of Fire has risen again. And by sorcerous intent. ‘Twas no accident. It is the isle upon which thou didst defeat Exodus. It is also the isle upon which I had constructed three great shrines honoring the principles of Truth, Love, and Courage. The

shrines can only be used by one who is called the Avatar. That, of course, would be thee. A talisman is required to receive what each shrine has to give and these talismans are guarded by tests that only the Avatar may pass. It makes me happy to know that these shrines are not lost, after all, and are available for thine use. I have a ship docked at the southern shore of Vesper called the 'Golden Ankh' if thou dost wish to go there. Here is the deed." Lord British handed Sullivan a parchment allowing him use of the ship.

"Thank you, m'lord," Sullivan bowed.

Lord British laughed. "Thou dost not need to be so formal, my friend. Thou shouldst not forget that we have similar origins and share much history. I know thou hast not seen me for a long time, but that's no reason to feel guilty and start all this bowing nonsense."

Sullivan smiled. "I shant forget m'lord. I will break myself of the habit immediately."

Lord British looked at Sullivan a bit oddly. "Strange..." he muttered.

"M'lord?" queried Sullivan.

"Nothing...nothing Avatar. Just a passing thing. My perception of magical spell castings is not as it once was, and this damned problem we're having with the ether has rendered mine abilities well nigh useless, but I couldst swear I saw thy visage change for an instant to that of someone else. But, no matter. I can barely cast food creation spells successfully these days. Please forgive the idle bantering of an old man."

"Not so old, m'lord," said Sullivan breathing a silent sigh of relief.

"Thou dost flatter me," Lord British said with a laugh. "Come, let us continue talking in the dining chamber. I'll have Boots fix us up something tasty. I see thou hast brought Petre with thee. How art thou, Petre?"

"Doing marvelous, m'lord," said Petre with a bow.

"And how is that amazing newspaper coming along?"

“Excellent, m’lord. My reporters in Trinsic had the luck of covering the Avatar’s story the very moment he arrived! Things are running smoothly. My couriers are delivering faithfully throughout the land. In keeping with that I decided to deliver the Avatar into your care with a personal escort of mine own.”

“Very good, Petre. Wouldst thou care to join us for a little breakfast?”

“Actually, if it pleases your majesty, I was hoping to take advantage of this moment and interview Geoffrey for an article about fighting techniques.”

“Of course, Petre, go right ahead.” Lord British waved his hand down the hall indicating Geoffrey’s general direction. Petre thanked him and, bowing politely exited the throne room.

Lord British began walking to a side door that led to the dining hall. “He’s a good man, that Petre. To think! A newspaper in Britannia! Ha! Clever, that Petre. Invented a printing press independently. No design information from my quarter. Just goes to show that times are changing, I dost suppose. I’ve read a couple issues. Seems to be harmless stuff. And the people seem to like it. I think everyone gets it now.” Lord British seated himself at the head of a long table. Sullivan sat down at his right.

“Ah, let me not forget this.” Lord British handed Sullivan a crystal. “I focused this on the entrance to the Castle of Fire. Thou mayest find it useful. Be aware that it might shatter as thou dost get nearer to the place it is tuned. Thou mayest find it useful, so take it. Now, to this matter of the red moongate. Thou didst say it simply appeared. I, for one, did not send it. Therefore there are other forces at work here. Didst thou bring thy Orb of the Moons with thee?”

Sullivan cleared his throat, “No, m’lord.”

“Very well, take mine. It may work for thee. I cannot seem to get it to work. The moongates are not working properly. One of my mages shattered as he didst try to enter a blue moongate with mine Orb of the Moons. Others have reported similar incidents. With these moongates

malfunctioning and magic behaving erratically or not at all, I cannot help but think the rising of the Isle of Fire may have something to do with this.”

“What couldst it be m’lord? Certainly not Exodus!”

“Yes, Exodus! The remains of that being, the Core, still reside in the Castle of Fire. I fear the worst on that subject. I suggest thou shouldst investigate as soon as possible, Avatar. The rising of that fell island mayest indeed be the reason for thy presence here.”

“M’lord, I shall take it upon me to do as thou dost suggest as if it were a command.”

Lord British looked pleased. “I thank thee Avatar.” He smiled. “It is good to have thee back once again. Before thou dost leave the castle, I shall take thee around so that thou canst see all the staff. I wish to reacquaint thee with them and the castle refurbishment. Much hath changed in the two hundred years of thine absence.”

Sullivan would have rolled his eyes if he did not have to look the part of the doting King’s Champion. This was going to take forever.

* * * * *

Petre meanwhile had been busy rummaging around in the library. Finding what he sought he sauntered around the halls looking at tapestries. At last, he peeked into the throne room. The entire royal guard was standing with their backs to him. Not leaving anything to luck, however, Petre opened a vial and drank its contents. He looked at his hand until he was quite invisible and then quickly walked over to Lord British’s bedchamber door, opened it, and stole inside. He made his way into a small, private room in back and found a lever that opened a secret panel. He glanced behind him and then entered. He was inside a secret passage that ringed the entire castle. Another lever stuck out of the floor in front of him. Flipping it, another panel opened revealing more of the passage.

There was a series of these of which he opened and closed behind him, making his way to the other side of the castle where there lay a lever that did not seem to open any panels at all. He then made his way to the stairs near the main gate that led up to the castle roof.

There he was met by a guard who did not challenge him. Nor would he as Petre had quaffed another black potion of invisibility before going up. He had brought quite a few since they did not last very long.

He crossed the open roof to a tower in the northwest corner and unlocked it with the key he'd found in the library. It was a storage room. A large keg with a tap sat in the corner. Sacks, barrels and crates lay strewn about. Petre opened them until he found a bag full of reagents. Then he found a book lying on the floor that he snatched up. Inside one of the crates was a pair of magic boots. He took these and donned them, appreciating their lightness and knowing full well they were an excellent item to complement a full set of magic armor.

He drank another potion, closed and locked the door, and made his way fast to the tower on the northeast corner. The panel in the wall was already open, Petre having flipped the switch below in the secret passage.

In this tower Petre disregarded the armor that was stored in here and took from the shelf what he really wanted. It was a musket and a bag of fifty rounds of ammunition. There were only two of these weapons in all of Britannia. Lord British had brought them from another land long ago. And now it was going to mysteriously turn up missing. Not that anyone was going to check on it anytime soon. The dust that lay on it was thick. Petre crooned for a while, stroking the smooth steel bore and wooden stock. A very handy thing to have in a nation without firearms. Sure, they had cannons, but nothing portable and easily concealed like this. Petre chuckled, drank another potion, and was safely back in the secret passage making his way back to Lord British's bedchamber. He made sure the coast was clear, drank another potion, and got the hell out. When he was safely in a hallway out of the throne room, he quickly shoved the musket into an empty quiver he'd brought and made haste to the courtyard to await Sullivan.

About an hour or two later, Sullivan burst out of the eastern door into the courtyard looking quite cross. He saw Petre and turned south to leave the castle. Petre hurriedly followed after him, alarmed.

When Sullivan pushed the doors open into the foyer, Chuckles skipped over to him, smiling widely.

“Hi! Dost thou want to play the Game?”

Sullivan reached out and grabbed Chuckles by the throat and slammed him up against a wall! He reached into his boot and pulled out the poisoned knife, holding it near the region of the Jester’s genitalia.

“Now hear me, Chuck!” snarled Sullivan, “I am quite cross! Thou shouldst just give me thy clue lest I hack off thine nuts and shove them down thine throat! See? I can make threats on thy life and play the Game at the same time! Quite skilled dost thou not think?”

Chuckles merely nodded with round dinner plates for eyes, trembling with fear. He handed Sullivan a scroll, and when Sullivan let go of him, he ran into his room and slammed shut the door, cracked it open to peek out and then slammed it shut again. There was the sound of the sliding of bolts and then silence.

Petre, shocked by this display of very unavatarlike behavior, grabbed Sullivan’s arm and said in a low voice, “I don’t know what that was all about but we had best leave. NOW!”

Petre, still clinging to Sullivan’s arm, actually found himself trying to keep up with the avatar imposter, such was Sullivan’s own desire to leave. When they were away from the castle and no one was nearby, Petre spoke a little louder. “What in Hells is thy problem?”

“What a nagging bitch that L.B. is,” said Sullivan irritably. “Do this Avatar! Do that! Why, I dost have a list a mile long of all the tedious drivel he wants me to undertake! No wonder he dost not know what is going on in the land! He doth never leave the castle! I dost not think he hath even been outside for two hundred years! Pasty! Is he a – oh, what didst thou call it – a ‘computer geek’, too?”

“What dost he want thee to do?” asked Petre calmly.

“I have to go to this Isle of Fire place and investigate some Dark Core with Exodus’s name on it. I must needs visit some drooling, kooky, old mage in Cove to find out about some material called ‘blackrock’ that supposedly is impervious to the effects of the etheric disturbance. While I’m there I have to give Lord Heather this bill to sign banning the dumping of

waste into Lock Lake. Then I'm supposed to go out and 'break bread with the people' and discover what it is that ails them. For all his lack of observation he still seems to get the sense that the people are restless and dissatisfied. Well, any idiot would know that! There has been no war for ages! Nothing interesting going on! He gave me a whole tour of the castle! I had to speak with every dribbling sot that we bumped into. I even had to babble at a stupid rat that had a silly ribbon tied around its neck! And to top it off I nearly soiled my trousers when a flash of sense reached his idiot brain and he made some comment about seeming to see another face on my head than the one that he was supposed to see! Art thou trying to give me a heart attack? I didst not sign on for this job to be executed! Especially by a bungling, senile old fool. After all the mumbling introductions I was forced to listen to him get all dreamy-eyed, reminiscing about this-thing-and-that-thing-and-wasn't-that-a-hoot sort of rotten tripe! I wanted nothing more than to divest myself of my breakfast on the hem of his robe!"

Sullivan stopped and stood there for a moment to catch his breath.

"I suggest thou dost calm down, Sullivan," said Petre. "Thou shouldst be relieved to note that thou wilt not have to appear before L.B. again for some time. And if everything goes well, thou wilt not ever have to see him again."

"Good," said Sullivan haughtily.

"Now, I know about the Isle of Fire and the blackrock. We can skip the 'breaking bread with the people' crap. What is this matter of the bill?"

Sullivan shoved the parchment at him. It was, indeed, a bill forbidding the further pollution of Lock Lake. Petre thought quickly. The primary polluter of the lake was the Britannian Mining Company. The BMC was under the control of the Fellowship. They were the ones secretly mining the blackrock. Petre knew that the blackrock project was a very important one to the Fellowship. If this bill hampered the BMC to execute its operations efficiently and inexpensively, then it would further hamper the Fellowship and make Petre's own plans much more difficult. Therefore, this bill could not go to Cove as it was. It had to be modified.

"Let us go back to the ship," said Petre. "I assure thee, Sullivan, I have this whole situation well in hand. I do apologize, but in order for the

grand scheme to come to fruition, 'tis going to require thee to be an errand boy for a while. I suggest that thou dost take on a more Avatarish demeanor. That doth not include grabbing people by their windpipes and threatening genitalia with sudden separation from their owners.”

“Fine,” said Sullivan, frowning, “just so long as I never have to go near that mongrel puppet-king ever again.”

Sullivan stalked off toward the docks. Petre, shaking his head, followed.

Chapter 5: A Child's Education

Sullivan waited while Petre opened a chest full of tools. He removed a small box containing inkpots, quills, wax, parchment of various types, and different kinds of seals. He sat down at a desk in his cabin on *The Beast* and quickly began to draft a new bill, this one stating guidelines of compliance within a ten-year period and subject to inspection once a year by a representative of the Grand Council. Cleanup procedures of the first year entailed only the organization and selection of a crew, the working out of their pay and the setting up of financial guidelines by Cove to be sent back to Britain at the end of the first year for approval. The second year was worded in such a way where nothing much would actually be done. The rest was much the same. Petre signed the names of Miranda, the Council member primarily responsible, Inwisloklem, serving as an advisor to the bill, and left the last line for Lord Heather, whom Petre was certain would readily agree to it as it required him to do next to nothing for five years, at least. Of course, Petre planned on nothing being done about it at all as his own plans would be nearly complete before the first year was up.

Next, Petre drew up a return letter “from” Lord Heather “to” Miranda. In it, Lord Heather stated how delighted he was to sign such an important and much needed bill. But, before returning the signed bill to Miranda immediately he wanted to design an appropriate plan and send it back with the bill for the Grand Council to approve, thus staving off the Grand Council for a time on this matter.

Petre signed Lord Heather's name to the document, then applied wax and stamped royal seals on both the forgeries. To Sullivan he said, “We will go to Cove. I want thee to deliver this bill to Lord Heather. Thou wilt then take this letter back to Miranda. I will speak with Rudyom the mage in Cove. Then I have business in Vesper. Stay behind in Cove and eliminate Jaana, one of the Avatar's friends. Dispose of her. She will not be saved. While I am in Vesper, I want thee to go to the Fellowship Headquarters in Britain and talk to Batlin like we'd planned. He will most likely send you off to Minoc first. Take these tools. If he gives thee anything sealed, open it and then reseal it. I trust thy talents are wide-ranging and thou canst handle this. Thou wilt then return to Britain and speak with Batlin again. While thou art in Minoc, however, I want thee to eliminate another of the Avatar's

cronies. Her name is Julia. I do not require her corpse, so thou mayest dispose of the body at will.”

“And when I go to speak again with Batlin?” asked Sullivan, inwardly slaving at his prospects in Cove and Minoc.

“Simply follow whatever directions he has for thee and do whatever thou must to become a Fellowship member.”

“Aye, aye, captain. Anything else?”

“Yes. I want thee to take Spark along. Show him the ropes of adventuring.” Petre smiled. “Break him of his virtuous habits in thine own clever way. He is young enough to assimilate the Triad of Inner Strength readily. And we both know what that really means.”

“Indeed, Master Petre, I am duty-bound to comply with these tasks thou hast set before me.” He smirked. “Worthiness precedes reward.”

“Spark,” called Petre, “’Tis time to go.”

They left the ship and met two waiting carts, one driven by Battles and the other by Leavell. “To Cove, gentlemen,” said Petre.

* * * * *

Their stay in Cove was brief. Lord Heather, having heard of the Avatar’s arrival in Britannia, had spruced things up a bit throughout the town. Unfortunately, the wind was blowing in the wrong direction and the stench of Lock Lake wafted through the streets. An embarrassed Lord Heather eagerly took up the bill and signed it with great swirls and swooshes.

Petre went to go see Rudyom and got his notebook, a wand that blew up blackrock, and some blackrock samples. He bought up his entire catalog of spells, bid him good day, and left for Vesper with Leavell, informing Spark that he would be staying close by the Avatar to learn the ropes of adventuring. Spark practically split his head in half with grinning and ran off to go pester Sullivan.

Sullivan, meanwhile, had already cased Cove thoroughly, astounded by the number of beautiful women that seemed to congregate in this little nook nestled in the mountains. More remarkable was its resistance to the inclusion of a Fellowship Hall. But, that would change soon, thought Sullivan. And he smiled when he saw that they had not been able to stop a branch of the Britannian Herald from moving in. Indeed, the Fellowship would be just a step behind after Petre was finished propagandizing these people. Even now the press was tirelessly chugging away.

He had gotten a room at the Out'n'Inn and met a wonderfully perky young woman there named Pamela who seemed to be genuinely intrigued by the suggestion that she was welcome in his bedchamber any time.

He had gotten some lunch at The Emerald and met a nice woman named Zinaida who he could not help but flirt with. His suggestion of a midnight bedchamber rendezvous was met with equal success. This Avatar thing was really working out quite well.

From the bard he heard the tale of Nastassia, and so, naturally, went out to the Shrine to investigate. His heart skipped a beat. Nothing so beautiful had he ever seen before in his life. A strange and unnatural feeling came over him.

He spoke with her at length and she revealed to him her story, tending the shrine, awaiting her fate, hoping that her mother would be able to rest in peace, and hoping for some news of her father who had died in the Great Forest by a wild beast. Sullivan mentioned that he was traveling to the forest of Yew and that he would be happy to report back any news about her father that he acquired there. Nastassia was ecstatic with glee and kissed him. Sullivan kissed her again. She expressed how well he kissed and asked him to do it again. Of course, Sullivan obliged and she began to moan. He told her to meet him in his bedchamber that very night and she said she would think on it. She asked him who he was. Revealing that he was the Avatar made her eyes nearly pop out. He knew then that she would be in his bed for sure.

After that Sullivan strolled over to the healer's facility and knocked on the door. Jaana dropped her jaw and ran into his arms, kissing him all over and saying how much she had missed him. He told her that he had some emergency business in the mountains but would be back at his room

around midnight and that she should join him there and they could talk the night away. She smiled and said she couldn't wait.

Sullivan was dawdling near the well in the center of town when Spark ran up to him, out of breath, gasping out chunks of sentence that meant he was reporting for duty. Anything the Avatar wanted Spark would get it for him. He was ready to "learn the ropes of adventuring."

Sullivan said that he was at Spark's service and, since it was almost dinnertime, said he would buy supper for him at The Emerald. When they arrived Sullivan winked at Zinaida and sat down at a table with Spark and they proceeded to engage in a very lively conversation wherein Sullivan caught wind of Spark's little escapade in Buccaneer's Den. The boy was already on the path. It would be a simple matter to complete the work he was already doing most of himself.

"I perceive that thou wert amazingly adroit with those wenches at the Baths and showed great cunning managing that pirate at the bar."

"Really? I mean – yes, of course. A mere nothing. Dolts, all of them!"

"But that is not quite enough, Spark. It is the purpose of the Avatar to rout evil from the land. Part of an Avatar's duties is the execution of evildoers and dissidents, no matter how benign they may appear to be. Evil lurks in the dark hearts of people in many forms, hiding out and deceiving the unwary, waiting for the moment to pounce, revealing their truly evil intentions on the victim at the last moment when it is too late for escape to safety."

"Execution. Thou dost mean murder? Is that virtuous?"

"Virtue, shmirtue," said Sullivan with a wave of his hand. "Times are changing, boy. I, the Avatar, began the system of virtues. I can take them away if I no longer deem them of value. There is a new and better way. 'Tis called the Triad of Inner Strength. And 'tis this way that we must spread throughout the land. 'Tis for the betterment of the people that they give up these outmoded notions of virtues. They were good for their time, but no more. You, boy, are standing at the threshold of a new era. The era of the Fellowship."

“What is the Triad of Inner Strength?”

At this point Sullivan went on the usual Fellowship spiel promoting the three main Fellowship tenets, providing copious examples of people who had reformed their lives, making them healthier and happier. Of course, all of the examples were pirates and their methods of achieving sanguine cognition were extraordinarily bloody, but he had Spark’s rapt attention.

“Now, thou dost have a unique opportunity here, Spark.”

Spark’s eyes lit up. Now he was really attentive!

“There is not merely one, not two, not three, but four enemies of Britannia lurking about in this den of evil,” said Sullivan dramatically, gesturing around him at Cove.

“Are they more of those confounded traitors that call themselves your friends?” Petre’s propaganda he’d been feeding Spark for the past few years had taken firm root.

“One of them is. The other three are her lackeys. Their usual mode of operation is to go out and seduce the husbands of women and have sex with them in ways that cause the men to crave their attentions more and more until they are addicted. Then they trick the wives into coming to their homes at inopportune moments in order to catch their husbands performing the most unspeakable but pleasurable sexual acts you’ve ever heard of. After ruining the homes of these families they set about fomenting the children to violence and tricking them into killing their parents and robbing the houses of valuables and bringing the loot to them. Utterly disgusting. When not busy doing these things they wile away their time with other hideous acts of violence. Why just yesterday they accosted an elderly man on a lonely road walking with his toddler grandson. They cut the child’s throat and then proceeded to beat the man to death with the corpse. Hideous. Simply unjust.”

“So, how dost thou propose to get them?” asked Spark, titillated in spite of himself.

“Well, I have lured them into a trap where they will all be in the same place at the same time tonight. They will be justly tortured and executed.”

“Tortured?”

“Yes, Spark. One must always mete out justice in the manner of that old saying, ‘an eye for an eye’. ‘Tis only proper. The evildoers must be completely degraded before a proper execution can be accomplished.”

“Wow,” said Spark, stunned. “I didst not know these things.” He slammed his fist on the table, startling a few nearby customers. “How can I help?”

Sullivan smiled and sipped at a dark, red wine with an alluring bouquet. “To the corruption of youth,” he said to himself.

* * * * *

“When shall we wake them up?” whispered Spark.

“No need to whisper, my boy. All the rooms of this inn hast been rented. There art no one near to listen. They will wake up of their own accord. Until then thou shouldst remove their clothes.”

Spark dropped his jaw. “Thou dost mean it?”

“Of course, boy. Thou art the one who art learning. Not I. ‘Tis thee that requires the hands-on experience.”

They were in a room at the Out’n’Inn. It was lavishly draped with gold and blue wall hangings and golden lamps on golden stands stood in the four corners of the room. The bed was covered with silk sheets and a blue, down-filled comforter. A small table and chair were situated near the south wall and two chairs sat facing the bed on the west wall. Sullivan, thinking ahead, had made sure to leave Battles playing drinking games with De Maria the bard.

In the two chairs facing the bed sat Nastassia and Jaana. They had been tied up and gagged. On the bed lay Pamela and Zinaida, also bound and gagged. They were all fast asleep. One by one, each had come to the

door, knocking softly. And one by one each had been rendered unconscious with the blue powder and caught as they fell. Spark thought it all hilariously amusing.

And now, pulse racing, he was being handed the opportunity of a lifetime. Never had he been in the presence of so much female flesh in such a sober state. He carefully untied each woman, stripped her naked, and retied her bonds with shaking, excited hands. As a neophyte “pirate” he was very proud of his rigging prowess.

“Very good, Spark. Here, have a sip of this.” Sullivan handed Spark a bottle.

“What is it?”

“Good old-fashioned pirate rum,” smiled Sullivan.

Spark laughed and took a swig. “Hey! That tastes good!”

“Thou dost like it? Have the rest. I already finished my bottle,” Sullivan lied.

Spark guzzled some more. “So, what dost we do now?”

“We wait a bit longer ‘til they start waking up.”

“And then what?”

“Didst thou bring the items I asked for?”

“Right here,” said Spark, holding up a bag.

“Good. Now remove thy clothes.”

“Me?” said Spark uncertainly?

“Why, of course, Spark. How else art thou supposed to degrade these evil witches if thou art fully clothed? Thou dost know what I mean by degrade, right?”

“I’m not sure.”

“I wilt show thee. In the meantime, finish thy beverage. Thou shouldst never waste good rum.”

Spark kept drinking until he was visibly tipsy and rosy-cheeked. Pamela began to stir.

“Now, Spark. Thy education begins.”

He walked over to Pamela, and ripped off her gag. “Wake up, you whore!”

Pamela’s eyes snapped open and she looked about in alarm. She saw the other women asleep in the room, tied and gagged. She started to scream. Then she saw Spark. “Please help me little boy,” she pleaded.

“Don’t listen to her, lad. She’s a witch. She’s trying to tempt thee to kindness so that she can spring her trap on thee and suck thy soul from thy flesh. She is a whore and shall be treated like one.”

At once, the Avatar removed his clothing and thrust himself upon her with such violence that she screamed again. He rode her like a wild horse for some time and then stopped. He looked toward Spark. “That is how one must begin these things, boy. Quick! The other one lying here is awaking! Do as I am doing!”

Spark wasn’t sure about all of this, but obeyed. He was now quite drunk and stumbled a few times getting out of his trousers. He walked timidly over to the waking Zinaida. Her breasts were heaving and her olive-skinned legs moved lasciviously about. As Spark approached he suddenly noticed his member had sprung into a position that had only recently become familiar to him with the pirate wenches on Buccaneer’s Den. He covered it with a hand and blushed hotly.

“No need to be embarrassed, boy. ‘Tis quite natural. And for us ‘tis a weapon for battling evil. Now do as I do. Spread wide her legs and thrust thyself here.” Sullivan demonstrated with the dexterous skill of long practice.

Spark, still uncertain, slowly advanced upon Zinaida, who was now wide-awake and staring at Spark with a bewildered expression on her face. She was still gagged and so could say nothing intelligible. When he inserted himself where he had been told he felt a wave of unparalleled, exquisite pleasure. He moved in and out of her, slowly at first, and then with a will. He pawed at her breasts and licked her nipples with his tongue. The pirate wenches had only used their hands. This was another world entirely!

“Now slap the witch across the face, boy!” And the Avatar slapped Pamela a harsh blow with the back of his hand. She whimpered and stopped struggling so much.

Spark followed along and struck Zinaida. A mere tap. “Harder Spark. This vile enchantress deserves no mercy from thee. She hast killed hundreds, perhaps thousands. She hast ruined as many lives. And she dost gloat over the dead as she dost collect their skulls for her monument to herself! She is a witch! And she must pay for the suffering of innocents!”

Spark digested this and struck Zinaida as hard a blow as he could muster. Zinaida cringed back and winced. She mumbled something beneath her gag and glared hard at Sullivan.

“Turn her over, boy, and prop up her rump like so. Now examine the region I am pointing at here. Above this place is another. This must be assaulted. Their evil resides here and it must be destroyed. Do as I do.”

Sullivan reached into the sack Spark had brought and got out a jar of salve. He rubbed some of it on the spot he had indicated and then some on himself. He then promptly slithered his way into the evil place and, grunting and sweating gave it his utmost attention and effort, doing battle there like Spark had never seen. It looked like very hard work. But, he followed suit, Zinaida shaking her head, eyes angry and afraid, tears streaming.

Spark had several false starts, some of which were interrupted by Pamela’s pained screaming. But, at last, he managed it and never had he felt more pleasure in his whole life. This new place fit him like a glove. He never thought fighting evil could feel so wonderful. He began thrusting into Zinaida with vigor.

He heard a groan but paid no heed. His eyes were closed, lost in a world of pleasures undreamed-of. Finally, his activities brought about a climax that sent his head spinning as he spent himself inside her. Exhausted, he slid out, panting. He glanced over at the sound of gurgling and saw, to his horror, Pamela spasmodically jerking all over the bed and then lying still in a crumpled heap. Sullivan was on top of her. And there was blood all over the sheets. He looked over at Spark.

“That is the final part thou must master in the execution, boy.” He pushed Pamela off the bed. She fell to the floor with a sloppy thump. Sullivan walked over to the chairs against the wall where Nastassia and Jaana, now wide awake, were staring in horror at the sights they had just witnessed. They fell to screaming, muffled by their gags, and thrashed about trying to get away.

Sullivan grabbed Jaana, hit her hard across the jaw, stunning her, and untied her from the chair. He hurled her at the bed where she landed, bouncing up and down momentarily from its natural elasticity and was about to try to get up and make for the door when Sullivan hit her again and forced her on her back. He tied her hands to a post at the head of the bed he had installed for that purpose.

“Now see, lad, one can raise the legs up like so to gain access to the evil spot that I showed thee.” Sullivan did this and, his member remarkably ready for war once again, jammed himself into the fray without the use of the salve. Jaana grimaced and moaned with agony.

“Go to it, boy! Thou must be engaged in this action before thou canst properly perform the execution.”

Spark looked down at himself. “It doesn’t seem ready yet,” he said.

Sullivan withdrew. “Thou must fondle and toy with it until it dost rise again,” he said, demonstrating. Enough practice at this and thou shalt be able to raise thy blade at will!” He got back into Jaana and resumed his fight for goodness and justice.

Spark followed his advice and discovered that he was, indeed, wielding a freshly sharpened sword. He dived into Zinaida with renewed strength and watched the Avatar as he slipped a blade across Jaana’s skin.

In moments she was convulsing like Pamela had done. The Avatar gasped, pulled out, stood on the bed over her and released himself on her prone and motionless form.

Spark was enjoying himself far too much to be as horrified as he had been the first time. He alerted the Avatar that he was about to experience a release of his own. The Avatar quickly handed him the knife and told him to do what he had just done.

Spark stroked the tip of the blade down Zinaida's back. The Avatar took it from his hand. And then, Zinaida bucked and heaved beneath him. Her muscles clenched and gripped Spark's little soldier with such ferocity that he was lost in throes of pleasure greater than before. He yelled out and disgorged himself in her as she shuddered one last time. He was dazed for several minutes. This was absolutely amazing!

"And that is thy introduction to the work of an Avatar and his assistants," said Sullivan, breathing heavy and wet with perspiration. He wiped his brow.

"But, there's still one left," said Spark, looking over at Nastassia, who sat there, terrified.

Sullivan looked at her. He had planned on having her all to himself. The things he would do to her for making him feel what he had felt, even if only for an instant. But, he thought better of it. No need to give her that much importance and significance. Besides, one must not be miserly with a child's education.

"Go ahead, Spark, she's all yours."

Spark got her on the bed and was quickly doing what he had been taught, but he found himself getting creative and experimental. Sullivan smiled, most pleased. The lad was off and running. A quick study. He was checking out various positions and even made her use her mouth on him, threatening her with the knife. Knowing it was poisoned, the boy laid the knife aside and went to his pack. He pulled out a whip.

After tying Nastassia, standing, to the post by the bed, he proceeded to whip her until her whole back was a flayed, bloody mess. When she fell

unconscious he went out and got some water, came back in and doused her with it. Revived, she croaked at him to stop. She was able to speak as she had bitten through her gag. Spark told her he would never stop. She was going to die and die horribly. She was a hideous witch! An enemy of the people of Britannia! She deserved worse than death!

Spark began getting very riled and very upset. He spat awful curses at her, berated her for her obscene wrongdoings. Nastassia merely leaned against the post, crying, saying she did not know what she had done wrong to upset this boy so much. She did not know why these other women had been punished. She did not even know Spark. Confused, in pain, and afraid, she begged once more for clemency and fell silent.

But, true to his newfound ways, Spark would hear none of the witch's vile trickery. He untied her from the post, dragged her to the table, causing her to lean over it, and attacked the evil passage with a rage that even made Sullivan look twice. Spark was yelling and screaming obscenities, "Slut! Whore!" His face was red and puffed from screaming, rage, alcohol, and exertion. Each word released a stream of spittle that tangled in Nastassia's violently waving hair, which was now a wet and matted mess.

Spark stepped back, pulled her from the table and pushed her onto her back to the floor. The cuts made by the whip seared straight through her and she screamed. Spark stroked his member, got down on his knees and shoved it into her mouth. She gagged and began to throw up.

Finally, Spark took up the knife, got inside her again, and at the appropriate moment, stabbed her twice. Once in each eye. There was no thrashing or convulsions. The knife blade had twice gone into her brain. But Spark was not finished. He went on and on, ravishing her corpse until he could stand it no more and, stabbing her repeatedly, climaxed.

Spark got off of her with a snarl and stood up, covered with blood and sweat. His eyes and hair were wild. He grinned at Sullivan.

"So, Avatar, dost I pass?"

Sullivan, one eyebrow upraised, cleared his throat. "Why, yes...Spark. I do believe thou dost pass. With honors."

Spark threw the knife into Nastassia's corpse. "I'm going to sneak over to the well again and get more water."

He left. Spark had exceeded Sullivan's expectations by a thousand miles. He had not thought the boy would take to Sullivan's ways so quickly. What interesting rationales the lad must cook up in his brain to deal with the criminal acts he has just committed, thought Sullivan. But, he did not muse long on the subject. There was work to do.

Spark came back with the water, cleaned himself up, and dressed.

"What dost we do now, Avatar? Are we going to clean this mess up?"

"In a manner of speaking," said Sullivan.

"How dost thou go about it?"

Sullivan held up two unlit torches. "We set fire to the place. No other way to ensure total destruction of evil."

Spark got very excited. "Can I do it?"

"Certainly, Spark. 'Tis, after all, thy education. I will let thee start." He handed Spark one of the torches. The Avatar struck a match and lit both. Spark immediately began setting fire to the bed, strewn clothes, and drapery.

"I will finish this," said Sullivan. "Go now to the well and cut the rope that draws up the bucket. Spark giggled, comprehending the reason, and ran off. Sullivan finished lighting various other rooms and then abandoned it altogether, locking the door behind him and tossing the key far away. Soon smoke was rising up into the star-filled sky as the flames licked up the sides of the walls and consumed the roof. Spark returned and they both sat some distance away to watch the Out'n'Inn be nothing more than a gutted husk by morning. No one came. Anyone that could care was too far away to notice.

In the early grey of morning, the two headed toward The Emerald, shook Battles awake, who sat snoring at a dining table next to the equally snoozing form of De Maria.

“Where to, matey?”

“To Britain, Battles. And fast. We have urgent state business that must be attended to at once.”

“Right,” mumbled Battles, half-awake. “We gots to urgently state our business that we tended to once.” He flopped on a dusty driver’s cap and stumbled out the door.

Chapter 6: Piss-Warm Fellowship

Sullivan, successfully avoiding Lord British, made his way through the castle and delivered Lord Heather's "letter" to her. She was overjoyed at the response, it being far more than she expected and gleefully told Inwisloklem, one of the gargoyle representatives at the castle who had been helping her draft the bill, the wonderful news. Sullivan hid his grimace of distaste on shaking the gargoyle's hand and carefully wiped his own "clean" after touching the horrible leathery skin when he was out of sight.

