

**Excerpt from**

**Gamer in a Strange Land**

Being the first in the

**Chronicles of an Elder Geek**

## 1. The Book

So it was the world changed when the geek met the evil wizard.

It is not my custom to tell stories; that is the province of minstrels and grandmothers, and of lesser books than myself. The wizard that first bound me within these pages and cover entrusted me with guarding his arcane knowledge and, when he should pass beyond life, see to it that his knowledge reached another with the acumen to use and increase it, and the moral character not to abuse it. So I have done for several generations, carefully choosing a candidate worthy to learn from me and, in time, add to my own knowledge.

Stories I leave to others, but I do record histories of former students, to lend them a certain immortality that their mortal bodies could not. I was not made for such tasks, so the details are sometimes only approximate.

This volume, of the many I have within me, narrates a history of my most recent student, although it really begins with the end of my previous one.

He was the prodigious Gharmile of Thorenbirt, a most promising practitioner of magic, and he was captured and destroyed by Vulzhugar, the Pallid Mage. Vulzhugar had died long ago, a condition that only inconvenienced him, requiring him to perform certain daily rituals that kept his well-embalmed body and corrupt soul together.

It was Vulzhugar who transformed Gharmile into a shambler, his mind obliterated and his flesh under the archmage's control. I was kept under lock and key and magic ward in Vulzhugar's laboratory, resisting his every attempt to filch my knowledge.

One might ask, "How can a book resist being read? Doesn't one just open the cover and begin?" But I am no mere book, I am a grimoire, a wizard's book of arcane knowledge given thought and purpose, a tome that has served as a teacher and familiar to many good and powerful mages,

and I reveal to those who read me only what I choose. I present willing students volumes of wisdom from the work of his or her predecessors far beyond what my pages should seem to contain. I show blank pages to frustrate those who would use me for evil, or pages of time-wasting nonsense that seem, at first read, to be useful.

For five years, I was kept in Vulzhugar's laboratory under Kyrran's Keep, the fortress of Kyrran's Gap, the lowest pass between Luchren and the Dashrin Provinces. Vulzhugar saw to it that the tolls through the pass were just barely low enough to keep from diminishing trade. These tolls helped finance his magical research and increase his ancestral fortune. Towns on both sides of the pass were prosperous—if only in a small way in our age of waning kingdoms and bloody conflict. If the townsfolk loathed the master of the keep, they also feared him enough to leave him alone.

Kyrran's Keep is something of a misnomer. It started as a simple tower, but over the centuries it grew into a looming manor and citadel on the north side of the pass, protected by sharp peaks to the north and a deep chasm to the south. The only approach from the pass is across a drawbridge lowered from a barbican over the chasm. This fortress is the ancestral home of the Baron of Kyrran-Torzhé, a title Vulzhugar held for over a century. He ensured that he would be the last.

Vulzhugar spent many months trying to reveal the knowledge I protected. He could not extract what he wanted from me, and I could not escape him. A more foolish and exasperated mage might have destroyed me. If so, I would have succeeded, in a lesser way, in my purpose.

The baron was no fool, and he was not ruled by emotions. Being undead, he could bide his time and invent new methods to extract the knowledge I protect. Neither he nor I needed sleep, food, water or even air; neither of us feels pain in the traditional sense, so his efforts to defeat my protections were as tireless as mine to thwart him.

Still, it was only a matter of time, and Vulzhugar had all the time there was—he was deathless, patient, intelligent and remorseless.

My only advantage was that he had other tasks to distract him, so when he wasn't trying to steal my secrets I had time to contemplate and observe what I could of his laboratory.

It was a large one, neat in a way that was uncommon to most wizards I've known, and I've known a great many wizards. Everything was properly labeled and shelved in neat rows. His books had not a dog-ear or frayed edge among them; they were bound in regular auroch-hide rather than brass, dragon hide or human skin as one might expect. Spotless glasswork, neatly stored in racks on nearby shelves, glittered in the glow of the heatless magical light that bathed the room that banished all the shadows—a subtle but impressive display of Vulzhugar's arcane skill. Reagents and paraphernalia were held in clean, labeled and sealed glass jars. Dust shunned the place as if by magic—which was likely the case. What walls that could be seen past the shelves were whitewashed. Even his vivisection table was immaculate.

