

# Work Samples

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## QUEST / INTERACTIVE DIALOGUE

*Design test for a fantasy CRPG. The point was to create a situation with different choices and consequences for the player and involving a special item, a demon-infested garment. Quest and dialogue are supposed to anticipate both male and female characters as well as a broad range of mindsets from rogue to hero.*

### **Synopsis**

The PC enters a ruined castle in search for a quest item, an artefact needed in an important ritual or task to save a city/country/the world, depending on the desired epicness. When she reaches her destination (in this case the top of the highest spire, but it really could be anywhere gamedesign demands), the ghost of the artefact owner, none other than the dead king, appears to her as she touches the crownjewel.

In the ensuing dialogue, the ghost might be able to explain what has happened to his realm (if the player is interested), and explain his function as a guardian to the powerful artefact. He will also try to ask a favour in return for his support and the PC's life, requesting her to sever the ties that have bound his spirit to the place for countless centuries – i.e. destroy the artefact.

While a PC basically has two choices here, a character equipped with the item in question will have a third option available to him. All choices are meant to have both positive and negative impact on the story and a comparable yield of loot, experience points and possible follow-up quests, so there is no 'right' or imbalanced way of completing the task.

#### 1. Release the ghost.

This will destroy the artefact, thus spawning more work for the hero to find a surrogate (with the released spirit's help). Delaying the ritual might cost innocent lives, depending on the severity of the overall situation and the importance of the ritual or task the artefact is needed for. It will also gain the PC a powerful ally that will come in handy in a dark hour later on, and safe conduct out of the place.

#### 2. Ignore the ghost's pleas and take the artefact.

This will cause the ghost king and his undead minions to attack, forcing the PC to fight her way out and obliterate the spirit. This will gain her lots of loot (and of course, the needed ingredient), but seeing as the ghost is already dead, he will probably appear again later to vengefully haunt the PC and cause trouble further down the road.

#### 3. Bind the ghost (option available for players having the item with them).

The demon inhabiting the garment will suggest to use its powers to bind the ghost into the artefact, thus enabling the PC to tap both the power of the artefact itself and the ghost shackled within. While that will gain her a very powerful item, it will possibly put a strain on her relationship with more righteously minded henchmen characters ("what, you carry a demon on your body and a circlet possessed by an insane ghost?"), as well as cause unforeseen complications in the ritual/task the item is needed for – with disastrous consequences.

### Interactive Dialogue

The dialogue is split into five modules, of which three are compulsory and two are optional, depending on the dialogue choices the player makes:

1. Introduction

2. King's offer

3. Final decision

Optional: Background information

Optional: Conversation with the demon

### Excerpt of one possible branch

Note: For the sake of brevity I present here only an excerpt of one of the possible branches of the dialogue tree (namely the "rogue" choices). For the full tree, please visit my gamewriting portfolio at <http://jennystevens.de/gamewriting.html>

GHOST KING

(whispy, ethereal voice) Who goes there? I demand to know who treads in my kingdom!

PC

I am Hunter. I have come to claim your crown. Its jewel, actually.

GHOST KING

Yes. Yes, I see... A hunter you must be, and of great fortitude, to set foot on this cursed lands.

Reckless, too. You carry your doom right on your naked skin, hunter. As I once did...

*(A shape begins to form in the mist, a vague impression of a human face lined with sorrow, pale hair wavering around it like smoke and dust.)*

PC

(trying to sound bold) That so? What's it to you?

GHOST KING

You must be either very brave or very foolish to bring a demon hither and expect to remain unharmed.

PC

I'd say my demon is my own business and has nothing to do with what I'm here for.

GHOST KING

(sighs) You remind me of myself, centuries ago, when I was mortal. Eager. Brimming with ambition. I thought like you did, then. Had I only known... You must not have the crown. It is dangerous.

PC

Yes, I hear that all the time. Really, when has "it's dangerous" ever worked? I need it and I'm going to get it. Who do you think you are to keep me from taking it?

GHOST KING

I am the king of ashes. My name is lost to the wind. My realm lies in ruins. I was my own people's undoing. Enslaved to this place, I watch time grind my kingdom to dust, while I remain the same, eternally.

PC

Tear-jerking, but I have a world to save and no time for sentimentality. I'm taking the crown jewel out of here.

GHOST KING

No!

*(A sudden chill sweeps over your face, tangles your hair, a sense of horror clinging to it.)*

No. You do not know what you're dealing with, mortal. The stone, it will bring naught but suffering! Leave it be. There are other ways to achieve what you seek, less perilous ones. I can show them to you. Do not call ruin down upon yourself, as I did!

PC

Remind me why I care?

GHOST KING

Yes, listen! I have been here for an eternity. I have suffered regret beyond any mortal comprehension. I desire peace. If you were to destroy the stone, I could... go. Leave this place. Set me free, hunter. And I will aid you any way I can.

PC

Thanks, but I think I'd rather take the bird that's on my hand.

GHOST KING

Alas! I cannot let the jewel fall into your hands. I will kill you like all the others that came before.

DEMON

(whispering) Don't listen to that dork. He's helpless and tries to gain an advantage by playing the bully. Politicians...

GHOST KING

What? I can sense it, the evil spirit stirring. Beware, mortal!

DEMON

How pathetic. Listen, dear, I have a better suggestion than to smash what you came all the way for.

PC

Silence, demon! I know you and your lies, get out of my head!

DEMON

(sweetly) Oh, how terribly HUMAN... Have I ever led you astray? Ever done something that was not in our best interest? You might at least hear me out, what harm could possibly come from it, hm?

PC

If you have something to say, say it now.

DEMON

We need all the power we can get to complete your task, right? Why not take both the crown and the king?

PC

I already have a pesky demon whispering without end, why would I want a ghost on top of that?

DEMON

It might come in handy to have an immortal spirit at your disposal. They tend to be extremely powerful... and VERY amusing when they struggle against their fetters...

PC

And how would that be done?

DEMON

Spirits are so weak compared to us abyssals. I can bind him into the crown jewel. He will despise it, but that's all the more a reason. He IS a tyrant after all, right?

PC

I am intrigued...

DEMON

Yes, exciting, is it not? Oh, I would LOVE to do that for you, please allow me!

GHOST KING

*(The king's incorporeal eyes stare into yours, the hazy face anxious, smoky folds and strands still as frozen in time)*

This is what it comes down to. Each time. What is your choice then, hunter? You are rough, but I sense an upstanding soul in you. I wish not to destroy you. But I will, if I must.

PC (option 3)

I am sorry, king. But you all people must know that some sacrifices can not be avoided...

*The ghost's tormented screams echo through the ruin as your demon forges the spirit into the gem, bending, twisting, crushing him into the artefact he has despised and guarded for centuries. Then empty silence descends on the castle, silence only interrupted by the demon's soft chuckling in the back of your head.*

## SETTING DESIGN

*A planet I developed as freelancer for Fantasy Flight Games' Warhammer 40.000 roleplaying game Dark Heresy.*

Tygress V – an almost dead world beneath a merciless sun. There might have been cities here once, gardens, forests and oceans, but what happened to them is long lost to history. Now, only sprawling ruins bear witness to a time before rock and sand and vast fields of petrified tree stumps became the planet's only geographical feature. Deep in the desert, the last remnants of its civilisation rust away, decomposing wreckages of obscure, monstrous machines, some of which still thud and shudder and are the subject of superstitious fears.