They next went off to the Fellowship Headquarters and met Batlin. Oh, what an odious pig *he* was! If only he knew who stood before him. Not the Avatar at all, but one whom knew all about Batlin's pact with the entity known only as the Guardian. The entity that, with Batlin's help, was planning on taking over Britannia and entering through a special "gate" made of blackrock.

After a bunch of tedious and stupid questions, Batlin sent Sullivan off yawning with a package to be delivered to Elynor in Minoc. Dutiful professional that he was, he opened it immediately, copied the contents onto a blank parchment, and sealed it again so that it looked untouched. Old hat for him. He could do such things in his sleep.

He woke Battles up from his stupor and told him to get going to Minoc post haste where, upon their arrival, they were greeted by a throng of people complaining about another little murder at the mill. All of the murders that had been committed had been delivered in the Herald in gory detail, including Sullivan's little escapades. And now, the peace and serenity of Minoc had been shattered as well. Oh, woe. Sullivan yawned again and asked about the details as if he had been greatly inconvenienced. Somewhat puzzled by the Avatar's attitude the people told him.

He yawned again. Two gypsies. Big deal. Who cared about disreputable non-citizens. Useless rabble anyway.

But, tiredly, he strolled languidly to the mill and peeked inside. Yes, yes. Same way as Christopher had been slaughtered. Yes, yes, he would look into it. Yes, yes, he was really the Avatar. And now they should all go away so that he could investigate the crime scene in peace.

After everyone had gone he left the premises, got back into the cart, and away they went, straight to the Fellowship hall. Elynor took the package, examined it carefully and asked if he had opened it. Of course he hadn't, and don't be silly. She thanked him for delivering it, gave him some gold coins and bade him go back to Britian and speak with Batlin.

On their return he realized he should stop by Margereta, the gypsy fortune-teller. He had read Chuck's annoying clue on the way to Cove. He told Battles to hang out at The Checquered Cork and get himself something to irrigate his parched palette. Then he and Spark went to visit Margereta.

Sullivan told Spark to distract her gypsy friends while he spoke to her. She was in league with another evil witch in the area who would be routed out later. Until then they were to deal with this one while they had the opportunity.

They stopped the cart some distance away. Spark ran up to two gypsy men who were hanging around and asked them to come see his horse for he thought it was sick. Sullivan, meanwhile, approached Margereta, and introduced himself as the Avatar. He asked his fortune be told. She told him it would cost him twenty gold. Sullivan handed it over without balking and then sat down at her table.

She peered into the crystal ball that sat there and began uttering words in a strange voice.

"I doth see a voman standing by a shrine. She is dead. 'Tis her ghost that haunts the place now. She is weeping and she doth look torn and bloody. Hmm...the crystal is cloudy vith mist. I see that thou must join the Fellowship, but...hmmmm, thou art already a Fellowship member." Margereta frowned.

"Hmmm...it is not vedy clear. Ah...a new evil threatens Britannia. Thou dost have something to do vith it." Margereta frowned harder.

"The Time Lord is in trouble. The Visps know something about where he is. The Monks at Empath Abbey may have information vegarding communicating vith the Visps. I doth see more. The Time Lord is bent to

the vill of evil. I doth see much death, much despair, much destruction. Thou art key to these things.”

Suddenly, Margareta gasped and looked up at the smiling Avatar. Her eyes closed to slits. “Thou art not the Avatar. Thou art Sullivan, the murderer and vapist. The defiler of corpses. The bringer of pain and suffering.”

“I was afraid thou wouldst say something unfortunate like that. Can’t have thee running amok mispronouncing thine R’s and W’s and assassinating mine character, can we?” He jammed his poisoned knife into her throat before she could call out. Looking around he saw Spark engaging the two gypsies, keeping their backs turned to him. Good lad! Sullivan threw Margareta over his shoulder, took her into the gypsy wagon, and went to work living up to his title.

It was not until he emerged from the wagon that he walked leisurely over to the cart. The gypsies turned to him and told him that the horse was fine. All it needed was a little food and water, which they would be happy to provide.

Suddenly Spark let out a yelp. The two gypsies turned quickly giving Sullivan enough time to stab them both in the ribs with his poisoned blade. They, too, were shucked into the wagon which Spark promptly ignited.

Hurriedly they departed the area and headed toward Julia’s house whereupon they seized her and engaged in coitus with her simultaneously, timing her death so that they could also climax simultaneously. They set fire to the house when they were done and, satisfied, rescued Battles from alcohol-induced brain death and went back to Britian.

Upon returning again to Batlin, Sullivan was forced to perform yet another service. He was to go to Dungeon Destard and retrieve a chest of Fellowship funds.

Journeying to the mouth of the cave, Sullivan smelled the stench of an obvious trap and did what any self-respecting adventurer would do: he sent Spark into the dungeon to investigate.

About an hour later, Spark ran out wild with fright. He babbled something about an empty chest and a cavern full of dragons. That was good enough for Sullivan. They returned to Britain and told Batlin the situation. Batlin did not seem very perturbed, waved it off as unfortunate, apologized for the dragons and told Sullivan to be back that night to receive his Fellowship medallion.

This they did and Sullivan walked out of the Headquarters a Fellowship member...again.

Of course, Petre's carefully coached newspaper staff printed the news all over Britannia proclaiming the Avatar had renounced the virtues in favor of the Fellowship's Triad. Readers who had stayed true to the virtues, abstaining from Fellowship membership were shocked and amazed. Many more flocked to Fellowship Halls throughout the land to join immediately or, at least, to see what all the hubbub was about.

But, the act had the desired effect overall, and over the ensuing months thousands of people would acquire membership, vastly outnumbering the few who would still stick by the virtues. The Fellowship had gained a stronger hold on the populace than it ever had before.

Chapter 7: The Plot Sickens

A heavy tome was slammed down on Petre's cabin table.

"Study this," said Petre.

Sullivan opened it up and riffled the pages. "It doth look like a primer for a course in Beginning Magic," said Sullivan off-handedly.

"It is. Thou art going to learn magic."

"What? Me? What, for heaven's sake, for? Thou dost want me to do book-learning? I'm sorry Petre, but I am a man of experience. 'Tested by time and reality' doth my motto be."

"Thou wilt be able to exercise far more power from a pool larger than thou dost currently encompass," said Petre. "Seeing through walls, poisoning people, causing storms, causing blades to shoot out into mobs of people and spin about, slicing them all to death, creating clouds of poison gas, causing people to sleep and awake at will, throwing bolts of fire and incinerating small children and puppies. I guarantee thee, Sullivan, 'tis right up thine alley."

As Petre spoke, Sullivan began to get very interested and raised both his eyebrows. "Ah, yes, I see that I am being both prejudiced and hasty. I doth see the wisdom in it."

Petre slammed down another heavy volume he had pulled from an oblong chest he kept under his bunk.. "This is a spellbook. I hath gone to all of the idiot mages and purchased all of their spells. That spellbook, from the first to the eighth circle, is complete."

Sullivan was eagerly flipping the pages. He was silently chuckling to himself. And then he stopped and frowned when he got to the eighth circle spells. "There dost appear to be a blank space where a spell should be, Master Petre," Sullivan said, turning the book around so Petre could see.

"Indeed. I couldst not find it. None of the lunatic mages seemed to know what I was talking about. I will research it and see what comes up.

‘Til then, no matter. Study, study, study! A word of caution, however. Start with the cantrips, work thy way into the first circle slowly, and do NOT go on to a higher circle ‘til thou hast mastered the prior. Dost thou understand? It could prove fatal to thee if thou dost do that!" ”

Without looking up, fascinated by this unprecedented turn of events, he mumbled his ever-servile obedience to the great Master Petre and practically waved him away, eyes glued to the text.

“I am going to be gone a long while. Thou must do a few things for me whilst I am away. SULLIVAN!”

Sullivan looked up. “Hm?”

“Pay attention! This is important. Thy future is at stake here.”

Sullivan closed the book with a loud “thuck” and stood before Petre, all attention.

After receiving his instructions he left the belly of ‘The Beast’, but hung about out of sight where he could see the ship and waited.

Quite a bit of time passed before he saw Petre leave the ship and climb into a cart driven by Leavell. With a snap of the reins they were off. Sullivan looked around. Most of the crew was in town. Robin was asleep in the Captain’s Quarters. Battles and Spark were raising hell at the recently reopened Blue Boar.

Sullivan crept back aboard the ship and made his way to Petre’s cabin. He deftly picked the lock and entered silently. He gave a cursory search in case there was anything else of interest he might want to snoop into. But there was merely the usual assortment of toiletries and odds and ends.

He slid the oblong chest out from underneath the bunk, picked the lock, and opened it. Books. Sullivan was disappointed. Nothing but books. Books, books, books, books. Oh well, he thought, it had been worth a try. He was about to close the chest when a glint of gold leafing kindled and flashed upon his avaricious pupil. Oh, might as well give it a riffle or two. Nothing to be lost. He picked it up and turned to the first page:

Ye Creation of Ye Olde Magicke Items of Flabbergastingly Great Power

Certainly interesting enough. Sullivan scanned the table of contents. Everything from Enchanted Arrows to Firedoom Staves, from Stone Golems to Glass Swords, from Magic Wands to Magic Gates and Teleporters. It was all here. The great wonders of Britannia could be *manufactured*!

Sullivan was goggle-eyed and slack of jaw. Absolute power was in his hands. He had to have this book! And then his eyes stopped at an entry entitled:

Magickal Rings

Sullivan flipped to the designated page and read all about magickal rings and their properties. It seemed that the ring he wore held a single “fixed charge”. What that meant was that the recorded three-dimensional image of a face and voice were permanently stored in the ring. Petre’s admonition to never remove it lest its properties be nulled was erroneous. The real reason was probably that Petre did not want to risk Sullivan suddenly not appearing as the Avatar at an inopportune moment. He could understand such logic, but was still slightly put off by Petre’s apparent mistrust.

Sullivan found a hand mirror, set it down on the desk and then, looking into the glass, removed the ring. And there he was! Good old Sullivan. He put the ring back on and was the Avatar again. “Ah, Petre,” he said to himself in the mirror, “thou hast been holding out on me.”

He smiled. This opened new vistas of opportunity. Having an easily changeable double identity was quite a handy thing to have. And this book gave full instructions for making more of them! This magic stuff was the very thing he was looking for. If only he had some means of copying this book. It was quite thick and full of diagrams and pictures. It would take forever! Petre said he would be gone for a long time, but didn’t say *how* long.

Sullivan, determined, simply took the book anyway, closed the chest, and pushed it back under the bunk. He would think of something. But now, onward to the tasks at hand.

His first quarry was not far. Just outside Britain was the chicken farmer Mack. Some kind of idiot loony who had been ranting some poppycock about `tigerlions' from the stars. Petre wanted him "taken care of". Why he wanted to waste time ventilating some ignorant peasant was beyond Sullivan. He decided to accept the job as a sort of treat.

When Sullivan arrived at Mack's farmhouse he poked around a bit, but no one was home. So, he decided to check the field across the road and quickly spotted the moron hacking away at his crop with a scythe. Sullivan waved and the clod came trundling over, scythe on his shoulder.

After the pleasantries had been dispensed with and Mack's eyes bugged out after being informed he was standing before the Avatar himself, Sullivan began to interrogate Mack about his `tigerlions' saying that he had been sent by L.B. himself to investigate this serious matter.

Mack, at once, let loose his tongue describing the crashing of the strange vehicle, the emergence of the horrifying beast within, its subsequent attack and its expiration upon his Hoe of Destruction. The words "Kill Wrath" meant absolutely nothing to Sullivan, who shrugged this whole event off as sensationalist fabrication by a poor peasant eager for renown. The Herald had been chock full of this tripe for long enough. It was time to put an end to it.

He asked to see this strange vessel and Mack took him to the far corner of the field. Of course, absolutely nothing was there. Mack cried out with astonishment and stuttered oaths to the truth of his statements, swearing on the grave of his dead mother and the long lineage of his chickens.

Sullivan was singularly unimpressed and made a great show of not stifling a yawn. Riffraff, he thought. But, to Mack, he said that the nobles believed his story and he wanted to interview Mack more in depth on the matter – in a place of privacy. Mack suggested his farmhouse and away they went.

Sullivan asked Mack if he could take a look at his prize chickens, being something of a chicken farmer himself. Mack was beside himself with enthusiasm and showed him around the chicken barn.

Sullivan slugged him and knocked him unconscious to the floor. He tied him up and waited till he was awake before he started taking his chickens and breaking their necks one by one. When Mack was finally in tears yelling at Sullivan to stop it, stop it, stop it, he grabbed a rake and snapped off the end of the handle.

Stripping Mack's trousers off, Sullivan jammed the handle into Mack's rectum until he had widened the gap considerably. He then grabbed baby chicks and started shoving them in. Mack was sickened with horror and in agonizing pain. "Why are you doing this?" was all he could say, until he even stopped saying that and just sobbed.

Sullivan took to stuffing chicken heads in but got bored. He finally stuffed baby chicks down Mack's throat until he suffocated and died. He didn't bother setting the house on fire. Who cared about stupid farmers? He untied Mack and positioned him so that it looked like it had been self-inflicted. The bastard was crazy anyway. Anyone looking in on this scene would believe Mack had, at last, come to the bad end he'd been working up to.

Sullivan dusted off his hands and left. The next target would be only slightly more difficult. An idiot knight was little better than an idiot farmer and this particular one was a drunk pile of dung to boot.

Battles and Spark were dragged away from the booze and wenches and they set sail for Jhelom. During the journey Sullivan did his duty and studied magic like mad. He seemed to be taking to it rather well. The cantrips were easy and the First Circle spells were a cinch. By the time anchor was dropped at Jhelom he was halfway through the Second Circle.

He kicked Spark and Battles into the bar there and stood looking at the dumb mark upending another goblet into his bottomless liver. What a waste of Knighthood! To bestow such a title on that alcohol-swilling, mangy ape!

“Dupre!” Sullivan called. Dupre cast a bleary-eyed glance in the wrong direction and, with a wobbling head, turned back to his drink.

Sullivan, exasperated, walked over to him and tapped him on the shoulder. Dupre turned and looked at him with a frown. “Well, well. If it ‘t isn’t thu Afatar! Ho, ho! Daphne! Thou comely pig! Fill ‘er up, eh?” He winked at Sullivan and was suddenly struck a blow by Daphne the big, ugly barmaid of the Bunk and Stool.

“Thou cretin! Thou hast not paid thine tab for two weeks! No more until thou hast shown that thou art bringing some coin of the realm to this establishment!”

She smacked him again, opened the door, and told him to get out.

Dupre stumbled out, mumbled “bitch”, and was hit several times by thrown glassware. Sullivan, winking at the other barmaid, who was quite pretty, followed the drunken sot that swayed outside, not knowing where he was bound.

“Dupre. I suggest that thou shouldst go this way,” said Sullivan, grabbing Dupre’s elbow and steering him toward a bridge linking two sections of island together.

“Go where? Get thine hanz uf me!” Dupre shrugged Sullivan away from him and stumbled to the ground, landing on his face. Blood streaming from his nose, he tried to get up, swayed on one bent knee, and fell over again.

Sullivan pulled Dupre to his feet and told him to get walking. He would have no more of this nonsense. He found the right nerve in Dupre’s arm.

“Ow! Thou ard uh knafe!”

Sullivan whispered into Dupre’s ear. “This knave will kill thee most horribly if thou dost not cooperate and walk over to yonder bridge.”

Dupre turned and looked at Sullivan. Sullivan twisted his arm, drilled into the nerve and forced Dupre to walk at a trot, grimacing with pain.

Sullivan was not in the mood for silly games with the Avatar's stupid monkey friends.

When they got to the bridge they walked under it and out of sight. Without ceremony or torture, Sullivan took the poisoned blade out and sliced Dupre's throat, nearly severing the head. Oh, was he mad!

He went back to the Bunk and Stool and told Battles to go rent a horse and cart and bring one of the special barrels from the ship. Sullivan never did enjoy the odor of formaldehyde and was quite glad to know that Dupre was the last body that would have to be so bathed and stored.

“Battles!”

“Aye!”

“Inform Robin that he shouldst ready ‘The Beast.’ I wilt be along shortly. Spark. Go and help him.”

As Spark and Battles headed for the ship, Sullivan turned around and looked at the Bunk and Stool. He sighed. Maybe, he thought, I just need a little something to make me feel better – less restless. He nodded to himself and went into the Bunk and Stool. Perhaps a little practice with the magic he'd learnt would do him some good.

Daphne, the rotund innkeeper, asked him what he wanted.

“I'll take that pretty little brunette sitting on yonder ass, doing nothing, and...” he paused, looked about, and saw a tawny, blonde, statuesque woman sitting at a table with two men. All three were dressed as fighters and were quite armed. “I'll take her too,” he said, pointing.

Daphne looked at Sullivan incredulously. She frowned and screwed up her face as if to shout obscenities at him and kick him out of the inn.

Sullivan wagged his pointed finger in her face and poked her in the eye. She yelped and clasped a hand to her head. The other eye had closed automatically. Sullivan pushed her into an empty room and locked the door behind him. Daphne, eyes watering, looked hard at Sullivan, face reddening with rage about to burst in a gale of shit and fire.

Sullivan punched her in her fat gut and knocked the wind out of her sails. He slapped her hard across the face and pushed her face down on the bed. Pulling some cord out of his pocket, along with a wad of fabric he always seemed to carry around for the purpose of gagging, Sullivan tied Daphne's wrists behind her back. He pulled up the drape that served as Daphne's dress, pulled down her super-stretchy underwear, and jammed himself roughly into her back door.

“Thou shouldst not worry, dear, just loosening things a bit.”

After a few minutes, Sullivan tidied himself, slipped out into the kitchen and came back with a tube. He prodded this into the place he had just been.

“Quite dark in there Daphne,” commented Sullivan matter-of-factly. “Thou shouldst have more light. I shall help thee!”

Sullivan stuck an unlight torch into Daphne's gaping hole, head first, and cast *Ignite*. The torch lit! Daphne writhed and screamed behind the gag. Her eyes lolled with pain. It quickly went out, however, and Daphne lay face down on the bed, feet on the floor, and a smoking fat ass high in the air.

Sullivan coughed from the stench and inserted four more torches, one by one, into the sizzling cavity. He cast *Great Ignite* and Daphne was bucking up and down on the bed, nearly breaking it. She groaned and tried to yell, but the gag held.

Impressed with himself, Sullivan cast *Fire Blast* and Daphne was roasted to a dripping ball of burning grease and bones. The bed caught and soon the whole room was ablaze.

Sullivan ran out and used *Telekinesis* to slam and bolt all the doors in the inn. Nobody could get out. The blonde jumped to her feet, sword drawn.

“Timmons! Vokes! We dost have a deranged wizard among us!”

The other two fighters, Timmons and Vokes, immediately whirled upon Sullivan and lunged to the attack.

Sullivan mumbled some words and two more *Fire Blasts* hit Timmons and Vokes square in their chests.

“Syria!” was all Vokes could exclaim before he fell to his knees, sword clattering to the floor, and he was engulfed in a bright, orange explosion.

Syria unsheathed a dagger from her belt and threw it hard at Sullivan. He reached out and caught it!

“Sorry, lovely, but knives are my weapon of choice. Now drop thy blade and surrender thyself to me.”

Syria, looking at the twin bonfires that were once her friends and the flames licking out from underneath the bedroom door behind Sullivan, cast down her sword.

“What dost thou want of me, fiend?”

“Just a little cooperation. There is a pretty girl hiding behind the bar. I want thee to acquire her and bring her before me.”

Syria looked behind her at the bar. She moved carefully to it and behind it. Sullivan saw her reach down and yank the pretty brunette off the floor, eyes wild with terror. Syria dragged her out and shoved her at Sullivan, who caught her by the arm and held her to him.

“Now take off thy clothes,” he said to Syria.

“I will not!”

“Then I will kill this girl,” he said, shoving the point of the knife under the girl’s chin.

Syria looked at the girl, looked at Sullivan, narrowed her eyes and slowly began to remove her leather armor and undergarments.

“I dost assume,” she said when she was taking off her underwear, “that thou didst want me to remove these as well?”

“Naturally, my beautiful swordmaster,” said Sullivan. Absent of armor, Syria was quite sexy. Her body was tight and athletic, her stomach flat, and her breasts were firm and large, holding their position without any need of a brassiere. Sullivan was becoming quite aroused and the girl he held felt something from his trousers rise and poke at her bottom.

“Now what?” said Syria.

Sullivan addressed the girl. “What is thy name?”

“O-O-O-Ophelia,” said Ophelia.

“Ah, what a lovely name. Go to Syria, my darling.” He gave her a little nudge and said to Syria, “Undress her.”

Syria did as she was told, biding her time for the right moment to strike. She unpacked Ophelia till the girl stood next to her, just as naked as she was. Ophelia’s breasts were slightly smaller, her skin less tan, but she was quite a figure. Sullivan walked around until he was standing behind them.

“Both of thee, to thy knees. I want the two of thee to kiss each other and fondle each other’s breasts.” They did a couple of quick brushes of the lips and light touches of fingers on skin and that was it.

“No, no. I’m afraid that won’t do. And until thou art both licking each other’s furry slots we shall all burn up and die in this horrid little inn.”

After much coaching with the knife, Sullivan finally had them with tongues firmly lodged in each other’s nether regions. He opened his trousers and, with his free hand, began to masturbate until it was finally too much for him. He got behind Syria, told her to just keep licking away, and sought to plunge into her.

Suddenly she sent her right hand around to knock Sullivan’s knife arm, but Sullivan was quick and had her wrist firmly grappled. She swung her left hand and he grabbed that, too. Then she tried to stand, but Sullivan

was too strong and he kept her on the floor. The knife, of course, had dropped to the floor. Ophelia, laying on her back, upraised on her elbows, legs spread wide, saw the knife. She looked up at Sullivan who was chuckling nastily.

“Dost thou want the knife, Ophelia? Thou shouldst come and get it.”

Meanwhile, he forced Syria forward and down, commanding her to go back to her licking and drooling. Ophelia did not dare move and flames were going up the walls. The room stank of burned flesh. Sullivan began riding Syria hard, holding her wrists tight behind her back. Ophelia merely watched, terrified, with her legs open, every once in a while getting an accidental lick from Syria who was trying her best to avoid touching her.

Suddenly, Sullivan snatched up the knife and drove it into Syria's neck. Her eyes bulged and a thin string of saliva issued from her mouth and dripped onto Ophelia's open vagina.

Sullivan rolled her over and out of the way. He chuckled again and was suddenly on top of Ophelia, utilizing the lubrication Syria had so graciously provided to good effect. Ophelia silently took the onslaught. She didn't move. She barely breathed. She had long since withdrawn and was now, essentially, useless.

Sullivan did away with her as he had Syria and took his leave from the premises before the building came tumbling down around him.

“I think I shouldst practice more magic,” he said to himself. “The Second Level was far too easy.” He rubbed his temples a bit, feeling a slight headache coming on. But, soon it went away.

Making his way back to the ship, Sullivan told Robin that he needed to go to New Magincia. On the voyage to that quiet island, Sullivan hit the books hard, studying with all of his might until he felt proficient in the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Circles. By the time land was in sight, he had mastered the Sixth, but as he practiced he noticed that the headaches became more frequent and of greater intensity. Nothing unmanageable, however. Still, he wondered what was the problem was.

“Ah, me and Leavell gots shipwrecked here once, we did,” said Battles as they stepped onto shore. “That is ‘til Petre found us and gave us jobs. We’s found a right perty girl here that Petre helped us deliver to Buccaneer’s Den to sell to the Baths. ‘Course we hads to test her out and be certain she was proper grade.” Battles gave a sly grin. “Lotta whimperin’ and hollerin’ ‘board ship that week, but oh she were a lively ‘un.”

“Didst thou fetch a good price for her at the Baths?” inquired Sullivan.

“Nay, Master. She kilt ‘erself before we was landed. We was too much fer ‘er methinks. Good while she lasted, though. Could gobble me werm down ‘er throat like none other ‘fore er since. Right proper whore she were.” Battles stared off dreamily.

Spark listened to Battles talk, giving his own sly smile at the memories he held of his own secret peccancies.

The trio marched south down a dirt path that ran through the island’s center. There were two targets on Petre’s list here. And when the path wound through close-cropped sheep-grazing land Sullivan found one of them.

Katrina was her name. Beautiful and pure of heart, she recognized the Avatar at once and ran to greet him. But time was, of course, short, and villainy was afoot. Sullivan asked Katrina to join them, introducing Battles and Spark (who almost grimaced with disgust as he took the evil witch’s hand). He had an appointment with Alagner and he thought he might need her help. She was only too glad, and she happily went with them to Alagner’s house where Sullivan immediately cast a *Mass Sleep* spell that rendered everyone around him unconscious. He quickly took stock of the situation and began his preparations for the evening’s entertainments.

When everyone woke up, Alagner, who had a sort of dazed look in his eye, as though he were not quite himself, was raping Katrina. Katrina was lying on her back, arms tied to the table and completely naked. The table was a bit short and her legs hung down the side but did not touch the floor. Alagner was gripping the sides of her voluptuous hips and rutting like a bull, even though his manhood was barely large enough to touch the walls of

Katrina's fleshy folds. Hence, Katrina had a look on her face that was almost more annoyance than fear or shame.

Alagner squeaked and mumbled and then let out a whiny, shuddering moan. Katrina's look of disgust worsened into a look of utter sickness as Alagner emptied himself into her. Katrina turned her head aside and looked as if she were about to vomit.

Alagner was suddenly pushed away and Battles, also quite dazed, took his turn. He grabbed Katrina violently and thrust into her pelvis like a hammer. Katrina began moaning. Her eyes closed and she licked her lips. She raised her legs and wrapped them tightly around Battles, corkscrewing her hips around his abnormally large shaft. Battles was making very loud and rapid slapping noises against her. Her moans were rhythmically interrupted as Battles slammed against her abdomen. He drooled and licked her nipples that had hardened into little round buttons.

She opened her eyes and saw Spark standing over her. He was getting onto the head of the table on his knees and staring down at her. He waved his massive, horse-sized member in her face, slapping her cheeks. She hesitated a moment and then took it up into her mouth, sucking furiously like a starving calf.

Battles, sweating and heaving, suddenly slowed down and paused at each thrust, thighs and buttocks quivering. Katrina, between gasps for breath and slurpings of Spark's man meat, sighed with pleasure at the sensation of hot fluid entering her and spurting out around Battles's rod and down her thighs to her ass and the surface of the table.

She laughed and suckled Spark harder and more vigorously. At last, Spark let out a small sound and gushed into her mouth all the hot, sticky goo he could muster. Katrina stroked him, coaxing it all out and greedily licking it all up. What she couldn't swallow ended up on her face, running down her cheeks and neck.

Battles and Spark shoved off and up came a fellow named Boris, the husband of Magenta who was the Mayor of New Magincia. He lifted her hindquarters up enough to get at the other hole, which was now quite slippery. Katrina's eyes bugged out as Boris wiggled himself into her, but she slowly relaxed and began to smile, still stroking Spark, who was

gradually stiffening again. He pushed himself back into her mouth while Boris waylaid the other end.

Spark made a mess of Katrina's face and hair, and Boris let loose in Katrina's ass. Soon there was so much cream spilt on the table that Katrina was sliding around upon it. Boris and Spark stepped away and a stalwart chap with a full beard stepped up whose name was Sam. He cupped his hand on her wet vagina and rubbed it around for a while, probing with his other hand around her buttocks. Then, with both hands thick was glop, he smeared it all over her breasts. This accomplished, he got up on the table, straddled her, and squished her breasts around his pulsing wand, slipping it in and out between them.

A gentleman named Henry, a close friend of Katrina's, came up and inserted himself into her dilated anus. Alagner returned and tickled her ear with his little worm that she simply grabbed with her mouth, instinctively, and sucked with abandon.

Spark and Boris came up on either side and when Katrina's arms were untied she reached out and began to jerk their members rapidly, every once in a while lightly stroking the sacks below them with her fingers.

Each one in his turn released himself on or in her and then they would go for it again, and again, and again. This went on for a very long time until Katrina was covered head to toe with dripping slime. She still bucked and writhed on the table. She still wanted more. So they kept giving it to her. More men from all over the island were lined up, coming and going, one after the other, on and on and on.

Russell, the shipwright, brought in some wood and tools and made a funnel that directed the drippings from the table down to the floor. Alagner crawled under it and wrapped his lips around the end. Russell disgorged the contents of his fiery serpent onto Katrina to do his part and then went to the end of the line to await yet another turn.

On and on it went, men delivering their life essences to Katrina's waiting body. Spark and Battles went off to the ship after a couple more rounds, but the line of New Magincia males kept going till dawn of the next day.

Katrina had long since died from the abuse, but her corpse was defiled over and over as the men ejaculated in her. When she had grown too stiff to be violated she was simply spattered with warm juices. All of this runoff, of course, had been going down the funnel where Alagner had been consuming the product at the other end until he too had died. Since his death had occurred later than Katrina's and whose corpse, therefore, was still pliable, the men had taken to desecrating him as well.

It was about nine o'clock in the morning when Magenta, the Mayor of New Magincia, came through the door. She went directly to where Katrina lay and, removing her own clothes and letting them fall to the floor, got up onto the slick table and lay down on Katrina, licking the goo from her breasts and working her way down to Katrina's cold genitals.

Sullivan, meanwhile, laughed in the corner. He was fairly exhausted having orchestrated this whole nightmare and had a headache verging on a migraine, but it didn't detract from the humor of the situation. Many *Charm* spells had been used to make this possible. And now, upon the arrival of the Mayor, it was time to take his leave. He had saved one final spell for last and, with it, he vanished. Only his footsteps could be heard as he walked to the door and there he halted.

Turning around, he let the *Charms* fall. Instantly there was awakening confusion. Naked men in the act of coitus with Alagner, others standing around Katrina ejaculating, others preparing to do so, and the Mayor herself licking the cold, coagulated glop of an entire night and a hundred men from Katrina's colder privates.

Men were stumbling around looking for clothing. With the exception of a nameless few, all erections dwindled to limp dishrags, most were doubled over and vomiting. Screams, disgust, terror. The Mayor passed out and hit her head on the floor. Blood flowed and mingled with stray puddles of white, sticky fluid. In the bedlam and noise, the man who had been violating Alagner's rectum looked around for a moment, saw that no one was looking, and finished his business before slinking away. Sullivan, unseen, stepped aside to let him pass. The man warily looked around as he ran, naked, for home. And so did many others. A few stayed behind to try and wake the Mayor until it was agreed to get her to a healer.

Sullivan *Charmed* them once more and they fell to raping the poor woman where she lay, unconscious and bleeding from her head. He lifted it right as they were squirting onto her.

There were more cries of disgust and horror. Absolutely mortified and confused at their behavior, they sought to leave the place as fast as they could, leaving the Mayor where she lay.

Sullivan chuckled and sauntered, invisible, to the ship. Magic was fun! He drank a couple of bottles of Swashbuckler's Spit to help take the edge off his headache which wasn't quite as fun.

On board 'The Beast' again, Sullivan told Robin to set sail for Moonglow. Checking in on Spark and Battles he fielded their questions regarding what had happened at Alagner's. For the life of them they couldn't remember. Of course, Sullivan told them, they had fallen prey to one of Alagner's most potent alcoholic distillations and had to return, weaving and lurching, to the ship. Oh, they had said.

Sullivan went to his cabin and removed Alagner's notebook from a satchel at his belt. He had acquired it when everyone had first been commanded to sleep. It was entertaining reading, but Sullivan knew all about it. First-hand experience and all. Without further ado, Sullivan went topside and made a little fire in a bucket. He burned the book, made certain that nothing remained in the ashes, and threw it all overboard. With that he went back to his cabin.

The journey to Moonglow gave Sullivan enough time to study the Seventh Circle. Mastering this circle meant that Sullivan would never need money again. He practiced *Create Gold* several times until he had a modest heap of it on the floor of his cabin. How wonderful! First fame and now fortune! Petre just kept giving the gifts that kept on giving. All those beautiful, sparkling, gleaming yellow nuggets! He fingered each one and cooed softly. So much for Robin's shipment of lead, he thought. But, so what? This was gold!

When they arrived at Moonglow, Sullivan gave all the gold to Robin. Amazed but not thrown off his balance, Robin calmly thanked Sullivan profusely and, with a smile and a nod, went ashore to buy what pleasures he could find.

Sullivan made a few more nuggets and gave them to Spark and Battles, giving them leave to enjoy the fair isle of Moonglow at their leisure.

Sullivan then pondered which quarry to take on first. Both were mages, both were friends of the real Avatar. One was crazy and the other was asleep. Well, that settled it. A wake up call it would be.

After fiddling around acquiring the proper items to set before the door of the ancient, cobwebby house that held the sleeping enchantress in order to get it open, Sullivan stole inside and gazed at the figure that lay supine on a bed of stone. She wasn't a withered hag like he had suspected she would be. She was, rather, quite an attractive woman. Her deep, even breathing brought his attention to the mounds of her breasts beneath her tattered and thin robe.

Lust immediately seized him and he tore the fabric from her milk-white skin, leaving her bare and inviting. He took off his trousers and spread her legs, forcing an entry that hadn't felt another human being for two hundred years.

He ravaged her several times, giving her necklaces of pearls, glistening white with each session. He turned her over and probed her back door repeatedly with his throbbing snake, expending the fruits of his exertion into that tightly closed canal.

Sullivan rummaged around for a few tools. A hammer and some metal spikes, some chain. He drove the spikes into the table and tied the chains to them and then to her limbs.