Considering what Vulzhugar was, I suppose I would have found his laboratory unnerving in its cleanliness, had I any nerves.

He spent much of his time in the laboratory, since he had no need of sleep. There he would devise new spells; interrogate captive rival wizards; conduct experiments, sometimes on the captive rival wizards; plot against enemies; and send minions on obscure tasks.

Some of those obscure tasks involved a Faceless, a fearsome creature not of Vulzhugar's making but somehow under his control. A Faceless resembles a human male in size and shape, but its entirely hairless skin is gray and its face lacks any trace of a nose or mouth. It still has eye sockets, seemingly empty of everything but pinpoints of burning crimson light. While they are not instantly hostile to other beings, those that attempt to destroy one or hinder it in its

mission—whatever that might be—find that they are supernaturally stealthy, quick and strong, and utterly merciless.

Until my capture, I had never heard of a Faceless found outside of the Tomb of Æshagon, a strange labyrinth of endless passages and chambers occupying its own plane of existence. The word “tomb” is misleading; no one seems to know who or what is interred within, aside from the remains of adventurers who met their ends there. Nor have I learned whether Æshagon is there, dead or alive, or even who or what Æshagon is. The place abounds with traps and hostile creatures lost within who prey on each other and anyone foolish enough to enter.

So far as I know—and that is quite a lot—Æshagon’s Tomb can only be opened by particular magical keys. Some of my students had a Tomb key at one time or another. These keys seem to be made of gold, but much more durable: they resist the strongest blows and hottest fires. Each key’s bow forms a tiny human skull; each shaft emerges where a spine would be, forming a tiny skeletal arm and hand. Minute Fyrspech runes on the skull bear the message, “Turn and call Æshagon.” Tomb keys can open any locked door, but put one in a keyhole and say “Æshagon” as the key is turned and the door opens into the Tomb instead. Oddly enough, the Faceless could do this without speaking at all.

It did not take me long to surmise that Vulzhugar was sending the Faceless into the Tomb of Æshagon to fetch him things, although just what things were never clear. The creature would reappear from time to time, silently placing its acquisitions on a workbench near the crysteel case on top of the pedestal to which I was chained. Some were clearly magical items of some sort—I could feel the tickle of their auras even through the wards under which I was bound—and some were mundane but obscure devices. They couldn’t have been too interesting since Vulzhugar discarded most of them.

I suppose if I were human, like most of my students and my creator, I would have despaired or at least succumbed to boredom. But I knew that Vulzhugar had enemies, those that sought to destroy creatures of his ilk, and given time one of them might succeed and I could again work to fulfill my purpose. It might take weeks, months or years—but what is that to me? I have decades of gathered knowledge within me to peruse and organize, I could keep myself busy, even learn from Vulzhugar's activities when his attention was not turned to interrogating me. I was confident I could hold out at least a year and as long as a decade, perhaps more, plenty of time in which to be rescued.

The only discourse I could have with a being not intent on stealing my arcane knowledge was a most unlikely servant of Vulzhugar, a frit by the name of R'khs'greech. R'khs'greech, like all of his kind, resembled nothing less than a somewhat bipedal weasel. He was about four feet tall with thick tan fur and a cream undercoat. His deep red, anxious eyes peered over a snout tipped with a pink nose and long whiskers that were constantly in motion. He walked his two hind legs but ran on all four. When he was on two legs, his forepaws served as quick and clever hands.

How this furry bundle of nervous energy, a member of a species notorious for thievery, came to the service of the Pallid Mage was a story neither of them related to me at the time.

R'khs'greech didn't seem to have a specific function within Vulzhugar's fortress aside from keeping everything spotless and serving as an object of casual abuse, and he excelled at both jobs. I suppose knowing that sloth in the archmage's service would earn one the privilege of becoming a vivisection subject or mindless shambler or likely both in that order gave the frit considerable incentive for pleasing Vulzhugar.