### **Environment**

The natives call their planet *Shad A'Zhel* - The Trial - and indeed it is a hard and lifelong trial to be born here and survive. Tygress V is searing hot and almost completely devoid of water, its atmosphere, yellowed from nitrous gases, is thin and riddled with holes, exposing great parts of the surface to intense solar radiation. The brittle atmosphere and lack of greater bodies of water also do not suffice to compensate for the extreme temperature drops between day and night, and violent storms accompany each dusk, with the strongest appearing in the equatorial regions where they leave little more in their wake than ionised dust.

The colour of the sky ranges from rusty red to dark honey, depending on the concentration of nitric oxide in the troposphere. It's frequently covered in heavy, sluggish, billowing cumulus clouds, chemical vapours from the volcanoes girdling the equator. Different wavelengths of sunlight are bounced off these gas clusters depending on their chemical composition, making the clouds display spectacularly shifting colours. Among the natives, certain colour constellations are said to be good (or bad) omens.

Geographically, the planet consists of little more than bare mountain ranges, sandy tundra and endless plains, vitrified to vast glassy flats by the immense heat of unknown weapons from a forgotten war. All life on *Shad A'Zhel* is gathered around the grassy steppes of the northern pole, where the atmosphere is thickest and keeps off most of the solar heat and radiation. However, the electromagnetic assault of the restless star's solar winds materializes here in extensive bands of aurorae borealis, visible from outer space through the debris of the dead civilization as complex, multicoloured patterns that earned the world its nickname among space farers – Knit Beanie. The natives interpret the lights as divine messages.

What little flora and fauna survives or has developed on the planet undergoes rapid cycles of life and evolution to escape the mutagenic effect of increased background radiation. Everything that grows and lives here, including the few human inhabitants, is small, dark and short-lived. The southern hemisphere up to the equator line and some thousand kilometres beyond is uninhabitable, blazing hot, battered by gamma rays and shaken by frequent earthquakes. Still, some scattered groups of completely savage mutants survive here, more animal than human being, whom the inhabitants call the *Daz'ha* - the Damned - and who are equally feared, loathed and rumoured.

## **People**

The Zhelani, as the natives call themselves, live a semi-nomadic life in tribes and families, hunting whatever small animals there are to be caught, gathering seeds, roots and berries from grass and wild shrubs and catching precious morning dew in sophisticated devices made of leather and hollowed deadwood. They are tough, sinewy and able to keep going unruffled for days without water or food. Freshwater, being the most precious good of their world, is sacred to them, a gift of the *Nay Va-Sul*, the One Beyond The Sun, which of course is the God-Emperor of Mankind. Deliberately wasting or spoiling water is one of the most grievous misdeeds among the Zhelani, resulting in immediate expulsion from the tribe (considering the hostile environment, this equals a death sentence), to protect the remaining family from the Va-Suls's wrath. 'Water-defiler' is the literal translation of their only term for 'criminal'.

Due to the importance of the colours of the sky – it's vital to know when to seek shelter from an acidic rainstorm and other meteorological phenomena – and the divine lights of the aurorae, Zhelani deeply believe in the significance of hues and the sanctity of certain compositions. Apart from the obvious need of camouflage in brown and ochre, they go to great lengths to find and develop new dyes, adorning themselves and their dwellings with straps of colourful cloth, dyeing their hair and covering their bodies in the patterns of the divine lights to attract the attention and goodwill of the Va-Sul. Blue and turquoise, as the rarest of colours, are generally associated with benevolence and the divine, as are black and pure white in combination, representing the stars in the night sky, the heavenly realm. Black combined with deep red however, as displayed on the burned and pustular skin of the southern mutants, has a connotation of loss, pain, and the evil.

Hunters are highly respected among the Zhelani, for their work is essential to the survival of the tribe. Every hunter is obliged to pass a trial on reaching the age of fifteen to be officially recognized as an adult: to find and kill one particular prey selected by the tribe's elders and to bring home a trophy. Frequently, this involves the hated mutants who inhabit the hostile regions closer to the equator, and thereby a long, strenuous trek southwards. Because for all their savagery the mutants still retain some degree of human intelligence, which makes them difficult to hunt and a worthy prey. If the hunter returns successfully, the weapon of his childhood days is destroyed in a solemn ceremony and his family presents him with a new one that has been specifically manufactured for this purpose. As a reminder of this memorable event and of their new responsibility, most hunters keep spear- or arrowhead of their old weapon as a trinket in a bracelet or necklace.

## **Relationship to the Imperium**

The Zhelani are vaguely aware of the Imperium surrounding them, mainly due to the fact that at regular intervals the high priests of the one-eyed God – the servants of the Administratum - come to them in bulky, flying machines to claim their tribute. They know that those machines are called 'shuttles' or 'ships', and that they can fly to other worlds beyond the sky, where there must be other humans, but this knowledge is largely irrelevant to their everyday life.

Every ten years, a tribe's best hunters and warriors are singled out to travel to Emneia, the only permanent settlement on the planet, where the priests of the Va-Sul take with them those they deem worthy to serve the Emperor, and it is a great honour for every Zhelani to be chosen. When the

warriors and their tribes make camp at its walls, the population of the small city grows to a multiplied number, and the days and nights before the priests arrive become a veritable fair, hunters competing with spear and bow, tribes exchanging news and gossip and everyone praying and celebrating in equal measure.

The Zhelani do not know what becomes of those that are taken by the Administratum, for none of the chosen has ever returned. None but the fabled warrior Sulak - he who is loved by the Sun - who, according to legend, descended out of the skies, girded with flaming armour and a living sword, to purge the Damned that had amassed in the south, threatening to wipe out the righteous.

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## PROSE: CHARACTER EXPLORATION

*Taken from my short story 'Suffered enough', set in the Warhammer 40.000 universe. This is an unofficial story derived, without permission, upon the Warhammer 40.000 intellectual property owned by Games Workshop Ltd.*

*Synopsis: A young psyker, riddled with guilt, conquers a deadly foe, thus coming to terms with himself and his place in the Imperium of Man.*

Graves.

Ultimately, that is all that is left of us. When all is said and done, when all struggles are over, when all fights are won or lost and the dust has settled, graves still remain.

Graves are silent. They are unimpressed, unmoved, uncaring about who lies within, about human desires and sins. Graves abide, stoic witnesses to evanescence. The terminal period at the end of each and every life.

They even pervade my own name. Graves, Tybalt Valerius. It is not the name I was born with. I chose it, so I will each day be reminded of those who are lost and of what is at stake. It has served me well. It suits me well. It is appropriate to all the deaths on my hands.

I am an imperial Inquisitor, by calling. I protect the Imperium of Man, I hunt down those who would rather see man's only home in a pitiless galaxy wither or go down in flames. I have to kill, oftentimes. I have to be unyielding, unforgiving, impassive to casualties and the suffering of those in my service. It's part of the deal. But now, standing at yet another of the countless graves I leave in my wake, I am once again convinced that there is more to it, that there was more to it all along.