Then he found an orange potion. Feeling the call for a private joke, Sullivan masturbated and ejaculated into the liquid and then poured it down the mage's throat. She, who was Penumbra, awoke.

At first she was very happy to see it was the Avatar who had roused her. And then she took account of her position and the state of things in her immediate vicinity and gave a puzzled frown.

Sullivan proceeded to rape her again, quite violently. She didn't know whether to scream for help or enjoy it. He was the Avatar after all.

He demanded that she suckle his enraged member and she did so, continuing to be puzzled. He slapped her and told her to suck harder. She obliged out of an even deeper puzzlement. Sullivan exploded in her mouth and he bade her let none of it slip from her mouth. She silently obeyed and drank up the hot, salty froth.

Then Sullivan stood up on the “bed” and urinated on her face. She spluttered and coughed and this time she really did come to the decision to take offense. She started yelling for help. Sullivan kicked her to silence. Penumbra looked at him, shocked and humiliated, struggling in her chains. She started to say the words to a spell. Sullivan uttered words of his own. A green, sparkling mist formed and enveloped Penumbra’s body. Her body contorted and twisted this way and that until she lay dead and the mist drifted away.

Sullivan, wasting no time, left the house, made sure the door was locked, and strolled, whistling, to the Lycaeum. It was time for a little studious research.

Mariah was ecstatic upon seeing him but acted very strange. Beaming, she praised the heavens for the Avatar’s safe delivery of inkpots and feather dusters to Britannia. But Sullivan would have none of it. He had to get her quickly under wraps so as to avoid a wizard’s duel with an insane mage.

Mariah instantly became rooted to the spot where she stood after Sullivan’s casting of *Paralyze*. He drew his knife and cast *Conjure*, which caused to appear a tusked Troll. *Charming* the Troll he had it bind Mariah’s hands and feet and then permitted it to rape her several times with its oversized and oddly shaped genitals. The creature’s equipment was far too large to comfortably accommodate a human female, leaving the experience for Mariah an extremely painful one. The Troll, meanwhile, had never been so pleased, never having had anything tighter.

The Troll continued to rip apart Mariah’s vagina. The pain was unbearable. She passed out.

Sullivan roused her with a bucket of cold water, which sent her nipples soaring upward like volcanoes rising from the earth. But the Troll

was still on her and she screamed at the agony of the tearing as the Troll thrust himself into her, ripping and mutilating. Blood and more blood.

Sullivan conjured another that took up a position behind Mariah and widened her anal passage beyond reasonable limits. The partition of flesh between the two openings was giving way.

In a massive eruption, the two Trolls fired twin volleys into Mariah's bloody cavities from their bizarre organs. Sullivan watched, fascinated, as Mariah passed out again. The Trolls removed themselves and went away, leaving Mariah to fall upon the floor, with blood and semen dripping down her legs.

Sullivan made several more conjurations, bringing about starving rats, which he sent upon the bloody Mariah. Sullivan watched as the rats chewed their way into the mess of her genitals and into her abdomen, eating their way out of her from there, exiting at various points.

At last, slightly bored, Sullivan cast *Delayed Blast* and left the room. He entered another Lycaenum scholar's dwelling who was about to scold him for his rude entry when the explosion rocked the walls, obliterating Mariah and the rats.

The scholar, whose name was Jillian, cried out in alarm, but Sullivan calmly and gently soothed her by opening her robe and toying with her breasts. Aghast at this effrontery, Jillian attempted to close her robes and bid him farewell when Sullivan obliged her with another rude entry, strangling her at the crucial moment.

Nelson, another Lycaenum scholar, happened to come in on them just at that moment. The blast had caused much scurrying within the Lycaenum's confines, people checking in on other people to see if they were all right. Nelson simply stood there slack jawed and blinking behind his thick glasses.

Sullivan struck him with a *Death Bolt* and Nelson crumpled into a heap right there in the hallway. Sullivan stalked around the Lycaenum a bit. There were quite a few robed scholars examining Mariah's former habitations with gawking exclamations. Sullivan passed by and slipped into another room occupied by the Lycaenum's advisor, Zelda.

He asked her if she was all right and if there was anything he could do for her. No and thank you was the reply. When he didn't leave the response was repeated with irritation. But, Sullivan had other ideas than simply going away. He approached her, chuckling his nasty chuckle, and pinched her nipple. She yelped and was about to scream for guards and Lycaeum scholars when Sullivan's hand clamped over her mouth and he whispered the words to the *Charm* spell.

Zelda, following Sullivan's instructions, immediately went down on her knees and opened Sullivan's trousers and licked and sucked what she found there. He turned around and bent over and she tongued his anus while jerking his organ with her hand between his legs. Sullivan turned again when he was about to issue a stream of sticky substance and splashed it onto her extended tongue. He slid his shaft down her throat and let her clean it with her tongue and lips.

Then he made her lie on her bed, but in reverse, with her head at the foot. Sullivan squatted over her face and, grunting with the effort, squeezed a great, brown turd directly into her open mouth.

A young, pretty girl who had come from town to the Lycaeum to study music poked her head in through the door to ask Zelda's advice about something. Her eyes went round at what she saw and was about to leave when Sullivan Charmed her, made her come inside, get down on her knees, and lick Sullivan's ass clean. This she did while Sullivan held Zelda's mouth shut and pinched her nose closed until she suffocated.

Sullivan had the girl keep licking him and stroke his flesh pole. After a while he made her lick the ass of Zelda while he pushed his pole into hers. Culminating in an unusually strong orgasm, Sullivan happily decided to relieve himself while still inserted in the girl's rectum. Urinating in a young girl's ass was a pleasurable experience that, years to come, Sullivan would remember with fondness.

When he was quite through he cast *Poison* on her and left her there, *Charmed*, licking the ass of a corpse, to slowly die.

Outside the Lycaeum he discovered the two Trolls he had conjured earlier. They had overpowered the guard at the Lycaeum entrance and were

taking turns raping him. The guard was nearly dead and the Trolls looked like they had hardly begun. Sullivan thought a moment and decided to leave them be. However, the offensive talking Fox going by the name of Frank he promptly *Charmed* into attacking the Trolls. The Troll who was not occupied at the moment, scooped the fox up and attempted to get its hose into the proper orifice of the fox. Finding something close, the Troll thrust and tore the fox in half, leaving poor Frank's guts hanging out of his pelt. The troll sloppily stuffed the warm innards into the furry skin and utilized it in the best way it knew how to masturbate with it and ejaculate into the bloody mess.

Sullivan dusted his hands, noting a job well done and went off to explore the island a bit. After a while he collected his crew to go back to the ship.

The next morning 'The Beast' was sailing for Yew.

* * * * *

Reyna, one-time healer of Yew, screamed as the drake's colossal penis tore through her guts. The scream was quickly drowned to a gurgle as the drake's spear shot right out of her mouth, plunging a fountain of dark blood and entrails out with it, splattering the wall of Reyna's shop. She hung there, motionless, skewered from buttocks to throat.

Sullivan clapped his hands at the performance and sent the *Conjured* creature away to molest somebody else. The drake lumbered off, Reyna's body still pierced to its underside and headed north through the wall of the dwelling and toward the graveyard. Sullivan was left with the sound of rutting and grunting and he turned his head to see how Spark was coming along.

Aimi, one of the monks of the Abbey, was having a tough time of it. Spark was no gentle lover, to be sure. And it didn't help matters when her torment was added to by the antics of five *Conjured* and *Charmed* gremlins. She was covered with green slime from head to foot, choking on it, forced to swallow it. Spark himself had been assailing her rump for over an hour and she was sore and bleeding from that region. At last, Spark drained his pipe into her as the gremlins strangled her and drained her life. Spark then chopped off her head and limbs and separated her hind end from her upper

torso. The gremlins picked up pieces where they lay and scampered off with their prizes to fornicate with them in dark, private corners and holes.

The ritual setting of the fire followed a few minutes later. As the house was ablaze, shooting embers dangerously close to the edge of the forest, they saw another blaze go up to the south-east. After killing Nicodemus in a series of Swordstrikes Sullivan had ordered Battles to burn the house and set fire to the great Knight's Bridge board to the north of it. It was a kind of celebration for all their hard work. This had been the last stop before heading back to Britain.

And it had been quite fruitful, all this traveling. Magic was easier to learn than Sullivan thought. He had mastered the entire spellbook. The only thing that annoyed him was that one missing spell in the Eighth Circle (and those damn headaches). Petre's excuse of having difficulty in locating it was pathetic. In light of Sullivan's discovery of Petre's copy of "**Ye Creation of Ye Olde Magicke Items of Flabbergastingly Great Power**", Sullivan did not doubt that Petre was holding out on more than just that.

He would keep his eyes and ears open. Somewhere Petre had that spell. For now, he contented himself with studying that fascinating volume in depth and even found a means to copy spells and books, instantly making duplicates. This Sullivan did, making himself his own copy and returning Petre's. Chuckling with pleasure at his growing collection of newfound abilities, Sullivan positively slobbered up the contents of that powerful book. More magical lore had been packed into one tome than any other in Britannia. Mages throughout the land would kill their own mothers to get a glimpse of a single page of what Sullivan was now reading, from beginning to end, with the casualness of a library browser.

By the time they arrived in Britain, Sullivan cooked up an excuse to get everyone off the ship, giving them gold and charming them, so that he could utterly dissect Petre's cabin. He felt that there was something there still. Something he had missed. And consequently, something that Petre had missed. An overlooked bit of evidence. And why not? Why would Petre suspect Sullivan of snooping?

He dug around for several hours, every once in a while poking his head out to make sure no one, particularly Petre, was coming back aboard. And then, at last, he found something. It was an obscure reference in a scribbled note he found between two pages of a book in Petre's trunk. It was written in the manner of a reminder of sorts. What Sullivan could discern from Petre's crabbed hand was a delivery of some kind of material to a place. And the place had a name: AMBROSIA. And that was all.

Sullivan was mildly disappointed, but at least it was *something*. He tidied up, putting everything back the way it was and left the cabin, being sure to lock it, and went into town for a bite to eat at the Blue Boar.

* * * * *

A solid month went by and no sign of Petre. But Petre's influence was thick in Britain. While Sullivan had been away on his errands, an entertainment sensation had rippled through the Capitol City. The air was abuzz with it. Apparently, a new invention had been demonstrated at the Farmers' Market that had drawn crowds the Market had never seen in its history.

It was a new kind of crystal ball. Nothing really remarkable in that, per se, but this was exceptionally captivating. This crystal ball recorded events around it such that, on command, it could replay them. In addition, it was able to project on a large, flat surface, its recorded contents to be viewable by large numbers of people. The many uses of this new technology were touted: from recording stage plays, to covering news events, to security for local businesses. The possibilities were endless.

Of course, Sullivan knew immediately that this was simply a preparatory step, coaxing the minds of Britannians into accepting a new vehicle for Petre's news-dispensing services. And he laughed all the more because he knew where this technology came from. Alagner had invented such a device. Minus its projecting ability (and the unmentioned capability to manipulate and magically alter the recorded images before being replayed) which Petre had obviously added on for just as obvious purposes, it was essentially the same thing. Yet another reason Petre had Sullivan kill the old bugger.

Soon after these repeated public demonstrations, all reporters at the Herald were issued crystal balls and taught the voice commands to operate

them. Before plays were shown at the Royal Theatre, news footage collected throughout the day was projected onto a flat, white screen. Such twenty-minute news spots became a daily fare and the Royal Theatre began showing the nightly news irrespective as to whether or not a play was scheduled.

After another month had gone by Sullivan noticed reporters walking around with smaller crystal balls as well. He stopped one to ask about them and was told that they recorded still images. All of the printing presses in Britannia had been refitted with magical devices capable of editing and printing images of an amazing life-like quality. These small orbs recorded those images that got printed.

As the reporter walked away to get some celebrity shots of Patterson and his wife Judith, Sullivan frowned in puzzlement. For someone as absent as Petre had been, he certainly was getting a lot done in Sullivan's immediate vicinity. Where was he? Was he avoiding him? Did he suspect Sullivan's snooping? Was this some kind of test?

Sullivan stopped by the Herald and poked around asking questions, but Petre's hide and hair were scarce in equal measure. Sullivan filed his concern away to the murky back of his mind and focused on the study of magic and alchemy, his newfound passionate interest, when he wasn't waylaying young women alone at night and stealing away from fresh dirt-mounds before dawn.

A few weeks later Sullivan, who had been following the Herald with increasing interest, picked up the morning paper and read a most unflattering account of Batlin's leadership acumen. The article went on to say how the Fellowship was recently under investigation by the Britannian Tax Council and that there was a question as to the management of the Fellowship's books.

Now Sullivan thought this was all very interesting. Making the Fellowship look bad was NOT the Herald's job! But, Sullivan kept his mouth shut, made some inquiries, and discovered that the Tax Council's question had only been about the misfiling of a tax payment by the Fellowship, which had later been cleared up. The Herald was really making quite a lot about a mere nothing.

Untroubled, Sullivan decided he wasn't going to wait for Petre any longer. He went and found Battles and Spark, lying in bed with a dead whore between them, covered in blood and semen. It seemed Spark was influencing Battles with quite a bit of success. He wondered how far the two of them were getting on with each other. Sullivan shook his head. That was not business he wished to hear. He roused the two with his foot and told them to get ready to set sail. They were going to Buccaneer's Den for a vacation.

Spending time gambling and whoring was just what Sullivan needed. But, always, every morning, he read the paper. And in each paper there was a Batlin article. And each one was worse than the last. Illicit affairs, poor treatment of Fellowship members, the lack of any result in addressing the poverty issue in Paws, mishandling of bookkeeping ledgers, smuggling contraband via unwitting Fellowship couriers for his own profit, embezzling Fellowship funds, and a whole host of other "crimes" that Sullivan knew Batlin could not possibly be bothered to engage in. His real crime was worse than any of these: being a traitor to the entire world with intentions of selling out to an outside invader with expectations of personal gain and power. This whole series of articles mystified Sullivan. Focusing attention on Batlin was counterproductive to the cause of keeping the Fellowship looking peachy. Petre's designs depended on it being so.

Even more strange was the mysterious disappearance of his headaches. One day after a bout of ill-used spellcasting that sent him to bed with a migraine to end all migraines Sullivan awoke to feel absolutely no pain at all. In fact, he'd never felt more keen.

As the weeks went by, the articles began lambasting Batlin further and also started calling for new leadership. As more weeks went by, polls were taken (Mock ones, of course. Petre would never really ask a peasant's opinion. As far as he was concerned, peasants didn't have thoughts or ideas. Just filthy animals. Sullivan tended to agree.) and nominations were made as to who should replace the fat, old monk. Finally, the nominations and debates settled on one person. The Avatar. It was argued that he could be the only natural and logical choice given all that was available (which wasn't much).

Sullivan was aghast. There were several more days of this lauding of The Avatar's "virtues" as the next Fellowship leader and demands for Batlin

to abdicate. This might possibly put Sullivan in a head-on collision with “the Man” himself. And Sullivan wasn’t confident that his magical ability could outmaneuver that wily lard barrel. Not yet, at any rate. It was probably best to lower his profile a little and stay hunkered down in Buc’s Den, screwing and knifing the local talent and gambling and drinking and carousing with those other two scoundrels. Yes, he would stick around here and enjoy life for a while.

One week and thirty-five missing prostitutes later, Sullivan was on his usual, leisurely walk to the House of Games when he was accosted by Petre aloft in a floating carpet.

“Hop in,” he said.

“Ah, Petre. It has been so long I thought thou wert deceased.”

“As thou canst see I am quite substantial. But no time for chatter. Thou art being handed the Fellowship today, on a plate of silver. Batlin is abdicating. Tonight he shall name thee his successor, by ‘popular’ demand.” Petre said the last sentence with a smirk and a wink. And then Sullivan understood. This had been Petre’s plan all along. To oust Batlin and install Sullivan in position as the head of a very powerful organization. This placed them in complete control. Sullivan climbed aboard the carpet and away they went.

“So what is Batlin going to do after he steps down? How didst thou make him simply decide to leave? Certainly mere lies in that rag thou dost publish alone didst not sway him.”

Petre, steering the carpet with gentle tugs at its front edge, answered a bit enigmatically, “Batlin has been subdued.”

“But, what of Elizabeth and Abraham? They shalt not simply stand idly by and watch thee ruin their fun!”

“Elizabeth and Abraham serve us now.”

Petre said it with such deadpanned nonchalantness that Sullivan was silent for a long while, merely gazing at this unlikely manipulator. He was trying to fathom where in Britannia he had come from and whence he

derived his ability to coerce and effect as much as he had in as short a time as he'd had.

“And what of the arrival of that Guardian?” Sullivan asked, almost afraid to.

“Taken care of,” Petre said simply.

Sullivan's eyes went wide. Awe of Petre crept into his flabbergasted brain, and a new feeling regarding Petre that Sullivan had never experienced before: **fear**. Petre was doing things that Sullivan could not account for. There were powers at work here that Sullivan did not understand. And that made him suspicious and wary. Petre was doing things behind his back and wasn't telling. And *that* was infuriating.

Sullivan had long felt that Petre was full of crap and that this whole scheme he had plotted was a mere pipe dream. He had been along for the ride and it was certainly better than being in prison. But, such thoughts had begun to change a little when Sullivan found that magical text in Petre's cabin. Now the change was complete. Something very real was happening here. And Sullivan was quite put out that he was going to continue to go along for the ride – as a puppet.

He would bide his time. He would wait. He would quietly dig. AMBROSIA, he thought to himself. He would find this place and, perhaps, plumb the depths of some of Petre's secrets.

Sullivan changed the subject. “There is something I hast been wanting to ask thee since thou hast been away.”

“Ask,” Petre said, steering the carpet around some mountain crags.

“Well, after thou didst leave and thou didst command me to engage in magical studies I didst realize that I was actually using magic when all the rest of the mages in Britannia wert insane. ‘Twas mine understanding that thou hadst not disabled the Tetrahedron Generator yet at that time. Didst thou shut it off after all?”

“No. ‘Twas still quite active,” said Petre. “Thou wert able to utilize thy skills before the disrupted ether started to thwart thy mental faculties.

The mages currently mad in Britannia didst not become so instantly. The Generator requireth time to do its work. The real Avatar, had he been allowed to do so, wouldst most surely experience the same phenomenon. Thou didst experience headaches?”

“Yes, indeed. The pain gradually increased over time as I kept practicing. Then, suddenly, I didst awake one morning and the pain was gone.”

“That marked the moment whence I disabled the Generator,” Petre said.

“I see. Thankfully thou didst. The aches wert becoming most unbearable.”

When they returned to Britannia, Sullivan was still unable to believe the truth of things, looking into the eyes of a cowed and, indeed, *fearful* Batlin. Soon the ceremony was over and Sullivan was formally made head of the Fellowship. Batlin quietly disappeared into obscurity and was eventually strung up by a waiting Hook.

Chapter 8: The Rise to Power

Following Batlin's abdication and swearing in of the Avatar the event was splashed liberally on the front pages of the Herald for weeks. The news came as a great shock to people who had long held out against those annoying Fellowship recruiters. People who had given no thought to the Fellowship did so for the first time, if nothing else but out of Avatar hero-worship. Those who simply had clung to the Virtues out of habit began thinking about the Triad of Inner Strength as a possible alternative (and, perhaps, a more practical and responsive alternative at that). But, those who believed in the Virtues and the Avatar as their Champion and, moreover, were suspicious of the Fellowship and its motives, were deeply dismayed. This was simply unheard of. They felt betrayed. Unfortunately, those who truly felt this way were small in number. Britannia had grown bitter and cynical even before Petre and Sullivan had stepped onto the stage. They were merely fanning embers that already were, even now, kindling into a bright flame.

As it was, then, the membership rolls of the Fellowship exploded. Voluntary enrollment came to unprecedented figures. Recruitment was found to be, as a whole, much easier than it had been before. Over the course of the next few months the Fellowship had become quite massive, outnumbering faithists in the Virtues ten to one.

All the while Petre was coaching Sullivan in running the Fellowship and quadrupling its income, canvassing the public, holding public speeches touting the benefits to joining, and generally doing everything possible to increase the scope of the Fellowship to be the most powerful force in Britannia.

With Sullivan heading the Fellowship, Mayor Patterson as a cooperative member, and the Fellowship's gradual infiltration of the Britannian Tax Council and the Royal Mint, Petre got the whole weight of the Fellowship mustered against the Great Council, lobbying them to enact new institutions into existence.

Over the course of the next several months the Britannian Welfare & Relocation Program (BWRP) was brought into existence to help alleviate the suffering of poverty in places like Paws and to enable helpful relocation to

more productive areas of land and/or integration and reeducation into new jobs.

The Britannian Development Bureau (BDB) was created to schedule and allocate funds for developing wildlands and landscaping hitherto uninhabitable regions for immigration purposes. This Bureau worked hand in hand with the state-subsidized Britannian Construction & Land Development Company (BCLDC) to whom such funds would be delivered and would organize projects and create jobs.

The Britannian Forestry Commission (BFC) was set up to check the activities of the BDB and the BCLDC to ensure that tree cutting would not get out of hand and to respond to environmental crises involving Britannian Forests and wilds. The state-subsidized Britannian Lumber Company (BLC) was thus formed to perform such logging as was necessary, answering only to the BFC. Another state-subsidized corporation, the Britannian Silverleaf Company (BSC) was made to control Silverleaf logging and was also answerable only to the BFC.

Petre also pushed to enact: the Britannian Civil Engineering Commission (BCEC) which would allocate funds for the building of better roads and bridges and other infrastructure requirements; the Britannian Historical Foundation (BHF) to collect historical texts throughout the land and codify them, creating new textbooks for general education; the Britannian Education Bureau (BEB) which would oversee and enable a public education system and building of new schools; the Britannian Shipbuilding Company (BSBC), another state-subsidized corporation to standardize and establish construction codes and government-run shipyards using new mass-production techniques (playing on the Herald's frequent publication of news stories about ships sinking and foundering due to poor construction techniques used by unaccountable shipwrights); the Britannian Steel Company (BSCo.) to ensure a steady supply of stock steel of superior production, again maintained by the institution of standard mass-production techniques; and the Britannian Agricultural Committee (BAC) to oversee the farming, harvesting, and distribution of animal and vegetable products used for food and the production of medicines, alcohol and tobacco products, standardizing procedures for improvement and hygiene where necessary and having legal powers to enforce restrictions where necessary (especially after the Herald's recent rash of stories regarding food poisoning cases throughout the land).

All of these institutions, companies and new laws were of such a beneficent nature that the Great Council and, indeed Lord British himself, could hardly bring themselves to say no in the light of public pressure brought onto them by the Britannian Herald and the clamoring that went on by the public in the Great Council's open-forums that they held once every two months (aside from their usual closed-door monthly meetings).

The Fellowship continued to maintain control over the Britannian Mining Company, the Baths, and the House of Games; all of which had quadrupled their revenues since the Avatar had taken office. The Baths and the House of Games were especially doing well. Between all of the Herald's lascivious advertising and the fast-talking salesmen in all of the Fellowship Halls selling tickets to board newly built vessels (by the Britannian Shipbuilding Company, of course, out of the taxpayers' pocket) each month saw more and more visitors to Buccaneer's Den. Soon two more Bathhouses were built along with three more Game Houses. Business was booming and the pirates who ran it were growing fat.

Naturally the Avatar (i.e. Sullivan) was the daily hero in the passing of these bills. He was always in the papers and at podiums delivering speeches, trumpeting the causes of better living standards, freedom of choice, more power to the people, and other such rot. Privately, he and Petre would get together at Fellowship Headquarters after the nightly meeting and chuckle over the insidious masterwork they were building. All of these institutions and companies they were creating were controlled by the Fellowship and run by Fellowship members at the management level. No Bureau chairman or corporate president could lift a finger without getting the go-ahead from Sullivan, who took his orders only from Petre.

Rather than checking or controlling and regulating tree felling, woodcutters were hired in droves to clear-cut whole swaths of forest with reckless abandon. Combined with newly instituted mass-production methods utilized by the Britannian Shipbuilding Company, vessels were being pumped out at a phenomenal rate. And all were seaworthy. The Herald continued to publish false stories about the shipwrecks made by private shipwrights until, finally, a law was passed forbidding shipwrights to build any more vessels until they became licensed (with such gigantic fees that nearly all the shipwrights went out of business overnight and the ones that didn't found it cheaper to just go to work for the BSBC and give up

their private practice). Eventually, seeing as there were no private shipwrights left, the law was amended to simply outlaw all private boat building and made the BSBC the sole manufacturer of anything that floated.

The Britannian Silverleaf Company was operating similarly, stepping up the cutting and processing of Silverleaf trees by a factor of five. Further, much of the money derived from the sale of the final product went into Fellowship coffers.

The Britannian Steel Company, through its own mass-production efforts, was so adept at dumping cheap and reliable stock steel onto the market for building purposes that it began setting up lines for making a whole host of household items and tools that could be bought for equally rock-bottom prices. The blacksmiths could not compete and were quickly driven out of business. As a few stragglers tried to sell their craftsmanship to the wealthy a law was passed forbidding the sale of their inferior iron products totally, leaving the BSCo. as the only manufacturer of such goods in the land. As production of the BSCo. increased, the Britannian Mining Company also increased production of smeltable ore and gained appreciably from this vast new flow of business.

The Britannian Agricultural Committee clamped a heavy hand on medicinal products (after all, the Fellowship didn't believe in healers). Stories in the Herald attacked healers in every city for negligence and malpractice of all kinds. Fellowship members formed vigilante mobs that ran the healers out of town and (to "handle" the problem) healers were outlawed against practicing their quack arts in any Britannian city.

The BAC also took a dim view of current food distribution practices, claiming that open carts were simply inadequate for the transportation of edible goods and further claimed that farming in open fields, without being properly decontaminated, was potentially hazardous. Thereon, all farmers had to deliver their product to centrally-located warehouses where all food products would be "tested" and government-operated covered carts and ships would distribute the food where it was "needed". Thus all food distribution was tightly controlled and accounted for. The Farmers' Market dwindled to nothing, being replaced by other entertainments, Fellowship lectures, news viewings, Buc's Den ticket sales, and just about anything that brought the Fellowship a tidy profit, round the clock, day and night. The

former Farmers' Market park area was kept at a constant carnival-like atmosphere, attracting folk from all over.

After a while, the Farmers' Market suddenly stopped selling wine. At first there was bewilderment and disappointed revelers complained loudly. But soon there was a Herald news bulletin projected that the BAC had discovered poisoned grapes in Yew. The monks at Empath Abbey were forbidden to make any more wine until the problem could be sorted out. Petre and Sullivan decided to take a vacation and travel to Yew and oversee their plan there.

It was there intention to put some harder stuff on the market to really lull the populace a bit. And the ethereal, esoteric vintages lovingly made by the monks just weren't up to snuff. So they had the BAC shut them down with a fake poisoning scare. Now it was time to retrofit. The Construction & Land Development Company workers had already arrived the day before with their plans and tools and had already begun work on the Abbey, much to the consternation of the monks who could do little more than stand around and watch as their private little world was invaded.

BAC officials were instructing farmers transported to the region in the planting of vast fields of corn, wheat, and potatoes which would be fermented to make 180-proof bottles of hard liquor called Swashbuckler's Spit. They were also taught the cultivation of coffee and the extraction of *caffeine*. Along with the hard alcohol, an "energizing stimulant drink" was to be made composed chiefly of this *caffeine* and a special ingredient that would be shipped to Yew every two weeks to replenish the stock. It was not said that the ingredient was nothing more than raw Serpent Venom from Buccaneer's Den. The other crop was tobacco for the manufacture of small, smokable things called *cigarettes*. The Britannian Lumber Company was already clear-cutting whole sections of the Great Forest to make room for all these crops and the monks were up in arms.

Petre and Sullivan were out happily surveying the removal of the Abbey's prized grape plants when a flock of monks saw the "Avatar" and came over, troubled and bewildered. They wrung their hands and gestured at the Abbey, asking what was to become of their Order. Sullivan, with downcast eyes and sorrowful look, told the monks he was terribly sorry but all of this was very necessary. They would be compensated and relocated to

Paws to resurrect their Order and the BAC would do what they could to subsidize the development of a new winery in an unaffected region.

The monks exclaimed and asked for explanations: unaffected by what? What poison was found in their grapes? Such a thing was inconceivable! Sullivan only said that he understood how they felt, that he was very sorry, they would be compensated, and could they please collect all of the members of their order and wait by the burned-out remains of Nicodemus' old dwelling. There they would be shown the source of the poison and their questions would be answered.

The monks agreed to this and did as they were asked. Petre and Sullivan went to their horse-and-cart and took out two long packs. They met the monks at the house, far from the noise and activity of construction, and led them round behind the gutted structure. There they bade the monks look up to the tops of the mountain range to the south. As they did so, they slipped the covers off the oblong things they carried, revealing the cool, flickering flames of Firedoom Staves. Petre had made these special. The explosions they made were silent. Together they incinerated the monks where they stood. Those few who tried to escape only found themselves being chased down by balls of fire that followed their every move. In their horror they were burned alive, but their screams were not heard...or were they?

Sullivan felt a prickling in the back of his neck and whipped around just in time to see something jerk back behind a soot-blackened wall of the house.

“What is it?” asked Petre.

“I knowest not,” Sullivan replied in a low voice.

His eyes narrowed and he trotted over to the edge of the house and peeked around. The heel of a foot disappeared behind the house's north wall. Sullivan gave chase. When he reached the corner something whipped around it at the level of his face and knocked him to the ground. There was a flash of green and brown as a boot appeared and kicked the Firedoom Staff from his hands. Then a bowstring was drawn back.

When Sullivan's eyes regained focus he saw a man in green tunic and pants, brown boots, and a green cap with a red feather sticking out the back.

"Who art thou and what dost thou want?" asked Sullivan warily.

Blood trickled from a cut over his left eye and dripped down his temple and into his ear in his horizontal position. His head was the only thing off the ground, staring into the point of a purplish arrow with a tip that looked strangely like a giant bee stinger. All the rest of him failed to move.

"I might ask thee the same question," said the archer. "But I wouldst wager that thou certainly art not the Avatar in word or deed. If thou art thou dost shame all that, before now, thou hast stood for. This is the second time I hath witnessed thee in the act of heinous crimes. We doth lack a healer and a mage here in Yew because of thee. I stand next to the hulking frame of thy handiwork and rearward there wouldst be more graves for the citizens of Yew to dig if thy staves had left any evidence. However, thou art fortunate. Thy choice of location to commit foul deeds is well made. The Royal Court and Prison is conveniently located yonder northwards. Let us take an invigorating walk as soon as thou dost call thy friend and tell him to lay down his weapon."

"No need for that, ranger," said Petre from behind him.

The green-clad man, without turning, said, "And dost thou value thy friend's life? No, perhaps thou dost not after what I hath witnessed. Thou art both members of the Fellowship I see," he said, noting the medallion that hung about Sullivan's neck. He continued, "For that reason alone I shouldst kill thee both where thou art, but unlike the deceivers thou art, I am a man of justice and honesty. Thou wilt, regrettably, live to see thyself put to trial."

"Those are brave words for one who is about to be killed," said Petre.

"Thou shouldst make no assumptions as to mine abilities," said the man coolly.

"Mayhap I couldst ask thy name before I roast thee," said Petre.

“I am Tseramed, and I am forever the enemy of the Fellowship. So much so that, given this present plight, I wouldst be obliged to forego mine honor and accept a moderate stain on it to slay thee.”

With that he whirled and kicked at Petre while letting loose an arrow. It hit Petre’s shoulder and he went down – asleep. Sullivan had rolled and picked up his staff. He sprung into a crouch, holding the staff before him, but there was nobody there. Just Petre, bleeding from his shoulder, quite unconscious.

Sullivan, more cautiously, reconnoitered in and around the whole building and found no one. At last, pulling the arrow from Petre’s shoulder, he spoke a cantrip of waking and roused Petre from his slumber. Then he collected their staves and, with a tug off the ground, got Petre to his feet and marched him back to the Abbey. There he cast a *Heal* spell on Petre and let him go back to sleep in the horse-and-cart. He had a better idea of a place to vacation in.

Twitching the reins he turned about and quietly set off back down the road to Britain. But they would stop only briefly. Their goal was Cove, to take care of a recurring problem. Tseramed would just have to be dealt with later.

After a day of rest in Britain and Petre’s full recovery, the two conspirators went east. Sullivan pondered Tseramed and his open declaration of malice. No good leaving such as he loose to stir up real trouble. But rangers were difficult folk to hunt and harder to kill. The thought of this revived old memories in Sullivan’s dark brain. Yes, he was quite familiar with rangers and their ways. It boded great ill to have one -- as competent as Tseramed seemed to be -- declare war on them.

In silence they traveled, passing a ring of stones that encircled only bare earth, the moongate having disappeared. Sullivan paid this no heed. He was among the few citizens of Britannia who knew what Petre had done in order to bring about the ultimate demise of the blue moongates. The only other ones were Abraham, Elizabeth, Hook and Forskis. He also knew that Petre had rigged them so that he could, by remote, activate them again in a fully functional state.

How he had done it was another matter. How he had avoided releasing the Time Lord at the same time; how he had been able to adjust and manipulate the Generators to begin with; how he had gotten the Guardian off their backs; these were all questions that continued to occupy Sullivan's mind. And then there was AMBROSIA. Soon, Sullivan thought, soon I will get a chance to uncover Petre's secret.