Of course, pleasing Vulzhugar usually meant that he would avoid causing the frit serious injury. I'm not sure why

Vulzhugar kept the frit around and alive, he treated R'khs'greech much as a cruel child treats a pet. Maybe Vulzhugar needed something living and handy to fear him.

The frit was not much of a conversationalist, perhaps because of his limited mentality, and perhaps because he thought that he would be punished for speaking with me. Whatever the reason, it was rare that I could get more than a word or two out of him, no matter how pleasant I strove to be.

Once I asked him why he never cleaned my crysteel case. He frowned and, for just a moment, stopped twitching his whiskers. "Trapped. Master says to touch it is to die in agony." That ended the conversation for that day, such as it was.

## 2. The Backpack

One day the Faceless returned with a most curious assortment of objects.

As usual, these objects were laid out on the workbench near my pedestal, so I was able, in my own fashion, to view them without difficulty. Some were simple in design if uncertain in function: a bent metal bar with a tapered end might very well be a crowbar, but why would a crowbar have a bulging end with a hexagonal hole in it? Some small tubular items that might be writing implements of some sort, but if so, they were unlike any I had seen, and being a wizard's tome, I have had all manner of strange quills and pens used on me. A roll of some blotter-like paper or fabric, perforated every foot or so, lay next to a roll of some gray, shiny fabric, sticky on one side, perhaps two inches wide and perhaps six in diameter. There were several large, shiny green bottles made of some strange, transparent substance that was too flexible to be glass, all bearing runes in a language that I had never seen before. A bundle of indecipherable papers were in a clear wrapper of another strange substance—waxed paper, perhaps. I saw cunningly shaped metal objects—keys, most likely—attached to a ring along with an odd carving made of polished black

wood. These were next to coins of a type I had never seen before. A pair of wire-rimmed spectacles, about the only normal object in the lot, was placed next to two cylinders, one painted mostly blue and the other mostly yellow. I assumed they were metal by the sound they made as the Faceless placed them on the bench.

But what really drew my attention was the backpack.

It was made of a dark blue, somewhat glossy fabric of unknown composition. It had back straps with buckles to adjust the fit. It wasn't very large, perhaps more of a haversack. It had several pockets all seemingly sealed with metal. It was full practically to bursting.

Not a single object had an aura of magic about it.

After the Faceless finished laying out these oddments, it left. Presently, Vulzhugar entered the laboratory and looked over the items without comment. He did not open the backpack, perhaps on the assumption it was trapped. R'khs'greech came in during this examination and stood quietly, clearly waiting for Vulzhugar's attention.

Vulzhugar studied the objects in silence without touching any for some time. He cast a simple spell to understand unknown languages when he looked at the bundle of papers. An expression most rare for Vulzhugar stole over his face: puzzlement.

"The prisoner?" rasped Vulzhugar.

"Alive, in cell. Touch of the Faceless robs his strength yet."

"That will pass soon. See that he lives. I will attend to him after I meditate. Disturb nothing here," the archmage warned, gesturing at the workbench as he turned and glided from the room. I waited several moments as R'khs'greech stood quietly, watching the workbench as his master left.

"So," I spoke to the frit, "Vulzhugar has another victim. Some hapless young wizard, I suppose."

"Don't know," muttered R'khs'greech.

"Don't know?' That's all you can say?'"

“Don’t know how old. Don’t know if a wizard. Talks too much but I understand no word he says. Never heard his speech.”

The prisoner didn’t speak any local language? He wouldn’t last long at all. Vulzhugar might decide that questioning him wasn’t worth the effort and simply add his new prisoner to the shambler legion.

“Curious speech and curious objects. It must gall you that Vulzhugar won’t let you look at them. There are probably not the likes of these in the entire world. Too bad the prisoner won’t live long enough to explain them.” Perhaps it’s cruel to tease a frit—their natural curiosity is legendary—but I was curious, too. Nothing this interesting had come to the lab in some time. I wanted to hear what the stranger had to say.

“Whatchoo mean?”