I do not know, and it may well be, naturally, my imagination. But I do believe I am cursed. Fated to survive against even the most impossible odds, to carry on while those around me are destroyed. Cursed, or possibly the Immortal Emperor deigns to care enough and sees fit to punish me for courting damnation, for hearing the whispered, venomous half-truths of the Immaterium in my mind and for not being strong enough not to listen. But I have been granted the right to live, have I not? I have been tested, thoroughly, and deemed strong enough, by the grace of God, to withstand temptation. And yet...

Yet it *did* begin with the emergence of my powers. As I murdered my family and my liege, and a dozen bystanders - unwillingly of course, but what difference does it make. As I was cast out and almost burned at the stake for being in league with dark and forbidden powers. As I unleashed onto my homeworld a civil war that lasted for sixteen years and claimed eighty thousand lives and more.

It is strange to think of it now, of myself being a child, so many decades ago it seems to have happened to a different person. And in a sense, that is true. In a sense, the boy I was died the day my gift awoke, tearing my small feudal world asunder and changing my path in life and my place in the galaxy forever. What was left of him was eaten up aboard the Black Ship, in the darkness of the cell, subdued almost to extinction by the suppressive Wards and psychoactive drugs. It was like an impossibly long dream, filled with guilt and shame of what I had done and what I was, like sailing in a dark, silent cocoon in the void between stars.

But cursed as I may be, I am also blessed, for I was allowed to see Terra, and still live.

I remember Terra. Venerated, holy Terra. Ravishing. Harrowing.

No ordinary human being can possibly understand the horror of the trials a Psyker is subjected to, being constantly pushed toward the edge of what one's mind can bear, and sometimes over into an abyss of screaming madness, left to fight your way out on your own. Demons, both personal and literal tearing at your soul. Demons in human form, tossing you back into the pit when you know you can fight no more. They call it the Sanctioning. All of my kind call it hell, by any of its various names. If they survive to remember, that is.

But then, on Terra, there is also the light. Light, golden, searing, all-encompassing, finding and purging every shadow in your mind, seeping into the dark corners that you didn't know exist, hurting and healing at the same time. The Astronomicon. The psychic beacon cast by the God-Emperor, cradling all of Terra, all of the galaxy and every being therein in its embrace, like a burning sun, like an almighty voice and more that I cannot describe. I fail to understand how any of my kind, or any human that is, can experience such overwhelming divinity and still fall from faith. I, personally, was restored to a sentient being solely by kneeling before the Golden Throne, staring at the face of God, on that joyous day I was granted continued existence.

Where after they let you leave, just like this. Scorched and marked both in mind and body, like a newborn, thrown into a universe that will never be the same as before.

Ah yes, I do remember...

Not only have I been granted the right to live. I have earned it, by persistence, by steadfastness, by bearing the unbearable. It has been written onto my skin for all to see. It's not up to me to doubt the decision that has been made in my favour, even if it is hard for me to grasp at times, given the body count of my long life. Especially then, when I was young and... probably mourning. When I, aboard a returning Black Ship, travelled back to the place that was supposed to be home, the Calixis sector of which I had fewer memories than of the planet where they had tried to break me.

I wandered the darkened, empty corridors and abandoned cells, the likes of which had contained myself only years before, yet it felt like a lifetime. I stood in the middle of the silent hangars, thinking of all the souls that had journeyed on this ship and that never returned a free being, and I felt sick to the bone to be what I was, to feel what I felt. I questioned it, my fate, the law of the Imperium that had protected me from a torch wielding mob, the gifts that had been bestowed upon me. I felt their weight on my dreams like an ill will and I was afraid of their secrets. I loathed my powers and damned them all to hell, but still my Emperor had burdened me to live, to utilise them, to serve Him to the best of my abilities. It had been justified. The war, the dying, it had been sanctioned. Just that... I myself did not believe I deserved it.

I was lost then, in spiritual terms, despite all the fervent passion I put into my prayers - and I prayed almost all the time, constantly, silently. I did not know who I was, nor what to do with my newly earned life.

I was lost.

*(to be continued)*

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## PROSA: BESCHREIBUNG

*Auszug aus einem Roman (Fantasy, work in progress).*

Eine steinerne Rose und eine Laterne über der Tür markierten den Eingang zum Schrein des Weinenden Gottes. Ein unauffälliges Haus, kaum mehr als ein hoher gemauerter Quader mit durchhängendem Dach, umrahmt von einem welligen, gepflasterten Platz. Moos wuchs zwischen den Steinen und der Regen sammelte sich in großen, dunklen Pfützen in den Senken. Die Laterne schaukelte im Wind, leise quietschend an ihrem eisernen Haken, ein schwammiger gelber See in der Schwärze der Nacht. Keine Menschenseele war zu sehen um diese Stunde, und nichts zu hören außer dem stetigen Rauschen von Wasser auf Stein. Und dem Säuseln der Stimmen darin.

Iza schlich über den Platz, den Kopf gesenkt, den Mantel gegen die Kälte eng um die Schulter gezogen. Die Hitze in ihren Gliedern sorgte nur dafür, dass die Nacht noch eisiger erschien. Wassertropfen prasselten auf die Krempe ihres Hutes, rannen daran entlang und durchzogen ihren Kragen mit klammer Kühle. Unter der Laterne hielt sie einen Augenblick inne. Der Regen jammerte um sie herum, fordernd und drohend, gerade so leise dass sie nie sicher war, es wirklich zu hören, und ein leises Gefühl der Übelkeit pochte in ihrem Magen. Angst. Sie legte die Handflächen gegen die Balken des Portals, verzog das Gesicht ob des Gefühls von tausend Holzsplittern unter der Haut, und gab der Tür einen zögerlichen Stoß. Sie war nicht verschlossen. In Tempeln von Imarus gab es nichts, was es zu stehlen lohnte.

Innen lag ein hallender, hoher Raum, kaum wärmer als draußen und nur erhellt von einer einzelnen Kerze auf dem Altar. Rasch trat sie über die Schwelle, drückte die Tür hinter sich zu und ließ Regen, Wind und Stimmengewirr hinter sich. Völlige Stille breitete sich aus. Die Luft roch nach Staub und Feuchtigkeit, wie ein alter Weinkeller. Oder ein Grab. Eine Weile stand sie regungslos, das Wasser aus ihrer nassen Kleidung tröpfelte geduldig zu Boden und kroch die Fugen entlang. Dann ließ sie zittrig den angehaltenen Atem entweichen. Sie drehte den Kopf von Seite zu Seite, um die verkrampften Muskeln ihrer Schultern zu lösen und wartete, bis der von dieser Bewegung verursachte Schwindel abebbte, während sich ihre Augen an die Dunkelheit gewöhnten.