Until then there was work. It so happened that the waste running into Lock Lake from the Britannian Mining Company's activities had gotten so bad that even Lord Heather had to abandon the previously applied, ineffective ten-year abatement program and raise a tumult. Miranda decided to answer his summons in person. She was quite a bit puzzled, too. Hadn't the Avatar delivered that bill to Lord Heather? Why wasn't Lock Lake getting cleaned up?

So Miranda and Lord Heather were in Cove now. And Miranda was certainly learning now of the abatement order that had been given to Lord Heather instead of the bill. And Lord Heather was most definitely learning of the letter he never sent. Obviously, Petre and Sullivan could not allow this mass epiphany to take place. It would get all straightened out, the BMC would be attacked to stop dumping waste in the lake, thus tying up production time, and there would be setbacks, setbacks, and setbacks. Oh annoyance!

So Petre and Sullivan deftly handled the affair by arranging a little accident. It was made to seem Lord Heather was taking Miranda out on the Lake in a little rowboat giving a tour. The boat capsized and drowned them both in the polluted waters. Most unfortunate. But any resolution to the Lock Lake problem was now effectively put on hold. The Grand Council shifted it down low on the list of priorities after the event. It had been mostly Miranda's project anyway. Funerals and services were held in Britain and Cove. Petre and Sullivan failed to attend. Of all those who did show up, Lord British, Raymundo (Miranda's husband who ran the Royal Theatre), and Inwisloklem were the most visibly upset. The Herald hounded them during and after the entire service asking about "their feelings". Petre and Sullivan laughed at the headlines the next day when they read how Lord British's Royal Guard and Inwisloklem had to break up a fight between Raymundo and an exceptionally aggressive reporter, causing a great row among the funerary attendants. Petre was already drafting a law suit against Raymundo for assault and attempting to quell the reporter's right to liberty

of speech (a legal right that Petre had snuck into the legal bill that Lord British had ratified allowing the Herald to exist in the first place).

Over the course of the last few months of the year that would end on the anniversary marking the imprisonment of the real Avatar, Buccaneer's Den slowly expanded and was modified to include entertainment of an ever more depraved sort. One could find anything one might be looking for there. And the wants of the people were always supported by the Fellowship. Many of these "entertainments" had been personally devised by Sullivan, who would take little vacations now and then to partake of them. Sullivan also used this time to make his quiet little investigations into the Ambrosia matter.

While Sullivan's image as Fellowship Champion of the people was developing, Petre had been taking little trips of his own. He was traveling the land and surveying people associated with malcontented fringe groups and people who had reason to be dissatisfied with the present government. He gradually narrowed his survey to individuals who had a bloodthirst for the nobility. There were plenty of talkative grumblers, to be sure, but he was looking for the more reactionary and violent types: revolutionaries. At least those who had the potential. He had the ones he wanted sooner than expected and he would visit them frequently, gaining their trust and planting seeds in their minds. Over the course of the past months he had been building them up, convincing them that they were going to turn the nobility in Castle British out on their ears and the moat would go red with royal blood.

Four, knife-toying bastards, itching to cut noble throats and soak purple fabric. A pirate, a rogue, a paladin and a mage. Fransisa, Corwin, Brax and Athelas they were. Petre set them up in Dungeon Despise. He gave them weapons, magic armor, a teleporter that went to different parts of Despise (an escape route to a spot on the mainland not far from the Shrine of Spirituality and a route that deposited one right in the Royal Orchards. He had them train and recruit others that could be entrusted to the "Cause" and let them be, checking on them from time to time to see how they were getting on. He would tell them the time to strike. Grinning, with wild eyes, they said they would wait, and they turned back to sharpening their blades and hacking at a practice dummy made in effigy of Lord British. Their time would come and Petre's plan was the best they'd ever heard of. Yes, they would wait.

Petre also checked in on the Britannian Purity League, headquartered in Vesper. The work done there was going beautifully. Vesper was now an even more segregated and hostile region than it had ever been before. There were beatings, robberies, and demonstrations. The whole place was a powder keg. The BPL's delightful publications, riding on the same courier system as the Britannian Herald, were gaining wide circulation. The usual flyers,

KEEP BRITANNIA CLEAN! SEND THE GARGOYLES BACK!

were, of course, everywhere present. But Petre planned to step up the BPL's efforts. Every week in the Royal Theatre, and elsewhere all over Britannia, "documentaries" and special reports were projected via crystal ball. And all of them were regarding the foul practices of the gargoyle race, their anti-human history and sentiments, and historical plans of the gargoyles to rid Britannia of humanity forever. Fictional stories acted out and recorded (the equivalent in Earth terms to movies) were shown that had a slant depicting gargoyles as an evil, unclean and uncouth race that stirred up trouble, raped Britannian women, stole Britannian money, and murdered Britannian children. Nearly all villains portrayed were humans dressed up in gargoyle costumes. After Petre had taken over the use of the Cube Generator it was his voice and command that was heard. Dim-witted Fellowship members who heard the voice telling them to hate gargoyles became enthusiastic gargoyle-hating activists, spreading the word, becoming BPL members, spreading the fear. Petre was building a growing hysteria. Anti-gargoyle literature was everywhere. He sent Forskis to Terfin and had him assisting some Fellowship members there to incite anti-human sentiment among the gargoyle people, while increasing their angst against the principles of Control, Passion, and Diligence.

By the end of the following year the inevitable suggestion of Mayorship for the Avatar was, at last, stated openly in the Herald. Patterson was strong-armed into claiming he had an illness and proclaiming the Avatar his successor until the next election. Petre had his blackmail in hand. An orb that had recorded numerous rendezvous' with Candice, in all their

disgusting details (Petre felt that Patterson was quite a raunchy pig in matters of sexual peculiarities and told him so).

Not long after Sullivan was named Mayor, Patterson was found dead “from his illness” and Candice turned up missing. Petre had Sullivan name him as Fellowship Leader in the Avatar’s absence.

Now, in order to solidify Sullivan’s position as Mayor of Britain a new ruse was called for. There had been much opposition to the Avatar’s taking the title of Mayor by the Great Council. It was not because of any law that was being broken. In fact, there *were* no laws covering this circumstance. It was the simple fact that the Avatar, as a Champion of the people and symbol of the unity of the Eight Virtues, should not be mixed up in politics. It could lead to all sorts of misunderstandings, accusations of favoritism, and all manner of conflicts of interest. Accusations, of course, are what immediately flew at the Great Council via the Herald. What did the Great Council have to hide? Why were they so afraid of the Avatar becoming part of their class-stratified political system? Was there corruption in the very heart of the Britannian nobility? Conflicts of interest, indeed!

But harassing the Great Council in this way would not last forever. Petre had to produce something really astounding to accomplish something even more effective: drown them out. But Petre had not been idle. This moment had been anticipated. And the time was at hand. Spark was sixteen now and his long “education” with Sullivan was ready to be taken up a notch. Sullivan had already instilled in the boy a worthy guile. The arts of assassination, lock picking, and silent murder were equally well-instructed. The arts of provocation, acting, and sleight-of-hand were neither avoided. He even taught him strategy and combat tactics in unconventional warfare, though if Spark had known who the Avatar really was he would have wondered where he had acquired such knowledge. By the day of his sixteenth birthday (celebrated with much drinking and murdered whores) Spark was a well-rounded young man and eager to do his duty for the Avatar.

After a long discussion with Sullivan they both approached the boy about being sent to Serpent’s Hold for training in the conventional arts of warcraft and hand-to-hand combat. After the half-year term of training, he

would be sent back to Britain and given his first real assignment. Spark was overjoyed and agreed instantly.

Over the course of the next six months Sullivan and Petre staged terrorist attacks on small towns and outlying regions away from the larger cities. The events were publicized in the Herald as having been done by Britannian dissident groups that had allied themselves against the present government. The wave of terror went on ceaselessly and relentlessly. Every week had two or more headlines. The crowds were a hubbub of fear and panic. In some places there were mass migrations out of the towns to the protection of more urban centers. But even that proved fruitless when bombings and poison gas explosions occurred in busy city districts. The Royal Guards all across Britannia were proving to be utterly inept. Not one “terrorist” was ever captured or even seen. Of course, they never realized that in all cases there were always only two perpetrators.

After six months Spark returned and Sullivan and Petre offered him a position as Captain of a crack assault team. Spark could handpick his team members and train them himself. Spark went to work immediately and Petre and Sullivan organized their last major “attack” – this time against Castle British itself. It was time to – as the newspapers would later state “bring the battle home” to the very core of Britannian government.

The plan was well choreographed. It had to be done just right. Petre did not have a way of killing Lord British so the old noble would be an impediment to them if they simply stormed in and invaded the castle. But they had a selective list of casualties that would have to result from their assault. And they had been so selected to be the most damaging to the palace’s security and to enrage the populace to new levels.

The assault itself was simple to execute. Wearing rings of invisibility they stole into the castle by the front door late at night when they knew Lord British would be asleep (how Petre knew for certain was a mystery to Sullivan). They silently crept into the rooms of Nystul (L.B.’s personal magician) and Geoffrey (Captain of the Guard) and slit their throats. Then they unveiled their special Firedoom Staves and silently incinerated them.

Next, they made their way to the Royal Nursery and blasted Sherry the Mouse to carbon powder. *Paralyzing* the Royal Children, Sullivan stuffed them all into a big sack. Then, quietly sneaking about, they placed

powder kegs everywhere with lit fuses. In the Throne Room where the Royal Guard stood watch they cast *Delayed Blast* spells. Then, from a safe vantage on the roof overlooking the courtyard they waited, still cloaked in invisibility.

At last the kegs and spells detonated. Pandemonium! What few of the Throne Room guards survived went immediately to check on LB who'd already risen. Other guards came clamoring through doors going this way and that, usually through the courtyard, where they were picked off with magic bolts from Petre's and Sullivan's crossbows. Nanna, who had been asleep in the nursery even as the children were being stolen, came storming out of a side door into the courtyard screaming for help and that the children were gone. Several guards tried to reassure her and calm her long enough to get a clear word out of her when they were pelted with bolts. Nanna screamed, running this way and that.

And then Sullivan did something for the first time in the presence of Petre that Petre would later ponder gravely. He took an infant from the bulging bag. A little girl named Kristy. He quickly broke open a skin containing oil and doused it on the child. Then he spoke a few words and the little girl ceased to be paralyzed. Immediately she went into a fit of crying – which turned into screaming when Sullivan set her on fire, picked her up, and hurled her at Nanna. Two guards burst into the courtyard just at the moment Nanna was struck by the wailing fireball. Nanna looked down as the flaming baby landed at her feet, writhing and kicking and then finally laying still. She grabbed her head in her hands and screamed, but it was too much for her and she fell to her knees in shock.

The guards gaped at the scene and were just whipping their heads around and up to see from where the flaming and blackened toddler had been flung when they were each struck in the chest by two more screaming balls of fiery atrocity. Max mercifully broke his neck on impact but Nicholas lay on the ground wriggling in pain, screeching horribly. Both guards stood stunned until one of them had sense enough to gather a wit or two and try to put out the flames. But his attempts met with little success and Nicholas was very quickly dead. The horrified misery of the guard was also alleviated when a crossbow bolt shot into his throat. The other guard was at a complete loss when others poured into the courtyard. And they were soon joined by Lord British and Raymundo who had been staying at the Castle as a bereaved guest.

Raymundo cried out, recognizing the yet uncharred bits of clothing that Max wore and ran to the pitiful little body, dropping to his knees, keening and sobbing. Lord British was in full wrath and the static of lightning bolt spells crackled about his hands. The guard who had been left standing before this fresh party had arrived numbly pointed up to the parapet above the courtyard. None of the guards saw anything, but Lord British narrowed his eyes. Something was there, cloaked by a magical ring. He could just make out the shadowy forms of two hunched figures up there.

Petre was suddenly in a panic. Lord British was looking right at them. If they tarried any longer there would be hell to pay. One more crossbow in Nanna's back and they were done. Petre whispered to Sullivan to pull out his stone and get the hell out of the castle. Doing so himself he winked out and was gone. But Sullivan lingered. He thought himself an artist after all. He had one more thing to do and then he could go.

Just then a lightning bolt struck the merlon he was most directly behind and was knocked backward by the shockwave. Shaking his head he picked himself up and the bag and ran to the southern battlements overlooking the moat and the entrance gate which was, even now, being drawn to keep any other attackers out and whoever might already be inside trapped. Sullivan grinned and took out not one stone but two. They were colored Virtue Stones. Petre had stolen them some while back along with the Lenses. Sullivan had the one Petre had *Marked* to the escape rendezvous point. The other one Sullivan had lifted for his own purposes, and he had *Marked* it to just outside the gate of the castle. Sullivan cast *Recall* on this one and was suddenly standing in the middle of the street looking across the moat at the raised drawbridge.

Sullivan made a quick check to see if he was still invisible. Seeing all was well, he reached into the bag and pulled out two tiny infants he'd snatched out of some cradles in the nursery. Both were already dead from suffocation. But, no matter. When people came to investigate what was going on, this is what they were going to see first. Sullivan pulled out his knife and completely gutted one of the babies, letting its diminutive entrails hang out to touch the ground. The other child was relieved of its limbs and eyes. The torso was set on the ground, upright and the sightless head allowed to loll back to stare at the sky. The entrails from the first baby were wrapped around it like a shawl.

Suddenly there was a sound. Sullivan looked up and saw a guard patrolling the entranceway notice the babies on the ground. He had drawn forth his halberd and was warily creeping forth onto the scene. As he got closer he gasped and recoiled. There was a sharp intake of breath as he prepared to hail other guards that might be in the vicinity. But he was suddenly silenced as, charmed, he fell under Sullivan's command.

Only a few minutes later, when a beggar came walking along the street looking to sell some of his jokes, he stopped and stared at the utterly horrific and absurd sight before him. A dead, bloody baby with no arms, legs, or eyes, gazing blindly at the heavens, wrapped in entrails and a town guard, standing naked in the street, holding another bloody and limp infant. The beggar nearly fainted when he saw what the guard was doing with the carcass. It was an abominable sight and the crippled beggar hobbled from the place and came back with other citizens who also gazed at the terrible display.

The guard was bucking his hips in a frenzied movement now, the limbs of the infant's body flailing wildly about in a sort of hideous rhythm. By this time a massive, incredulous crowd had gathered. Then there was a groan and the guard dropped the body to the ground, white fluid dripping from its mouth. There was dead silence in the crowd the shock was so extreme.

The guard, following some weird, pre-assigned program, went over to the small form wrapped in guts. The guard turned around and squatted over the upturned little head. He grimaced and turned red, grunting and seeming to heave with all his might. Those in the crowd who had the appropriate vantage held their hands to their mouths as the guard let fall a decent-sized brown turd.

He was about to go on and do other things when five street toughs pushed their way through the crowd and tackled the guard to the ground where they proceeded to beat him senseless and bloody. Then other guards showed up and tried to put a stop to the beating. A brawl ensued between citizens and guards until it acquired the size and momentum of a full-scale riot. A riot wherein feet on both sides trampled the bodies of the children without heed so incensed had everyone become for different reasons.

Only one person calmly chuckled and surveyed the scene. But even if anyone could have overheard that evil laugh they would have seen nothing. And, after Sullivan cast *Recall* on the other stone, there was nothing material there at all.

When Sullivan showed up at the rendezvous at the Fellowship Headquarters, Petre proceeded to yell at him for being late, demanding to know the reason. Before Sullivan could answer Petre launched into another incendiary tract concerning Sullivan's actions at the castle. The children were meant to be preserved for ransom and delivered to the castle dead later.

Sullivan tried to get a word in edgewise and explain to Petre that what he had done was liable to be even more sensational than a kidnapping. But Petre just glowered at him and then said, gratingly, that Sullivan had best watch his step and cease acting the part of a loose cannon. Petre knew very well how and when things were supposed to happen and he warned Sullivan to not step out of line again if he wanted to get the post he had envisioned. They were very close to realizing their mutual aims.

Sullivan took it all in stride and agreed with Petre on all points, vowing never to do anything that might jeopardize the Plan and that he would follow Petre's orders without fail and in all things.

Petre was somewhat assuaged by this placatory gesture from Sullivan. But he felt uneasy. Was there a tint of mockery to his voice?

And there the matter was left. The business of the next several days dwarfed the incident to insignificance and Petre had virtually forgotten it. But Sullivan quietly and smilingly seethed. Loose cannon, indeed! Sullivan's manufactured riot put a mere kidnapping to shame! The Herald convulsed with the news for the whole week, topping off the raid on the castle with a flourish. The testimony of the eyewitnesses who had seen the morbid placement of the baby and the actions of the guard were like a dollop of sweet cream on top of an already juicy vulva. Sullivan smiled at his handiwork (as he almost invariably did). The testimony of the guard could not be had as he was quite dead. In the scuffle, someone had seen fit to slip a dagger between his ribs and into his vitals. It all – as Petre liked to say – “made great copy”.

The Herald was unrelenting in its cry for blood. These “terrorists” had to be stamped out once and for all. The possible cooperation of town guards with the terrorists was also discussed due to the guard’s unnatural behavior and due to the fact that no terrorist was ever spotted or apprehended in ANY of the attacks. Some began to wonder if the guards themselves were responsible. But, soon, all was discovered and the town guards found themselves in the clear if not wholly trusted.

Spark had picked and trained the men for his team. Some of the most vicious bastards and bloodthirsty pirates and rogues one could ever meet. They were ready. Sullivan put on a great show of outrage at this “senseless act of terror committed by treasonous felons.” He further derided the Great Council for its lack of preparedness in handling this situation in addition to its slow response in dealing with the attacks by these traitors in other cities.

With the help of the Fellowship Sullivan and Petre pushed for and passed bills creating the Britannian Special Forces Group (BSFG), a sort of militia group serving to patrol, spearhead and perform military operations in the interests of handling these terrorist attacks. It was to be a crack assault team composed of the most highly-trained professional soldiers in Britannia. They also established the Britannian Secret Service (BSS), an internal policing organization whose express purposes were for the protection of government officials, the investigation into claims made by individuals regarding treasonous acts including assassination plots against government officials, policing matters of internal national security, investigating conspiracies to overthrow the government and counterfeiting currency.

In addition they enacted:

The Britannian National Security Bureau (BNSB) – the organization directly responsible for overseeing the affairs of state as they related to matters of national security, the BSS being its main enforcement arm.

Serpent’s Hold Military Training Grounds (SHMTG) – involving redevelopment of Britannia’s traditional training place for town guards and palace guards and paladin patrols, turning it into a modernized facility teaching updated methods of armed and unarmed combat and strategic warfare.

Serpent's Hold Military Police Training Center (SHMPTC) – an extension of SHMTG to train especially for military methods for civilian policing.

Naturally enough, Fellowship members were placed in administrative positions in all of these new organizations.

Elizabeth headed the BSS with Hook as its Chief Agent

Spark was officially named as Captain of BSFG and the SF Group itself was populated with the men Spark trained.

Abraham was made director of the BNSB.

Soon the Britannian Tax Council was balking at the massive funds being dumped into all of these new organizations. Patterson had also been president of the BTC before he'd "abdicated". After his death, without a named successor, the BTC had simply installed a "weak-willed sniveler" to replace him. He was stonewalling everything and blocking funds from being allocated complaining that Mayors cannot simply run around draining the coffers dry, Avatar or not. Obviously, he was not a Fellowship member, preferring the Virtues instead.

Petre finally had to manufacture some evidence of him engaging in illicit sexual perversions, throwing it all over the press until he relinquished his presidency of his own accord in shocked embarrassment. A compliant Fellowship member was quickly ushered in to occupy the seat.

Problems with the Royal Mint managers were solved by a similar business. The finances of Britannia were now fully at the behest of Fellowship control.

In the mean time the people were clamoring for something to be done about the terrorists. Support for the Avatar's Mayorship -- though promising with the creation of a military Special Forces Group and the refurbishment of military training -- was flagging. So far there had been no concrete results and the attacks continued. The invasion of Castle British and the horrible things done there stabbed at the very soul of Britannian hope for a government of prosperity, good will, and security. It was time to act.

One day Petre went out, posing as a reporter for the Herald doing a story on the BSFG, tagging along on a routine patrol. Spark had been well prepared and well rehearsed as the whole thing was being recorded via crystal ball.

They hiked for several days northwest of Britain and up into the mountains of Serpent's Spine. The meandered for a bit and finally zig-zagged their way to the entrance to Dungeon Despise, following up on a tip given to them by a logger in the area about strange people going in and out apparently heavily armed and doing training exercises and such. They searched the dungeon for some time and finally came upon a magically locked door.

Spark removed a leather wallet from a pouch at his side and opened it revealing several sheets of odd parchment. Each one was a copy of the *Unlock Magic* spell. Spark, being no magician, had to carry around sheets that could be only used once for each casting. It was explained he had to carry these in order to bypass just such an obstacle as now stood before them. He was also armed with normal lock picks and other door opening tools.

Spark pulled out a sheet, read the spell and watched it disappear as the last word was said. But the door was now unlocked and they could proceed. But, a little further down the tunnel and they came to another magically-locked door. Spark proceeded to repeat the procedure and they passed beyond the barrier...only to come to yet another door.

As a third *Unlock Magic* spell vanished from Spark's hand, one of his men pushed open the door and they all piled into the room that lay on the other side.

Chaos! There were men everywhere, some carrying weapons some not. But, indeed, they were caught utterly by surprise. Poisoned arrows whisked through the room and into the hearts and brains of obviously terrorist scum. The few who remained standing sprang for the door and attacked the interlopers, but they were dispatched immediately and as quietly as possible.

Stepping around the corpses they surveyed the room. A couple of troll heads were hung up decoratively on the wall. There was a table upon

which lay a fire wand, another on which lay a couple of bags of food and some stacks of gold coins. Another table in the corner bore alchemist apparatus. There was a crate of dishes and cups and a locked chest. The oddest thing in the room was a bed with curtains drawn around it. The nightstand next to it revealed a Magician's wand, a bag of invisibility dust and a key. The key simply unlocked the chest in which were piled reagents of all kinds.

Suddenly, one of the men in Spark's company made a silent sign and pointed upward. All looked and noticed a rectangular hole above them. Spark pressed himself against the wall to get an angled view into the chamber above and saw a wooden handrail on three sides, open at one end. It was as if it was designed to accommodate a stairway up to it. And then he saw something pass by. It was a head with a red bandana tied around it and a gold, hoop earring set in the ear. A pirate. And then another went by. The gaudy helm of a paladin. Voices wafted down to them. The occupants of the upper room did not appear to be aware of their visitors.

Quickly Spark looked about the room for a lever or mechanism that lowered a hidden ladder or staircase from some hidden trapdoor or panel. He signed for the others to do the same. They soundlessly scoured the room for some sign or clue. And then someone called Spark's attention to one of the bodies lying on the floor. Spark glanced at it, but nothing seemed amiss. He was about to query the man who'd indicated it when he glanced at it again and noticed the peculiarity in question. The corpse was lying on its left side, slightly rolled over onto its chest and its left leg was raised up off the floor, resting on nothing but air.

Spark smiled and went over to where the body lay. He pushed the foot and it slid off of whatever invisible thing it was on and thumped to the floor. He put his foot on the place it had been and he touched something solid. He slid it forward and his toe came in contact with another hard surface. Spark stepped up and repeated the procedure. Invisible steps!

He crept slowly up the staircase and peeked his head up above the line of the floor. Petre came slowly behind him. There were four terrorists sitting around a table drinking and speaking merrily about some plan of theirs to overthrow the government. Spark narrowed his eyes and, without taking his eyes off them, signaled with his hand to his men in the room below and charged up the steps. They were all taken by surprise and looked

at each other for a moment with puzzled expressions. Two crossbowmen came halfway up the steps and shot the mage and paladin several times before Spark and two other swordsmen reached the rogue and pirate. The pirate was beheaded instantly and the rogue put up a short fight before being riddled with holes by repeated sword thrusts from three sides.

As the four terrorists soaked the flagstones with scarlet, Petre commented on the stacks of documents in the room and maps hung on the walls. Riffing through some of the documents Spark “found” a treatise calling for the dissolution of the Britannian government, notes regarding prospects for assassinating Lord British, a document signed by these four agreeing to attack Castle British on the dawning of the seventh day. It gave a date corresponding to the attack that Petre and Sullivan had performed themselves. And this was all being recorded. Petre smiled as Spark broke open stacks of crates to reveal the most shocking thing of all: muskets. Hundreds of them. They had been preparing for an even greater coup.

There were also two teleporters in the room. Spark’s company traversed these and found more chambers with more terrorists. After brief exchanges of arrows and blades the terrorists soon surrendered. Spark had them taken in chains from Despise to be held for trial in Britain. He also had the documents and weapons sealed and loaded on carts for the same destination.

And that was that.

Everything had gone as planned. None of these malcontents knew Petre. The only four he’d come into contact with were dead. Corwin, Brax, Athelas, and Fransisa had recruited the rest of these filthy bastards. And what poor selections these substandard slobs turned out to be.

Petre, with a smile and a flourish, made copies of his crystal ball’s contents and played back the day’s events for all Britannia to see. It was plastered all over the papers. It was discussed in taverns, in schools, in the streets, in homes. Pictures of the terrorists were displayed. The faces of the enemy. These evil men had accomplished the bombings, murders, and the attack on Castle British. Some of the Herald’s readers had lost family members: grandparents, husbands, wives, sons and daughters. The horrible way in which the children in the Royal Nursery had been killed was inexcusable. The people had been formerly frightened and angry. Now,

with the enemy in hand, they thirsted for blood. That anger had been formerly directed at the guard who had been caught fornicating with the baby carcass in the street. After intense interrogation of all the palace staff and guards it was discovered that the attackers had used certain magical incantations in their offensive, allowing them to disappear from one location to another, render themselves invisible, and -- so one guard theorized, defending his fellow officer -- possibly charming others to commit grievous acts of hideousness and violence. This explanation didn't sit well with a cynical and terrified public. The people castigated the Royal Guards and Town Guards throughout Britannia for their ineptness and, possibly, criminal behavior. But, now Britannians had the real thing on their plate. The actions of the guard in front of the castle were tossed aside (to the relief of the rest of the guards) as the masses turned their frothing, toothy maws on the prisoners brought from Despise in chains. There was spitting and rock throwing. All of the Town Guards in Britain had to be called to quell the mobs of people who came to vent their anger.

Usually the Royal Judge in Yew handled the criminal trials, but in this case the Great Council ended up having to adjudicate the matter. Sullivan didn't give them much choice. There were mobs causing property damage all over the city and the terrorists were already here instead of on their way to Yew. They may as well get a trial on and over with. The evidence was in hand -- documents by the pound. And then there were the weapons. Much of the screaming and yelling stopped when the crates were dropped right in front of the castle and flung open. Filled to the brim with the strange devices Spark plucked one out. Someone in the crowd asked what it was, so Spark demonstrated. He loaded it, tied an apple to a lamppost, stepped back far enough to give dramatic effect, and blew the apple to pieces. There was a shocked, collective gasp in the crowd. Most had never seen such a thing before except a rare few who had taken a peek at one that used to reside in the Royal Museum but had been stolen several months ago along with the Virtue Stones. There had been one in a storeroom in Castle British, too, but it had also strangely turned up missing. The things were loud and deadly and those crates were filled with them. Spark turned the crates over, digging around in the piles. He was searching for something and then he picked up a musket. He searched around and found another one. He held them up.

“People of Britannia! The musket in mine left hand was stolen from the castle of Lord British. This other was stolen from the Royal Museum! These cretins are responsible. ‘Tis obvious what hast happened here. They

stole these guns and then used them as models to duplicate many! If the Britannian Special Forces Group had not caught these repugnant scoundrels then these weapons would have been used against thee and thy families!”

The murmuring that had been droning in the crowd grew to shouts of protest and threats of violence against the downcast, captured men who wriggled in their chains. They were glancing nervously at the crowd and at their armed escorts. Some cried for mercy, some babbled fragments of explanation: how they had been coerced by four men who came to them promising monetary rewards for their help in defeating an unexplained great evil, how they knew nothing of the guns, how none of this was their idea. They had been poor farmers, some of them from Paws, and had been given food and clothes for their families. These men were lowly and bankrupt, barely having any training in fighting at all let alone being told the purpose of their stay in Despise. They had done nothing.

But the screaming crowds would hear none of it and drowned out the pitiful protests of the “terrorists” with jeers and snarls. Spark led them over the drawbridge into the castle and dumped them into the courtyard under heavy guard. He and Sullivan met with the Great Council in their meeting chamber in the east wing of the palace that was, even now, undergoing reconstruction.

The meeting went on for a great while as the Great Council convened and the evidence was heard. The documents were brought forth and Petre had had the foresight to include false biographies of each of the people captured and those that were dead. Supposedly these bios had been kept updated by the central four responsible for this terrorist group, noting each man’s duties and accomplishments, notes for commendation or reprimand, awards given for a particularly devious act, etc.

Outside the crowds were demanding blood and Petre, properly disguised was fomenting violent riots. Shop signs were being broken and windows were being smashed. He reminded people about the stupidity of the guards and they started attacking them in force, throwing rocks and beating them with sticks. Regiments of guards were being sent for by messenger from other towns, but they were suffering similar fates. The only solid line was being held near the front gate to the castle until, at last, the drawbridge was hauled up. Still there were those who strove to brave the moat and its lurking, tentacled guardians and tried to swim across. Some

were killed by the creatures, some shot by guards, others were hauled out. On and on it went.

The Great Council, meanwhile, was very conscious about what was happening outside the gates. They had to reach a decision now and Sullivan knew it. Charles came in and informed them that Lord British was arguing to give the offenders clemency, possibly a reduced sentence, and wanted to get a list of their demands to see if they truly had a grievance that ought to be rectified. Lord British did not want to be known as a king who neglected his people and their troubles. Sullivan snorted at that, knowing full well that Lord British had been burying his head in the sand now for well nigh twenty years. And his love of the people was a dubious claim, at best.

The Great Council dismissed Charles. They very obviously wanted to abide by Lord British's request, but they didn't see how they could do much about it in light of the riots growling in the streets of Britain and, indeed, all over Britannia. Damn that contemptible newspaper! The Britannian people were shouting their lungs out for blood and death. Sullivan (the Avatar) advised them that something had to be done with these prisoners in a manner that would quell these mobs and satisfy their righteous and due anger. If not then these incensed mobs would cause more property damage and more lives would be lost. There were a few protests at the table. They absolutely could not give in to mob rule! It would be the death of the government if the people could just band together like that and change anything they wanted as they saw fit! Preposterous! Anarchy! They would have none of it! Who ever heard of such a thing! The peasants formulating national policy, indeed! Absolutely not! No, no, no! They stamped their feet and crossed their arms and glared, puffing their cheeks and grumbling about how insurrections of this sort would have been dealt with in the old days!

But the other members realized that violently opposing the people would cause more damage than they had on their hands already. And killing people who had a right to be angry in apparent protection of a few obviously guilty scoundrels might start a *real* revolution. Majority decided it. The prisoners were found guilty and sentenced to death by hanging, right outside in front of the castle.

But before the meeting was over, Sullivan turned their attention to other documents that had been "discovered" in Despise. It seemed that this group had been in contact with other groups just like them. The members of

the Great Council hung their heads in despair. There were more “terrorists”. Sullivan told them that the Britannian Special Forces Group would be busy indeed.

Sullivan had the guards at the gate lower the drawbridge and he went outside to deliver the news. Instantly there was cheering and demands for when and where. Sullivan told them that a platform would be set up right this minute and that by evening all of the terrorists would be executed. The crowd cheered again and all was done as promised. Hawkers and vendors even set up shop selling food, cigarettes, Swashbuckler’s Spit, and tasty new energy drinks containing something called caffeine. All was a success and the people were – momentarily – out of the nobility’s hair.

The Herald, of course, blared triumphant with the success of the BSFG. Spark and his team were heroes. Over the ensuing weeks further successes (although there were actually none as there were no more “terrorists” beyond the ones Petre created) cemented their usefulness and legitimacy into the minds of the people. Furthermore, Sullivan’s Mayorship was assured.

The discovery of the muskets was very alarming. The terrorists were warring against Britannia with superior firepower! A call for better armament for Britannia’s security was demanded. And then it was revealed by the Britannian Secret Service that there even more enclaves of dissidents throughout the land (most of these were really just remote, independent pirate outposts and straggling forest dwellers). Many of these terrorist bastards were toting around muskets and cannons while guards and the BSFG were carrying swords and bows. The Britannian National Security Bureau and the Avatar harangued the already-rattled Great Council. But, they were not budging, not seeing it wise to contribute to the wholesale manufacture of such weapons.

The BSS reports, the pressure coming down from the BNSB and the Britannian Herald (and, by implication, the people) were trying hard to break the Great Council. They, indeed, appeared to be cracking, but a few voices were keeping them constrained. One of those was a newly appointed Great Councilman. None other than Raymundo, the bereaved husband who had lost Miranda in the drowning at Lock Lake with Lord Heather, and one-time father of Max (one of the children from the Royal Nursery who had been burned alive and thrown down from the top of the castle at stunned Royal

Guards). It was amazing he had enough emotional will left to go on living let alone fight political battles on the Great Council.

But he was the most outspoken against the plan. His platform was an end to violence. That, of course, made him a target. Sullivan grated at his lip service and pitiable mewling in Council session. His pleading and aggressive attacks against everything Sullivan and Petre were trying to accomplish had grown tiresome in the extreme. Something had to be done.