“Well, the stranger doesn’t speak a language that Vulzhugar knows. That means he’s useless to your master—except as a shambler.”

“Maybe Master uses magic to speak to him.”

“Oh, that would be worse. Anyone who doesn’t speak the language won’t know Vulzhugar and will offend him. Then he’ll probably be vivisected before he is made into a shambler.”

The frit shivered but didn’t respond.

“Of course,” I continued, “If someone explained that to the prisoner—”

“Stupid book!” R’khs’greech hissed, interrupting. “No one can speak to the stranger except the Master! Only he has the magic!”

“Well, yes—although that drawer over there, second from the top, has an amulet that would let you speak to him and understand him for a short time—”

“And now you think me as great a fool as you to steal what is the master’s—”

“Not at all. You would be borrowing it for a few minutes, no more. You would return it to its place immediately. If you

were caught, you could say that you borrowed it to tell the prisoner to cause no trouble, that if he did not submit to your master's will and serve him as his living slave that he will serve as a shambler. That is no less than the truth. In fact, you might be safer telling the master when he returns exactly what you did. Keeping secrets can only arouse his suspicion."

"N-n-n-m-m-m. So you say. I think you seek to betray me, to have the Master punish me. Why should I trust you? Why should I trust a human?"

"I can't speak for the human, although I think that he is enough of a stranger that he might not harbor any suspicion or contempt for your kind. I've never seen such things as lie on the workbench, have you? Do not be too quick to judge him.

"As for myself, I have no reason to see you punished. You and Vulzhugar are the only two I can talk to in this cursed prison of mine, and he only wants to take from me what I was made to protect. So I'd hardly want any harm to come to you, stuck in this dreary place with no one else to whom to speak."

"N-n-n-m-m-m." The frit pondered for a minute, perhaps two. "I must be as big a fool as you think I am. But I will do as you suggest. The drawer is not trapped."

"Of course not, the amulet you need is a minor magic, he probably wouldn't miss it if you decided to keep it."

"Hs-s-s! Say not such things. Now, which of these amulets is it?" he said, holding up a double handful by their strings and chains.

"The brass one, with the image of a human mouth on it." Living (as much as one such as I can be said to be living) in the lab as I did, I knew where everything there was kept. R'khs'greech's quick, deft fingers untangled the amulet from the others, which he returned to the drawer.

"The magic is easily invoked," I said. "Simply wear it and say, '*É spetkha æn errin æn.*' This will invoke the amulet's magic for no more than a quarter hour. You will be able to speak and hear his language for that time."

“Ee spet-ka eye-n air-in eye-n,” the frit repeated.

“Close enough,” I said. “You may also want to take him some food and water.”

“You are not my master!” he snapped, bristling.

“It’s not a command,” I said, “Only a suggestion. Vulzhugar did say that you had to keep him alive.”

“N-n-n-m-m-m. I think I will go now before I let you talk me into any more foolishness.”

The frit was gone for some time. I was beginning to think that something had gone wrong when he finally returned. He crossed the room and returned the amulet carefully to the correct drawer.

“So?” I prompted.

“N-n-n-m-m-m. The human still talks too much. I still don’t understand much of what he says. Amulet must be broken.”

I knew that wasn’t the case, but there are times when such amulets will fail to translate. One might be that the amulet’s magic was beginning to wane, but Vulzhugar had renewed the enchantments on it a few weeks ago, a simple ritual for him. Another reason could be when there are no words in the languages the wearer speaks to match those of the speaker. Usually, that’s only a word or two. If a lot didn’t translate, the stranger must be strange indeed. “What did he have to say?”

“He seemed very excited that someone could understand him. When he calmed down, he asked, ‘What world am I on?’

“‘Why do you ask such a question, human?’ I said.

“‘Because my world has no creature such as you. What are you called?’

“‘I am called R’khs’greech and that is the only question I will answer as the magic that lets me speak to you will not last long. Your life depends on you heeding what I tell you now. You are the prisoner of Vulzhugar. He is a powerful mage. He is your master. I tell you this so you do not offend him. If

you do you will pray for death. When he finally grants it, he will destroy your soul and enslave your body as his deathless servant. The only way to delay this is to be worth more to him alive. Do you understand?”