Die Einrichtung des Tempels war wenig dazu angetan, die Stimmung zu heben - schmale, harte Holzbänke, kahle Wände aus grauem Stein, schmucklose, leere Kerzenhalter - aber das war nicht, weswegen sie hier war. Heilige Stätten waren nicht notwendig für das, was sie vorhatte, das musste sie alleine durchringen, und ohnehin fand sie die Vorstellung befremdlich, dass Götter an bestimmten Orten präsenter sein sollten als anderswo. Aber es war gut, an einen bestimmten Platz gehen zu können, ein Ziel zu haben. An einer Stelle zu stehen, an der vor ihr schon andere gestanden waren mit ihren Nöten und Zweifeln, und die Trost erfahren hatten. Es war gut, sich nicht alleine zu wähnen in der Nacht.

Ihre Schritte hallten durch die Stille, als sie den engen Mittelgang hinunterging. Sie legte Hut und Mantel auf einer der Bänke ab, überlegte kurz und zog dann das nasse Hemd über die Schultern und die Stiefel von den Füßen. Niemand war hier, und selbst wenn - die Anhänger Imarus' waren Heiler, und Heiler waren nicht gerade für ihr sensibles Gemüt bekannt.

Barfuss stahl sie sich die drei flachen Stufen hinauf zum Altar, kalter, rauher Stein an ihren nackten Sohlen. An der Wand dahinter hing ein Bildnis des Gebrochenen Gottes, mit viel Liebe aber wenig Fertigkeit aus dunklem Holz geschnitzt und poliert. Der Künstler hatte die alte Darstellung gewählt, eine gequälte Gestalt, aufs Rad geflochten. Kaum ein erhebender Anblick. Das Gesicht lag im Schatten, unlesbar, und die gebrochenen Glieder, von unten flackernd von der Kerze beleuchtet, schienen sich sachte zu bewegen. Sie schauderte und wandte den Blick ab. Dummes Mädchen. Hier gibt es nichts, was du fürchten müsstest, schalt sie sich. Aber sie wusste sehr wohl, dass sie hier nicht gänzlich willkommen war. Sie streckte beide Hände nach der Kerze aus, so nah, dass sie fast die Flamme berührten und das Wasser von ihrer nassen Haut dampfte, aber sie konnte die Wärme kaum spüren. Asche und Feuer für ihre Sinne, nicht mehr. Sie kniete nieder und ein erneuter leichter Schwindel zwang sie dazu, sich am Altarstein festzuhalten, kalter, rauher Stein an ihren Knien, kaltes, raues Tuch an ihrer Hand. Die Welt war nichts anderes mehr als kalt und rau und unangenehm.

„Versuch es gar nicht erst“, flüsterte sie mit gesenktem Kopf, „du kannst nicht gewinnen.“

Die Phiole hatte sie durch die halbe Welt begleitet, ein Miniatur-Fläschchen mit dunkler, sirupartiger Flüssigkeit, jetzt nur noch ein zäher Rest am Boden, und einer winzigen, ausnehmend scharfen Klinge in einem Messingring an der Unterseite des Korkens. Tollkirsche und Traumkrautextrakt, die Garantie für eine... interessante Nacht. Ihr Silberfaden auf die andere Seite. Ein Bader aus Calimshan hatte es für sie angefertigt, Flasche und Inhalt, und ihr dabei unentwegt die Art furchtsamen, angewiderten Blick zugeworfen, den man für gewöhnlich für die betrunkenen Irren in den Gassen reservierte. Vielleicht war der Unterschied auch gar nicht so groß.

Sie entkorkte die Phiole, legte sie schräg und tauchte die Spitze der Schneide in die Flüssigkeit. „Imarus Herr der Gnade, steh mir bei in dieser Stunde.“ Ein winziger Stich links, knapp unterhalb des Ellenbogens, wo die Pulsader nah unter der Haut lag. „Befreie mich von Furcht im Angesicht meiner Feinde.“ Ein Stich rechts, in genau berechneter Länge und Tiefe. Zwei kleine, leuchtende Punkte Schmerz. Eine passende Gabe für den Gebrochenen Gott. „Imarus, Herr der Gnade, gib mir die Kraft, das zu erdulden, was getan werden muss.“ Sie verschloss die Flasche sorgfältig, breitete die Arme aus und richtete den Blick auf die Kerzenflamme, die in einem ungefühlten Luftzug sachte hin und her tanzte.

Eine lange Zeit lang geschah nichts. Iza spürte ihrem Herzschlag nach, wie er allmählich schneller wurde, dem Prickeln, Jucken, Pochen um die Einstichstellen, der wohlthuenden Schwere, die durch ihren Körper kroch. „Ein Tropfen, höchstens zwei“, hatte der Bader gesagt, als er ihr die Flüssigkeit auf die Zunge träufelte, warm und unerträglich süß aus dem Kupfertöpfchen. „Zwei Tropfen, angenehme Träume. Zumindest meistens. Fünf, du wirst wünschen, nie geboren zu sein. Zehn, und du brauchst dich um nichts mehr zu sorgen, nie mehr. Das hier ist Gift, täusche dich nicht.“ Am Anfang war es leicht gewesen, ein Tropfen auf den Finger und abgeleckt, aber mit der Zeit ließ die Wirkung nach. Aus einem Tropfen wurden zwei, dann erst ein einzelner Stich, dann zwei. Bald würden auch die Stiche nicht mehr ausreichen und zu tieferen Schnitten werden, und die zwei Tropfen zu drei, zu fünf, zu zehn... Ein vereinzelter Blutstropfen quoll aus der kleinen Wunde an ihrem linken Arm, rund und glänzend, schwoll an, zitterte, fiel zu Boden.

*(to be continued)*

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## PROSE: ACTION

*Taken from my short story 'Friends in Unusual Places', set in the Star Wars universe.*

*Synopsis: Hunting for his missing child, an old and bitter mercenary gets caught in a tight spot, fights old foes and finds new friends.*

I met my two charges in the tunnel leading to the hangar section, both trembling with fear and excitement, but otherwise unharmed. 'Cheer up, pals!', I called out to them as they joined me in fleeing down the corridor, 'Just a scratch! I enjoy blasting that scum into oblivion!'

It was not entirely true. It had been way to close for my taste in the loading area. My ribs were throbbing; it was difficult to breathe by now. I made a mental note never to give ammunition away to a civilian to save them. But I knew enough of protecting people not to let the struggle show. After all, there had been times when I had been more than a ruthless pirate or a single-minded mercenary.

I called the Trianii over comlink. 'Get the engines running, we're just around the corner!', and shut her off before she could distract me with any questions or more information that I could handle right now. Get to the hangar, get into the transport, get out of the mine before everything goes to hell. Objective clear.

We passed a pile of unfortunate battle droid's scattered remains and breathlessly stumbled into Hangar 51-A. A massive military freighter lay at bay, a ship of dark brownish colour that seemed to date back directly to the very beginning of space travel, primeval engines droning at a frequency that was more felt than heard. The name written in bold, flaking red aurebesh letters on the prow did nothing to improve on the primitive impression. The Running Bantha. Oh, stars.

'That's simply great,' I murmured as we ran towards the shuttle. 'A flying scrap-heap. Man, are you two lucky to have one of the galaxy's best pilots at your side.'

I had no visual on my companions because the entry hatch was located on the opposite side of the ship, but I heard their voices chattering, and then the telltale whizzing of blaster shots. Even *more* blaster shots.