And something was. At the next Great Council elections the Avatar declared to the people that he was going to run for a Great Council seat. His popularity, influence and media support got him that seat with ease. Once in he immediately went to work battling with the Great Council directly. Petre, meanwhile, had been digging for dirt on all of them. And what he couldn't find he made up. He approached them all and blackmailed every single one of them.

Raymundo, however, was taken aback and shouted at Petre to get his filth away. Raymundo tried going to the papers with Petre's attempted blackmail scheme and was disappointed when absolutely no mention of it was made in the Herald.

Suspicious now of Fellowship motives he sought to acquire Great Council approval for an investigation into the Fellowship's affairs but was voted down. Instead he was sent by Great Council decree to Terfin for the purpose of investigating rumors of unrest there. Raymundo was furious but was told that the matter took precedence. This declaration shocked Inwisloklem and Wislem who had heard nothing of the kind. Nevertheless the Great Council desired a human emissary be sent to oversee the investigation. When pressed for information regarding the source of the rumors the Great Council merely stated that it had been indicated in BSS reports.

There was also a demand on the agenda by the BSS for a service administrating and funding intelligence-gathering activities throughout the lands. The Britannian Intelligence Agency (BIA) was the result. Elizabeth took charge of this agency and advanced Hook (whose name had been changed to Maldus) the directorship of the BSS. (Petre had also given Hook a new hand.)

With Petre's hold on the Great Council, Sullivan managed to pass many new bills:

The Britannian National Standards Institute (BNSI), a necessary requirement for standardizing techniques and methods for coming research and mass-production efforts throughout the world.

The Britannian Automatic Rifle Manufacturing Company (BARMCo.), a state-subsidized corporation that would arm the military.

Then a bill creating an official military broken up into three branches:

Britannian Army (BA)

Britannian Navy (BN)

Britannian Marines (BM)

Separate from these entities was the Domestic Military Police which would replace all the guards (royal and town). All new recruits would be trained at Serpent's Hold. All old guards would be sent back to the Hold for retraining in the new methods.

The Herald made much of these changes pronouncing them as a long overdue revamping of an overly-traditional system of town guards that had proven inadequate in handling Britannia's enemies.

The Herald further described the necessity for increasing the quality of life for Britannian citizens. Research into making new materials and new processes would be required. This opened the path for a bill creating Britannian Laboratories (BL), a state-run research and development facility.

Not long after this the Britannian Chemical Company (BCCo.) was formed, of course, on the very shores of Lock Lake. In fact, it took over much of the town of Cove, turning that once-beautiful region into a gutter of industrial waste and belching smoke stacks. Soon the only people who lived there were people who worked at the chemical plant. A few broken-down hovels for the workers, a nasty, decrepit-looking tavern that only sold Swashbuckler's Spit, energy drinks and cigarettes, and a whorehouse comprised Cove. The place was soon sooty and gray and wraithlike, nestled

as it was below the mountains, maintaining a haze of putrid smog over the terrain. And the reek was detestable beyond imagining. It got into everything. Not just one's clothes. It seemed to soak right into one's body. From then on a person could always tell a man from Cove by his smell, assuming his drab and sullen composure didn't give him away first.

Meanwhile, Petre had Forskis fomenting hatred for human beings among the gargoyles of Terfin and disrespect for the Principles. But Petre completely mistrusted Forskis over the long term. Forskis believed he was helping these evil humans for his own purposes, giving him an eventual opportunity to wreak gargoyle revenge on the human race. Petre knew of Forskis' plan to kill the Avatar as soon as he was able to return to Britain. Well then, Forskis would simply not return. Until then he had his uses.

Petre prepared a forged Great Council letter, fully sealed, for Sullivan to give Raymundo before he left for Terfin. He was to give it to Forskis at the Fellowship Hall there upon his arrival.

Concerning Britannia's domestic problems, the BSFG was busy routing out criminals on the loose in the land. Long-standing offenders in hiding on the books were given chief attention.

Petre had Sir Jeff, the Royal Judge, mysteriously disappear in the mountains on a hunting expedition and had Sullivan vote in a new High Court official. A Fellowship member from Vesper was installed to the post.

With this little detail attended to criminals could be railroaded through the court system and executed publicly in front of Castle British. The beauty of it all was that nobody knew what many of the criminals looked like, the descriptions given (if any details of such nature were to be had) were vague at best. The arrests of Kellin, Sullivan and Hook were declared, but it was not these men who went to trial or were executed.

The execution of Hook had been changed to be particularly bloody in order to assuage the savage hunger of the crowds. He was put on a rack and stretched while starving rats in a cage were held against his stomach, chewing out his innards. The people that were killed were outspoken against the Fellowship.

Sullivan's stunt double had been none other than Anton, his former cell neighbor dragged up from the depths of the Fellowship dungeon. He was strung up on a gibbet and pelted with stones handed out to the angry mobs. Petre had created a minor illusion around him so that he did, indeed, look like Sullivan. This was done for the benefit of Abraham and Elizabeth, just in case they still cared. A rotten corpse was dumped in Anton's cell in his place.

There were lots more of those these days: corpses, prisoners and executions. They had to hire more trolls to torture the ever-increasing population of "political dissidents" that Maldus' (Hook's) BSS was quietly dredging up from all over the countryside and depositing into the Fellowship dungeon.

Finally, Lord British himself had to come out of his hole long enough to criticize the Avatar and the Great Council concerning their methods of handling the executions, particularly Hook's. He did not approve of executions to begin with, and certainly cared less for the executions being public events!

Sullivan, absolutely seething in L.B.'s presence, said he would take care of it. But, as soon as he was out of sight he ordered the Fellowship dungeon emptied of half its contents and delivered to the execution dais in front of the castle in chains. The Britannian Herald printed a story about a major enclave of murderers and baby-rapers that had been captured. The Royal Court Judge simply signed off saying they'd been tried and were found guilty. Sullivan spent a solid month dreaming up creative methods of torturing and executing these prisoners in groups at a time, every day of the week. Bloodthirsty citizens from all over Britannia were coming to see the daily show. Lord British had nothing more to say.

In the absence of palace security after the deaths of Geoffrey and Nystul, Petre had infiltrated Fellowship members into the military staff. Lord British was no longer surrounded by people he could confide in. The ones with whom he could were powerless to do anything or find out what was happening to Britannia. He remained silent, falling under the spell of his ever-growing ennui. He had his suspicions but was simply too unsure.

On Terfin, when Raymundo finally arrived at the Fellowship Hall, Forskis took the proffered letter and read the Great Council command to

place Raymundo under arrest in a Terfin dungeon. Forskis was about to scoff when he noticed a small, secret symbol that Petre used. Forskis grinned nastily to himself and realized the Great Council order was a fake, for Raymundo's benefit. It not being time yet to dissolve his relationship with his human co-conspirators, Forskis did as the order commanded and, after showing it to a shocked Raymundo, had him dragged away and locked up.

Things had moved along quite well. The first phase of the Terfin project was near completion. Mainland Britannia was very much in Petre's grip. At this point only two more things needed to be taken care of and then he and Sullivan could go on and do the rest of the job that would consolidate their power. Petre went to Sullivan and explained to him what had to be done. Sullivan, badly in need of a vacation, readily agreed. He took a couple of glass swords and the two lenses that Petre had stolen from the Royal Museum and off he went on the magic carpet.

Chapter 9: Playing with the Isle of Fire

The Britannian Herald headlines began screaming about a horrible new threat to the world:

**PSYCHE OF EXODUS RETURNS TO
DARK CORE FROM VOID!**

**ISLE OF FIRE RISEN AGAIN FROM THE
DEPTHS!**

**AVATAR BRAVES UNKNOWN DANGER,
SEEKS ULTIMATE DESTRUCTION OF
EXODUS!**

The people were buzzing with new excitement. Panic again in the streets. Oh, woe! Oh, woe! If the Avatar fails we're doomed! Blah, blah, blah. Petre smiled and made some public announcements regarding the Avatar's departure and his intentions to rid Britannia forever of this ancient evil and restore peace and security. From out of his pocket he produced a small metal box with a keypad on it. Pressing a few buttons Petre commanded the Sphere Generator to reactivate the moongates.

Meanwhile, Sullivan was flying high over the oceans on the magic carpet, breathing in the chill morning air and mentally going over all that he and Petre had discussed. He knew all about the tests, the current habitation of the Castle of Fire by Erstam the mage, and the things he needed to do to fashion the Black Sword. The tests were the tricky part. They were designed so that only the real Avatar could complete them. But complete them he must or he would not get the Talismans he needed to destroy the Core. How would he do that? Simple. He would cheat.

Petre had made a great study of the island and worked everything out so that Sullivan could just get to the essential points and get what was required to do the job. This essentially meant skipping the tests themselves

but still getting credit for completing them since completion of a test was triggered only by the acquisition of a Talisman.

Sullivan saw the dark form of the island on the horizon. By noon he was passing over an inlet between two great towers and into a little bay. Landing on the northern shore he saw the Castle of Fire. It's black stone spires and walls soared above him as he approached the blasted and charred front gate. Ah, yes, the dragon. Sullivan stopped and wiped some of the soot from a twisted iron bar. Big deal, he thought. Dracothraxus was supposed to die in the test anyway, bound by forces that governed the very tests themselves. Maybe an Avatar was required to kill one as great as she. But, a glass sword or two in the gut should do just as well.

He went inside and immediately searched out Erstam and spoke with him. The distrustful, blind old man was polite but insincere in his gentility. He wanted nothing more than for Sullivan to just go away and leave his toys alone. But, he was quite excitable when discussing some of his favorite topics and was eager to share what knowledge he learned, though at times he would clam up as if he felt he had revealed too much. Sullivan told him he just wanted to look around a bit and then he would depart. At this Erstam seemed slightly relieved, but he gave nauseatingly persistent warnings for Sullivan to keep his hands in his pockets and to not go bumping into things.

Next, Sullivan found the Dark Core. Radiating evil as usual. The mirror was more interesting and he had a delightful conversation with the daemon, Arcadion, who lived within it. After some time had passed and they had come to some agreements to exchange aid they reluctantly ended their conversation and parted fast friends. Birds of a feather.

Sullivan headed for the chamber to his left and entered a moongate. This took him into the tunnels that comprised the Test of Courage. He had several Mass Death spells ready for use and applied these throughout the test without having to lift a finger. When he came to Dracothraxus' chamber he threw the first glass sword at her and hacked off her head with the other before she could even say a word.

Even so her corpse was made whole again and she spoke, offering him a gem that was inside her mouth. All he had to do was take it. Sullivan, without hesitation, took it. This was all part of the script. Boring.

Dracothraxus began speaking about their next meeting but Sullivan was already walking away.

He bore the gem back to the mirror and struck it with the scintillating, azure treasure, pouring the essence of the daemon from the mirror into the little blue stone. Sullivan marched right off to Erstam and told him he needed the unfinished sword and some blacksmith equipment set up. Erstam asked why and how did Sullivan know he had a blackrock sword? So, Sullivan explained the whole tedious story in a hurried and irritated voice, urging Erstam to just get on with it.

Eventually the old geezer did get on with it, and after a few bungling attempts finally got it right and Sullivan had his blacksmith equipment and the unfinished blade.

More hours of tedium later, Sullivan figured he'd done all he could with the blade to get it as close to perfect as possible. But it was still heavy and unwieldy. It was as good a time as any to use the gem. He took out the blue stone that held Arcadion and brought sword and stone together.

There was a brilliant flash! There was a sound of rending metal! Then the light abated and there was the sword in his hand. It was light, superbly balanced, and glowed with a dark sheen, the blue stone emanating pure malevolence from the pommel.

The daemon spoke to Sullivan again, remarking on his powers that he could now make available for Sullivan's use. Well, may as well test them out.

He went back to Erstam's chamber and commanded Arcadion to kill the mage. The Black Sword seemed to swing of its own volition as Sullivan brought the sword down on Erstam. Arcadion's power drained the life and soul right out of the blind, old man and channeled that power straight into Sullivan. His knees buckled and he fell, trembling to the ground. Never in his life had he experienced such pleasure! It was pure ecstasy, this consuming of a soul! And to suck the life out of one as powerful as this mage must have been gave him a feeling of boundless energy. Time to *really* test this!

He ran again to the moongate that delivered one to the Test of Courage. Instead of using spells, he hacked and slashed his way through the tunnels, killing everything in his path and draining their life essences from them. Dracothraxus was absorbed with such ecstatic force that Sullivan passed out for several hours before regaining consciousness and passing through the chamber that contained the Talisman of Courage.

Merely picking up the Talisman brought him to the Castle of Fire. He stood in the northernmost chamber of the castle, looking into the blank eyes of a statue of a soldier. It was the Shrine of Courage. It told him a bunch of pre-recorded crap and bestowed a gift of strength upon him, making him three times as strong as a normal man.

Next he traversed the Test of Truth, but only a short distance. The Talisman was hidden in a small room that had an invisible passage leading to it that was near the beginning of the test. The rest of the tunnels were just a trick to waste time and energy. Upon reappearing before the statue of the mage that was the Shrine of Truth, a gift of intelligence was given him. His spells would now be easier to perform and more potent.

Last was the Shrine of Love. He passed through the moongate and came out onto a small island ringed around on all sides by mountains. Easy enough. Petre had informed him that the stone golems were susceptible to the Magician's wand and would be destroyed with a few shots. Sullivan pointed it at the golem standing near another that had fallen in the middle of a sand pit. He fired several times until it broke apart and fell to the ground in pieces.

It was the already-fallen golem on the ground that he wanted. He searched around with his fingers over the rough stone body until he heard a faint click and felt a small door open. The Talisman of Love was in his hand and suddenly he appeared before the Shrine of Love. The statue gave him a gift that would increase his dexterity and, thus, his skill with weapons. Sullivan smiled at her and hacked off the statue's head with the Black Sword. Strangely there was a quantity of power that flowed into him. Perhaps there had been a spirit animating the Shrine after all? Sullivan hacked at the other two. Same thing. Interesting!

Sullivan went back into the room that held the Core, set up the gargoyle and Britannian lenses so that they were between the Core and the

torches on the walls. Then he set the Talismans of Truth, Love and Courage on top of the Core. There were flashes of electrical discharge in the room, the Talisman of Infinity momentarily appeared on top of the Core with the other Talismans. Then there was a great explosion and a shock that threw Sullivan backward to the floor. A moment later Sullivan looked up and saw that the Dark Core was gone, sent back to the Void at last.

All in a day's work, thought Sullivan. Alighting on the carpet, he commanded it to rise. But before he left the area he wanted to find another little island. He steered about here and there until he spied it. Landing in a little mountain-ringed valley he explored around a bit until he found a great rock that seemed to have red veins coursing their way through it. The Stone of Castambre, and on it was perched the Tree of Life. A deer was quietly grazing upon the lush grass nearby.

“Let us dispense with this nonsense, shall we, Arcadion?” Sullivan addressed the daemon.

Arcadion crooned with pleasure as he divined Sullivan's intended nastiness. Sullivan pointed the Shade Blade at the deer and a gout of fire poured forth. The ground over which it passed exploded in blazing heat and then its destination was reached. When the fire ceased the deer was roasted to charcoal. Not satisfied with that minor evil Sullivan hacked at the tree and the stone draining the life energy from each.

Suddenly, Sullivan fell writhing to the ground, paroxysms of a million orgasms passing over and through him. It nearly killed him. Slowly, as his heart began to beat normally again, he looked up and saw the tree quite dead and shriveled. The stone was grey and lifeless, the formerly red veins devoid of all color.

Sullivan stood up carefully and moved about, discovering as he did so that his trousers were moist. Had he peed on himself? Curiously he undid his trousers and looked. His eyes bugged at what he saw. Indeed, the million orgasms he felt he had experienced seemed to have actually occurred. His pants were soaking wet and slimy with semen. And wonder of all wonders but his penis had grown to an enormous size! It hung there limp and exhausted but its size was greater than that of a horse!

Sullivan pulled his trousers down completely and gathered the fleshy pole in his hand. It was huge! He played with it and found it quick to respond to even the slightest touch. At once it was rock hard and throbbing painfully. There was nothing to do but to relieve it, so he masturbated right then and there. In a moment he heaved forth a sticky spray of white glop that landed on the ground several feet in front of him with an audible thud. Well, this has been a day for wondrous benefits, he thought. What's one more?

Sullivan got back on the carpet and headed back to Britain. Simply the action of his penis rubbing slightly against his trousers caused it to engorge with blood and become painfully erect. He masturbated twenty-eight more times before landing at Castle British by nightfall. And when he hastily pulled up his trousers he had to run off and masturbate three more times before he managed to carefully walk toward the Throne Room to gain an audience with Lord British.

He could barely concentrate well enough to inform L.B. that the Dark Core had been destroyed and that he apologized for his earlier mishandling of the executions and that all would be rectified.

Lord British gave him the benefit of the doubt, having felt the passage of Exodus to the Void himself. That alone was worthy of some kind of reward. So Lord British lightly touched Sullivan's forehead and gave him another gift of strength that made Sullivan essentially six times stronger than a normal man.

As soon as the meeting was over Sullivan practically ran to the carpet and flew low over the city until he found two children, a boy and a girl each about twelve or thirteen years of age, having sex in a copse of trees at the edge of town. Sullivan quietly landed nearby and ran over to them. The pain in his groin was too much to bear. He felt like he was going to explode.

He burst upon the two kids and without warning or preamble jumped on the boy's back, effectively holding them both down. He was looking into the eyes of the girl as he pulled down his trousers and shoved his horse penis into the boy's rectum. He quickly gushed the same humungous amount of white glop that he had on every other occasion since the incident with the tree. But, it was very tight where he was and he was instantly hard again and painfully aware of it. He rutted the boy, riding him hard, pushing the

boy's own penis in and out of the girl who was actually rather enjoying the feeling and enjoying the boy's plight whom she didn't really like that much. She was just bored and he was there.

Sullivan gushed again. And then again. Ten more times after that. There was slimy goo everywhere. All three of them were slipping around in it. The boy finally passed out, his ass was bleeding, and still Sullivan rode on, unheeding.

The girl yelled at him, "Why dost thou not rape me? The boy doth grow small and soft inside me. I dost feel nothing!"

"Shut up, you!" Sullivan growled at her. But, he pushed the boy away, slipped into her, and went to work on her violently, her breasts bobbing madly in the onslaught.

Sullivan erupted sixteen more times. He couldn't stop. Suddenly, he heard a voice. It was Arcadion, speaking from the Black Sword in its sheath by his trousers. Sullivan drew it out and the girl screamed. Arcadion said to him that if he wanted this to stop for a time he had to kill the boy and the girl. Their energy flowing through him at the moment of orgasm would be sufficient to quell the appetite of his new organ for a time. How long a time? Oh, it varied. Sometimes a day. Sometimes a few hours. But always when the hunger struck it had to be fed or Sullivan would die from the agony as his member sought in vain for something else to penetrate.

And so the boy and the girl both fell to the hideous blade and Sullivan, exhausted, felt somewhat normal again. What an odd fate this was to be so afflicted. But no matter. There could be worse fates than this. It was actually mandated now that he do the things he normally did for pleasure. Plausible deniability. "The devil made me do it." Sullivan laughed.

He had superhuman powers now and the most lethal magical artifact in Britannia. He knew it. And he was impatient with Petre's slow pace. But, he would hold his tongue. For a little while longer he would hold his tongue.

Chapter 10: To Be War!

Sullivan returned to the Fellowship Hall the next morning to meet with Petre. He gave a partial account of his dull adventure, leaving out most of the indiscriminate slaying and the episode at the Tree of Life. Petre wanted to see the sword and nodded in a knowing fashion when Sullivan unsheathed it. A strange sensation overcame Sullivan then, as the sword lay naked before him. He actually had to suppress an urge that seemed to come from the sword itself to cut Petre down where he stood. But Sullivan managed to get control of himself and, with some effort, replaced the sword in its scabbard. He could not tell if Petre had noticed his odd behavior as the man was instantly all business and rummaging around on his desk for something.

“Thou shouldst see this,” said Petre and he handed Sullivan the morning paper.

The front-page story spoke of Spark’s Special Forces Group patrolling in the territory west of Trinsic. In Dungeon Destard they chanced upon a gargoyle named Kallibrus and two human companions going under the names of Cairbre and Cosmo. They were carted up to the Royal Prison in Yew (which had undergone quite a bit of expansion recently) and the story proceeded to explain the reason. It was announced that

“...Kallibrus was found hiding out in Dungeon Destard with Cairbre and Cosmo, going over plans and charts. The plans that were seized contained data collected by these individuals regarding regional surveys and observations of Britannian military details. Records found in the possession of these individuals contained written mandates from high-level gargoyle government officials to seek out information for the planning of an attack against the Britannian mainland. The attack was to begin with an initial spearhead invasion on Serpent’s Hold from Terfin. Establishing a base of operations there would allow the occupation of the various islands northwest of Serpent’s Hold, gradually moving up the mainland, taking Trinsic, Paws, and finally piercing the heart of Britain itself, leaving some troops on the western shores near Trinsic to discourage a possible naval/marine thrust from Jhelom. The Great Council is currently engaged in a formal investigation of this matter. The three suspects await trial on charges of High Treason and Espionage.

“Information brought to the Council’s attention hath informed them that many disgruntled humans (in fact, many of the same humans that hath been causing so much trouble in the recent past) hath allied themselves with the gargoyles in this endeavor to wipe out the Britannian government. These humans hath been assisting the gargoyles in whatever way they can with whatever traitorous means they hath available. Motivations of these people are many and varied, ranging from age-old hatreds against Lord British by outdated organizations heralding from times of Old Sosaria, to selfish motivations for territorial gain and monetary profit. These persons are helping to finance a gargoyle assault.

“Inwisloklem and Wislem both vehemently deny any knowledge of Kallibrus’ activities. Neither dost they have any information regarding Cairbre or Cosmo. They both further deny that the gargoyle race is planning and/or preparing for an invasion of the Britannian mainland, or an invasion against any other place. The trial of the three suspects wilt begin tomorrow morning.”

Sullivan looked up from the article. “So, what now?”

“Now? We dost wait. In a few days the Royal Judge will report that Kallibrus hath given a full confession of his guilt that will explain his intent and involvement as a spy for Terfin. In this confession he wilt also officially implicate his countrymen and King as being party to constructing the machinery of war and that Draxinusom himself gave the order for intelligence to be collected for the purpose of engaging in a war with Britannia.”

“And I suppose,” said Sullivan, “that you’ve been up all night making sure that document had all its t’s crossed and i’s dotted before sending it off to the Royal Judge in Yew?”

“Of course! We both know that the gargoyles on Terfin hath no such intentions. But we must keep the ball rolling on a war footing. Keep the people riled and upset, thinking about other things, making sure that they dost keep their faith in us to plan a winning battle against evil everywhere.”

“So how are things going on Terfin, anyway?” Sullivan had readily taken up smoking cigarettes and promptly lit one now, inhaling it deeply and breathing out with a very satisfied, slow exhalation.

“Splendidly!” Petre sat down in his chair and put his feet up on his desk. “As thou dost know I hath had Forskis working day and night to stir things up there and he hath been working closely with Runeb at the Fellowship Hall and Sarpling who art the island’s provisioner. Just a few days ago the three of them blew up the Shrine of Singularity, blaming the action on humans. Forskis then simply killed Quan, former leader of the Fellowship Hall on Terfin, and installed Runeb in his place. Runeb immediately started holding public meetings calling for all-out war against human-dominated Britannia, ‘Down with Lord British,’ that sort of thing. Just yesterday I didst send a ship loaded with cannons and machinery for fast ship construction. Forskis shalt receive it in secret. I hath also sent Owen in suitable disguise to oversee the building of the vessels for the gargoyles.”

“Owen,” Sullivan laughed. “Yes, very clever.”

“I hath Forskis in charge of building up Terfin’s defenses and the invasion force that was, before this, utter fantasy. Last night I didst return from Vesper. I am stepping up the Britannian Purity League’s anti-gargoyle literature and recorded reenactments to a new fever pitch. The angry mobs hath been getting angrier. Inwisloklem and Wislem hath already been accosted so many times by angry citizens that they hast now an armed escort when leaving the castle to their assigned quarters at the edge of town.”

“Thou hast been busy,” said Sullivan idly. All this preparation! Given his newly acquired powers he began to seriously doubt the necessity of all of this. Why not just shoot straight for the gold?

“Indeed,” said Petre. “For now do nothing. Thy time will come very soon. Just one more obstacle in our path need be removed.”

“When?” asked Sullivan flatly.

“By the end of the month thou shalt be putting that blade to most excellent use.”

“I cannot wait,” said Sullivan, unsmiling. He turned then and left. A familiar urge was upon him that had to be sated.

* * * * *

The next week brought new headlines. The Britannian Special Forces Group hauled in another spy. Fodus, a gargoyle miner from Minoc. “...In his possession were found notes on military activity in the area and plans and charts detailing a proposed invasion route from Terfin, crossing the mountains into Minoc, taking that fair city, and then marching south to Cove and finally west to Britain. Also on his person were found instructions from Draxinusom himself to smuggle out lead ore so that a gargoyle mage could transform it into gold in order to help finance secret operations on the mainland. Fodus has given a full confession...” The Herald burned with the news and the citizens fumed.

Within the Great Council, strained members trying to come to some kind of a decision as to what should be done began to slowly realize that Raymundo had not returned. They needed to find out what in Hells was really going on anyway, so in order to stall further thinking on the grave matters set before them it was decided to send a diplomatic envoy to Terfin to get to the bottom of this ridiculousness once and for all. The Great Council members more-than-half thought, in light of their recent blackmailings, that this was all some sort of Fellowship hoax to achieve some idiotic political end. They did not realize, however, just how right they were.

Four members of the Great Council were voted to go on this diplomatic fact-finding mission, escorted by a conscript of Britannian Marines. They set sail at once.

On their way to Terfin, however, a fast attack ship (carrying Spark and his Special Forces Group) sailed close and fired her cannons. The target vessel -- being a diplomatic ship and, hence, without cannons -- was poked full of holes and began presently to take on water. The crew did their best to try to turn and flee but the attacking vessel was soon alongside and boarding her. The Britannian Marines were no match for Spark's men. Within fifteen minutes of boarding, the SFG was off again, leaving the diplomatic vessel to sink beneath the waves with all hands lost.

The following week brought strange news of “survivors” picked up amidst the wreckage of a vessel that was later identified as the diplomatic ship that the Great Council had just sent to Terfin. At an open Great Council forum attended by the public, this group of survivors was interrogated. One happened to be a reporter from the Britannian Herald who carried the most damning evidence anyone could hope to find. The crystal ball he had carried on that ill-fated journey had recorded everything. Now he played it back, projecting it for all to see.

This is what the Britannian people saw: A ship loaded with a crew of gargoyles had pulled alongside the diplomatic vessel, boarded it, and killed as many people as possible while setting explosive charges to blow up the ship. The Great Council diplomats were brutally slain before the ship was destroyed. And on board the gargoyle war ship, shouting and giving orders, was the unmistakable visage of Lord Draxinusom himself.

The results of the forum were carried on the Herald’s Special Bulletins and news viewings. The world was shocked. Petre admired his visual creation and patted himself heartily on the back.

The very next day Cosmo, Cairbre, Kallibrus, and Fodus were all publicly tortured and executed at the front gate of Castle British. The Avatar himself did the torturing and performed the final executions. The gathered citizens cheered him on and savagely exulted at each cut and burn. The whimpering cries from Fodus were the most pitiful and the Avatar took an extra long time to kill him because of that.

From a window in one of the towers in the castle, Lord British looked upon the sad scene and wept considerably. He felt very alone. Whatever that thing was down there murdering those men (who were probably innocent) was not the Avatar. There was no doubt left in his mind. Deep misgivings and a heavy weight of oppressive powerlessness came over Lord British then. All anger left him and the void was filled with a debilitating depression. He turned from the window and went weeping to his bedchamber. He felt that very soon his time was coming.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, Petre had made a blackrock copy of the Shade Blade that Sullivan bore. He put together a trunk full of books. Odious-titled books of

black magic and incendiary political tracts such as *The Black Compendium* by Mondain, *The Tome of the Dead* by Suvol Shadowface, *Artifacts of Darkness* by Mordra Morgaelin, *Modern Necromancy* by Horance, *A Short Treatise on Britannian Society* by Clayton, and *Thy Message Received!* By For-Lem. There were other titles as well that built a kind of mental profile of the owner of such books and provided a clue as to their intent. Titles such as *A Complete Guide to Britannian Minerals, Precious, and Semi-Precious Stones* by B. Ledbetter, *What Color is Thy Blade?* by Menion, *The Blacksmith's Handbook* by Christopher, *Observations of Black Rock* by Rudyom the mage, *Book of Prophecy* by Naxatilor the Seer, *Lord British: The biography of Britannia's longtime ruler* by K. Bennos, *The Hundred and Eleven Year, Three-Month, Seven-Day War* by Perrin, *The Carver Chronicles* by Morfin, and *Murder by Mongbat* by J. Dial.

Petre also placed a whole collection of lethal magic weapons into the trunk along with documents specifying plans to assassinate Lord British, how to go about it (using the Black Sword), and correspondence from Draxinusom ordering Wislem and Inwisloklem to do so. Last among the documents was a very recent letter from the two gargoyle representatives to Draxinusom, not yet sent, stating in no uncertain terms that they were going to eliminate Lord British with pleasure. The letter was dated for that very day that Petre placed it in the trunk. He laid the Black Sword copy on top of the pile and closed the trunk. After these preparations had been attended to Petre met with Sullivan and explained the plan.

Later that very night Spark and his Special Forces Group slew the soldiers that were standing guard around the domicile in which Wislem and Inwisloklem lived. He tossed a sleep grenade through their open roof and stole inside, covering his face with a cloth. Two of his men wearing cloth tied around their faces crept inside behind him carrying Petre's special trunk of goodies. They set it on top of a table and booby-trapped it. Then they sank back into the shadows, careful not to disturb the two gargoyle sleepers.

* * * * *

A jeweled net of stars hung thick over Castle British. Sullivan stopped a moment to admire them as he often liked to do on his walks at night. He breathed deeply of the chill night air and sighed. The unnatural urge was close upon him again and he was in the middle of working. This little affliction of his was getting to be a bothersome problem. He couldn't

afford to screw this up and here he was walking up to the main gate of the palace with an erection.

He penetrated the castle's gaping orifice and entered the secret passage that ran around its inside perimeter. All he had to do was get to the northwest corner of the castle, do his duty, and then he could prowl around for some juicy morsel.

He made it about halfway along when he simply couldn't stand it anymore. He had to take care of it or he might slip up at the crucial moment. He pressed a lever in the passageway and a panel in the wall opened. Stepping through he found himself in the bedroom of Bennie and Boots who were quietly snoozing in the darkness.

Sullivan drew his sword and hacked off Bennie's head. The familiar flood of life-force oozed into his nervous system like warm, electrified wine. Boots immediately started up and would have screamed had not Sullivan clamped his hand over her mouth. He undid his pants and turned her on her stomach. As his horse cock stretched her anus to a circumference beyond its design specifications, Boots did scream, but the pillow her face was buried in muffled it. Sullivan spent his massive, sticky blob, projecting it into her bowels. And at that moment the sword did its work and sucked the soul right out of her. It felt as if the sucking of energy was being drawn right out of her innards and through Sullivan's giant member and into his body, as though his penis were a great siphon.

Drifting out of his reverie and back to reality, Sullivan redressed, regrouped, and returned to the secret passage. When he reached the end he pulled another lever and another panel clicked open.

He was in a small room with a table and chair, a chest of drawers, and a lewd painting hung on the wall. A door stood closed to the east. When, at last, he opened it he saw the curtained bed of Lord British. Petre had checked a crystal ball that viewed Lord British's bedchamber to make sure he was asleep before Sullivan entered the castle. Sullivan hoped old L.B. hadn't decided to get up to get a glass of warm milk.

Sullivan silently slid into the room and practically floated over to the bed. Lord British was sound asleep, laying on his side. Sullivan went around to the side of the bed so he could position himself for a good hack.

The curtains were down on this side so Sullivan quietly pushed them away, momentarily obscuring his view of Britannia's king.

When Sullivan pushed back the curtains and dropped his arm he froze. There, sitting straight up in bed, staring at him was Lord British -- wide awake.

“What evil treachery is this, Avatar-thou-art-not?”

Sullivan would have answered but Arcadion piped up from the Black Sword and addressed the king. “Greeting! Salutations! Didst thou soil thy sheets, O king? Thou dost reek! Or dost thou stink only of fear?”

“So,” said Lord British, “thou hast discovered the secret of mine undoing. But, I will laugh to my grave, for thou art truly a slave to thy weapon, my unfriend. Thou shalt find that the demands made upon thee by this fiend shall grow ever stronger, more twisted, more depraved. Thou wilt find thyself a ruined shell, sapped of life. Just as the Shade Blade helps thee drain the life of others so it will drain thee.”

“Bravo!” exclaimed the thing in the Blade. “Thou art full of thyself today, O king! Mayhap thou wouldst care to give a lecture on the metaphysics of Emp dung?” Arcadion addressed Sullivan in the tone of a supplicant, “Please, Master! Let me liquefy this upstart human who claims a thing which can, of course, only be thine! Thou art made to rule where this cretin has merely hung a dilapidated title about his neck! Let me kill him for you, Master! Let me murder him with pain and sorrow and terror from dark spheres beneath the earth and betwixt the stars! Let his passing be a torturous one! I can give him horror that will subjectively last a thousand years for him in the moment it takes me to draw out his soul! Let his spirit be a broken one!”

