

Killer of Souls

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In the dark, putrid confines of the Castle Ba'irth, it was coming. An acrid steam hissed from iron grates in the floor as an evil energy shivered around me. I crouched in the half-light, behind a timeworn stone pillar, in the cellar maze of the ancient edifice of the Jumkai, faced with a question I couldn't escape: "Was I ready?" A distant thump. "Am I ready? Why should I doubt it? Would Gack, the Lord-High Enabler, have wasted the Entity's limited resources to send a mere scrunt on a mission of this import? "Besides," I thought, "if I am to avenge the enslavement of my planet by the Jumkai, I must be--"

A creaking door. A guttural roar. Distant, slathering, sticky footsteps. "Check your weapons," I whispered to myself as I scanned left -- then right. "Zabooka, Boomzot, Firle, Bristler, Flasher and Pod Hammer. All there. All deadly. All loaded, cocked and charged. That was the good news.

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Killer of Souls/Caringer/2.

The bad news: The read-out on my health level indicator was down another 15% thanks to that recent -- and extremely careless -- encounter with a mere flit fly! "Maybe," I mused, "the Jumkai were driven to conquer five galaxies - just to get away from those damn bugs." I smiled grimly. Imagine, joking at a time like this! Perhaps Admiral Kluthark had been right when he pinned the battle ribbons on my tunic aboard his flagship after the Sineadian Uprising: "You have ice water running through your veins."

A clang. I shivered. Closer. The faint trace of a smile ran away from my face as quickly as the Kumbai Guards had run from the formless Irqiat when Liquador's army flew between the twin moons of Oorocdha and into immortality. Greasy footsteps. Louder. Wetter. There was no mistake. It was him! Loënwat the Killer of Souls. I could hear the unmistakable gurgling and ragged breathing. I could smell the stench of evil. Loënwat, the legendary creature of ten billion half-forgotten nightmares, was using his twelve, flailing, snorkel-like nasal protrusions to explore the rancid air. Deep within his sinuous, yet blubberous and scabrous body, he knew only one goal: To find and enslave the last remaining enclave of humans in the Universe.

The pace of the splattering footfalls quickened. My thumb trembled above the "fire" button as I double-checked my weapon selection: My always-trusty Zabooka. The same weapon I used to dispose of Raivål in that long-ago duel in the valley of Ya'eral. I slid left slightly as Loënwat's first slippery tendril slithered into view.

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Killer of Souls/Caringer/3.

This was the moment.

Then, a sound. Discordant. Distant. It didn't fit into the milieu around me. An unwanted intruder. Not now! I tried to refocus as a second blue-gray, mucous-covered tentacle slapped through the doorway.

Another series of mindless beeps! Madness! This was no time for the Lord High Commissioner of the Spuædæant to interrupt! I glanced away from the slithering, slapping horror in front of me to check my sub-galactic com-link. It wasn't engaged. There was only one, logical explanation.

I jolted forward and grabbed the phone.

"Hello?!"

"Hi, honey!"

Sigh. "Oh. Hi."

"What's wrong?"

"Wrong? Nothing."

"You sound upset."

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Killer of Souls/Caringer/4.

"All I said was 'Hello.'"

"Are you playing that damn computer game again?" Eleanor has a certain minor tone in her voice that's very unpleasant when she's suspicious.

"Game? Come on! I'm, uh, working."

"Right."

"No, really. I'm working. Right now, in fact, I was just about to make a big breakthrough - And, your call kinda' messed me up." There was a palpable pause. I'd probably gone too far. I tried to soften things a little. "Eleanor, I'm not upset with you! But, writer's block is no joke."

The sigh was one I'd heard both from Eleanor...and my agent -- a lot lately. "Whatever. 'Cause, you know, Leonard isn't going to keep making excuses for you if you don't produce for him."

"I know. I know. It's just a little writer's block. I'm working on the story! It's just taking more time than I thought it would. Jeez!"

"Seems like you were telling me that three months ago." Three months was being generous. There was another pause my brother-in-law could drive his Peterbilt through.

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Killer of Souls/Caringer/5.

"I'm not a writer, but -- instead of all this sitting and thinking you're doing...wouldn't it be better if you did something like work out an outline?"

A scribbled outline -- long ago buried in strike-through's, X's, lines and spilled coffee mocked me from the floor. "I'm not good with outlines."

"What's to be good with? You just write down some notes for yourself...then write it. Seems simple. It's a good way to work it out."

"Outlines have rules, honey! You start with a Roman numeral. Then, you have to create subcategories under that Roman numeral." The terror of high school English class came pouring back on me like a tidal wave of S'prith'ca invaders. "But, you can't create sub categories UNLESS you have at least TWO of them. So, if I start off with a Roman Numeral I...I can't put a capital 'A' under it -- unless I also has a 'B.' And on and on and on!" I smoldered for a moment, remembering the disdain on the face of my English 101 instructor in college. "Outlines have rules, Eleanor!" It all seemed to obvious to me. Didn't she get it?

"If you're so concerned about rules, Aaron, how come you never obey the speed limit?"

I didn't have an answer for that one. So, I tried to confuse her with fancy footwork. "Logic can sometimes be highly overrated."