'You, get to the hatch, but careful!' I commanded the prisoners, gesturing right, turning left to flank the enemy – with bare hands if need be – and then I froze in mid-motion. The cold steel barrel of a blaster touched my head from behind, and I heard a familiar, rasping voice.

'Not so fast, Spooky,' said Ishakk, and I could virtually hear the Rodian's murderous grin. I felt my hackles rising. 'Put down that gun of yours.'

Slowly, I lifted my hands and my blaster clattered to the ground. 'Always nice to meet an old matey, isn't it?' I said, turning to him. The two prisoners stood like glued to the spot, staring at me and my pirate pal. Then suddenly, the old man broke away and ran, that is, limped as fast as he could. The young one lifted my own blaster rifle with the precious twelve shots that I could have used so badly in the loading bay, and trained it on me. Mental note update: never give any weapon to any civilian for any reason.

'Nice thanks for me rescuing you, kiddo' I murmured, darting killing glances at the boy who all of sudden didn't seem all that terrified anymore, feverishly scouring the situation for a possibility to escape. *Okay, fellows, now I could need some help here.*

Ishakk snarled. 'Right, Spooky,' he hissed, 'always nice to meet mateys that leave you high and dry. Makes you so want to obliterate them bastards, doesn't it? Time to say goodbye, *buddy*. You not gonna get away this time. Not this time.'

Time. Time ticking away. Keep him talking, keep him from shooting. 'So tell me, *buddy*, why all this effort to lure me into this darn hole with false hints? You could have finished me off down on Syron a whole lot simpler.'

He laughed triumphantly, a cold, reptilian, and utterly unpleasant sound. 'I could have. But then you wouldn't even have known who it was that got the better of you, no? Plus, where's the fun in that? I really had a blast watching you blindly follow my breadcrumb trail of nice, faked information. You running after your brat, hilarious. And to think that you were always so smug.'

There was the opening. I could see the triumph in his eyes that made him overconfident for the moment, his guard lowered. The boy with my blaster rifle idly stared over to the action by the shuttle, obviously bored with two old friend's casual chat. Bloody amateurs.

I acted the defeated, hanging my head, shifting my weight over to the other foot to be an inch closer to the boy. 'Oh. I see. So, this round is to you, then.' *Yuck, I'll retire if I'm no longer able to take out a one-eyed Rodian!*

'Yes, Spooky-boy. This round is to me. The last round you'll ever see.'

'I don't think so.' Leaping forwards, I grabbed the boy's right wrist and twisted it sharply until it snapped, pinned his other arm behind his back and whirled him round just in time to get him into the line of fire between me and Ishakk. The shot took him squarely in the face. I shoved the lifeless body onto the Rodian and bolted, not even bothering to pick up my rifle. It was stuck between the two men going down in a mess of flailing limbs; getting it free would have cost me precious seconds. Sacrifices. I know hell of a lot about them.

Out of the ship's shadow, a slender figure hurried towards me, robes fluttering around his lean frame, the blue, cold light spilling from the glowing blade illuminated his serene young face from below. An invisible giant's hand slapped me on the back and tossed me to the floor, then Khel-Ryc was level with me, the humming lightsaber swirling, blaster shots that were meant for my head zipping into the darkness below the ship. Those Jedi know for sure how to make a dramatic appearance.

The low humming faded away with a fizz, and silence descended on the hangar bay.

'Ouch,' I moaned against the smooth metal floor.

Khel-Ryc crouched beside me. 'I am sorry captain, there is no time for pleasantries.' He held out a hand to help me up.

'Yeah I get your meaning. You have the old man?'

'Yes. He is with the Trianii now, shocked, but not gravely injured as far as I can tell.' We began sprinting around the freighter to the entry hatch. 'I am glad you managed to reach us, Mr. Blunt. It is high time.'

'I would have loved to come earlier, but I was slightly delayed by a cosy chat with an old friend of mine. While you were having tea with the Trade Federation officers, might I point out.'

Click-click-click. More hostiles behind us.

Both of us turned round, assessed the situation, then unanimously decided to make a run for it. We stumbled over literal heaps of disabled battle droids at the ship's entry hatch and inside, blaster shots zinging off the scratched metal all around us before the hatch snapped shut with a steamy hiss of hydraulics.

'We're in, get the shields up,' I cried over comlink as I picked my way through cargo to where I presumed the bridge to be, an awful long way through that huge ship compared to my tiny dead Ace of Spades. I missed her already.

'What armament does this lame bucket have?' I fell into the pilot's seat that blue-furred Th'on Meapheor left to me without argument, for once.

'None whatsoever, captain,' Th'on answered, slipping into the second seat and getting the basic launch routines underway.

'Alright. We'll improvise then. And fast.' It took me a while to get my bearings. I had known the Ace's controls entirely by heart and by fingers. 'Let's see if this Bantha can do a stampede. Subspace drives engage... no warm-up... yes please ignore that warning... that one too...'

'Everybody hold on,' Th'on announced. 'This is going to be a rough takeoff.'

'Relax, my furry friend.' Calm. Breathe. I let my mind sink into that monster of a ship as best as I could, tried to link with it, tried to be friendly. 'I will get this archaic beast through it. I will.'

And go.

We grated off the platform in slow motion, probably crushing the unfortunate squadron of battle droids underfoot, but it got lost in the engine roar. Volleys from the defence turrets strafed the massive vessel as it ponderously rose into the clear desert sky like a chubby brown animal, and were soaked by the quickly depleting rear shielding.

'C'mon, fatty, do your best! You don't wanna have your big backside roasted, do you?' I gnashed my teeth. The nimble Ace would have been in hyperspace by now.

Then, all warning lights began flashing, the rear-facing cameras showed a blinding flash, followed by red inferno under a growing plume of black smoke as the building on the surface blew up. A split second later the shockwave hit us. The ship lurched and shook, totally unresponsive to my commands. We were flung into the atmosphere at an acceleration rate way higher than any of the vessel's components was made to tolerate, stressed metal groaned, I crashed into the edge of the control panel as something hit us from the side, all lights went out. Then we overcame the planet's gravity well and shot off into peaceful black space, dotted with brilliant pinpricks of light. In the sudden silence, the blue rim of Syron shone majestically below.

Stars. I wouldn't mind to die among them.

One by one, the lights and instruments came back online as emergency power restored itself. No telltale fizzing of hull breaches. Soft humming of still working life support systems. No pursuit in sight. I let the breath I had held escape slowly. 'Thank you,' I whispered to the ship, fondly patting the console that just had caused a huge lump on my skull.

Th'on eyed me from the side, bushy eyebrows raised.

'What?' I snapped. 'She saved our asses, didn't she? Pay some respect. Now bring that navcomputer online again and get us to lightspeed with v max, before the Federation goons come after us, if you please. I have to put a patch on that blaster burn. Smells like barbeque...'

I headed for the rear, to where I had seen the med-bay on my way to the bridge. That was the one advantage of a ship as large and cumbersome as this one: lots of space.

Khel-Ryc joined me discreetly. 'Would you mind if I had a look at that injury?'

I mutely shook my head, not in the mood for false pride. You can't do everything by yourself, and a man without friends doesn't last long in the void.