“Whatever thou dost do to me – Sullivan – thou wilt be destroyed in a personal holocaust far worse than Arcadion can muster at this moment.” Sullivan gave a start at the mention of his name. Lord British's eyes seemed focused on some distant point. In a moment he spoke once more.

“Thy fate is now inextricably entwined with that of Arcadion's. The Black Sword binds thee both. Thou wilt find that no matter where thou shouldst leave the Blade it will always return to thee. Thou couldst drop it

into the Great Deep and yet thou wouldst find it safely in its scabbard, urging thee to take another victim. Thou dost think it to be the Tree of Life that didst lay the Great Hunger upon thee? Nay, Sullivan. The Tree wouldst impart no such evil gift. As long as thou art alive thou wilt feed as thou hast fed, only with greater urgency and magnitude. Thy future life seems pitiable to me. Thy death wilt be a blessing, not merely to thy victims, but also to thee. My time is passed. Do as thou wilt.”

Sullivan stood in Lord British’s bedchamber. He was vaguely disturbed as a sudden flash of recollection, a fleeting glimpse of memory, moved brightly across the darkness of his mind. Then it faded and was gone. Sullivan’s expression hardened and the Black Sword was swung, parting Lord British’s head from his shoulders.

A hideous wave of energy blasted Sullivan then. It seemed to fry every nerve in his body. He collapsed alternating between broken sobs and stark terror. And then a feeling of complete dejection came over him followed by the most depressing sensation of falling into a black void of ultimate despair that was at the very limits of human stamina.

At length he picked himself up and pondered the scene. Lord British’s body lay sprawled on the blood-soaked bed. His head lay on the floor, eyes turned back into the skull, mouth open.

Sullivan resisted various urges to do nasty things to the corpse. No evidence of human involvement could be left here. He removed a piece of gargoyle jewelry from his pocket and dropped it on the floor. He turned to leave, but as he did so he noticed the late king’s robes draped over a chair next to a small table.

Curious, he searched around in the various folds and pockets and found a scroll. Sullivan unrolled it and raised an eyebrow at what was written thereon. It was Lord British’s Last Will and Testament.

Sullivan’s eyes stopped at the fatal paragraph. It left all of Lord British’s belongings to Nell, the castle chambermaid. Apparently Lord British had been dallying with her for many months and now she was pregnant. Sullivan’s blood chilled when he read that Lord British intended to leave the entire kingdom to their unborn child!

Sullivan rolled up the scroll and put it in his tunic. An heir! That simply would not do. No heirs were going to ruin Sullivan's rightful place in the world. He had one more task before he could leave the palace.

He crept down the hall to Nell's room and opened the door. Slipping inside he tied a gag around her mouth. She awoke when he tightened it. She tried to scramble up but Sullivan held her down. He tied her hands and feet and carried her to Lord British's bedchamber. There he bent her over while standing, tied her hands to the bedpost and raped her. He drove the sword through her back and pierced her abdomen just as he ejaculated into her. Blood and huge quantities of semen dripped down her legs as Sullivan felt Nell's life force and the life force of the unborn baby slip into his veins.

Sullivan then undid her bonds, lay her on the bed and rearranged Lord British's body and hers so that they lay entwined in a lewd position. Then he left, sheathing the Black Sword, smothering a dark chuckle that came not from his own throat but that of Arcadion's.

* * * * *

Petre found Sullivan's report very interesting and was particularly curious to see the Will, but Sullivan had already set it on fire, destroying every last trace of a notion that a stinking, miserable brat might sit on the Ankh Throne of Britannia.

The next day Charles found his mother and father dead. He had gone to the guards to tell them of the sinister deed and then to Lord British's bedchamber where he found the king and his sister also deceased. Charles then chose that moment to have a nervous breakdown. After the disappearance of Jeannette, the girl who had worked as a waitress at the Blue Boar, Charles had grown morose and sullen for he had fallen quite in love with her. Later, when citizens noted that one of the city wells had gone foul and dredged up the poor girl's decomposing body, Charles had sunk into a depression far worse than even Lord British had ever exhibited. And here he was, just starting to get over it and feeling a little better when the whole of his family and the king were killed.

Charles could not be rushed to a healer as the Fellowship had driven out all the healers in the city. So they let him be and hoped he would stop his raving and mad utterances and get better.

Chuckles was not chuckling anymore. He didn't know what to do. Besides the Royal Guards (who were composed of careless Fellowship members) he and Charles were the only palace staff left. He took off his bell-jingling hat, sat down on the fountain in the courtyard, and held his head in his hands.

Word was sent to all of the city residences where the Great Council members lived in Britain during Council sessions and times of crisis. They were rounded up and brought to the castle and were horrified at the carnage. An immediate investigation ensued.

The Avatar was roused from his apparent slumber at the apartment he lived in at the West End of town and was taken post haste to the castle. By that time the other Great Council members had already found the gargoyle jewelry. They put two and two together and went, with a contingent of guards, directly to the home of the two gargoyle representatives, Wislem and Inwisloklem. They were still asleep when the guards broke down the door, startling them awake. Halberds were pointed at the gargoyles while a search was made of their house. Some of the Great Council went inside to make observations and ask questions. Others stayed outside with guards looking at the military personnel who had been killed the night before.

The chest was quickly found on the table. One of the guards used a set of lock picks to open it. When the lock clicked open there was a sharp explosion. The guard, four others next to him, and one Great Council member were blown to bits. After the smoke cleared the trunk was found to be unharmed. A brave soldier tipped back the lid of the trunk with his halberd and revealed the paraphernalia inside. The Black Sword copy lay on top.

The Great Council members pored over the contents and gleaned everything they needed to arrest the two gargoyles and take them to a prison tower in the castle. They were tried and executed the following day. At the subsequent Council meeting Sullivan met with little resistance in getting a formal declaration of war against Terfin declared.

Madness swept the population. Riots everywhere. Any gargoyles in mainland cities other than Vesper were beaten and killed. In Vesper there

were more organized battles and many gargoyles escaping the other cities sought refuge there. Others sailed for Terfin if they could get a boat.

It was on one of these boats plying a route to Terfin that Petre had also loaded up full of muskets. Something for the gargoyles to fight the war with.

Sullivan established an emergency military government and passed a bill creating the Britannian Military Engineering Company (BMECo.) which immediately went into operation under the directive of emergency mass-production of war machines.

He also directed BARMCo. To build assault rifles for the invasion troops, giving them new plans and designs for weapons that were, in Earth terms, equivalent to M-16s.

He further directed the Britannian ShipBuilding Company to build as many naval warships as it could. The Britannian Lumber Company, Britannian Steel Company, and Britannian Agricultural Committee all tripled production for the war effort. A draft was put in place conscripting citizens from every corner of the world to fight the gargoyles. BPL hate propaganda was ceaselessly churned out and shoved down the people's throats.

Petre ordered Forskis to goad Runeb into firing the first volley by attacking New Magincia; an unsuspected move that would be certain of success. It was a logical target, being the first of just two steps in making a supply line for an attack against the mainland.

Draxinusom, elderly as he was, tried to rally some support to put a stop to this madness. But his support was weak and the gargoyles (particularly the younger and wingless ones) scoffed at his peaceful rhetoric.

Petre sent the BSFG and Britannian Army to Vesper to assist in the war that was already being fought there. Sullivan practiced his battle face. It was his fullest intention to join in the fray.

Within two weeks the Herald wailed of Britannia's first defeat. The island of New Magincia had been taken over by the gargoyles. And of course it was. They had met with absolutely no military resistance. There

were Navy warships in port and others still in the queue being built, but everything had been purposefully delayed so that the gargoyles could have their victory. Petre and Sullivan had to make it look like a real war after all.

Sullivan immediately ordered two attack waves sent out. One to engage the gargoyles in a naval battle en route from New Magincia to Vesper, the other to go directly to Terfin, establish a beachhead, and push inward until the whole island was overrun.

The Navy warships set sail. Two great armadas. Sullivan would join the Terfin battle when they got there. Travel by magic carpet was much faster than the tedious bobbing on the ocean. Until then he would have to satisfy himself with overseeing Secret Service operations.

Petre had been very busy writing the war into print. Article after article in gruesome detail. A buffet of gargoyle atrocities was spread from front page to back. If any Britannian had reservations about the war in the beginning, those reservations had vanished. The gargoyles were disgusting beasts! And all the while Petre would use the Cube Generator to continually provoke the stupid on both sides to ever escalating acts of violence.

Also further reports of human support for the gargoyles continued to make their way into the news. Of course none of the stories were true, but this gave the Fellowship the perfect opportunity to kill all people who had resisted Fellowship membership. Every day was filled with at least fifty executions, often more. The front gate of Castle British reeked with a thick miasma and was dyed permanently red from all the blood that spurting and flowed.

The BSS was everywhere spying on citizens and arresting anyone whom even breathed the slightest negative comment about the government or its policies. In the course of this massive witch-hunt many members of the Great Council were, of course, found to be dissidents and were executed. In fact, there were so many that Sullivan declared the Great Council corrupt and dissolved it completely, declaring himself Imperial Regent (Sullivan had taken to referring to Britannia more often as “The Empire” or “The Imperium”). His first act as Regent was to change the name of the Britannian Herald to the Imperial Herald, much to Petre’s annoyance.).

By this time Terfin's shores had been secured and troops were moving inland. At this news Sullivan left Abraham temporarily in charge while he departed with much pomp and publicity declaring that he was off to secure Fellowship everywhere. He would slaughter the gargoyles on Terfin and bring glory to the Britannian people. Amidst much cheering and celebration he flew away on his magic carpet bearing the Black Sword which, of course, he could never leave behind.

The Great Naval Battle was something of a joke in reality. The human armada that had caught up with the gargoyle navy had had the advantage the whole time. Since Owen had supervised the construction of the gargoyle ships they were, naturally, poorly built. Thus, two-thirds of the ships had already sunk by the time the Britannian warships were upon them. The gargoyle cannons also malfunctioned. They were sitting ducks. The Britannians waged the war at sea solely with cannons and suffered no casualties. The gargoyles were slaughtered.

Spark had completely routed Vesper, leaving no gargoyle alive. He then set sail to New Magincia to take on the gargoyle outposts there. When he arrived the meager quantity of poorly manned outposts were easily removed. The gargoyles had been armed with muskets. And these weapons were no match for the SFG's automatic assault rifles.

But Spark did not stop there. His orders were to annihilate all inhabitants on the island. He grinned at his clever interpretation of the command and he and his company roved about the island picking off farm tool-wielding peasants. The SFG raped, pillaged and burned. Babies were thrown, screaming, into piles and set on fire. Women were brutally gang-raped and slain. Men were tortured and killed. The sheep on the island were obliterated. Fields and woods were torched. By the time they were done New Magincia was a blasted mound of dirt that jutted up, sterile, from the sea.

When Sullivan arrived at Terfin he immediately took command and led the troops into the enemy country. A previous order regarding procedures for captured gargoyles was rescinded by Sullivan with a new order: "Shoot to kill. No prisoners. Wipe them out. All of them."

The automatic assault rifles cut through the musket fire and destroyed whole battalions of gargoyles in minutes. Sullivan himself stormed the

Fellowship Hall and killed Runeb and Forskis with the Black Sword, with Forskis cursing the Avatar to the last. Lord Draxinusom's hovel was broken into and the elderly gargoyle dragged from his bed. He was packed in chains on board a vessel and sent back to Britain "to be thrown to the ravening mobs".

Every square inch of Terfin was scoured. Gargoyles were killed. The caves in the mountains were scoured. More gargoyles were killed. Separating himself from his platoon, Sullivan strayed alone down a narrow crack into the earth in one such cave system. After a considerable distance he found the gargoyle queen atop a nest of eggs.

"Well, well. That dost clear up a little mystery. Thou being the only female on this island, I dost think we shalt get along famously. Dost thou agree?"

Sullivan cast a powerful Paralyze spell on the massive gargoyle queen and examined her closely. He found what he was looking for and slipped his throbbing, gigantic penis into it. A gargoyle vagina did not appear to be that different from a human one. He thought it humorous that he was copulating with the only girl in the gargoyle race and that she should be so defiled by a member of another race that had just destroyed her kind.

Ejaculating profusely, Sullivan slipped out and looked for that other inlet. There had to be one and there was. Sullivan entered it and found it be ridged inside with pleasurable nodules. Nothing else quite like it, he thought. Too bad she was the only one. Anal sex with a gargoyle female was highly recommended.

Soon he spasmed again, and with a slip of the sword drained the queen of her life. Sullivan clambered off of her and caught up with his platoon, ordering them to bring fuel and explosives down the passage he had just come from. Later that day the queen was set on fire with all her smashed eggs and the entire chamber was destroyed.

In a great and horrible holocaust of terror and genocide the entire gargoyle race was completely annihilated. There was not a single gargoyle left anywhere. Not one in the entire world!

Sullivan returned to Britain, stepping over the trampled and torn up hide of Draxinusom that had been left to rot in the sun after the citizens had had their way with him. There was a great victory party that lasted for weeks in which Sullivan remembered very little, being so drunk on Swashbuckler's Spit, except for blurry visions of nightly forays into remote locales seeking victims to rape and kill.

The Britannian Development Bureau was immediately set in motion to redevelop Terfin for human habitation. The Britannian Construction & Land Development Company hired thousands to work. It was the greatest time of prosperity Britannia had ever experienced (for some, anyway).

The Britannian Welfare & Relocation Program set about on its relief mission to New Magincia (which consisted of little more than sending more unwanted immigrants there) and Paws. Sullivan himself, for entertainment, handled the Paws relocation program. The whole town needed to be moved to make way for a massive, corporation-run, industrial agrarian project. He certainly relocated all the people...into graves out in the swamp. He had long wanted to do something of the kind ever since he had to pass through the place to get between Britain and Trinsic.

Other projects for the construction business involved redeveloping Yew, Jhelom, Moonglow, The Isle of the Avatar, The Isle of Fire, Vesper, Spektran (after Sullivan killed the idiot Martingo – so-called Sultan of Spektran), and Skara Brae.

Skara Brae was a bit of work. Sullivan spent several weeks magically hunting down and destroying all the spirits that had accumulated in the area. The liche, Horance, was a particularly hardy soul that refused to be killed by normal means and seemed to have his own plans for Britannian domination. While Sullivan could appreciate such aspirations he had no interest in the plan. Attempting to kill Horance with the Shade Blade proved futile. Arcadion would have nothing to do with that creature. So, the Avatar had to come to an agreement with Horance, displaying his massed might and convincing the undead mage that his plan would meet with failure at every turn. Why not join the New World order?

Horance refused outright, so Sullivan concocted a powerful new Charm spell and permanently placed Horance under a spell that would cause him to roam about the countryside, attacking young girls and engaging in

sexual intercourse with them, draining their life essence as he did so. Sullivan figured if he couldn't destroy Horance or get his cooperation then he could at least get some cheap entertainment out of him.

The Ferryman of Skara Brae was also a tough nut to crack. He couldn't be killed either and was totally unresponsive to any and all offers. So Sullivan, being too busy to deal with this undead retard, just had the whole ferry moved -- with the Ferryman on it. He was chucked into a cave and the entrance was sealed. That was that.

Chapter 11: More Worlds to Conquer

Despite the efforts of the Britannian Forestry Commission to quell disputes regarding logging, a group of concerned citizens had the audacity to build their own printing press. They were distributing leaflets concerning the evil Britannian Lumber Company and Britannian Silverleaf Company which were clear-cutting the Great Forest and destroying the homes of intelligent, peaceful forest creatures called Emps that lived in the Silverleaf trees.

Sullivan took a moment to be creative about this and, whipping out his copy of Petre's magic-item-creating book, made a magic sword. He laughingly engraved on it a name in Gargish (saying that the use of a dead language made it seem more mysterious). It was called "**Betarbzen-mur Laitan,**" or, "**Emp Tickler.**"

Sullivan sent Spark to go wipe out the tree-hugging dissidents while he went into the Silverleaf forest to see what damage he could do there.

The Emps were cute and cuddly and liked honey. They ran around in the woods with a gait like a small child's. Sullivan brought lots of honey and, in no time at all, befriended the gentle little creatures. He asked them what their grievances were and they told him that the Silverleaf trees were their homes. Men with shiny, sharp sticks would come and cut them down. This made the Emps very sad.

Sullivan told them to worry no more. He would take care of it. He promised them that their homes would not be in any more jeopardy. The Emps, very happy about this, thanked him many times. Sullivan said it was nothing and asked if he could take a little tour of their forest kingdom so that he could get to know them better and improve relations between Emp and human. They agreed and guided him around while he licked his lips at all the tasty Silverleaf just waiting to be plundered.

He asked them how great their kingdom was. After providing an explanation of the word "kingdom" the Emps told him that this small section of the Great Forest is all that was left where Silverleaf trees grew. They numbered less than two thousand these days and feared that one day there

would be no Emps. Sullivan said that such a thing would be a sad future indeed.

Then he told them that tomorrow he would return with more honey. He was going to set up a tent in the forest and have a little party. All of the Emps in the village were invited to attend. Happily, Sullivan parted, leaving the Emps with gladness in their hearts.

The next day all of the Emps were in attendance inside his great tent he'd set up. They were joyously lapping up the delicious honey when, suddenly, the outside of the tent began to hum. One of the Emps peeked out and saw that strange, crackling, glowing square columns that had risen from the earth surrounded the entire tent. One of the Emps touched it and fell back, stunned. Sullivan had surrounded the tent with force fields.

The waves of evil emanating from their host caused the Emps to panic. They began desperately searching for a means of escape. Sullivan drew forth "Emp Tickler" and started impaling and hacking up the Emps who had come to his little tea party. Most he killed but the others he scratched or nicked. These remaining Emps clutched at each other, huddled in a corner, staring at Sullivan in terror with big, brown eyes.

But Sullivan smiled at them. He dropped Emp Tickler to the ground and snapped his fingers. The force fields outside slowly sank into the ground and were gone. The Emps made no motion to flee as long as Sullivan stood there. He kicked the sword toward the cowering Emps and as it slid across the ground it shrunk in size. By the time it reached the nearest Emp it was about the size of a large dagger. For an Emp that was sword enough. The pommel of the blade began to flicker in a hypnotic, repetitive manner. The Emp that looked down at it was transfixed. And then the ones who had been cut began to change. Their eyes darkened and their teeth grew sharp. Their fur became black and coarse. They slavered and hungered and they all looked at the few Emps who had not been cut and remained unchanged.

The now evil-looking Emp who had been hypnotized by the sword slowly picked it up and stared at it. Then, suddenly, it turned and stabbed an unchanged Emp in the stomach. The other evil Emps hooted and hollered and they all fell upon the remaining unchanged Emps, beating and biting and throttling. The one who had been stabbed in the stomach died slowly and

painfully, looking mournfully at the vicious scene before him. His wife (or, in Emp-terms, “bonded one”) was currently being raped by these horribly changed Emps and stabbed to death. At last the blade-wielding Emp killed the slow-dying one and fell to cutting up the flesh and eating it. The others did the same. But their hunger could not be satisfied. Soon the whole tent was filled with clean-picked Emp bones.

Sullivan had long-since disappeared. The Emps came out of the tent and into the darkness of late night. And so the band hurried out into the murky, forest blackness and started hunting other Emp villagers. Within a month the Emp population had dwindled to three hundred. And they were all changed, evil Emps. With no unchanged Emps left to eat they fell to eating each other, non-Emp meat not satisfying them at all.

Another two weeks later would see the remaining Emp, the first to take the sword, attempt hunting humans. It stole a few babies from cradles but these just did not ease the insatiable hunger like Emp flesh did. He tried to eat himself but this was simply not feasible. Finally, the miserable creature attacked some hunters and was shot, but not before stabbing one of the hunters in the groin.

After getting rid of the dissidents and burning down their press and wiping out the Emps, there was no more dispute. Done. Next Problem.

The Britannian Civil Engineering Commission began building bridges, dams, paved roads, poles and towers with wires running along them everywhere, strange metal tracks that connected all the cities, and odd, long, flat areas that were paved but seemed to serve no purpose.

The Britannian Historical Foundation and Britannian Education Bureau changed their curriculums, gradually altering history and reality in a long-term plan to solidify the new power structure. One day, no mention of Lord British would be found in any textbook.

After several months Sullivan created the Britannian Gas & Electric Company (BG&E) and Britannia glowed with electric lights...for a fee. This explained, of course, the poles, towers and wires.

He also created the Britannian Automobile Company (BACo.) which started making horseless carts for the people (for the price of state-controlled gasoline). This explained the paved roads.

And finally there was the Britannian Railroad Company which explained the tracks. Britannia was getting modernized, whether it wanted to be or not.

Then the Imperial Herald piped up with a new story. The Britannian Intelligence Agency had rediscovered a formerly lost landmass: the Serpent Isle, as the inhabitants called it. An entire island almost as big as the Britannian mainland. All of its citizens were completely hostile to Britannia, calling old Lord British “Beast British”. Hearing of the gargoyle war (the gargoyles having been their allies and engaged in frequent trade with them – which in reality wasn’t true at all) the Serpent Isle had declared war on Britannia.

The war economy, never having been stopped, was to continue. Sullivan again called the nation to prepare for war against a new threat, even though he was a bit nervous now. He did not recall this Serpent Isle business being part of the plan. He questioned Petre on this issue but Petre told him only that he needn’t worry. All he had to do was sit on the throne and play Regent. This new war was another planned slaughter. Tut, tut. Stop fretting.

Petre then told him that he had only a few more details to handle on his end of things after which all would be consolidated and Sullivan could be rewarded for his labors. Then Petre left and Sullivan did not see him for several months.

Things ran pretty much in an automated fashion and on a particular schedule. When Britannian Laboratories developed aircraft Sullivan issued an edict forming the Britannian Air Corps (BA Corps) and established a school in Britain for fighter pilots.

It was determined that domestic, homeland security was threatened by magical creatures walking about. Sullivan issued another mandate to systematically hunt down and destroy these creatures. Dragons, unicorns, hydras, drakes, mongbats, headlesses, acid slugs, talking animals, undead,

even a species of water fowl that attacked ships at sea. The list was long but manpower was set aside to handle the task.

Instead of heading off to war on the Serpent Isle, Sullivan had Spark and the SFG spearhead the magic animal slaughter and work out means of disposal for the bodies Sullivan knew would pile up when Spark was on the job.

As great armadas were sent to wipe out the Serpent Isle Sullivan ordered the BSS to step up their activities and bring him a continual supply of fresh victims – right to the castle. After a while, when huge piles of animal carcasses were burning across the land, Sullivan took Spark off that duty and gave him a cushy job as Captain of the Royal Guard. Between the two of them the hapless women smuggled into the castle didn't stand a chance for a quick death. Spark was too much into making it last. Sullivan was getting so bored so quickly with each one that Spark was doing most of the killing while Sullivan was simply sampling and moving on to the next.

The range of victim qualities began to increase. Very young, very old, obese, thin, male, female, crippled, retarded, dead, various degrees of decomposition, torture with every imaginable device, implementation of feces, urine, menstrual matter, fetuses, blood. Cannibalism was practiced and victims were tortured and eaten alive. Babies were made to “suckle” and were raped in other ways. Then they were tortured and made to scream in hideous ways. Old women were flayed alive, parents were made to fornicate with their children or eat them and vice versa. Whole castle chambers were decorated with body parts. The whole place reeked of death.

Once, Sullivan went up to the southwest tower and visited Weston, a peasant from Paws who had come to Britain and stole some apples from the Royal Orchard. He was caught, arrested, and held in the tower prison. No one had ever told Lord British and the poor man had been languishing up here ever since.

Sullivan told him in gory detail how he had gone to Paws. He vividly painted Weston a picture of how Sullivan had anally raped his wife. Bite by bite he described each savory mouthful of flesh made from his own baby and how his wife, utterly starved and wasting away, had eaten the meat. He told countless stories of terror and death as Paws was wiped out. His own wife was made to stroke Sullivan's penis and collect the contents into a great

bowl. When it was pleurably filled Sullivan held her head down in the bowl while humping her ass until she drowned in his semen.

He laughed at Weston then and turned him into a small boy wearing a pink tutu, make-up and nothing else. Sullivan raped the boy and then conjured an endless line of burly sailors to rape him until Sullivan ordered the activity to cease. This he never did as he soon forgot about it. The corpse of Weston as a child was raped for months afterward until the spell eventually wore off.

Charles, who had been forced to serve the Avatar in more ways than just delivering meals and beverages finally committed suicide. But, Sullivan would have none of that and resurrected him. He put Charles in chains and tortured him every day. Sometimes he would spend weeks painfully killing and resurrecting Charles, to punish him for thinking he could escape.

So, Charles went mad instead. Not much Sullivan could do about that. Henceforth, Charles was kept by the throne in a cage. When a particularly succulent and frightened morsel was brought before Sullivan he would sometimes let Charles loose on her. He would frantically beat her and copulate with her and soil her, laughing and screaming hysterically all the while.

Chuckles was another matter. All he did was passively resist. He would not scream when tortured. He would not obey. He would not talk. He would simply stare off into space and sit listlessly in a corner. Food had to be forcibly shoved into his mouth and was made to swallow it.

Sullivan fashioned a long, glass tube about five feet in diameter and thirty feet high, nearly touching the ceiling. It was placed in the Throne Room and was open at the top. A teleporter was suspended upside down over the mouth of the tube and other teleporters were installed at the bottoms of every chamber pot in the castle and every outhouse in Britain. Anything that came in contact with those teleporters was routed directly to this teleporter over the tube. Chuckles was lowered into it, all the way down to the bottom and the teleporters were activated. By the end of the first day Chuckles was covered with urine and shit. Sullivan and Spark found this enormously funny. Watching a stream of piss, a turd, or some watery and diseased brown liquid dump itself on the poor jester was side-splitting

humor. Every once in a while some urine or vomit would catch the jester's hat just right and tinkle the bells in a merry way.

The Ankh Throne was cast down and replaced with a chair made from the bones and skulls of his victims. It was upholstered with their skin and hair. Gems were set in empty eye sockets and the whole was coated with a gold paint.

One day, Sullivan sat in his chair, entertaining a naked, ten-year-old girl on his lap. A messenger nervously approached the dais after being let in by Spark. He was about to speak, but Spark hit him on the back of the head and reminded him not to speak unless spoken to.

The young girl bobbed up and down on Sullivan's stiff shaft, gripping the arms of the Bone Throne tightly and moaning with pleasure. Sullivan jerked and heaved and let forth his fount of hot cream into the girl's vagina. However, Sullivan had made a minor alteration. The semen was produced in such volume and ejected itself in such force that the girl's whole body was filled. The pressure squeezed it through her until it ran out of her mouth, ears, nose, and popped out her eyes and oozed from the sockets.

Sullivan smiled and pushed her off of him.

"What dost thou want, peasant?" he asked stroking his still rigid pole.

The messenger, shocked, opened and closed his mouth several times until Spark hit him in the kidneys with a steel pipe.

The messenger fell to the ground and, gasping, said, "The people thou hast sent to find the place thou dost seek hath discovered its whereabouts, milord."

Sullivan sat bolt upright, got up from the chair, and helped the messenger to his feet. "Art thou all right my good man?" Sullivan crooned, stroking the messenger's hand and face.

"Y-y-yes," he stammered, looking fearfully at both Sullivan and Spark. My Gods but they were insane!

"Good," said Sullivan, "Where is it?"

“I doth have a map milord,” said the man and he produced a parchment from his tunic.

Sullivan grabbed it and carefully examined it. There it was! Ambrosia! An island lying to the northeast of the mainland! Sullivan was ecstatic. He shook the messenger’s hand and grinned like the devil. He bade the messenger sit down on the lower step of the dais. When he did so Sullivan grabbed the hair on the back of his head and pulled it back so that the man was forced to look straight up. Sullivan grabbed his cock and stroked it furiously, laughing like a schoolchild the whole time. And then his laughter became hysteria. His eyes were wide open and he had a lunatic’s smile on his face.

All of a sudden a blast of hot, white goop splattered all over the messenger’s face. Sullivan laughed and laughed and then his laughter became strained. Then he gasped and his hysterical laughter burst out again with full force. He walked away, leaving a stinking turd lying on the dais next to the sickened messenger who promptly threw up. Spark ushered him to a wide-brimmed chamber pot in the corner of the room and pushed him in. The messenger fell through the teleporter at the bottom and then continued falling into the glass tube. He landed at the bottom next to Chuckles and broke his neck when he hit the floor. Chuckles didn’t even stir.

Sullivan composed himself enough to take the Black Sword and go into the special room where stolen babies were kept. He killed the entire roomful, stealing their energy, and then made preparations for a little trip to Petre’s mysterious island.

When he was ready he told Spark to watch the fort and he would be back in a day or so. Spark nodded and went back to his projects. He was teaching small children how to torture puppies and kittens. In another chamber he had several young boys practicing the fine art of sodomizing little girls and gutting them with razor-sharp knives while they were still alive. In another part of the castle he had been feeding a baby magically-altered maggots that grew and ate their way out of him, turning into large, pus-oozing flies that buzzed out the window in search of other infants to lay eggs on. There was a longer-term project in the northeast storeroom: a young girl had been impregnated by a zombie and was about to give birth.

Spark was eager to gaze upon the progeny. An elderly woman hung suspended from the ceiling of Spark's bedchamber. He had fed her a special egg that, when hatched, kept her alive as a host and sent out mucous-laden tentacles from her bodily orifices that sought out Spark's penis while he slept and suckled him, feeding on his sperm. They would titillate various parts of his body while doing this. Some fondled his nipples while others stroked sensitive areas. Another usually entered his rectum and pulsed there. It was this that often aroused him to orgasm and he would pleasantly awake to these things touching him while the old woman's glazed, insane eyes peered unblinking at him from overhead.

The Royal Guard had been transformed into creatures of hideous shape. They often escaped at night to terrorize the citizens. Women were often found in the morning near death and exhausted from an evening filled with rape and terror. If they did not have abortions then they would often give birth to hideously malformed monsters that croaked and gibbered and shook their gelatinous folds of slimy flesh. Some women fainted at these births and were killed and eaten by their own spawn that then took flight to parts unknown.

Every once in a while military chiefs would seek an audience with Spark to report the state of the war, giving casualty lists, requests for supplies and other trivial details. They were usually yawned at and sent away with a bored wave of the hand. There were too many more interesting things to attend to inside the castle.

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Sullivan had landed on Ambrosia without incident. It was a sort of horseshoe-shaped affair with ruins and a tiny outcropping of rock in the middle of the water, cradled by the rest of the island. It was a very strange place. He found a cave entrance at the north end that led to a crater filled with strange blue ore. Near the entrance to the cave a fairy had danced. But, Sullivan left her in a very spoiled state.

At the south end was another cave entrance, disguised to look just like the side of the mountain. The entrance was blocked by force fields and when Sullivan tried to dispel them he found that he could not. And then he noticed the strange white mist. When it fell about him he could not cast spells, but he found that it was cyclical and he could cast a spell for a brief

second if he had it prepared and ready. After several failed attempts he finally caught the mist at the right time and away went one of the fields. Enough to get inside.

He was in a carpeted and insulated environment. It looked mostly like an office. There was a long table covered with maps and strange maps at that. Many of them didn't look like Britannia at all. He went closer to the table and looked again. And then he started and stepped back. There was a map on the table that was not Britannia and he *DID* recognize!

Panic and realization began to eat through Sullivan's arrogant and ever-darkening mind. He looked around and saw that there were several doors. He tried them one after the other. Most were storerooms, but one led on to a passage that ended in a small square room. A door slid closed behind him. His stomach suddenly floated up into his chest and he momentarily lost balance. Everything went back to normal a moment later. Then he felt as though someone or something was pushing him down. This too stopped and then the door slid open again. He looked out into a gigantic, titan cavern. It was so high the roof could not be seen except for the bottom tips of long stalactites that disappeared into the darkness. Bright electrical lights filled the room. The floor was flat, polished and clean. It looked like some sort of staging area. In the middle of the room, however, was the thing that made Sullivan's jaw drop. A Black Gate stood ominously in the center of that staging area, pulsing and rippling and looking for all the world to be very, very active.

On the far side of the room opposite of Sullivan there were large panels of flickering lights and levers. And there were great pipes running from these panels, up the side of the cavern, and into the darkness above. But, there was something else about that darkness. He looked at the light that was cast from the lamps throughout the chamber and realized that he *should* see the roof. The blackness had a shape. And as he gazed at the edges of it he saw that it was spherical. A moment later and there was a pulse of energy. A ripple went through the blackness and Sullivan nearly fell to the ground in fright. A sliver of blackish-blue seemed to move like lightning across the surface of this thing that was obviously round. And those pipes obviously ran up to it and connected with it somehow. It seemed as if it were some kind of black sun radiating an unlight of sorts.

Sullivan collected his wits and walked over to the panel of lights and levers. There were also glass screens that glowed and displayed strange characters, though there were some characters that Sullivan knew well that were not Britannian runes.

And then he found a series of file cabinets. Opening them up revealed a great many things. Petre's notes and plans. And as Sullivan read he grew ever more alarmed.