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"Sitting around, waiting for the story to reveal itself to you doesn't seem like much of a plan...especially when you've got a deadline." She paused to let it all sink in. It didn't. I guess she got tired of waiting for me to answer. "Look, I know I'm late. But, I'll be leaving the office soon. I'll probably get home in about an hour. I just wanted you to know...so you can start dinner for us." Very subtle. I got the message. "See you in an hour." Click.

As I hung up the phone, I surveyed the carnage around me. Dried egg yolk clung to the plate sitting on top of the scanner, next to the monitor. Half a cup of long-dead coffee sat inches from the keyboard. Notes I'd written to myself for the Western/romance novel everyone, including me, had been waiting for -- for months -- laid next to the coffee, untouched - except for a few dribbles of dark roast -- since 9. I slowly turned back to the screen.

Ohmigod Disaster! When the phone rang, I forgot to hit "pause!" Frantically, my fingers fumbled to the keyboard as I stared wide-eyed into the forbidding horror before me. How could this happen? How could I drop my defenses so totally? Loënwat was closing in on me. The noxious gas from his thrashing nostrils flared into flaming balls that lit the maze in an ominous glow. I should have been blasting him from behind my pillar haven, using the Zabooka to rake the scaly and disgusting body. But, my fingers were failing me. I couldn't find the keys to my weapons!

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Killer of Souls/Caringer/7.

I stumbled clumsily out into the moist light streaming from a sewer grate above." I was silhouetted against the coarse backdrop, just as the Prawnians once had been -- in their star-crossed clash with the Usåbel -- above the Gas Monster Dural. "No! No," I screamed! Too late. The creature had seen me! I fired blindly. But, somehow, my weapon selection had changed -- to the Pod Hammer! Against Loënwat? Insane!

The searing sound of my flesh frying filled my ears, as the creature who had seen a thousand suns age and die, simultaneously snorted twelve hot, congealed pellets of pure energy from his nasal orifice.

The screen froze. I sagged in my chair. The word "Replay" flashed in the lower right corner. "No thanks, I'm done... but, dinner's not." Even though, it seemed like seconds, my ugly death in the Castle Ba'irth had taken 45-minutes to unfold. Now, I only had time to boil some pasta...and, maybe do the breakfast dishes before Eleanor pulled in the drive. Bones and muscles popped and cracked as I crawled out of the chair and headed toward the kitchen. I left the computer on. "Later," I thought, "I'll take another shot at Loënwat.

TWO

Just the Facts

I've always considered myself a freelance writer. For most of my "career," this was because I'd never had a real job. At least, I didn't - until Leonard took me on.

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Killer of Souls/Caringer/8.

I'd written a little piece for Traveling Bride magazine that caught his eye. As I recall, he said he called because, "the lyrical qualities of some of these passages show me you could be a first-rate romance novelist!"

"Romance novelist?"

"Absolutely! You were, somehow, able to make the Moroccan wedding - with all the groomsmen wearing camel tongues on their heads - sound utterly quixotic!"

"It was meant to be tongue-in-cheek."

"And, what do you think romance novels are?"

Well, despite the fact that I was within 50 pages of wrapping up a Tom Clancyesque espionage/Armageddon thriller entitled "The Dawn Ripper," - about a secret agent sent out in a state-of-the-art one-man flying nuclear submarine to stop a plot to blow up the world at sunrise, I decided to go for it. After all, how often does a literary agent call YOU...especially when YOU haven't called HIM first? (The answer, by the way, is "really, really, really almost never.")

My first book was "Burgundy Heights." It was actually based on a plot that had been "suggested" by the publisher - after the original writer, Lawrence Applesby, aka Larry Hardwick, "took a hiatus" from Romance Novels.

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Killer of Souls/Caringer/9.

At least that's what Leonard told me when he gave me the project. I later found out, after 35 romance novels, Larry had become a permanent resident of Deep Valley Mental Hospital.

Romance can do that to you. It can drive you nuts.

The back door slammed.

"Pasta? That's it?"

I stood there dumbfounded...like a deer hoping the guy in camos with the big rifle wasn't who I thought he was. "It's a complete spaghetti dinner," I corrected lamely.

"Uh huh. So, where's the sauce?" Eleanor really knew how to hurt a guy.

"Well, you know, preparing food around here sometimes, I feel like Gunga Din trying to round up water and ammo. There's not always a lot to go around!"

She spun around to the cupboard, grabbed a jar of Aunt Molly's Sicilian. "Cute. But, I thought Leonard warned you about using too many similes. It gets tiresome." Her patience was as thin as the ice on a Wisconsin lake in April. Then, the jar of pasta sauce hit the countertop like a...well, you get the picture.

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Killer of Souls/Caringer/10.

Of course, Eleanor was right. "Tiresome" is a good word to describe the situation. I was tired of romance novels, Eleanor was tired of hearing me say I was tired of romance novels and Leonard was tired of hearing that I wasn't going to make the deadline with my latest effort, "Sagebrush Queen" - a Western.

I didn't choose the Western idea. It was chosen for me. Actually, that's how all four of my previous books had come about...they were somebody else's idea -- usually the product of a monthly brainstorming session of executives in New York at Sluttermeier Publishing. My imagination runs wild, when I think of those sessions.

MODERATOR:

Let's list some traits we want to see in the woman.

MAN 1:

Helpless.