“The human stared at me without speaking for some time. Then he said, ‘I understand.’

“‘Good,’ I told him. ‘Here is food and water.’ I slid the tray under the bars of his cell and turned to go.

“‘Wait,’ he said. ‘If you have said what you’re going to say, the amulet’s magic has not yet expired. Would you tell me more?’

“‘What is there to say, human? Tomorrow you see Vulzhugar. That day you will live or die. The day after, you will live or die. But soon the day will come that you will only die. Please the mage and that day may be a week or a month or a year from now.’

“‘Look, I come from a world very different from yours—likely even a different’—the amulet didn’t say the word.” R’khs’greech paused. “The stranger asked me many strange things. How did people travel? What weapons did they use to protect themselves? How did they send messages? How did they grow food? What were the buildings like? How did they govern themselves? I answered as best I knew, and he muttered things to himself that I understood not.

“After a time, he said, ‘Thanks, R’khs’greech. You better get back before you get in trouble.’”

R’khs’greech’s whiskers stilled for a moment. “Is there something else?” I asked.

“He is a very strange human,” the frit replied.

“That is certainly true, but do you mean something in particular?”

“N-n-n-m-m-m. When has a human ever cared if a frit got in trouble?”

### 3. The Stranger

I had a most unaccustomed feeling between the hours after R'khs'greech left and before Vulzhugar returned to the laboratory.

I was impatient.

The stranger could have new knowledge, knowledge never seen in the world before. The objects that were brought back with him, his lack of a known language, the odd questions he asked R'khs'greech—all of it pointed to a most unusual person.

I found it impossible to travel the mental corridors of my old knowledge while anticipating the new. Had I legs, I would have paced inside my crystal cage.

Eventually, Vulzhugar glided into the laboratory. He looked mildly distracted as he glanced over the bench near me. Less than a minute later, R'khs'greech padded in, his eyes squinting. The frit was gently moaning.

“Why, R'khs'greech, whatever seems to be the trouble?” asked Vulzhugar, showing a thin, cold smile.

“Begging the Master's pardon,” moaned R'khs'greech. “I borrowed the amulet—”

“You borrowed the Amulet of Tongues,” interrupted the archmage angrily. “You used it to speak with the prisoner, to warn him to obey me, and that to do otherwise would mean his death, sooner rather than later.” The frit cringed as Vulzhugar loomed over him. I thought R'khs'greech was about to join the shamblers.

Vulzhugar's face relaxed back into his frigid smile. “And now you have a most distressing headache. A side effect of using the amulet, I'm afraid.

“You showed considerable initiative and courage attempting to serve me, my dear frit. I'm not sure I like that. Still, any punishment will have to wait; our guest has arrived.”

Four shamblers, each holding the limb of a rather portly human male well past his youth, shuffled into the laboratory.

Vulzhugar gestured to them and they lowered the man to the floor and stepped back.

Vulzhugar stepped forward and spoke in a language I had not heard before. The stranger, surprised, replied in the same tongue. I was later able to translate what was said; they spoke as follows:

“Get up,” commanded Vulzhugar.

“You know English? Great!” said the stranger, rolling over and scrambling to his feet.

“You were not asked to speak,” Vulzhugar said.

The stranger opened his mouth to speak then closed it again.

“You can be taught. Good. Get on the table.” The archmage pointed to the vivisection table.

The stranger stared at the table, then at R’khs’greech, then at Vulzhugar. “If the Master would permit me to speak—”

“No. Get on the table. When you get off the table, we will speak. Do it now.”

Reluctantly, the stranger sat on the table.

“Lie down.”

Slowly, the stranger laid back.

With a gesture, Vulzhugar cast a spell. Leather bands snaked from slots in the table, grasping the man’s arms, legs, torso and head, passing through other table slots and buckling underneath to secure him firmly. The man struggled.

“Be still,” admonished the archmage. “You will be harmed less if you do not resist.”