I sat down while the Jedi inspected the wound, cleaned it, calm and methodically. The soft purring of the ventilation system soothed my raw nerves. He worked in silence for several minutes before asking the obvious question.

'You didn't bring your son with you, Mr. Blunt,' he said softly, casually.

'No,' I pressed through clenched teeth. 'And you obviously didn't bring your Jedi artefact. We don't always get what we want now, do we.'

Jonah had not been in the mine. Jonah was not a slave. That should have made me happy.

But it didn't.

Khel-Ryc rubbed bacta gel on the burn in a thick, cold layer. 'Captain, you did know the leads were fabricated. I sense you knew all along. Why did you still follow them?'

I sighed. 'Yeah. I knew. But I guess I had to try. You don't have kids, boy, you won't understand.' I rubbed my sore eyes. 'Dammit I was so bloody stupid.'

'Down in the mine?'

'In my life, kiddo. In my life.'

He remained silent as he tightly wrapped bandages around my ribs. The wound was not deep, but it burned as if the hot plasma was still searing my skin.

'Yes, I do understand, captain,' he finally said quietly. 'It is love that makes us blind. Anger and passion that make us do stupid things. You harbour an awful lot of each within yourself.'

That made me feel awkward. 'Huh,' I said bluntly, pinching the bridge of my nose between thumb and finger. 'Hey listen, boy, I guess I should thank you. For saving my life down there. But don't get all sentimental on me with that Jedi sageness, mkay?'

He gave me one of his rare short smiles. 'You are an ignorant man, Mr. Blunt. Saving lives is part of the Code. Every life. Even wretched, aggressive and destructive ones. And what is more, you were the only pilot in reach capable of manoeuvring this vessel through a thermal blast like you did.'

'Huh,' I said again. 'Putting it that way makes me sound a pretty crappy guy. But well, at least we have one honest man aboard.'

He got up and stored away the medikit. 'You might want to lie down for a bit. The plasma burn is not grave, but I suspect a concussion and several bruises that won't benefit from too much exercise. And I can imagine you will want to... contemplate for a while.'

Sure thing. Sit idly around and think about my lost son and my crashed ship. Bad idea. 'Hell, no,' I growled, getting up from the cot against all protest from my mauled muscles. 'I am a pilot. I have a ship to fly no matter how old and fat she is.'

He smiled slightly. 'I knew you would refuse.' Then, more seriously: 'Captain, you don't have any special relationship that none of us knows of with this old man, do you? He was not your target. Why did you bother yourself with rescuing him?'

'Ha!' I grinned fiercely. 'I continue to surprise, eh? You might want to contemplate that, kiddo.'

I left him standing there, nonplussed, and limped past him to make friends with my new ship.

\* \* \*



## QUEST ABSTRACTS

*The following are 'Adventure seeds' for the Dark Heresy roleplaying game that provide ideas for prospective Game Masters on how to use specific items or locations from the published supplements.*

### **The least of all evils**

The Acolytes hunt for an artefact of allegedly wondrous power on an Imperial fringe-world. The settlers, however friendly, have developed a semi-heretic admiration for the remnants of a xenos culture on their planet. Regardless, the Acolytes need their expertise to find what they seek. Venturing deep into the subterranean ruins of the lost civilization, they find the so-called artefact to be the power source of an alien terraforming device that essentially holds the (otherwise quake-ridden) world together. Will they follow their codex and, by destroying the xenos technology or even taking the artefact for themselves, condemn the colony to ruin?

### **When on Phyr, do as the Phyrrians do**

The Mechanicus harvest facility on Phyr has a new inmate, one that possesses crucial information for the Acolytes' inquisitor. While the Priesthood of Mars and the Inquisition squabble about jurisdiction, the Acolytes are sent to extract the prisoner before the death world claims him, leaving politics to their superiors. They have to slip into the facility with forged credentials and disguised as convicts, trick their target into trusting them and, after their escape, escort him over the planet's surface to the extraction point, facing carnivorous wildlife, failing biosuits, a capricious charge and the pursuit of the Mechanicus.

### **Paradise comes at price**

The Acolytes stumble upon a strange custom in a flourishing, paradisiacal colony: people are being snatched from the streets in broad daylight without anybody objecting. In secret, a fallen Eldar Ranger on the Path of Damnation has taken control of the world, saving it from certain ecological doom by using advanced technology (thus showering the Imperium with rising tithes). In exchange, the colonists are letting him have his share of the most beautiful humans for his perverted debaucheries. But without the degenerate Eldar's help, the planet will plummet once again into disaster...

### **Indecent Proposal**

A political VIP of the Lucid Court is struck down with an unknown affliction, the resulting power vacuum threatening the stability of an entire subsector. The Acolytes, as a last resort, are secretly sent to hunt up a purportedly sacred relic that is said to cure any ailment. Yet when they finally dig it out, they discover that it is by no means holy, but an occult and sentient device. Trading a life for a life, it requires a willing sacrifice to function. Will the Acolytes even bargain with the thing to protect the sector? And if so, whom will they choose?

## CHARACTER SKETCH: A GREYSCALE FANTASY VILLAIN

Khalris Morvenna is not a good man in any sense of the word.

He is a cold-blooded murderer. A poisoner. A scheming manipulator of other people. A consort of demons which he has no qualms about using as tools, a priest and follower of a barbaric, uncaring goddess that does not know right from wrong.

To others, even to members of his own culture, he seems eerie, unfeeling to the point of inhumanity, aloof to the point of arrogance, daunting, and utterly incomprehensible. His sombre appearance, his unnaturally calm manner of speech, even his way of sparingly moving and rarely blinking, all make for a deeply disconcerting impression that either intimidates others or provokes open hostility. He does not have a single confident in all the world.

In many ways, this impression is very close to the truth: Khalris, for the most part, regards ordinary people as pawns and inferior to himself, he has no problem whatsoever with manipulating or forcing them into doing his bidding if it serves the Big Picture. Though he does not specifically wish to inflict suffering on others, he is willing to sacrifice a person's wellbeing for a cause without second thought. Ruthless, callous and savage are all qualities that do indeed apply to him to a certain degree.

No, he isn't a good man. And yet, Khalris Morvenna is far from being evil. In a different life and given half a chance, he might have been someone else, capable of great caring and understanding, an artist or a counsellor, even a diplomat.

Blessed at birth with unfathomable intuition, he possesses an uncanny insight into people and situations that enables him to grasp the hidden workings of the human mind, will and emotions. It is a purely instinctive matter, but given enough time and familiarity with one subject, he may accurately guess her thoughts and sense every nuance of her feelings. What's more, he has an almost magical way with words, thus able to subtly and profoundly influence and manipulate what he comprehends so well.

His inherent understanding of the unseen forces of life does not even stop there. Khalris is constantly is aware of the hidden patterns of the world by a sense unknown to ordinary people; the interdependencies of human lives and actions within the intangible realm of future and possibility, the endless cascade of cause and effect that defines the universe. To him, this patterns and ripples that encompass everything and everyone are as real as anything in the material world - the fabric of life itself - and the fact that he'll never be able to share what he perceives has greatly contributed to his current state of dissociation.