WOMAN 1:

Oh, please!

MODERATOR:

No judging!

WOMAN 2:

Beautiful.

MAN 2:

Voluptuous.

WOMAN 1:

Does that mean "big boobs?"

MODERATOR:

Andrea, no judging! Let's move on to the man in our story. Traits?

WOMAN 2:

Hunky.

(CONTINUED)

Killer of Souls/Caringer/11.

WOMAN 1:

Oh, please.

MODERATOR:

No judging! That's for later!

MAN 1:

Did somebody already say "hunky?"

MAN 2:

A rogue!

MODERATOR:

Good! So, let's see what we've come up with! A Helpless, beautiful and voluptuous woman meets a hunky, roguish man.

WOMAN 1:

Oooh! That sounds good!

My first, committee-bred book was the one first assigned to the ill-fated Larry Hardwick: "Burgundy Heights." It was the story of a high class, but helpless woman of means who falls in love with a handsome rogue in the haughty and pretentious society of Victorian London in the 1890s. Then, came "Pegleg Lover" - the story of a voluptuous, but helpless princess, who is captured by -- and falls in love with -- a roguishly handsome pirate in the Caribbean. My third assignment was "Pergamoor's Lady," the story of a roguish 19th Century Scoundrel who sells low quality wooden flooring to the unsuspecting...but, who mends his ways after falling in love with the helplessly beautiful and wealthy daughter of an English nobleman. And, last year, I finished "Flying Fanny" - the story of a bold, but helpless, wing-walking heiress who falls in love with a devilishly goodlooking, barnstorming, biplane flying rogue.

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Killer of Souls/Caringer/12.

Then came the assignment for "Sagebrush Queen"...the story of a wealthy, helpless rancher's daughter who falls in love with...well, suffice it to say the story line had me feeling a little stale.

I guess that's why I picked up the computer game on-line. I thought "Killer of Souls" might give me a little mental break from the book. I thought it would help my brain during those miserable times when raising my hands to the keyboard seemed more like weight lifting than writing. But, instead of freeing my mind, I was soon imprisoned by the vaguely disturbing need to know what lay beyond the current level of the game. What scenery lay ahead? What demons must I conquer? Soon, I discovered that my little mental break had become a daily mental obsession. Maybe the game should have been called "Killer of Careers." I found it impossible to ignore my desire to spend all my time battling against impossible odds in an alien atmosphere. I ate pain for breakfast -- dined on suffering for lunch and snacked at 3 on smoke and gore. In fact, the only conflict I made it my religion to avoid was the that which tried to send my fingers into battle at the keyboard in the struggle to write a story I didn't really care to finish.

"I'm fixing lima beans because that's all we have to go with ...because somebody didn't make it to the grocery store like they said they would." Eleanor banged the can of expired beans into the opener like a Soyuz space capsule docking with...okay, I'll stop.

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THREE

"SAGEBRUSH QUEEN"

The Wyoming Territory in 1875 was an imposing place. Jagged, impassable mountain peaks and dark, forbidding ravines dotted the dry and desolate landscape like acne on a an unhappy teenager's irritated face.

Summer was uncomfortably hot; Winter, unbearably cold. Mother Nature seemed to reserve a special fury for any and all who dared to try to call Wyoming "home." And, with the fierceness of nature as a backdrop, noble, Native Americans struggled mightily against the oppressive White Man for control of the land and its abundant resources; which the original inhabitants of this great land knew were only to be borrowed from the Great Spirit -- not plundered for earthly gain.

Perhaps it was this tension between Good and Evil, Right and Wrong, Native and Interloper that caused the Aaronstein Ranch to be built like a medieval a fortress. When cattle baron, Deke Aaronstein moved his family north from Kansas during the Civil War, he swore an oath to protect them from the ravages of the outside world.

The story went that when Aaronstein set foot on the mesa that would be his home, a fierce thunder storm was blowing in from the west.

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Killer of Souls/Caringer/14.

The Barron Arronstein -- or "Barronstein" as he would later be known by friend and foe alike -- raised a defiant rifle into the sky just as a thunderbolt tore through the black air. The weapon exploded. The Baron was unharmed. A legend was born on the spot.

Instead of a traditional ranch house built with native timbers, "Barronstein" built a fortress made of rocks, stones and boulders from the nearby mountains. The walls of Aaronstein Castle rose 50 feet above the mesa -- and more than 500 feet above the prairie grass. Each corner of the massive structure was anchored by a guard tower. In case of attack by the savages, Aaronstein manned the fortress walls with sharp-shooting cowboys. It was said that Aaronstein Ranch was home to the second largest army in the territory.

Deke Aaronstein reflected his massive homestead in both his build and demeanor. Tall and powerfully built, his cold exterior deflected all attempts to penetrate; while his cold heart remained ever vigilant for any who would dare try to enter pierce his stony defenses.

But, even in Wyoming, Indian attacks were few and far between. And so, very quickly, Aaronstein found his Castle had become less useful as a fortress to keep enemies out...and more convenient as a prison for keeping people in. Some said it was more a function of The Baron's controlling personality than it was the place or the time.

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Killer of Souls/Caringer/15.

But, if they said it, they spoke quietly and carefully...and only to those they could trust.