But then, as he was perusing the cabinets file by file, he came across a sealed envelope. Opening it revealed an old parchment on which was written a very powerful spell. Sullivan knew immediately that it was the missing Eighth Circle spell that Petre had been holding from him, and by the nature of the spell he could see why. Nevertheless that parchment went straight into his tunic.

Sullivan continued to read this eye-opening collection of material, every once in a while giving a nervous glance upward at the black sun. Plans of his own began forming in his mind as he divined Petre's intentions and just how he had planned to use Sullivan, setting him up as the abusive puppet emperor so Petre could remove him, save the day, and take control of the empire himself with full support from a population that had been terrorized and deceived. It seemed Petre knew all about Sullivan's escapades and chose him for precisely those habits. Evil emperor indeed! Sullivan snorted and then laughed aloud. Petre's plan was an open book now. Sullivan could see a way around this. But as he read, ever more shocking revelations surfaced. Petre's true identity was revealed at last. It seemed he was no mere Britannian peasant after all! But even more shocking than this was information Petre had regarding Sullivan's own identity. Truth shining through the obscurity of his clouded vision brought forth painful memories that he never knew he possessed. Sullivan had been robbed of his rightful life!

He slammed shut the last file cabinet and departed the island in haste.

Chapter 12: The Prophet

Immediately upon Sullivan's return to the castle he was assailed by reports from his mongrel servants brought to them by the military chiefs that had come. They had left the information with them because Spark was careless and preoccupied.

The war on the Serpent Isle had taken a strange turn. The colony on the Isle of the Avatar had been attacked and utterly destroyed. Information was being relayed to the people through another source than the Imperial Herald so all Britannia was now aware of the defeat. It seemed there was an underground newspaper operating somewhere in the land reporting accurate news!

Sullivan was concerned but not surprised by the news. After what he had discovered on Ambrosia he had his suspicions as to the perpetrator of this sudden aggression. The only thing that seemed out of place was the timing. It was too soon.

Within the week Moonglow and Dagger Isle were under siege. BIA data revealed that Serpent Isle forces had come under new leadership: a mutilated, misshapen man calling himself "The Prophet". Sullivan laughed. An interesting disguise but its wearer could hardly know of Sullivan's penetration of Ambrosia's secrets.

Sullivan tried to get Spark to do something about the underground movement that was undermining their propaganda machine, but Spark said he was too busy. Sullivan struck him repeatedly until Spark started hitting back. They fought for some time and then Sullivan pulled out the Black Sword and held it between them. The demon inside purred. Spark looked narrowly at Sullivan and then slowly backed off.

"Thou wilt do as I say, boy! Now take care of this underground movement!"

Spark nodded and said he would get right on it. The following morning Spark went off on his mission. Sullivan had not slept all night, fearing Spark would creep upon him and put a knife in his throat. It was with some relief that Spark went away.

In the mean time Sullivan simply got the formalities over with and declared himself Emperor of Britannia. He no longer saw any compelling reason to wait for Petre, especially since Petre was now looking to depose Sullivan and take the Throne himself.

The underground newspaper was printing all sorts of vile filth about what was going on inside the castle. All of it was true, of course, but that wasn't the point.

Moonglow and Dagger Isle, at last, fell and were occupied by Serpent Isle troops. Between Britannia's recent losses and reports of evil activities in the castle, faith in the present government was failing rapidly. Civil unrest grew. There were violent riots again. But the BSS kept the insurrections stamped out. The development of tanks and tear gas came in very handy for crowd control. Sullivan also ordered that there be forced conscription into the armed forces so those outspoken individuals could simply be sent to the front lines.

Sullivan retreated into the castle and stopped making any more public announcements. He diverted his attention by demanding fresh meat to be delivered to the castle by the Secret Service. The next two months passed with Sullivan concocting the most wretched and sadistic tortures known to man. The limits of his evil knew no bounds. Each batch of terrified people was handled in a manner even more horrible than the last.

But, after those two months were gone, Sullivan received a most disconcerting shock. He was running out of people to kill, so he had gone to Buccaneer's Den to the Fellowship Dungeon. He had been told that Petre had deposited the Avatar here in Sullivan's place with orders from Elizabeth to be tortured daily by a troll named Grod. Well, it had been a long time since then, but as Sullivan was in the area to hand pick more victims he figured he ought to stop in and say hello.

The dungeon was packed solid with political prisoners. Trolls scurried hither and yon, torturing here, beating there, etc. It was much busier than he had ever remembered it being. Checking against the prison logbook Sullivan found the number of the cell that he had once occupied himself and walked to the barred door.

Inside was a rotten corpse. Oh, well, Sullivan thought. It appeared that the Avatar's constitution finally gave and he had succumbed to the living conditions here.

Then Sullivan noticed something lying on the floor next to the body. A slip of paper? He stopped one of the trolls and ordered him to open the cell. He felt a pang of ugly memory as his foot hesitated at the threshold. He sent the trolls away to ease the irrational fear that they might close the door on him and lock it. Silly. He could kill everyone in this dungeon with a word. But the fear persisted.

At last he struggled to overcome it and went in quickly. He snatched up the paper and was going to walk out of the cell to read it when he noticed something else. A skeletal, blackened finger lay on the ground. Sullivan picked it up and frowned. There was a ring on the finger that looked very familiar. One of the rings Petre had fashioned so long ago to alter one's appearance. Sullivan uncrumpled the note and looked at it:

I will kill you both.

That was all it said. Sullivan kicked the body over onto its back. The skull and all features were that of a troll. Grod.

Sullivan's blood chilled. And then a rage boiled him. That body was old. Who knew how long it had been. Grod had taken the Avatar out of his cell and tortured him daily. He had finally escaped.

"Damn Petre!" Sullivan cried drawing the Black Sword. "God damn him! That idiot! That stupid moron!" Sullivan stalked from the cell. Whenever he passed a troll or a prisoner that was too close he swung his sword and killed the obstacle.

"Damn that miserable, stinking, son of a bitch! Right from the beginning had I not suggested that it would be better to kill him than go through all this trouble keeping him alive? Had I not? Now look at this shit! That god damn, fucking bastard! That cocksucking, goatfucking bitch! If I could grant him the cleverness I would say he had planned on the Avatar escaping to mock me! To divert my attention from his invasion to take my mantle of Emperor!" Sullivan hacked off the heads of two more trolls, ran

through five prisoners with the Sword, and finally made it to the staircase that led up to the daylight world.

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Sullivan immediately made a public declaration that Petre had turned traitor and gone over to the Serpent Isle. If he was seen in Britannia he was to be immediately arrested. Sullivan then took over leadership of the Fellowship as well and thus retained absolute power over the Empire. He didn't really expect Petre to ever show his face on the mainland again unless he was driving a tank. But, at least he had the satisfaction of knowing that Petre didn't have that option.

Sullivan spent much time locked up in a room of the castle. There were intermittent flashes of strange-colored light that shown from the crack under the door, weird odors and the occasional blood curdling scream. Rioting citizens outside the castle would, at times, perceive these strange noises, lights and sounds and pause in their destruction to stare at the castle. By now the ominous cloud of rumor had reached the ears of the people. They were not merely frightened of imminent invasion by a foreign power. They had become terrified of their own emperor. The contorted forms that flitted about in the night followed by mysterious disappearances by the next morning (predominantly girls and infants) mixed with the tales of torture, murder, and perverse sexual practices inside the castle filled the people with a burdensome dread.

Sullivan did not come out of the room for weeks. Some servants in the castle thought he might be dead when a long spell of silence came. But then there would be a new bout of noise and lights. Sullivan was obviously working on some secret project. But, no one would dare bother him or nose about in his business. His wrath was unmatched and the results of his punishments unpredictable. Sometimes a judgement would be laid surprisingly lightly leaving one nervously laughing at the mere wrist slap. But, more often, the punishment was so severe that one wished that one's grandparents had never been born.

Then, one day, Sullivan opened the door and stepped out. He looked up and down the hallway and then made his way to the Throne Room. He sat down upon the great bone seat and pondered. He sat there for a whole day and a night.

The next morning found him still seated upon the throne, staring into space, unmoving. The military chiefs who had been running the war came in to report. They were quite a dispirited group. Their hair was disheveled and their faces were ashen. They looked at each other as if silently debating who should speak. Then they focused their eyes on one. The unlucky recipient of the stares looked down at the floor and then slowly walked up to the dais. Sullivan did not move.

The slowly mumbled report dribbled out of the corpse-skinned man like watery spit. It seemed that Britannia was losing horribly. All of the islands were falling, one by one. The taking of Serpent's Hold had been a serious blow to the Empire. Trinsic and Vesper had been occupied cities for two weeks. And now Yew had fallen that very morning after having been besieged all night and the previous day. All of the roads and passes north, east and south were blockaded with troops. The Air Corps had been completely wiped out by anti-aircraft guns. Supply lines had been cut. Bridges and railroads had been destroyed. Ammunition was running out since Cove now lay under siege. The Britannian Chemical Company was what manufactured the smokeless powder and Cove was being shelled by a blitzkrieg of enemy tanks even as they stood in the castle delivering this report. It was only a matter of time before the Serpent Isle forces broke through the lines somewhere and marched into the heart of Britain itself.

At last the military chief's mumbling ceased, but still Sullivan did not stir. He continued to stare, unblinking, at some spot far off and somewhat overhead. The party soon left when they saw no response forthcoming. And then night came again with no change in Sullivan's position or posture. It was as if he were dead. And there were many in the castle that secretly wished such a thing to be so.

The first moon rose above the castle walls and let its silver light fall upon the dewy leaves in the courtyard. The splashing of the fountain was all that could be heard in the cool night air.

Suddenly there was yelling and the marching of feet across the drawbridge. The armored footsteps breached the castle, stamped through the courtyard, and burst into the Throne Room. The column of soldiers stopped at the foot of the dais. Still Sullivan did not move.

The soldier at the head removed his helm. It was Spark.

“Milord! Reporting to His Majesty regarding the arrest of the foul traitor Petre according to Imperial Decree! Mhudur, bring forth the wretched prisoner!”

From back within the column a soldier herded a chained, bruised and very roughed-up Petre to the front of the line. Spark grabbed him and threw him at the dais. Petre stumbled in his ankle chains and fell.

“Milord! I found this miserable creature skulking about by himself near Spiritwood. As to his errand there he said nothing and nothing could be beaten from his sickly hide!” Spark kicked Petre in the spine. “The prisoner was annoying and irritated me. He was constantly complaining and getting underfoot. He seemed to be searching for something in the wood and would never say what it was, but the lack of finding it seems to have left him quite cantankerous. I suggest thou shouldst kill the disgusting creature before he causes more harm to the Empire! For the record, milord, I care not for traitors! To *Britannia* and *Britannia alone* am I loyal!” At this last statement there seemed to be considerable emphasis on the words “*Britannia*” and “*alone*” and more than a hint of suggestion that the Avatar had another agenda antithetical to the best interests of Britannia. And if Spark found out about it he would be none too happy. For all his twisted nature, Spark felt he was redeemable at least by his love for his country and feeling as though he were doing the right thing (even though he had not the faintest clue what the right thing was). But, one thing was certain. People who didn’t love Britannia with the passion and zeal that Spark did were destined for an early tomb by Spark’s hand if he discovered as such. And that was that.

“Prisoner has been delivered to the castle, milord. I, Spark, will be taking entertainment in his chambers for the evening and will return to his fruitless mission on the morrow. Underground newspaper impossible to locate. Personally, I do not think it exists. I think this is all some sort of grand scheme of Petre’s to rape Britannia of its virgin women when it is obvious that such a right belongs solely to me. If milord wishes I shall strike down this idiot brigand where he lies, immobile, like some retarded and useless cripple, as all cripples are!”

No response came from Sullivan. Spark, indignant, stared at Sullivan with hard eyes for a moment, turned, and left the room, dragging his cohorts in tow.

Petre lay on the floor. This arrest of his had been very bad luck. He had found out about Sullivan's declaration of Petre's treason just before arriving in Britain. On hearing of it he made a detour to recover the remote unit that controlled the Generators. But Spark had caught him before he could do so. Without the remote he could not turn everything off and prevent Sullivan from doing more damage than he'd already done. Things had gotten very screwed up in unforeseen ways. Right then, however, in a soft, whispery voice, Sullivan spoke.

“So, Prophet. What say you call off this fucking war, turn in your gun and your badge, and call it a fucking day?”

Petre looked up at Sullivan with a strange look on his face. It was a wondering sort of look. What had happened to Sullivan's mode of speech?

“Thou dost think I am the Prophet, Sullivan?”

“Knock it off with the ‘thees’ and ‘thous’. I know who you really are and you know who I really am. Let us then drop all this pretentious bullshit and call everything what it is. You're going to ruin everything for me if you insist on this course of action! Of course I realize you desire this, but I won't have it! Fuck you, Petre! Fuck you! I played along with your stupid little fucking game and followed every one of your stupid little fucking orders! Now it's my turn and you intend to eat it right out of my mouth even as I'm chewing on it! You fucking god damn piece of shit! You fucking whore! Servants! SERVANTS! Obey me and take this vomit from my dais now! Throw him into the southeast tower! I'm going to execute you tomorrow morning, *Petre*! Long and slow, just the way you like it you fucking slut!”

Sullivan was standing and pointing frantically at Petre, spitting with red-faced fury each word. The twisted servants, meanwhile, had come and were dragging Petre off while Sullivan continued to rant. And as Petre lay on the cold stone floor of his cell he could hear Sullivan. He could hear him screaming and yelling and cursing the entire night. Petre realized that the evil that had eaten Sullivan's mind and soul had driven the man completely

insane. He had utterly snapped his hinges and was now a wildly swinging door in the wind. Sullivan was now more dangerous than he had ever been.

But, that night Sullivan's screaming grew even louder for a time when one of the solemn military chiefs had come into the Throne Room with even worse news. The Prophet had broken the lines. He was to the south, in Trinsic, directing the battle northward. In two days, without more reserves to replace the mounting dead, the Prophet would be marching straight to the castle.

Sullivan seethed and raged. If Petre was not the Prophet then who was the Prophet? Who was this "mutilated, misshapen" thing that crawled around in the dark seeking the Britannian crown for himself? The crown was Sullivan's! It was his! He was Emperor! No one else could have the Throne! No one else was fit to rule!

In a rage, Sullivan drew the Black Sword and hacked the chief again and again. Bloody pulp was all that remained and still Sullivan hacked at it, sending sparks flying as the edge of the blade struck the stone underneath.

And then, suddenly, he stopped. "Mutilated, misshapen" the reports had said. "Mutilated"..."misshapen"...mutilated...misshapen...

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The next morning Sullivan had the Herald print a special bulletin that the traitor Petre had been apprehended and was to be executed at precisely 11:00. Death by torture. It was to last not less than six hours.

Thousands of people thronged in the streets, but they were less interested in the execution of Petre than they were in what the Avatar proposed to do about the war they were losing.

Sullivan told them all would be made clear after the execution. He had a wonderful plan that simply could not fail. It could not fail at all. He smiled upon them exultantly and then had soldiers bring out the traitor.

Petre hung limply as the soldiers drew him out. He said nothing and merely hung his head. He was strapped down to a table on the raised execution platform and the soldiers that did this work commented on Petre's

foul stench, some of them covering their noses with their hands with pale looks on their faces as if they were about to vomit. Sullivan stood by the table in preparation for the execution. Soldiers with rifles in hand made a perimeter around the platform to keep back the crowds, but the crowds did not seem very eager to press forward and rend a traitor as they once did. They seemed, rather, cowed and fearful.

The torture commenced and it was long and bloody. Some people started to get up and leave but rifle-gestures from the soldiers prevented them from doing so.

At last, ten hours later, all of the people having been forced to stand and watch sighed with relief as the prisoner was pronounced dead. Almost everyone thought he had died hours before as he had never uttered a scream or a protest the entire time. Even Sullivan looked a bit perturbed by that fact. Then the people began shouting for the expected plan to save Britannia from the Serpent Isle hordes.

Sullivan nodded to them as they shouted and yelled and raised his hands, waving them to be silent. As they gradually lowered their voices Sullivan looked at them, slowly scanning the crowd. He folded his hands behind his back and inhaled as if preparing to speak.

“Fire,” he said.

The soldiers around the perimeter of the platform clicked off their safeties and opened fire on the crowd. There was screaming and panic as the line of people closest to the platform fell in the first spray of machinegun fire. The others turned and tried to flee but ran into the thick mass of human beings directly behind them that still didn't realize what the hell was going on.

Slowly, the masses began to move away from the platform, funneling down the streets of Britain, looking for someplace to run and hide from the lethal chattering of the guns. More soldiers were coming out of the castle to join their fellows. What had been the very back of the audience was now the front of the pack seeking safety. But as they ran they were the first to realize the horrible scope of the trap they were in. This was not accident. This was intended – planned! Their Emperor, the Avatar, Champion of the Virtues, had gone stark, raving mad.

Snipers suddenly appeared from the rooftops of buildings above the streets and riddled the panic-stricken citizens below. It was a bloodbath to beat all bloodbaths. The swarms of running people turned corners only to find roads blocked. Hands tested doors only to find them locked and barricaded from within. And always, wherever they went, there were the soldiers firing from the rooftops. There was no escape. And so they died. Men, women, children, pets, infants. There was no discrimination. Magazine after magazine, round after round, the killing went on. The entire perimeter of Britain had been surrounded. There was no escape from the city. By nightfall thousands of people had been slaughtered and Britain was carpeted with dead bodies filling the streets, blood filling the storm drains, flies and carrion birds alighting everywhere. There was relative silence then, broken only by the occasional burst of rifle fire when a soldier caught someone still alive or trying to run away. Then the soldiers began looting the bodies for valuables.

After Sullivan had given the order to fire upon the crowds he had immediately turned away as though it no longer mattered and was completely forgotten. He gazed upon the body of Petre amid the sounds of screaming and machineguns when his eye caught a ring on Petre's finger.

"No," he said, shaking his head.

"No, no, no, NO!" he walked quickly over to the body in long strides and tore off the ring and watched furiously as the body of Petre faded to that of Chuckles, once the happy court jester of Lord British.

Sullivan threw the ring to the ground and struck the corpse with his hand. He hit it again and again, yelling and screaming in a powerful rage. His eyes were wild, his teeth were bared, his face was red with veins bulging on his forehead.

And to make matters worse the urge was suddenly upon him. The Black Sword laughed cruelly. Sullivan molested the body right there on the execution platform while the people of Britain were murdered wholesale. Then, as the line of soldiers advanced, Sullivan followed behind defiling bodies that appealed to him and those that he finished off that weren't quite dead.

When at last he'd had his fill and slain a few with the Black Sword while fornicating with them, he wearily returned to the castle and kicked Spark in his bedchamber. The tentacle thing was latched onto him and Spark was not responding to Sullivan's attempts to wake him.

Sullivan swept the Shade Blade across the vertical lines of tentacles, separating them from the host. The crazy-eyed elderly woman screamed and screamed until Sullivan picked up Spark's rifle and shot the poor thing to death. Spark awoke as he was splashed with blood from the mangled thing overhead.

Sullivan kicked him and told him to get the fuck out of bed. Petre had escaped and he may or may not look like Petre. Spark was to get a Britannia-wide manhunt underway as soon as possible, meaning ten hours ago.

Spark told Sullivan to shove it and Sullivan told Spark to do as his Emperor ordered or there would be hell to pay. Spark looked at the insane Avatar for a long time, shrugged, and went to do his "Master's" bidding. When he went outside he stared, open-mouthed at what was going on. He looked up and saw Sullivan watching him from the parapet above the entrance. He had an arrow strung to a bow and it was drawn back, pointing right at Spark. Sullivan spoke to him then, but the voice sounded like it was being spoken right in his ear.

"Find him, Spark. Find him and kill him. If he has not been apprehended in forty-eight hours you will die." Sullivan let go the bowstring and the arrow zipped through the air. Spark attempted a dodge but the arrow seemed to follow him. And, so, the arrow struck Spark's shoulder. He quickly removed it but it was too late. The point had been poisoned.

"I can cure that poison, but only I know how to do it," whispered Sullivan. "Find Petre and bring him back to me dead. As your reward I will heal you. Now, go!"

With that, Sullivan projected such a wave of fear at Spark that he ran away, all the way out of Britain, stopping only long enough to grab a few of his most lethal SFG soldiers. He had to find Petre. Whatever it took he had to find him.

* * * * *

The next day Britain lay under siege. Sullivan had been very busy through the night making his final preparations. But, now it was time to leave. He took off the ring that made him look like the Avatar and left the city as Sullivan for the first time since that day in Trinsic when the Avatar had been taken prisoner.

Ah, that fateful day. They should have killed the bastard then. But, they didn't. He was left alive to be tortured by Grod until, one day, he had discovered the property of the ring. Finding he could not remove it without a special solvent he cut the finger off entirely and somehow escaped. He could have been out for a couple of years. But while he had been in prison the trolls had ensured that no one would ever recognize him again. He had been wholly disfigured and many parts of his body had been warped by the torture so that he was permanently bent and twisted. But, he seemed to have kept his mind intact.

Somewhere along the line the Avatar had made it to the Serpent Isle and recovered somewhat from his time in the dungeon. Then, by some miracle or freak accident the Avatar gained a following, raised an army, and waged war on Britannia, calling himself the Prophet. And now he was breaking Britain's defenses.

As the battle was waged the perimeter around the city was finally broken. The Prophet was in Britain. Sullivan's remaining troops fought in the city streets and were slowly pushed inward to be crushed at its center. Sullivan had charmed them all not to surrender so they were going to fight to the death.

Some Britannian Army officers nearest the center of the city saw that the drawbridge into the castle had been lowered. They had somehow escaped Sullivan's geas and had decided to make a run for it and hole themselves up inside the castle for as long as they could.

When they approached the drawbridge they slowed their run to a jog and then to a slow walk as puzzled frowns appeared on their faces. Two of the Avatar's decrepit servants lay on the drawbridge with arrows in their backs. What was this? They fell having faced away from the castle. Had

the Emperor decided to kill his own servants as well? The people being murdered the soldiers could understand, they were just riffraff. His servants were works of Imperial art according to rumors heard from inside the castle. Why would he kill them?

As they walked over the drawbridge they saw more bodies floating in the moat and more were lying in the foyer. The courtyard, the hallways, the Throne Room -- all were littered with twisted forms pierced with arrows. And in every room of the castle were also stacked crates. It looked as though the Avatar had made his servants bring all these crates into the castle from somewhere and then killed them. Why?

One of the soldiers crept up to a crate and used his sword to pry open a nailed lid. Inside were sticks and sticks and sticks of dynamite. Electrical igniters were attached to the fuses and wired to a pressure-sensitive switch under the lid. Other fine wires trailed from this crate to all the others. The soldier who had opened the crate had a split second to realize this before the dynamite exploded. All of the dynamite in all of the crates had detonated, killing all of the soldiers in the castle and blasting out a whole level of the building. This had the effect of causing all of the walls of the castle to collapse, leaving a smoking heap of rubble where Castle British had once proudly stood.

By the time the Prophet shambled up the main road to the castle there was nothing in Britain to conquer. No citizens. No castle. Just death and decay. The self-styled Emperor had, of course, most likely fled.

But the Prophet, once the real Avatar long ago, knew that this would not be over until Sullivan was safely dead. He knew of Petre as well. What is more he knew who Petre really was. He had had a lot of time to think in between torture sessions in the dungeon and he had finally remembered where he had seen Petre's face before, answering his near-subconscious question he'd had regarding why Petre had looked so familiar.

Both of those scoundrels were immensely dangerous, perhaps Petre most of all since he was the one who had made Sullivan what he was in the first place. Yes, the Avatar had many spies in Britannia watching and learning and reporting while he'd been recovering on the Serpent Isle.

Sullivan was from Earth. He had served an exemplary military career for seven years as an Army Ranger. As the politicking in the upper echelons grew ever more ridiculous, Sullivan left his military service in disgust and entered civilian life, acquiring employment in the Los Angeles Fire Department. By an odd accident he met Shamino in a bar, who rarely traveled to Earth, and talked with him for a long time, eventually getting around to expressing his profound disillusionment with his Earthly existence. He and Shamino became fast friends and one day they met again and Shamino told Sullivan about Britannia.

Naturally, Sullivan did not believe Shamino until he was taken through a red moongate and appeared in the streets of Britain. Sullivan liked Britannia so much that he stayed and became a ranger, taking up his old occupation he knew so well. He married a beautiful woman from Yew and she bore him two daughters. This was the life he enjoyed, but it was short-lived, lasting only two years.

Approximately twenty-three years ago Sullivan was roaming through the dark and dense Great Forest when he chanced upon a sylvan spring. Sullivan drank of the forest water and replenished his canteen. However, Sullivan did not realize that the water had been poisoned with magical potions that had been dumped there. His mind became twisted with the magical effects and a dark cloud passed over his mind changing him utterly. A horrible lust crept into his heart and loins.

When he returned home he violently raped his wife and killed her. Then he molested and killed his two daughters and fed all their bodies to wild pigs, tarrying and watching as they were consumed. The sight of it filled him with a vicious glee and he wandered around the country killing when he felt like it, stealing and engaging in petty theft when it suited him, generally performing acts of evil for the sake of evil.

Twenty years later, Sullivan joined the Fellowship seeing an opportunity to use the organization for the perpetuation of his own evil behavior. He snooped around and found out what they were up to which suited his nasty mind perfectly. Then, one day, he stole Fellowship funds and ran off. He had heard about legends in reference to the Avatar and began calling himself that whenever he interacted with people. The reactions he would sometimes get were amusing and he found that the disguise aided him in his thefts more often than not.

But, Abraham and Elizabeth soon discovered Sullivan's treachery and were hot on his trail. They finally caught up with him and threw him into the dungeon on Buccaneer's Den. But he wasn't to remain there long. Another Fellowship member visited him and befriended him and then made Sullivan such a grand proposal that Sullivan could not see turning down the offer. If this nerdy, geeky-looking fellow could break him out of jail, well then he would play along until he saw fit to depart of his own accord.

That person, of course, was Petre. The same individual who was responsible for poisoning the pool from which Sullivan had quenched his thirst. It was quite by accident and unplanned and Petre never did realize that he was the one who had warped Sullivan's mind. He had been engaged in a project of an altogether different sort.

Petre had been practicing his magical arts and was, at that time, busy concocting various potions. He was looking for one with particular attributes and all the ones that failed his tests or which exhibited properties wholly apart from what was intended he would take down to the pool and dump. The mixed-up cocktail of magical chemicals in that water had driven Sullivan out of his mind, but Petre was unaware of this. He finally manufactured his desired elixir and got a job delivering water and beverages to the castle. He put this potion into anything and everything that would be imbibed. The potion was designed to affect entities of powerful magical ability. This meant Lord British and Nystul. The effect was to gradually reduce a person's desire to attend to matters of importance, replacing this desire with an ever-increasing ennui and depression. Petre faithfully delivered tainted beverages to the castle, slowly poisoning Lord British's mind for twenty years. This is why Lord British never left the castle and had neglected his people. He simply ceased to care.

The Prophet knew that Petre probably was not in this pile of rubble that now lay before him. He had escaped like Sullivan had escaped.

The Prophet's spies had learned of Petre's secret base on Ambrosia only hours ago. This being Petre's most likely destination, the Prophet had sent men there to head him off if possible and find out what they could of the place while they were there. Then there was the issue of Sullivan. Where would he go? How much more of a danger did he pose beside being a murdering rapist and the fact that he was bound to the Black Sword? His

hunger would drive him out into the open again. It was only a matter of time and who the victim would turn out to be.

First thing's first. Nullify Petre and determine the extent of his damage. Then find Sullivan and, as the note said, kill them both.

Chapter 13: Petre Revealed!

Petre had reacquired his remote unit that he'd hidden in Spiritwood and immediately keyed in the sequence that destroyed the Tetrahedron Generator and sent out a massive energy pulse which wiped away the ether from Britannia altogether. All of the mages in the land died instantly from that wave and from that moment on not a single spell would be able to be cast and not a single magic item could ever work again. Britannia was now just as mundane as Earth.

Then he shut off the Cube Generator so that its effects were lifted and so that Sullivan could not use it. After that Petre went physically to Dungeon Despise and removed the prism from the Sphere Generator which destroyed it and set off the booby-trap the Guardian had set in it which disabled all moongates in the land.

Abraham was one of the few unfortunates who was attempting to use the blue moongate outside Britain to escape when Petre destroyed the Sphere Generator. He was killed instantly.

Elizabeth and Hook escaped on a ship bound for Jhelom. They killed the crew and changed its course to the Isle of the Avatar, but fell to arguing about who was going to pilot the vessel. Hook killed Elizabeth and threw her overboard. When he arrived in Jhelom he was arrested by soldiers serving the Prophet and held until word was received about what to do with him. Hook stole a gun and attempted to escape during the night but was shot to death by the night watch. After the energy pulse had evacuated the ether from Britannia, Hook found that his new hand that Petre had fashioned by magical means would not function. This occurred at a most inopportune moment: right as he was pointing the gun at the night watchman. When the pulse passed through him his hand ceased to function and he'd dropped the gun. The night watchman turned around at the noise and riddled Hook with bullets.

Petre, meanwhile, fled to Ambrosia via The Beast which he'd anchored in a little bay off the western coast. Robin and Battles, scared witless by the turning tide of war sailed away as fast as they could to the safety of Petre's hidden base. So distraught were they that they did not notice another vessel follow them far behind. Soon it was not more than a

speck in the distance and one would have to be searching for it with a glass and know where to look.

The party that had been sent to Ambrosia by the Prophet arrived first. They had quickly uncovered the hidden entrance to the offices and discovered the elevator that led down to the Black Gate chamber with the dark sun roiling overhead among the stalactites. They went back up to the surface briefly to radio the Prophet (Yes, they had radios. The Prophet was one step ahead of Petre's war machine all the time.) and alert him as to their status. Then they went back down and began rooting through the file cabinets, piecing together Petre's megalomaniacal plans.

Petre and company arrived the following morning. Perceiving the breach of his hidden entrance, Petre fell back and went to the northern cave instead. There was a secret entrance to his offices he could use from there.

He had Robin and Battles take the ship and flee to Dagger Isle. But they did not make it. Their ship was accosted at nightfall by another ship laden with cannons. As The Beast sunk Spark and his SFG boarded her. The two pirates were pulled aboard Spark's vessel and interrogated. After finding out all that Battles and Robin knew, Spark tortured them for the rest of the night and most of the morning as the ship sailed for Ambrosia. Their bodies were hung from the mizzenmast and left to be pecked at by seabirds.

But when they arrived at Ambrosia they were attacked by the Prophet's ship that had only just arrived. Spark escaped while his SFG fought the Prophet's men. The Serpent Isle soldiers quickly overpowered the SFG and slaughtered them all. Spark swam for shore and began searching for the northern entrance.

The Prophet's ship landed and he and his men made for the south entrance. When they took the elevator down to the great chamber they found the Prophet's men who'd arrived first dead on the floor and Petre busy at a console powering up the Black Gate. The Prophet's soldiers fired upon him and drove him to a doorway that he escaped into. The Prophet had to shut down the Black Gate and, fearing what it might bring through, not knowing how the controls worked, had to destroy the gate rather than try to figure out how to power it down.

Having been forewarned of what was in this chamber, the Prophet brought a copy of Rudyom's wand with him. He aimed the wand at the rippling black monolith and a bolt of energy surged forth destroying the gate and sending shards of the material throughout the chamber like shrapnel.

The Prophet chased Petre down the passageway he'd run into. The winding passage led into another grand chamber wherein lay a great winged vessel. The Prophet knew instantly what it was and called on his radio to the ship above. There was no answer. Petre could be seen in the cockpit of the craft, powering up and prepping for takeoff. Great doors opened in the roof. Seeing this the Prophet tried calling again. There was a weak signal and he tried to get a quick message to the ship to shoot down a plane that was going to fly out of the island at its southern end.

Petre, fully powered, engaged the throttle and shot the vessel up into the air. He flew out of sight and they all thought he'd gotten away when there came a deafening explosion and then another. They ran back to the Black Gate chamber and took the elevator up to the surface. Out in the grass near some old ruins by the water lay the wrecked and smoking craft. The Prophet's anti-aircraft guns aboard his ship had shot the thing down.

But Petre had ejected. The cockpit had landed out in the water and Petre could be seen swimming out to the tiny island in the middle of the bay. The Prophet's ship headed him off and he slowly began swimming toward the shore where the Prophet's soldiers waited for him.

But, as Petre approached, one of the Prophet's men jumped into the water and swam toward Petre as fast as he could. It was Tseramed and he had noticed Petre fumbling around at something in his jacket. Thinking it was a weapon of some kind, Tseramed sought to disarm him. There was an intense struggle in the water as the two met. Petre drew a knife and slashed at Tseramed as he approached. The two submerged, resurfaced, submerged again, grappling with each other's lives.

Then, as suddenly as it started, it was over. Tseramed swam back to shore with Petre in tow. He was not dead, merely unconscious, having been knocked a heavy blow on the back of the neck. The thing Petre had been groping for was a remote unit with a keypad. They later discovered that Petre was going to key in the self-destruct sequence that caused the black sun underground to detonate which would have destroyed the whole island.

Another soldier came up from down below. It seemed that the men that the Prophet had sent ahead had been busy in the file cabinets. They had distilled a final report regarding the contents of the cabinets and what Petre had been doing.