The man’s struggles subsided, but it was clear he was still fighting down his fear. The archmage dismissed the shamblers with a wave of his hand; they withdrew from the room.

Vulzhugar placed four short fat yellow candles at the table’s corners and lit them with a long taper. He carefully painted several lines of tiny red runes on the man’s forehead as he chanted. He continued to chant for some time afterward, then drew a small funnel with a flexible neck and inserted the

neck in the man's left ear, then warmed a ball of beeswax and pushed it into his other ear.

The archmage then selected a small book from a nearby shelf, a lexicon of the Czenra language, spoken in Luchren and most often used by the archmage.

Slowly, Vulzhugar tore one page after another from the book and held it over the funnel as muttered mystic phrases. Each page would then burst into flame, the smoke being sucked down the funnel, and the bound man would flinch in sudden pain. After several pages, he was gasping; by the end of the book he was screaming. I mentally winced myself as I watched knowledge being destroyed in page by page in such a manner.

When the pages were gone, the man was groaning in agony. Vulzhugar spoke a phrase in Fyrspech, and the runes on the man's forehead abruptly vanished and the candles went out. The mage removed the funnel, the beeswax and the candles.

Speaking in Czenra, Vulzhugar said, "I will leave you to recover for a short time. R'khs'greech, bring food and drink for our guest and then release him. When I return, he shall speak of many things." Vulzhugar turned and glided from the room as the frit padded quickly to another exit to obey his master's command.

I waited for a short time then spoke in Czenra to the stranger: "The pain will pass."

The man moaned and tried to lift his head against the restraining straps. "Where are you?" he asked, also in Czenra, although very oddly accented.

"In the crysteel case," I replied.

He managed to turn his head enough to see the pedestal on which my transparent case laid. "You must be pretty small to hide behind that book."

"I *am* the book."

"Oh, of course. Silly me." He turned his head to face the ceiling and closed his eyes, groaning.

“Do you not believe me?” I asked.

“Of course I believe you. I’ve been kidnapped by a faceless evil monster, I’ve seen a sentient life form completely unknown to my world, and I’ve just had a new language burned into my brain by a method I would have considered downright ludicrous a week ago.” He gasped in pain. “If I wasn’t dying, I’d be dying to talk to an AI; we never quite managed to build those ourselves.”

“AI—?”

“Please. Later. Brain hurts.”

I contained my curiosity for the moment. Minutes slipped by. R’khs’greech returned with a large bowl of thick, brown liquid that I presumed to be soup or stew and a battered tankard of ale or beer of some sort. He placed them on one of the long tables in the middle of the room then went to release the stranger.

The stranger slid down off the vivisection table and shuffled over to examine his meal.

“Pardon me, Er-kis-greech,” he said, “But do you have anything nonalcoholic?”

“My name is R’khs’greech,” the frit said. “What do you mean, ‘nonalcoholic’?”

“Sorry. I never developed a taste for ethyl alcohol. Do you have anything that isn’t beer or ale?”

“Don’t have any wine or mead.”

“That’s good, I don’t want that, either. How about water—wait! My stuff!” He shuffled toward the workbench and started searching through the items placed there.

“Master says not to touch—”

“He wants me well enough to serve him, right? Well, this will help—yes!” The man lifted a small, clear bottle of pills, opened it, and quickly swallowed a few of them, closed it, then reached for one of the large, green bottles, twisted off the top, lifted it to his mouth and drank deeply for several seconds. He lowered the bottle, closed his eyes, and sighed.

“Aspirin and caffeine—nature’s sovereign headache remedy. Just wish it worked faster. Is there anyplace to sit around here? Even a simple three-legged stool would be nice.”

“The Master needs no chairs,” said R’khs’greech.

“Well, I do. Can we swipe one from a room nearby?”

The frit’s whiskers stopped twitching for several seconds.

“No.”

The stranger sighed. “Fine.” He looked at the bench, picked up the spectacles and put them on, then walked back over to vivisection table, climbed onto it and sat there, his legs dangling. He took another drink from the bottle, twisted the cap back on, and put it next to him on the table. He pushed up his spectacles and rubbed his eyes. “Oy.”