The Baron's wife, Mimsy, was a former Dodge City dance hall girl. She was long of leg, big of hair and an expert with the application of theatrical makeup. But, many said, she lacked the social charm and natural beauty of her husband's first wife, Thessalonia; who was, by all accounts, a highly cultured gem of a woman who had given her husband's life direction...until she died in childbirth in the middle of a Kansas twister. The Baron's only child, Eleanora was the happy byproduct of a terrible night of terror and misfortune.

Not far from the imposing Aaronstein Castle, the little Mountain town of Forlorn Falls, provided the area's only link to the outside world. As the Baron's grip on the land and people tightened, however, the link to the outside became more and more tenuous. When Deke and his family had moved into the area, Forlorn Falls had a population of nearly a thousand. As the years passed, that number dropped to only about 200. No one knew what had happened to those who had disappeared. Aaronstein said they had left for greener pastures. But, those who disappeared always did so in the dead of night...without warning. Somehow The Baron's story didn't hold water.

Perhaps that's why, one day the card-playing stranger in a black, three piece suit came into town. Was he there to enjoy the scenery? Or, was there something more malev...

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FOUR

That was it. That was all I had. A little over two dog-eared pages. And, after staring at them for months, I didn't blame Leonard for his overly sarcastic tone the day he called to "shake things up a little."

"Uh, yeah. I think I got it, Aaron. Let me fill in the blanks for you. You need a little more time because you're feeling a little blocked."

"Uh huh." I knew I should be more communicative. But, right at that moment, I was trying to envision a different way to get to Loënwat without miring myself in the sub-sewer levels of Castle Ba'irth. I hated crawling in the sewer's muck and mire...even if it was only virtual muck and mire crawling. Then, it hit me. Yes! There must be a way in through the portico at the Towers of Beplår! Just past the staircase! There had to be a secret passage where--

"Hello? You there?" I guess, even the most patient of people can't wait forever for a response. "You're supposed to be a writer. Don't you think you ought to be able to come up with a better excuse than one I just came up with for you?"

"Blocked is a good word. Don't put yourself down."

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Killer of Souls/Caringer/17.

"Aaron, something else is going on here. It's something I can't get my head around. But, it's not writer's block."

"Uh huh."

"Hell, this is only your fifth romance book. You ought to be able to get to 20 before you dry up." He'd finally gotten my attention.

"Dry up?"

"It's just an expression."

"Right."

"But, let me tell you...when the Sluttermeyers call and say 'the deal's off' because you couldn't meet the deadline. It won't be just an 'expression.'"

"I'm willing to consider anything. I just need a little kick-start. You know?"

"Well, if the ability to continue earning a living in this business isn't enough of a kick in the pants, uh..." It was a pause born of exasperation and weariness. I knew I had to contribute to this conversation. And quick.

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Killer of Souls/Caringer/18.

"Maybe I need to quit thinking of writing as 'work.' Start thinking of it as a game."

"A game? Where'd that come from?"

"Uh, I don't know. It just popped out."

"Hey, I don't care how you think of it. That's up to you."
He took a second -- sounded like he took a sip of coffee. "A game, huh?"

"Yeah. You know...like one of those computer games the kids play."

"Sure. I guess. I've never seen one."

"Well, see, these games...they tell a story. As you finish each level --"

"--Level?"

"Uh...think of it as a chapter."

"Okay."

"As you finish each level...you reveal more of the story."

"And, this helps you...how?"

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Killer of Souls/Caringer/19.

"Leonard, I think I just came up with the answer...thanks to you."

"Me?"

"No more 'writer's block.'"

He laughed. The first time I'd heard him laugh...maybe ever. "God, you writers are a breed apart. Whatever. No more writer's block? That's good. 'Cause the Irma Sluttermeier, herself told me this is your last extension." I was expecting that. But, I wasn't ready for what he said next. "Two more weeks."

"Two weeks? To write an entire novel?"

"It's not a novel...it's a romance novel.

"But, two weeks!"

"Aaron, come on! Work with me here! What did we just talk about? Turn on your computer...pretend it's a game...and start playing. Take it from chapter to chapter!"

"Level to level."

"Whatever. Just do it in two weeks. Ciao!"

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Killer of Souls/Caringer/20.

As I hung up the phone, I looked at my calendar. Two weeks. It wasn't much time. And, there were so many unknown challenges before me. But, there was no point pondering any further. Now was the time to act. Now, it was time to save my career, my marriage, my sanity and Leonard's percentage. I double clicked on the "Killer of Souls" icon.

FIVE

"FINDING INSPIRATION"

The introduction to the game -- including astonishing animations and eerie music -- flashed across the flat screen. Someone who sounded either like Sean Connery or Jim Carrey when he played "The Grinch," was the narrator.

"In the light years and dark matter that fill the time and space between the galaxies, there has always been a malevolence; a blind fury that knows no bounds and lives by a set of its own unnatural rules."

I'd seen the opening once before, when I first started the game. But now, I watched each image wide eyed; looking for a key, a hint of something that would jump-start my Western. In the darkness and dim shadows cast by the fading light from a sun almost too dim to see, something huge and murky moved among the shadows on an icy planet of rock, ice and distant volcanoes.

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Killer of Souls/Caringer/21.