As it is, Khalris's life has been dominated by violence, coercion and fight for his very survival. Born into slavery and hurled into one disastrous alliance after another, he bears the marks of this journey on his body and his soul: fighting scars, whiplashes from his masters, runes written into his flesh, ritual cuts from his barbaric faith, the once bronze-coloured skin on his forehead reddened and mauled where his own family tried to burn out the child's 'third eye'.

He understood then that he was aberrant, set apart from other humans, that he had power over them and they were afraid of him because of that power. Later in life, when he was taught to speak to demons and the spirits of fire his ancestors worshipped - and when he first killed a man, his teacher, to be free of his spell - he learned that great might attracts great enemies, and that in order to survive he must accumulate ever greater power and influence over his brethren.

Though his reckless quest for personal power begins as mere self-preservation, it soon is deepened and justified by the unchallenged authority of religion. In search for an explanation of the abilities that so haunt and elate him, he traces them back to a banned and almost forgotten goddess of his once proud and untamed people: Noeeki, mistress of horses and the Unseen. A nihilistic deity of sorts, who's tenets involve the unpredictability of existence and the futility of planning, or indeed clinging to anything, for everything in life is ephemeral - joy and suffering, slavery and freedom. To whom killing or staying alive, lie or truth, noble or wicked are all the same. And that rings so true to Khalris and his perception of the world as an ever changing, unbiased pattern. Paradoxically, it gives him - who is constantly humbled by the insignificance of a single human life in the maelstrom of time - a purpose, a sense of belonging never felt before, even as it tags everything as meaningless.

It is then that he begins to embrace his own otherness, to make it his identity, welcoming it as marking him superior - descendant of a veritable goddess! To turn the imposed isolation into a virtue, rather than fruitlessly trying to be like the ones that have cast him out and used him for their own ends.

Consequently, even as he profoundly understands humans, he cuts himself off from them. He cultivates the fear he involuntarily strikes into most people to keep them at a distance, to have the whip hand over them. He'll any day prefer control over someone to being respected or loved (or that's at least what he believes).

He fervently strives not to emotionally attach himself to anything or anyone, following the doctrine of his faith, but also in an unconscious attempt to protect himself from the inevitable loss that life has taught him. This lack of commitment extends to almost every kind of sensory experience: he does not allow himself much enjoyment of food or drink (making for a rather gaunt frame), or any kind of convenience apart from the trance-inducing toxic substances featuring in his rituals (which are quite numerous). Probably the only material items in the world he ascribes any personal value to are his two blades, sacred instruments for sacred work as far as he is concerned, and the simple wooden symbol of Noeeki around his neck.

He drifts through life like a ghost, barely touching it, rarely tasting it, never relishing it.

He goes to great lengths to not give away anything about himself at any time, for he knows that revealing yourself to someone is to give him power over you - and he knows the treachery that can reside in the hearts of mortals.

Thus, he has learned to control every little detail of his mind, to admit not a single thought or emotion that might cause him trouble down the road. This is getting to the point where even his body language and choice of words are boiled down to the absolutely essential: no unconscious gestures, no superfluous nuances in the way he stands, talks, walks. Every movement, every facial expression, is subtle, conscious, and full of intention and meaning. Nothing is ever coincidental about Khalris Morvenna.

By the same token, he has become perfectionist to a fault. Everything around and within has to be neatly ordered and structured, be it his own room, his fighting techniques, his train of thoughts. His need to keep control and counterbalance the chaotic flow of the world drives him to be obsessed with details, to observe and analyze everything thoroughly in order to understand it completely. His thirst for in-depth knowledge seems boundless, as does his desire to achieve, to improve on himself and his abilities.

Yet he never allows himself to revel in his accomplishments. He never stops working, and it is never enough. He never learned how to play, how to enjoy for the sake of it, he doesn't even see the point of it. If he found himself suddenly bereft of a task or mission, he would probably be at an awful loss of what to do.

For paradoxically, despite his nihilistic philosophy, he carries within himself a burning longing for purpose, to be part of something greater than himself, to give meaning to this insignificant life tossed about in the currents of creation. Combined with his desire for order and stability in the face of chaos, this makes him feel drawn to powerful individuals with far-reaching agendas. Even as he despises being leashed, he pushes himself into service, since he has never known anything else - or maybe he simply doesn't place enough importance on himself to allow for a purpose of his own.

What's more, when he chooses to serve someone, he puts his heart and soul into it, doggedly loyal even when mistreated. As long as he appreciates their goals, he'll be willing to sacrifice everything and stop at nothing to achieve them. As long as someone has his respect, he'll unreservedly throw himself into the breach to protect them - regardless of his faith that teaches the futility of such actions. In spite of everything seen from the outside, he is not half as self-absorbed as it might seem.

Khalris Morvenna avidly wishes to believe that humans are nothing more than dust motes in the cosmic pattern. He strives to free himself from the entanglements of the world by not clinging to anything, by shrugging off everything mortal and laughing into the face of death and life alike.

But deep within this battered, wretched, wicked soul, a spark of zeal still remains: he craves purpose and meaning and is willing to subordinate everything to the cause; pride, life, wellbeing, his own and everyone else's.

He might not be as intrinsically evil as the demons and spirits he communes with. But he is definitely a person utterly at odds with himself, contradictory, unpredictable, fierce, his values firm but far from common morals. And that makes him extremely dangerous- a deadly enemy, and a pernicious ally at best.

\* \* \*

## NON-FICTION: BOOK REVIEW

Snow Crash is a science fiction novel penned by physicist and programmer Neal Stephenson, who is co-founder of the cyberpunk genre.

The book was first published in 1992 and anticipates many concepts that nowadays seem ordinary: virtual reality (known in the book as the Metaverse), globalisation, hyper-inflation and increasing privatisation of governmental responsibilities. It exaggerates these themes and takes them to an extreme, dystopian level, bordering on the satirical.

The book explores the thesis that religion, drugs and viruses are essentially one and the same - self-perpetuating information - which is illustrated by means of an elaborate plot centred around a conspiracy for world domination, featuring a biological and a virtual virus, Sumerian myths, linguistic theory and religious fanaticism. The two main characters stumble upon this conspiracy more or less by accident, and are quickly swept away into a fast-paced quest to save their broken, neon-coloured world.

The one striking feature of the book is, doubtless, its style. Written entirely in the present tense, it conveys a feeling of immediacy without equal. Combined with Stephenson's often colloquial choice of words, his skill in creating atmosphere by description and the super surrealistic setting, this makes for an extraordinary reading experience that is closer to reading a comic book than an actual novel: bold, colourful, fantastic.

In fact, Snow Crash was originally intended to be a computer generated comic, a project that was abandoned for unknown reasons.

Along these lines, the characters appear comic-like: Hiro Protagonist, a Korean-Afro-American swordfighter and hacker wearing a black leather kimono and riding futuristic motorbikes way too fast, and his partner Y.T., a mouthy teenage girl surfing the dense traffic of overcrowded America as a skateboard courier. Though great personages for a comic, both of them remain a bit shallow throughout the novel, in defiance of the author's attempts to lend credibility to the figures by sketching out their personal backgrounds in broad strokes. Most of the time, their thoughts and feelings are concealed from the reader and can only be guessed at by their actions, which, strangely enough, seem frequently incoherent with their stated motivations. More often than not I was left wondering at their seemingly arbitrary reactions, like choosing to have a discussion about the complications of a relationship while running for their lives, or simply not asking an informant the crucial question or pursuing an obvious clue.