According to the report, after Petre had successfully managed to poison Lord British and stupefy him into neutrality Petre had established his secret base on Ambrosia. He'd made a pact with the Kilrathi (much as Mondain had done many ages ago) and early on infiltrated their interplanetary computer network with the Porthole Operating System. He later shut down the whole system and reactivated it in order to demonstrate his power over the whole Kilrathi Empire and, subsequently, emphasized their dependence on him.

The pact itself was straightforward. He would give them access for an invasion of Earth. In return, Petre was to be made Governor of Earth and Lord of Britannia.

Petre constructed a Black Gate on the Kilrathi homeworld and utilized their astronomical alignment to send soldiers and equipment to two guardian-controlled worlds (Pagan was one of these). They constructed attack ships and took over these planets. They constructed teleporters to the Kilrathi homeworld and were provided with supplies, equipment, and more soldiers.

Etheric forces prevented the Kilrathi's own planned invasion of Britannia. It was only when they were disrupted that a Kilrathi attack ship was able to come near Britannia. But the etheric forces were only disrupted, not shut off, so the attack ship crash-landed. A farmer accidentally killed the Kilrathi pilot and the ship was moved to Petre's secret Ambrosia base. Petre later had the farmer killed by Sullivan.

Due to Petre's diligent research he discovered that he could create gates at will between worlds and dimensions with the blackrock material without having to wait for and rely on astronomical alignments. But the blackrock required a massive source of magical and electromagnetic power to control its mutability. Something of longer and more continuous duration was required.

Such a power source, in the form of a great black sun that floated in a cavern in the Lost Vale on Pagan was just such a source. Petre created magical items to move the sun to a specially made cavern on Ambrosia. A Black Gate was constructed there that could be controlled and that could not be used by the Guardian.

During this time Petre joined the Fellowship knowing its true purpose but realizing that it also fell in step with his own plans. The Guardian and Batlin were doing much of his work for him. He discovered Hawkwind the Time Lord's plan to send a red moongate for the Avatar. With limited divination power, Petre discovered where that location would actually be.

Petre planned and schemed. He initiated the formation of The Britannian Herald, passing it by Elizabeth and Abraham as a very useful tool for social manipulation. Lord British who thought it a benign contribution to the community ratified it.

Petre also established the Britannian Purity League which, with the invention of the printing presses, began circulating anti-gargoyle literature and hate propaganda in Vesper, soon spreading it into Paws and Jhelom and nearer and nearer to the capitol city of Britain.

Petre further used the press to push forward Fellowship projects and activities of Fellowship members. Patterson's success in getting elected as Mayor of Britain was due wholly to Petre's growing propaganda machine. It also enflamed the class system to new levels of animosity: peasantry vs. nobility.

Petre later broke Sullivan out of prison and made him an offer he couldn't resist: in exchange for Sullivan's cooperation and assistance, Petre would install Sullivan on the Ankh Throne as Emperor of Britannia.

After the Avatar arrived in Britannia Petre made the switch between the Avatar and Sullivan. Both reversed roles and the Avatar, magically altered to look like Sullivan, was brought back to the Fellowship dungeon in Buccaneer's Den and tortured every day for a year and a half until he was utterly disfigured and nearly mad, but alive.

Petre, during this period, had Sullivan become a member of the Fellowship as the Avatar in order to bring more people who still clung to the Virtues into the fold.

He also demanded Sullivan learn magic and unwittingly allowed him access to a rare tome that was one of Petre's keys to success. It was a volume on the creation of magical items.

Petre also succeeded in brainwashing a young boy named Spark into hating the current government. He tricked the boy into believing that the person who really was the Avatar was the same imposter that had stolen Trinsic's Rune of Honor (in reality Sullivan) and had a hand in his father's murder (which was Hook's doing). His unabashed rhetoric regarding national politics also led the boy to believe that the real Avatar's friends were servants to a great evil and the Avatar was returning to stamp them out. The Avatar would arrive in Britain soon and they were going to meet him as the Avatar and Petre were old friends.

But, unfortunate for Petre, he laid the foundations for his own doom when he allowed Sullivan the responsibility of educating the boy. Petre and Sullivan had discussed raising Spark into a military leader who would, hence, be extremely loyal to them. This Sullivan would do, but in his own way. He completely twisted Spark's notions of honor and virtue until he was solidly in the grasp of Sullivan's own degenerate and vulgar darkness.

Petre, at this point, caused the Kilrathi to prepare for another invasion of a Guardian-held world. It was on the eve of this battle that Petre went to Ambrosia, fired up the Black Gate and, laden with magical protections, went to visit the Guardian at his home in the Void. He had drawn up papers regarding a treaty between the Guardian and he.

The treaty consisted of this: Petre would call off further invasions against the Guardian's worlds if a) the Guardian ceded rights to Britannia and Earth to Petre, and b) the Guardian gave Petre the schematics and instruction manuals for all of the Generators in Britannia and left them operational. Petre warned the Guardian that if this treaty were not agreed to then there would be more invasions. He also told the Guardian that he had the Avatar in custody and also possessed the Armageddon spell. At this the Guardian narrowed his eyes and seemed to seethe, but he grudgingly agreed and Petre returned to Britannia to finalize his plans.

It was at this time that Petre had the Herald begin printing those scathing articles about Batlin's poor leadership. Batlin confronted Petre and commanded him to get control of his press, threatening that the Fellowship would deem it unworthy of reward and withdraw the funds that supported it.

During this time Petre modified all the Generators. The Tetrahedron Generator was modified to a) be hooked up to a remote control unit that Petre held that could cause disruption or harmonization in the ether at will and b) could be set to totally destroy the surrounding ether permanently (and hence all magic).

The Sphere Generator was modified to a) turn the use of moongates on or off individually, giving Petre total command of blue and red moongates. Black and silver gates were not, technically, moongates and so were not affected and b) to keep the Time Lord permanently imprisoned so that he could not help set things right.

The Cube Generator was modified so that the weak of will and mind would only hear the voice of Petre.

Petre, at once, met with Elizabeth, Abraham, Forskis and Hook and showed them the treaty and told them that Batlin had been cut off. So, they could forget about serving the Guardian as he would not arrive at the next astronomical alignment. The Fellowship would now have new leadership and they had best pay homage. The Avatar would take over but they would not be executed if they cooperated. Their skills would be needed.

He also told them that he had modified the Generators so that they were suborned to his command rather than the Guardian's. Of course, they didn't believe him out of hand, so Petre told them that he would prove it.

1) He would shut off all the moongates in the land and 2) when the astronomical alignment came the Guardian would not come through the Black Gate and 3) they would, from now on, hear Petre's voice instead of the Guardian's.

Petre, of course, detesting loose ends, could not trust the Guardian to keep his word or trust the precautions he'd maintained around the Time Lord would be sufficient to keep the Time Lord from escaping or getting rescued.

If either of the two appeared in Britannia with all of their powers it would be total disaster for Petre's plans.

In all of his extensive research Petre had uncovered the final incarnation of Tren and immediately realized why he had not been able to take possession of any other beings.

Petre constructed a ring of mage compliance decorated with a radiant soul-trapping gem and an adhesive of psychic bonding that would prevent even the most powerful mage from removing it. He further created the spells in its manufacture so that its magic would be hidden. Petre had needed the help of four other mages in manufacturing this item...all of which were killed afterward.

Petre then went to the Serpent Isle with Leavell and a band of Fellowship members and pirates and returned the Great Earth Serpent from the Void. Tren, who had possessed this being, had gotten stuck in the Void when Exodus transported him there.

Very grateful, Tren accepted the ring and when Petre told him to possess the Time Lord he obediently complied, leaving the Serpent and taking roost in the Time Lord.

Petre set Leavell (who he had been coaching in the ways of the press) up in a secret location on the Serpent Isle and left him and the band of Fellowship members and pirates there. They were instructed to incite greater furor and hatred against "Beast" British and Britannia, to establish a press, and to report directly to Petre via a strange device Petre called a "computer".

Back in Britannia Petre commanded Tren to reveal to him the Time Lord's powers and purpose and how the Time Lord could be destroyed or, at least, rendered servile. Tren told him that the Time Lord could not expire except by a direct command from the Undrian Council to do so.

Petre told Tren to manufacture the memory of having been given that command and leave it with the Time Lord. Then he told Tren to go possess the Guardian and spend the rest of his days ruling his empire with no thoughts of expansion. This was accomplished.

Petre then shut off all the moongates and began speaking to Elizabeth, Abraham, Forskis, and Hook via the Cube Generator. Finally, he told them in this way to meet him at the Black Gate at the time of the Astronomical Alignment, which was imminent, but told Batlin he must remain in Britain.

When they arrived and the Guardian didn't show up they bent on their knees and begged for leniency and promised they would serve the new order loyally. Then Petre destroyed that Black Gate. It wasn't needed and nothing good could come of having two of those things lying around.

Petre then went and told Batlin that he had been cut off from the Guardian and that he was to step down, abdicate, and hand over leadership of the Fellowship to the Avatar. Petre showed him the treaty, demonstrated his control over the Generators, and then brought in Elizabeth, Abraham, Forskis and Hook to testify to the truth of all he said.

Batlin at first refused and then finally relented. He performed his last ceremony swearing in the Avatar (Sullivan). Hook later killed him.

The report continued with the chronology of events that transpired after this, listing all of the evil deeds of Petre and the Fellowship up to the mounting Serpent Isle war.

It was around this time that Petre had disappeared again to open up the Black Gate and direct the Kilrathi and the subsequent invasion of Earth, the planet of which Petre was to be made Governor.

So, Earth had already been invaded and was, even now, a Kilrathi possession. It was also during this time that Sullivan acquired access to the Ambrosia base. The report then summarized the events after Petre's return and his arrest and the war that culminated in this moment.

By now Petre was quite conscious. He had been tied to a ruined pillar and was glaring at the Prophet with raging, burning eyes.

“Ah, Petre! You've joined us. How nice,” said the Prophet with a congenial smile. His face was scarred and blackened. One eye had a patch over it and all his hair had fallen out. He wore a hood at all times to protect his deformed head (which had been pressed repeatedly in a vise by Grod). Part of his lower lip was gone revealing broken teeth. His left foot twisted a

full 90 degrees forcing him to walk with a limp and was often seen with a cane. In this instance he was leaning on a staff. He was stooped and hunched and it was difficult to attribute him with the lordly mien of a general commanding the vengeful hordes from the Serpent Isle.

The Prophet hobbled closer to Petre and asked, “Do you know who I am, Petre?”

Petre looked at the mangled figure. “Mutilated, misshapen...” Petre’s eyes narrowed to red slits. Two and two came together and gave a correct sum. His face reddened and his voice grated.

“How did you get out of prison, Avatar?”

One of the Prophet’s soldiers stepped up and threw back his own hood. He looked at Petre with disgust and said, “Thou shouldst remember me, fiend! ‘Tis I, Tseramed that sought the true Avatar and ended his nightmare in the dungeon that, for a year and a half, he endured. Thy suspicious behavior and that of thy companion gave me cause to begin probing into the matter. Soon I acquired knowledge of the Avatar’s whereabouts and some inkling of thy plan.” Tseramed stepped back. “Forgive me Avatar, but I could not hold mine tongue against this vermin!”

“It’s all right, Tseramed. You alone have the right to raise your voice in my presence. I owe you much. But, as for you Petre, you will be taken to the Serpent Isle to receive judgement. Thereafter will the germ of the new empire, hailing its capitol from Monitor, be established. You have made a great mess, Petre and it is going to take immeasurable years to put things again to rights. I may as well stay and see that done since, thanks to you, I have no home any longer. It is now a supply depot for the Kilrathi. I find it humorous, Petre, that you should want so badly to be a Planetary Governor of a warehouse.”

Petre struggled in his chains, “And thanks to you my plans for a new order of great peace and prosperity is ruined!”

“Ah, yes. Your Pax Britannia. I have been leafing through some of your future projects outlined in this report. Establishing a Britannian Aeronautics and Space Administration for the purpose of getting Britannia into the network of space-faring civilizations. But not for peace, it seems.

There are plans here detailing the construction of mighty armadas of deadly starships. It seems you are hell-bent on conquest, dear stables caretaker.

“There is an outlined plan here for a complete takeover of the Kilrathi Empire, the absorption of the Guardian’s domain, and spreading out toward universal domination with your products installed in everything.”

“Yes, by now I suppose you know all about me, don’t you Avatar.”

“Indeed Petre, or should I say Willy D. Flates, the Third? President and Founder of MacroHard Corporation, sole distributor of the Porthole operating system. A system I was forced to use on Earth to play Ultima 7 on my computer. I can’t tell you how much suffering and heartache that operating system cost me in repeated formatting and reinstalling on my hard drive.

“But the key to your whole plan rested on the ability to control the usage of resources of two planets: Earth and Britannia. Britannia gave you the most leeway, didn’t it Mr. Flates? The means were more accessible in your rise to power. If you had not been stopped the realization of your ultimate, nightmare dream would have come to fruition. Finally, after all these years, the creation of a – oh, what did you call it?” The Prophet flipped a couple of pages of the report. “Ah, yes, the FSR – Fellowship Socialist Republic. That would have consolidated your power.

“Poor Sullivan didn’t stand a chance, it seems. You would have let him run amok for a while, destroying things, being himself until the people hated and feared him, and then you would waltz in with a liberating army and depose him. Willy Flates, Emperor of Britannia the Herald would exclaim. That army you were building on the Serpent Isle for just such a purpose, I must say, came in handy after I usurped it. You see I used much the same tactic. You had the exiled Lord Blackthorn handling your military matters since he wasn’t working for the Guardian anymore. Well, you know how heavy-handed he can be. I wrested power from him with ease and had an army all ready to fight. Thank you, Mr. Flates, for making my job so much easier. It’s not often your enemy hands you the gun to shoot him with.”

“I should have killed you when I had the chance, you fucking diseased do-gooder.”

The Prophet smiled, “The only thing I don’t understand, Willy, is how you even came to find out about Britannia. How did you get here?”

Willy laughed, “I’m not going to say, Avatar...er...Prophet – or whatever it is you are now. It’s no longer relevant. It was all *his* plan to begin with, you meddling schmuck. So, if I tell you then you’ll just haul off and root him out.”

The Prophet frowned. The action made his face even more grotesque. “What do you mean it was *his* plan? Is this some idiot attempt to pass off the responsibility for this entire fiasco onto an imaginary partner?”

Willy laughed harder, “You fucking moron! Where do you think I got the idea for Porthole, fuckhead! Something like that is pure genius! There’s not a god damn person on Earth who could come up with something as clever as that! I used it with total success to enslave the entire Kilrathi Empire to do my bidding. And I was doing a fucking bang up job screwing Earth with it, too. So, go ahead and do me in! Just you fucking wait, asshole! He’ll find some other way to take over the multiverse! And there’s not a motherfucking god damn thing you can do about it! Stupid cripple.”

“This scoundrel is lying, milord,” said Tseramed. “The fiend is simply trying to trick us into keeping him alive awhile longer.”

“You may be right, Tseramed,” said the Prophet, “but then we must not be hasty in executing this cocksucker before we find out everything we need to know about what he’s done. After all, it wasn’t until very recently that intelligence found out about this secret base. And it was far more than what I expected. I don’t wish to be further surprised with something far larger and of greater evil.”

“I understand, milord. As much as I am against torture, in the interests of time I am willing to temporarily forget my personal inhibitions against such nasty business and have a go at this villain.”

The Prophet laid a hand on Tseramed’s shoulder. “My dear friend, I do appreciate the gesture. A suggestion of that nature, coming from you, is truly a great sacrifice. But, no. I would not have you change that basic nature for which I possess the deepest regard. If anyone is to extract the

requisite information from this scalawag, it should be me. Indeed, there is a certain poetic justice in it.”

The Prophet turned to Willy and was about to speak again when a soldier waved to the Prophet to come to him. He was holding a radio. The Prophet went over and received the call. Apparently the bodies of the Avatar’s closest companions had been uncovered in a house in Trinsic, preserved in some strange-smelling liquid. The Prophet took the news half-heartedly. Magic didn’t work anymore, so there was no hope of resurrecting them. All he could do was give them decent burials. If he’d still had tear ducts he would have cried.

The Prophet handed the receiver back to the soldier and turned back again to Willy. But, Willy was slumped forward in his chains with an arrow in his chest. And Tseramed was just falling to his knees, clutching the shaft of an arrow that had pierced his throat. Blood gushed from the wound and Tseramed fell on his side, dead.

The Prophet looked around. There was a rock outcropping not far away from where they were standing. He saw a glimpse of blond hair fluttering in the breeze. Naturally, it was Spark, finally having found his quarry. But, he didn’t have very much time left to get back to Sullivan for the antidote, assuming he could even find Sullivan. His time was up, so he did not see much more use in skulking about. So, he did what he did best and hunted Petre down and killed him. Tseramed had spotted him and was about to notch an arrow in his bow, so Spark killed him too.

Then he saw the deformed cripple shouting and directing soldiers at him. Oh, well. Spark readied another arrow. But, at that moment, there was a brief rumble that shook the whole island and then a blinding white flash. A bowl-like depression was made in the ocean surrounding the place the island used to be and a wave went out destroying the ships harbored there. A great tsunami spread away from the area and the depression filled back in with collapsing walls of water. The tsunami continued on its path, flooding the shores of northeastern Britannia and the northern shore of Dagger Isle. The great mountain of water that crashed upon them killed the few people who lived in these places.

Other than that, the destruction of Ambrosia went unnoticed. There was a brief tremor that some people noticed, but overall no one cared. They had enough problems of their own.

Chapter 14: The Forest Pool **(And What Sullivan Found There)**

After Mr. Flates had destroyed the Tetrahedron Generator and sent the ether packing Sullivan had been journeying from Britain, slipping through enemy lines to the mountains in the north, seeking the passage that led through them to the Great Forest.

The wave from the Generator had gone out and passed through Sullivan. From that moment on he had no memory of what transpired until he woke up on the leaf-littered floor of a dark and quiet forest.

He sat up and shook his head numbly. Leaves and dirt fell to the ground. He looked about and noted how serene the moment felt. For the first time in what seemed to be eons he felt as if a burden had been lifted from him.

And then tiny, fragmentary snapshots of memory infringed on the edges of his awareness. Insane images. Running and leaping about. Hideous laughter that came from his own throat. Animals in his path fornicated with, tortured and slain. The ever-present feeling of being pursued by a demon.

A demon! Sullivan jerked his head at his right hip. The Black Sword was still there. He stood up, carefully as his head started to spin. He drew the sword and immediately noticed that it felt different. It was heavy, awkward and dull. Moving it required much effort and the blue gem was cracked and darkened. It seemed the demon had escaped when the ether wave passed, destroying the bond between it and the sword and, thus, himself.

The desire for evil in him was a bit lessened because of this. Not quite as acute or voracious. But the separation had driven him quite beyond his sanity. It had been nearly permanent. The demon had tormented him for some time before diving down into the earth, jeering and scratching with its bony claws, psychically raping every neuron in Sullivan's brain.

But it had passed. And Sullivan had survived. He took several deep breaths and was deciding the next best course of action when he heard a frail

voice call out to him by name. He turned around and saw a forest pool. It seemed to be filled with a cool, clean water that made him desire it instantly. He suddenly noticed how dry and parched his throat was. Every atom in his limbs was moving toward it before he even realized he was doing so.

And then he forced a stop. On the other side of the pool sat an old man on a stump, leaning wearily on a gnarled wooden staff.

“Come, my boy,” said the elderly voice. “Come, Sullivan, and drink. I know you are thirsty. The water is quite safe.

Sullivan hesitated, but not for long. Soon he was stumbling down the gentle slope to the pool and was on his knees, scooping up the cold, crystal water as though he’d never tasted clean water before. Always, however, he kept one eye on the old man who just sat on his stump, looking at him with cold, grey eyes that shone from his long, white hair and beard. The black robe he wore was full of holes and dusty as if from long travel.

Sated somewhat, Sullivan sat down on the grass by the pool and looked at the old man. “And who might you be?”

“Why, I am you, of course.”

Sullivan laughed. “Really, old man? I thought I was me and you were you.”

“Then you are mistaken, lad. You have performed your service, dutifully, but it is time to switch to our backup plan in case the first failed, which it mostly has. These troublesome Britanniens are always getting underfoot and I’ve had enough of trying to deal with them. I told myself I would try to keep them around and use them, putting them into good service for my Empire, but they always muck everything up! Don’t you agree, Sullivan?”

“I’m afraid I haven’t the faintest idea what you’re talking about old man. But I have a question of my own. How is it that you know who I am?”

“All in good time, boy. Now be a good lad, reach into your pocket and take out what is there. Yes, that’s right. There’s a good chap.”

Sullivan held a small case. In it was a copy of Petre's keypad that he'd made.

Now, open the case, take out the keypad, and press the following sequence..." The elderly man promptly rattled off a sequence of numbers that brought the Tetrahedron Generator back into normal operation. Sullivan, after he'd discovered Petre's treachery, anticipated that something like this might happen. So, he'd gone to Dagger Isle where the Tetrahedron Generator was kept and modified it. It would blast the ether, but only with a sustained wall of force. It would hold it at bay but not drive it off entirely. The problem was that it might fail completely after only a short time of use. The modification had been hasty and untested. There was no way to know.

For some reason, Sullivan felt compelled to enter the sequence into the keypad. He felt a slight tingle as the sensation of ether moved about him. It was a feeling he'd become sensitive to after practicing his magecraft.

"Now, key in this sequence..." And he uttered another long string of numbers that set off the booby-trap near the black sun that powered Ambrosia. This would start the chain reaction causing the dark orb to explode, obliterating Ambrosia in the process. Zombie-like, Sullivan did as he was told. In a few seconds there came an almost imperceptible shudder in the ground at his feet. And then nothing.

"Good lad! Most excellent. Now throw that blasted thing into the pool before someone has a mind to shut off that Pyramid again," said the old man, referring to the Generator.

Sullivan's arm tossed the gizmo into the pool. The deadly remote unit, having just brought back the ether to the entire planet and destroyed an island half a world away, fell ignominiously into the water with nothing more than a plop.

"Who are you?" Sullivan asked. His eyes were wide and he strained to get control of his body.

"I told you, my boy. I'm you!" The old man laughed an evil, cackling laugh and slapped his knee.

"Fuck you! Who are you and what do you fucking want?"

“Fuck? Fuck? Where did you learn such language, boy? On Earth?” At this the wizened gentleman cackled uproariously. “On Earth? My dear boy, you may have visited Earth and lived there for a time, but you are not from there. Look into the pool and all will be made clear.”

Sullivan looked down without wanting to and screamed.

And he didn't stop screaming for some time. Memories flooded back to him with something that felt like a physical force. He felt like he was on fire. He fell to the ground and twisted and shuddered in agony. Everything he'd thought he'd known about his individual nature was a lie. He was not Sullivan. His history on Earth was largely a fabrication. The events had actually occurred but he had not been entirely himself while engaged in those events. Shamino had not met him at that bar in Los Angeles. And he had not come to this forest pool after his arrival in Britannia. He had come here before he left. Petre had not been dumping chemicals in the water. The particular sequence of events of his story about his origins he had relayed, unconsciously, to certain people that would spread the rumor to be heard, eventually, by the Prophet.

It was not that he was two people. It was just that he was one person with two personalities. One was real. The other was a fraudulent cover to hide who he really was from those who might recognize him.

The personality of Sullivan was not real. And Sullivan was horrified by this. He would fade away into nothingness when the real personality came to take up its old residence.

“Tut, tut, child. That's no way to be, writhing in the mud like that.” The old man was suddenly on Sullivan's side of the pool, standing over him. Sullivan looked up at him in terror. Recognition poured itself like lethal poison into his mind.

“Yes, yes,” said the aged fellow. He grinned toothsome and knelt, patting Sullivan on the shoulder. He would have cringed at that foul touch if he could move.

“Now you see, don't you? Lord British and I had once engaged in that sorcerer's duel so long ago. He beat me mercilessly and sent me up the

river, as they say in some places. But, he knew that one day I would come back for revenge and so he pursued me. He dogged me relentlessly. There was nowhere for me to go in Britannia for long without that wretched fool coming around, trying to sneak up on me and take me out with one of his nasty *Lightning* blasts.

“So I went into hiding. I came to this pool that I had sorcerously changed as a sort of escape route of last resort. It was here that I became you and disappeared. It was half self-imposed exile and half a kind of vacation. I sorely needed one, anyway. I didn’t look like the aspect you bear now, of course.

“I planned and plotted and schemed in that other form and met Willy D. Flates. At that time he was just a nobody, fresh out of college and looking for wealth and power. In addition he had one hell of a chip on his shoulder. Being a computer geek and all he had never received recognition for his genius. Worst of all he’d never gotten laid.

“So, I promised him riches and power. I promised him the universe. And so I spread out my Plan before him and he latched on to it like a whore to a C-note. Unfortunately his arrogance got the better of him and he let that rotten Avatar creep go on living. I could understand wanting to torture that mamby-pamby little faggot. But, he should have remembered that the Plan was more important; not to be left to the vagaries of chance. To willingly let an unknown factor mess up the works was nothing short of a fuck up to confound all fuck ups. Oh, well. No matter. He’s dead now. And so is that cape-flaunting stupidhero Avatar. More importantly, Lord British is quite deceased.

“The only thing that gets under my skin these days is these idiot Britannian citizens. They’re worthless. I think you had the right idea when you just started slaughtering them all there toward the end.” He laughed and his eyes twinkled. “You’ll be happy to note that I’ll be following in *your* footsteps on that project.” He gave Sullivan a mighty slap on the back and guffawed.

“You see, boy, I’ve come to realize that I’ve highly overrated this dungheap of a planet. It has caused more problems just existing than any other place I’ve been. How many other worlds do you know of that attract as many evil power-lusters as this one? Why is that? I’ll tell you. It’s

because Britannia is like an unprotected, naïve, and beautiful young woman. There is much to be gained from experiencing her pleasures, and she's easy to take advantage of. Her womb is fertile and her defending knights are blind idiots.

“I don't need Britannians to further my ends. I can use more worldly, but cynical, Earthlings. They'll see Britannia and know exactly what to do. There will be a holocaust of rape and plunder, and I will finally have the motivated workforce that can extract and utilize the resources I need for universal domination. It needn't be complex. In fact, now, it is quite easy.”

The old man reached out and searched in Sullivan's pockets. He pulled out a piece of parchment.

“You know, I once wrote a book wherein my plan involved the use of this bit of information I now hold in my hand. That book (which, of course, I never published, but a few copies still exist in libraries here and there) was one of the things that got British on my ass.

“I had intended to use this information only as a threat, never to actually *use* it. At the time that would have been a silly thing to do. But, now things have changed. The situation is different. And my attitude is different. It's high time I came back fully so I can take advantage of the ether while it's still here.”

With that, the old man stood up and Sullivan started to dissolve, frantically sobbing and clawing at the dirt that his hands passed through without disturbing it. He was slowly growing more ethereal and dim. His last, desperate cry echoed faintly, then he was gone. All that remained was a thin grey smoke that wisped away into the air.

The old man looked down at the parchment and spoke the words of the *Armageddon* spell. A tidal wave of energy blasted away from him and spread over all the world, killing every living man, woman, child, and beast instantly. Britannia's version of a nuke, and this evil, cackling octogenarian actually used it.

He traveled across the silent lands, watching as the cold Armageddon storm formed in the sky to let fall icy rain and snow. Soon most of the vegetation would die. But, the old man was not concerned. This was

actually the second time in this world's history that the Armageddon spell had been used. The first time was thousands of years before when Zog, the first primitive Britannian to walk the land and fish in its streams, was visited by Wisps who gave him the spell, probably in exchange for some little tidbit of information.

Unwittingly, Zog used the spell and wiped out all life on the planet. But, eventually, it came back. The trees and grass grew again and beasts and people flourished once more.

The filthy old bastard traveled high and low across the wastes. He cared nothing for the great stench that filled the air from the millions of carcasses. He couldn't give a wit for the storms that killed the trees. All that was important was that it was his. The earth underneath his feet was all his, to be plundered at his whim. People would be brought from Earth and enslaved here to do his bidding. He would be the new god of Britannia. And under his rule Britannia would flourish. Whether or not the people rejoiced he could care less. The people weren't important. They were retarded morons. But dominating and ruling everything in the multiverse *was* important. And now he was free to build up his base of operations to do so. Free from interruptions by nosy L.B.s and stupid bitches like the Avatar, he could finally settle in and get some fucking work done. He could write a new book. A *real* how-to. He might add a few more steps this time than just three.

Who was he you ask? Well, who could conceive and execute such an abysmally horrid Plan as the one just related except one man who, in all of Britannia's history, has been the most over-looked and underrated fiend to breathe Britannian air?

Who could be as cruel, callous, uncaring, brutal, and diabolical as Maximillian the Amazingly Mean?

Author's Note

I make no apologies for the gross misuse of the English language in this story. Nor do I apologize for typographical and/or grammatical errors. I wrote and proofed it the best I could in the time allotted (which was a couple hours, two or three times a week, over the course of three months, commonly resulting in me falling asleep at my computer). Working sucks. It robs you of vital energy that could be better spent elsewhere. No, I don't know where, so stop looking at me like that.

Naturally, I acknowledge the legal rights of Origin Systems/Electronic Arts and do not intend to make any attempt, whatsoever, to make any money off this useless waste of time that you've just read (assuming that you've actually bothered to do that). To do so would be an infringement of registered trademarks and copyrights and all that crap.

I further acknowledge that, in the first chapter, I lifted dialogue straight out of the game. My excuse is that it helped to provide a starting point in which to come to a proper deviation in the plot of the game, so that I could blend it into the plot of my story (or, if you prefer, into la-la land). I will stick to that excuse.

I make no apologies for the gross and disgusting atrocities described in this story. I wanted to paint a particularly vulgar and evil picture of Sullivan's and Petre's characters. I hope you feel I've accomplished that. I suppose deleting this story from your hard drive, sending me hate mail, and/or wrenching uncontrollably could all be construed as a compliment of sorts. So, if you hate it, well, thanks. If you like it then I'm worried about the state of your mental health. (Okay, you caught me, I'm really not the slightest bit concerned. Thankfully, I don't even know you and we'll probably never meet. So, with this protection of anonymity I can safely tell you that I fucked your mother twice last Tuesday, opened mail that was addressed to you, and filmed your sister giving a blowjob to the pool guy. If you're interested in getting the film back, don't worry. I already took care of that. You can get it right off the net. God bless technology!)

Speaking of mental health I assure you I'm completely sane. I am NOT a serial killer hiding out and writing stories in his copious quantities of spare time trying to share ideas with like-minded weirdos.

Just in case you were wondering...

My intent when writing this hideous trash was to explore the concept of something TRULY evil entering Britannia and messing things up. I'm sorry, but the Guardian was just too goofy for me to do much more than titter behind my hand. And I just *had* to explain Lord British's behavior. If he had been a President rather than a monarch I think he would have been impeached for gross negligence in his duties. No real reason is ever given, either, for his lack of care or awareness. The tone of his Last Will and Testament simply characterizes, to me at any rate, a big, whiny pussy who just doesn't want to do his fucking job anymore but doesn't want to give up the comforts of his position to abdicate and let someone else get things in order. What the hell does that asshole do all day anyway except shove food into his gaping piehole and screw the help? Why should the Avatar help him?

So I gave the jerk the benefit of the doubt and made up some cockamamy bullshit about him being slowly poisoned with a mind-altering drug. The truth is that Mr. Flates never poisoned him at all. (Come on, folks! Security at the castle can't be *that* lax where they'll just take food products from anybody!) All he did was take advantage of L.B.'s lack of interest in his empire. He just caught the old boy with his pants down (most of the time quite literally, according to "deep throat" Nell. Rumor has it that L.B. commissioned Alagner to develop the crystal ball recording device so that he and Nell could make pornos. Apparently a few were actually made and leaked out of the castle into the hands of a lucky few who made a tidy profit selling them to private collectors of such material. An even more vicious rumor has it that Nell's brother, Charles, was the sole collector who bought all of them as he really wasn't after Jeanette at all and was really pouting around the castle because he found out that his sister was kicking up her heels for the main man and wasn't giving Charles any more hand jobs. How's that for long-winded hearsay?).

But, I digress. The short of it is that I loved the game. It's the only game I ever played that I actually spent a lot of time with. I usually get bored with video games pretty fast (mere minutes). The novelty of exploring an alternate world and having the freedom of movement to do so was the coolest thing I've experienced in the realm of electronic entertainment. I'm glad the game was made and I really wish someone

would make another like it. I played that game to death. I think I exhausted every possibility, explored every last nook, experienced every possible program glitch, and made every possible significant modification to U7 that a completely obsessed player (such as I must obviously be) can feasibly do.

What this boils down to is that I just had to get U7 out of my system so that I could stop being drawn to it, so that my free time could be better spent elsewhere, in short, so I could get on with my life.

So, I destroyed Britannia. And, let me tell you, I sure as fuck feel better!

Thanks Max!

Selwyn (a.k.a. Fecal Dragon)
2002

CONTACT INFO (for those who just can't refrain from comment):

All hate mail can be delivered to this address:

Denniswright57@hotmail.com

(whoever he is)

Disclaimer

The author is not responsible for the use or misuse of any material in this manuscript. If you are a serial killer hiding out and reading stories in your copious quantities of spare time trying to get ideas from like-minded weirdos, let it be known: I AM NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR YOUR ACTIONS! FUCK OFF!

MAY ALL WHO READ THIS ROT IN DEATH!