The Carrey-esque narrator continued: "Perhaps life in darkness breeds contempt for the light...any light. Perhaps it is the brutal, unforgiving cold that creates a love of pain and discomfort and a disdain for warmth of any kind. Whatever the reason, the creatures who reside in these, the nether regions of the Universe, have no desire for comfort...no need for hope...no love of life. They are the Junkai!" A guttural roar rattled the speakers I'd recently picked up in the clearance section at Staples. It was followed by the low, vibrating hum of what all of us in the post "Star Wars" generation assumes an approaching space ship sounds like. Across the bottom of the screen, I read that it was "The ore freighter Antipithee, inbound from the Polusian Cluster."

I looked at my watch. I now had one-week, six days, 23-hours and 45-minutes to finish the book. Was I wasting time? It sure felt like it! In the last six months, I'd become a true time wasting expert. And, sitting there staring at the computer animation certainly had all the earmarks of big-time time wasting. Maybe a computer game based on creatures from outer space wasn't the best place to find inspiration for a romance novel based in the Old West. "But, then again," I reminded myself, "what other choice do I have?" It was logic like that that kept me focused.

My first time through the early levels, I was like a rat in a maze eating the cheese -- or, in my case -- slaughtering aliens -- as I went. I slogged my way through the greasy carnage without knowing why. This time, I promised myself, I would pay attention.

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Killer of Souls/Caringer/22.

And, I had to admit I was already getting hooked by the story line.

The boxy, animated space ship, looking more like a collection of dumpsters with plumbing fixtures attached to the outside, fired it's retro-rockets as the faux-Connery continued. "In the vastness of the limitless Universe, what were the odds that representatives of humankind would venture into the regions controlled by the ruthlessly evil and unapologetically arrogant Jumkai?" Before I was able to consider whether or not it is even possible to be arrogant and apologetic, there was a whooshing noise. The scene cut to the interior of the space ship. The animation wasn't all that good. In the cockpit of the ship, the Captain, a man with a crew cut and mustache, was talking into the intercom's microphone. His skin looked yellow and his mouth didn't move like he was really talking...which, of course, since he was a cartoon, he wasn't. "Captain to crew. Listen up people. I've put the ship into a parking orbit above a planet that has been sending out a distress signal."

"Hmm," I thought, "That's definitely ripped from the opening of the first two 'Alien' movies. But, maybe it's not plagiarism -- if you stick it into a different medium." I didn't have a lot of time to think that one over as the screen filled with a series of quick flashes of terrified faces, explosions, panicked screaming, followed by a slow pan across a landscape of death and destruction in hues of gray and black, the narrator returned to lay out the basics of the story line.

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Killer of Souls/Caringer/23.

"I am Gack, The Lord High Enabler, a doyen of the last colony of free humans left in the Universe. It is one generation since our kind was enslaved by the Junkai, their Emperor Urqliat and his venomous adjutant...The Dark Interrogator, Loënwat -- The Killer of Souls."

"Hmm," I thought, "sounds like there's a bit of a "Star Wars" rip off in there, too." But, before I could let that sink in, a bolt of animated lightening illuminated a dark, hulking, growling, slobbering creature in a black cape roared. I couldn't help asking myself: "A huge, crusty fire-breathing worm with tentacles -- wearing a black cape?" But, I decided to let it go. After all, the clock was ticking.

Gack returned for more off-screen narration. And, I became more convinced that the guy doing the voice was trying to mimic Jim Carrey's 'Grinch' -- not Sean Connery...but, it was a subtle, slightly wetter difference. As the camera panned the rotting ruins of cities, blackened forests and smoking skeletons, the Lord High Enabler continued: "Earth is in ruins. The surviving human population has been forced into 'round the clock service of their alien masters...working in the mineral mines and harvesting ice from the poles to keep their masters living in the style to which they have become accustomed. All seems hopeless. But, hope remains.

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Killer of Souls/Caringer/24.

For, tucked away in a small corner of the Milky Way -- not far from a white dwarf star -- hidden from view within a cloud of superheated gasses from a long-ago super nova and enshrouded by X-rays from a pulsing gas giant, which intersects its orbit, is our species last hope for salvation -- the planet Auton."

As the scene on my computer screen changed to bucolic settings, with men in medieval garb working the fields behind oxen-like beasts with elephant trunks and tiger stripes, I felt doubt gnawing again. "As I recall, a 'white dwarf' would be extremely hot. So, how could the planet be "not far" away? And, wouldn't a superheated cloud of gas from a super nova -- or pulsing X-rays from a gas giant which intersects the orbit of the planet -- be kind of deadly for humans working in the fields? And, what the hell kind of creature is pulling that plow?" But, reason prevailed. "You only have 13 days, 23 hours and 30-minutes...hang in there." The camera tilted upward toward a large castle-like structure on a hill. We zoomed in until we could see the name on the mailbox out front said "Gack Residence." Inside, the Lord High Enabler sat in the middle of a large room on sort of an elevated recliner, as a guy with a Prince Valiant haircut walked into the room.

GACK:

"Ahh! Young Ariem, you received my message!"

ARIEM:

"It would have been hard not to get your message, Lord Gack. It was delivered by five riders of the Quorum, armed with boomzots."

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I smiled. "Imagine, making jokes when things are so bad. Hmm. Could be a good trait for my hero!" I made a note...and noticed, at the same time, that I'd stopped caring that their lips weren't moving while they were talking.