Same goes for every other character in the book, all of them archetypes with little personality: the crippled nerd, the charismatic Mafioso, the unkillable super villain. Often they appear to be slaves to the plot and mouthpieces for the author's theories rather than actual human beings. The fact that Stephenson can write about a character for several pages without even giving her a name (only referring to her as 'Y.T.'s mom'), and his decision to tell the showdown of the whole story from the viewpoint of a secondary character, ought to say something about the importance he places on them.

In terms of structure, the book presents events in a fairly chronological order, though the dramatic composition is in places questionable: plot points are only vaguely defined, and frequently the turn of events appears to depend on accidents and coincidences rather than logical consequences (like the evil super villain falling in love with one of the characters on first sight, and the cavalry arriving conveniently just in time to save the hero).

A good few times, Stephenson robs himself of momentum and suspense by keeping the reader in the dark about what really is at stake. We don't know what precisely is happening, stumbling along with the chronically ill-informed protagonists, and when characters and readers finally have wrapped their heads around a situation, the conflict is resolved, the scene over, and it doesn't matter anymore. The usually fast-paced action is for long periods bogged down by tedious pseudo-dialogue between Hiro and a piece of software to impart the necessary background information, and vague equivalents of character arcs are thrown into the plot right before the ending: a tragic connection between hero and villain and a love story finally gone right, none of it entirely logical or particularly conducive to the story.

To sum up, Snow Crash may be a very enjoyable novel due to its great style and 'visuals', if you're not going for rounded characters and highly designed plot as much as I do, and have the patience to bear with the author for page-filling Sumerian mythology and crazy (but well researched) theories.

Personally, I felt that there was much more potential in the setting and the ideas than actually was tapped, that it could have been an excellent book if not for the sketchy character depiction and the sloppy plot development.

\* \* \*

## NON-FICTION: COPY TEXT

*Texts in two languages for the homepage of a small start-up business dealing in screen design, visual effects and everything 3D. The main point of it was to bring across the advantages of hiring a new, relatively unknown and small generalist over established specialists in the field.*

### **Our services**

Welcome to the threeD homepage!

We offer top-quality 3D-animations and -graphics, custom-made and matching any budget. Whether you desire visual effects for your corporate image video, a complete visualisation of your architectural project or a virtual walk-in DVD - we make your imagination happen, neatly and personalized. From first draft to finished product we work hand in glove with you. So you really get what you want.

We build your vision.

With fresh spirit and passion.

### **Our philosophy**

threeD is a union of two graduates from Stuttgart Media University. Over the course of our work and studies, we forged and shared a couple of basic beliefs that now make up our company philosophy.

threeD is a young business, and a small one.

The two of us work together, but also on our own - whatever suits your project best. In this way, we achieve maximum flexibility, immediate control over results, and avoid unnecessary bureaucratic overhead. Our customers benefit from this with greatest possible insight into our work, face-to-face contact and the possibility to make changes any time, fast and fuss-free. We don't delegate, we do our work ourselves, passionately and committed - and that will show in your finished film.

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What we strive for is an aesthetic look that suits your project, and we leave the computer on the sidelines. We are creative craftspeople - our art is to only attract attention to the screen design when it is desired by our customers.

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dreiD ist ein Zusammenschluss von zwei Absolventen der Hochschule der Medien in Stuttgart. Während unserer Arbeit in der Ausbildung und in der Praxis haben einige grundlegende und geteilte Ansichten zu unserer Firmenphilosophie geführt.

dreiD ist ein junges Unternehmen, und ein kleines.

Wir arbeiten zusammen, aber auch alleine - je nachdem, was Ihrem Projekt am besten entspricht. So erreichen wir ein Maximum an Flexibilität, haben den direktesten Einfluss auf das Endergebnis und vermeiden unnötige Bürokratie.

Unsere Kunden haben so den größtmöglichen Überblick über unsere Arbeit, direkten und persönlichen Kontakt und können jederzeit völlig unkompliziert Änderungen vornehmen. Wir machen unsere Sachen selbst und mit Herzblut - und das wird man in Ihrem fertigen Film sehen.

dreiD ist auf dem Boden geblieben.

Kaum ein rechnergeneriertes Bild entsteht ohne einen praktischen Zweck. Wir wollen mit unseren Grafiken und Animationen diesen Zweck verfolgen, so gut wie nur möglich, nicht weniger und nicht mehr. Wir wollen keine große Kunst verkaufen. Wir passen unsere Arbeit ihrem Zweck an und nicht umgekehrt. Ob subtiler Effekt, elegantes Understatement oder blickfangendes Hd Rendering, bei uns zählt nur das Endergebnis: Ihre lebendige Vision. Wir rechnen keine High-End Software und zahllose Konzept-Durchläufe ab, wenn Ihr Film keine benötigt.

Wir wollen eine schöne Optik, die Ihrem Projekt gut steht, und lassen den Computer im Hintergrund. Wir sind kreative Handwerker, und die Kunst dabei ist die, nur dann aufzufallen, wenn es gewünscht wird.

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## ABOUT ME

My name is Jennifer Stevens, and I am a writer at heart.

I was born in 1981, and I have been writing stories since I first learned how to string letters and words together to sentences as a child. Almost as long, I've been playing and gamemastering Pen & Paper roleplaying games, so writing for and about those RPGs has been one of the most important and time-consuming parts of my life for more than twenty years. By now, I've added plenty of other text types to my repertoire, blog articles, copy text, book reviews, game writing... generally nothing that can be written is safe from me.

I am endlessly fascinated by the human character, the drama and conflict that arise from humans being imperfect beings with desires and flaws (probably coming from an obsession with Hermann Hesse and Friedrich Schiller in my youth). So, naturally, I am drawn to stories, games and roleplaying systems that focus not so much on the pure narrative as this inherent struggle of the human mind.

That being said, I have a knack for world design as well, detached from character exploration, and I heartily enjoy creating detailed environmental backgrounds with story hooks for players to use as their playground.

As for languages, I have a natural affinity towards them, especially the simple beauty of the English language, since my mother is half American and a large part of my family lives in England.

To me, words are nigh on magical, creating emotions and mental images with the most modest of tools. Most of the times the words come to me unbidden, falling into place like pieces of a puzzle, as if the sentences have always been there, just waiting to be unearthed. Writing, therefore, has always been as important to me as light and air, a necessity rather than a hobby.

As a person, I am rather calm and patient and a little shy, with a tendency towards tidiness and organization. I like to meticulously analyze things, think them through and deduce the underlying principles. Also, I have an exceptionally good memory, which aides in maintaining order and avoiding contradictions and loose ends - there's few things that I detest more than illogicality or plot holes. I am easily sparked and very focused and determined once something has aroused my enthusiasm.

Currently I live with my husband Markus near Regensburg, Germany, where we work at a developer studio for videogames.

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