GACK

I summoned you, Ariem, because a tragedy has befallen us that could lead to our destruction. My daughter, who was away on a goodwill visit to our asteroid outposts was captured in mid-journey by a Jumkai patrol ship.

ARIEM:

"The Princess Eleana? Captured?"

GACK:

You must find her and save her before the Jumkai and the Dark Interrogator, Loenwat, are able to addle her brain -- and force her to reveal the location of Auton.

ARIEM:

Where is she, Lord High Enabler?

GACK:

We believe she is being held in the keep of Castle Ba'irth...

ARIEM:

...Beyond the Triple Suns of Amaryu...on the planet Borfodin. I leave immediately!

GACK:

Oh, you can't go there directly. You must fight your way past the Jumkai -- from outpost to outpost -- find the worm hole that transports you through space and time to the far left side of the Galaxy and deposits you on Borfodin just as Princess Eleana is enchambered in Castle Ba'irth.

ARIEM:

So, I must go back in time?

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Killer of Souls/Caringer/26.

GACK:

If we are to go forward, you must go back.

My alter ego stepped outside my 42 year old frame for a moment. I felt myself looking at my body, slumped in front of my glowing computer screen.

ALTER EGO

You're actually paying attention to this crap?

I felt self-conscious.

ME

I've got writer's block. This is a good way to deal with it.

My alter ego walked across the room, tried to leave, but suddenly realized it was trapped. It lashed out.

ALTER EGO

You're supposed to be writing a romance novel, you idiot! What the hell are you doing?

I knew I was right. But, I hated me for saying it to my face. I turned back to the screen.

ME

Sit down and shut up. We have to work together on this.

My alter ego shook his head...which I noticed kind of needed a haircut...and sat down on the chair behind me.

(CONTINUED)

Killer of Souls/Caringer/27.

ALTER EGO

How did I get stuck with you?

Thank goodness I gave up so easily. I was losing contact with the story.

ARIEM:

What weapons will I have?

GACK:

The Entity can only give you a Flasher to begin with. But, we will drop-ship other weapons along the way of your journey. Look for them in the glowing red packages.

A glowing red square appeared in the room. Ariem nodded stiffly.

GACK: (CONT'D)

We will also send health packets to you. They are the green packages with the red cross. But, their location and the location of new weapons must remain secret...even to you. Do you understand?

I nodded along with Ariem. "More powerful weapons and health pellets...the staples of video game designers the world over. Ariem is in good hands."

GACK: (CONT'D)

Your first mission is to get to the Fortress of Festwal...this is where you will find a map that should point you to your next destination. The area is lightly guarded by Jumkai Troopers and a Panzor Brigade. You should make short work of them.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

Killer of Souls/Caringer/28.

GACK: (CONT'D)

But, do not tarry. The worm hole to the past -- which holds our future -- closes in only 13 days.

"Wow!" I thought, "This Gack guy is good! How does he know all this stuff? But, the timing was just right. 13 days is what I needed to finish my book. Soon, I was tapping on the control keys, working my way through the first level of "Killer of Souls" and, almost simultaneously, the first chapter of "Sagebrush Queen."

SIX

"INSPECTION"

That evening, as Eleanor pulled into the garage, I had pretty much figured out how the first chapter would end. Of course, I wasn't completely sure -- because I hadn't quite managed to finish the first level of the game. I was still trying to figure out how to find the entrance into the Mines of Noburna when she walked in stopped next to the desk. She looked tired. "I got a call from Leonard today." I nodded.

"So did I."

"Two weeks, Aaron."

"I know." Then, I added quickly, "I made a big breakthrough today."

She looked surprised. "Really?"

(CONTINUED)

I took the paper out of the printer and shuffled the pages into the proper order. "It wasn't easy. But, I worked on the story with a completely different attitude. -- came at it from a different angle. Changed the characters a little. See what you think." I handed her the papers and she shuffled them for a few seconds.

"Well, for starters, I think there's only six pages here."

"Every book's gotta start somewhere."

She sat down in the old La-Z-Boy we stuck in my office after the cat threw up on it one too many times. I'm not sure if it was because she's a fast reader, or because there were only six pages; but, soon she was looking up into my eyes with something I hadn't seen in some time...hope.

"This is good, Aaron! I'm a little shocked." It was the most enthused I'd seen Eleanor about something I'd written since I wrote my first piece for Ballpene -- The Metal Worker's Monthly entitled "Hammering the Hammered Hammerer...The crack-down on drunks in the metal shop." She looked at the pages again. "Deke Aaronstein sure is a dark character. He's so cold. It makes me shiver."

I nodded with more than a little self-satisfaction. "He's got a certain creepy 'otherworldliness' to him."

(CONTINUED)

"Exactly!" She looked back at the pages again.

Two weeks be damned. Now, I knew I'd get the book done by the deadline -- no problem.

"It's so original! So, NOT a Western." She paused to consider for a moment. "But, if he's Ellie's father...won't she share some of his traits?"

"Uh, gee. I hadn't thought of that. I don't know."

"You don't know? Aren't you writing the story? Haven't you plotted it out?"

"Sure. But, you know, every story is organic. It changes as it plays out in front of you. Sometimes the characters don't like to follow the outline." I paused a moment. What the hell was I talking about? "You know, as I'm writing, new ideas pop into my head. I can't say for sure where the story will lead me."

"Well, I think it's a very interesting concept that the bad guy Shanghai's unwitting travelers on the ore train and forces them to work as slaves in the mines under his ranch! Like he's the Devil -- forcing the unsuspecting into the Netherworld."

(CONTINUED)

Killer of Souls/Caringer/31.

I nodded modestly. "Yeah I like that, too." I quickly scribbled the words "Devil" and "Netherworld"

"And, then there's this 'Arie' guy -- a secret agent sent by the President to rescue the slaves. He's sort of a James Bond-like character, huh?"

"Hmm," I thought, "maybe that narrator had more of an effect on me than I realized!"

"Let me guess. Is there going to be a romance between the daughter of the evil Baron and Arie?" I pointed to my cranium.

"For me to know...and you to read about!"

Eleanor smirked. "Okay brainiac...come on down and help me with dinner."

SEVEN

THE ALIEN TOWN

12 days 4 hours Remaining

Arie stood on the Forlorn Falls station platform watching the ore train disappear up the grade toward a darkening mountain pass. The steam whistle's mournful call echoed off the cold, uncaring granite and shale in the fading light.

(CONTINUED)

Killer of Souls/Caringer/32.

He brushed dust off the shoulders of his black three piece suit and shifted his Stetson lower over his eyes as a dust devil swirled down the tracks after the train as if begging for a ride out of this dismal, dusty, godforsaken land.

A bolt of lightening. Rain began to pour. Arie collected his bags, looked around and took shelter under the overhang by the Station Master's ticket window. He dropped his luggage and smiled. "Looks like this is one saddle tramp who's all wet."

"People 'round these parts don't cotton to strangers who talk to themselves." Arie looked up. It was the Station Master -- staring, dead-eyed through wire rimmed glasses. "And, we don't like lawbreakers neither." He pointed to a sign at the edge of the platform: "No Loitering." Another bolt of lightening and a clap of thunder so loud, the windows nearly rattled themselves out of their frames. A dark figure, bent against the rain climbed the steps to the platform and leaned under the overhang.

"Problems here, Mr. Harbaugh?" It was the Sheriff. He wore a leather vest with a silver star over his heart. A graying mustache sprouted below weathered eyes and a craggy nose.

"Got a loiterer here, Sheriff Gackler." Harbaugh spit the words out as if each one was coated with acid. Arie sized up the lawman as he stepped up onto the platform. He grinned and pointed at the pile of moist luggage. "Just got in, Sheriff."

(CONTINUED)

Killer of Souls/Caringer/33.

Gackler nodded at Arie and snorted at the Station Master. "Charlie, how many times do I have to tell you?" He pointed to Arie's suitcases. "It ain't loitering if they just got off the train."

Harbaugh glared at the lawman. "We'll see what the Baron has to say about that." He looked through squinting eyes at Arie. "Strangers. The Baron don't cotton to 'em 'round here." He picked up a telephone and slammed the ticket window closed as a gust of wind blew the rain under the overhang.

Gackler picked up one of Arie's bags. "You better come with me."

"You're arresting me?"

The Sheriff shook his head, hefted the bag, and turned to leave. "No. But, if the Baron's men get to you, you'll wish I had. Come on." The rain fell harder as the the two rugged men slogged into the murky light.

"So, let me get this straight, Aaron." said Leonard. "The station master has a telephone?"

"Uh huh."

(CONTINUED)

Killer of Souls/Caringer/34.

"I don't get it."

"What's not to get about the guy having a telephone?"

"I looked it up on the Internet. The telephone wasn't invented until 1876. That's the a year AFTER your story is supposed to be taking place."

"Leonard --"

"-- Look, I know it's just a romance novel. But, you gotta give the chicks who read this crap credit for a few brains. Somebody's gonna notice."

"Leonard --"

"Willing suspension of disbelief, Aaron. The phone's gotta go."

"Leonard, he's GOT to have the phone, or Deke and his gang don't have any reason to come looking for Arie."

"But, it's inaccurate."

"Give me a break here, Leonard. Hang in there. Maybe there's a reason the phone is there. Maybe it's part of the story line." That stopped him -- made him think. It made me think, too.

(CONTINUED)

Killer of Souls/Caringer/35.

"What possible way could something like that fit into the story? Wait a second. This isn't some kind of time travel deal is it? You're not thinking of ripping off that old Christopher Reeve movie, 'Somewhere in Time' are you?"

I made a note of the name of the movie for my next trip to Blockbuster. "No! I haven't even seen that one...yet," I muttered.

"Well, the clock's ticking, so I better let you bang this thing out. I just wanted to let you know about some of my concerns BEFORE you write yourself into a corner. But, you sound distracted. I imagine you're working out the story right now. I'll let you go."

"Thanks Leonard. And, don't worry. If I can't make the phone work, I've got the perfect solution."

"What's that?"

"I'll change the date."

Leonard paused briefly. "That's why you're the writer and I'm the agent. Talk to you later."

I hung up the phone. "Yeah, I'm the writer -- who doesn't know where his story's going." I double-clicked the "Killer of Souls" icon on my desktop.

(CONTINUED)

Killer of Souls/Caringer/36.

Time to get busy with some serious story development!

EIGHT

11 Days, 20 Hours Remaining

Level 4: Under the Rings of Oblongdigo

The battle at the Thermopalique Space Port had been time consuming and costly. My health level had sagged to only 38 percent. But, I'd made it. Surely a health pellet would present itself soon. Now, I had time to think...take a breather and learn. In the blink of an eye I had hyper-jumped two galaxies and was now gazing out the the Interstellar Starship's viewing portal at the lava-spewing surface of Ithor the sole moon of the gas giant Oblongdigo.

According to the information screen below the portal, the planet got its name because it orbited between two massive stars, which pulled the planet in opposite directions in an immense gravitational tug o' war -- causing it to look less like a sphere and more like an eggplant.

Oblongdigons were an unusual race of gas-filled bags of intelligence who were neither friend nor foe to Human or Jumkai. They existed in an environment that neither of the more traditional species could survive. But, on the moon of Ithor, in a time long forgotten, Oblongdigons merged DNA with Human and Jumkai to create a race of beings, known for their ferocious gassiness.

(CONTINUED)

Killer of Souls/Caringer/37.

Some Ithorians were loyal to their Human roots; some loyal to their Jumkai. None were completely trustworthy. ALL were dangerously gassy. That's why the information screen closed with a warning: "Beware of excessive violence. Using your Flasher at close range could be dangerous. Firing a weapons too close to an Ithorian could result in a major explosion.

I was in the luminous streets of Brungee, the Ithorian Capital. My orders were simple: 1) Trust no one. 2) Go to the Humithorian side of the city. 3) Beware of Jumithorian spies. 4) Find the Humithorian guide named Fartuka. 5) Ask Fartuka to show the way through the center of Ithor to the Vault of Nemesor...where time runs backward.

Sure it sounds simple. But, remember...I had to keep Fartuka alive. And, with enemy agents firing lasers at us from all angles during our escape from the Humithorian enclave of the city, the odds against me were almost overwhelming; because, without Fartuka, any attempt to find the Vault of Nemesor would be impossible.

I strolled down the streets of Brungee looking side to side. Where was the Humithorian side of the city? Which Ithorians could I trust? Who should I annihilate on sight? An elongated gas bag with a face that looked like Harry Truman walked, floated and barked down the neon street. It growled. I fired. It exploded. The battle was on. I needed to find my way to the Humithorian side fast.

(CONTINUED)

Killer of Souls/Caringer/38.

Rumbling. Ohmigod! Earthquake!

The street opened up. I fell through fire, explosions, melting pavement and grinding rocks into a cavern. Dark...quiet. Too quiet. A distant gassy growl. My message screen lighted up.

"Beware of Jumithorian spies. Find Fartuka -- She is the one...the only one who can guide you to the Vault of Nemesor -- where time runs backward."

The way back to the surface was blocked by rock and fire. The only way forward was through the dark tunnels. One step forward. An explosion. In the flash of light, I could see an army of angry, gas-filled Jumithorians waiting in the tunnels. And, speaking of tunnels...my carpal tunnel was acting up.

NINE

11 Days 14 Hours Remaining

Sheriff Gackler's Warning

Sheriff Gackler closed his office door. Arie stood under the porch over the wooden sidewalk. Water, complete with rapids and waterfalls, ran through the streets. Did the door lock behind him? Maybe. Hard to tell with the continual thunder echoing off the ramshackle buildings.

Gackler had been helpful. Glad to tell what he knew. But, not ready to jump into the fray himself. "Got an ex-wife - Rose - in Tucson. We're planning to get together again.

(CONTINUED)

Killer of Souls/Caringer/39.

She's really countin' on it. I don't want to disappoint her." Seemed legitimate. Rose was a lucky woman. Arie double-checked his holster: Fully-packed with western justice - his trusty Colt .45 revolver.

The Sheriff's words of advice rang like shotgun echoes in his ears as he took his first step into the raging torrent that the Forlorn Falls Main Street had become. "You must find Emma Farthswell, she's the only person in town you can trust. She, alone, knows the way through the old mining tunnels under the city...the tunnels that lead where you need to go."

Arie took a second step. The water was more swift and deep than he had realized. With the next few steps, he felt his feet sliding. The lightening flashed. Someone appeared outside the saloon across the street. "Beware of the townsfolk. You can't trust any of them. They're all beholdin' to the Baron. Trust only in the old lady -- Emma Farthswell."

The stranger held out his hand, Arie reached out, then realized, too late, the man outside the saloon wasn't offering a hand, he was pointing a gun -- right at him. Thunder. The gun flashed. Arie slipped in the roiling rip-tide, flash-flooding Main Street as the bullet blipped in the water next to him and Arie was swept away in the current. What kind of current was this? What was that roaring noise ahead? No time to worry about the man with the gun, now.

(CONTINUED)

Killer of Souls/Caringer/40.

As Arie struggled to keep his head above water and, perhaps, catch his breath, he also fought to get out of this impromptu river rushing down Main. From each side street, between every building the water rushed, waterfall-like into the mainstream. Then, it hit him. The roaring noise ahead: "Waterfall!" If anyone had seen him, they would have watched as Arie, flailing arms and legs and all, flew over the falls and into a dark sink hole, along the edge of the ravine behind the assay office.