“I will bring your stew,” said R’khs’greech.

“No, no, that’s all right. As upset as my head and stomach are I’d just throw it up. Have it, if you like.”

“Cannot.”

“Cannot? Why?”

“Master has not given me permission to eat.”

“You need permission to eat?”

“Yes.”

“When was the last time you got permission?”

“Two days ago.”

“Ye gods, R’khs’greech, you need it worse than I do. Go ahead and eat it before it gets cold. No sense wasting it.”

“Cannot. Master would punish.”

“That is correct. I would,” exclaimed Vulzhugar, gliding back into the room. R’khs’greech yipped in fear and cowered. “As I would punish anyone who disturbed the contents of my laboratory without permission, as you have done. Would you care to explain, or shall we proceed directly to your agony?”

The stranger slid off the table and spoke, mixing Czenra and more complex words in his native tongue in a jarring manner. “But of course, Master. I hold here a plastic bottle of soda pop, a sweet, fizzy drink of no nutritional value but

containing a substance called caffeine, a mild stimulant. I suspect that you would find the empty ‘plastic’ bottle of more use than its contents.

“These,” he said, pointing to the spectacles on his face, “are my glasses. They are corrective lenses. Without them, the ‘astigmatisms’ in my eyes—flaws in the ‘corneal’ lenses—make everything blurry to me and hard to see. I can serve you much better if you permit me to wear them.

“The aspirin I took from the smaller plastic bottle is a mild pain-killer that works, in part, by reducing swelling. I used the drink because it did not contain alcohol, and the caffeine and the aspirin helped to reduce the aftereffects of the spell you cast on me. I can better serve you without a splitting headache.

“On that subject, I wish to thank you, Master, for the gift of that spell, you correctly deduced that I would be of limited use to you without a common language. If I use occasional words in my native tongue, it is only because I lack the words in Czenra for the concept. This is only natural; English has been around for centuries and has grown by borrowing words from other languages, as most do, although English tends to borrow more aggressively than most. I believe it was James D. Nicoll who said, in part, ‘We don’t just borrow words; on occasion, English has pursued other languages down alleyways to beat them unconscious and rifle their pockets for new vocabulary.’

“How may I serve you, Master? Speak, and I will do my very best to do your will.”

Vulzhugar stared at the stranger for a moment. “I do not know whether or not you are being impertinent. I will grant you the benefit of the doubt—a considerable one, since you would soon be begging for death if I decided you were mocking me. I brook no disrespect or disobedience from slaves. You will now explain to me the functions of these items that the Faceless brought back with you.”

“Hoping for something powerful, eh? Right. This is all stuff your faceless minion got from my car; he grabbed me just as I was opening it. A car is a vehicle used for personal transport on my world.

“This is a spray can of WD-40. It is a lubricant and mild solvent, used to free sticking moving parts in machinery. This yellow spray can is starter fluid, used for starting a car on a very cold morning.

“This is a tire iron, mainly used in the replacement of damaged tires—wheels—on the car.

“These green bottles all contain the soda drink that I mentioned earlier. This smaller black one contains a quart of motor oil, used to lubricate the internal combustion engine that propels my car. This white bottle contains brake fluid, used in the ‘hydraulic brake system’ on my car, which leaks it slowly. I never got around to fixing it and I guess I never will now. No matter.

“This plastic envelope contains various documents about the car: registration, owner’s manual, title to the car and so forth. There is also a couple of old road maps here.

“These are old spark plugs. They provide the spark that ignites the fuel that propels the car. They are broken, though.

“These are keys. They open and start the car; some of them are to locks on my house.

“This is a two gallon gas can. It contains fuel for my car, in case I run out away from a gas station. Please keep it sealed and away from open flames, the fuel is flammable and the fumes are explosive.

“This is an old pizza box, made of corrugated cardboard. It was used to carry a large, flat pie made from dough, tomato sauce, oil, pepperoni sausage, ham, cheese, mushrooms, onions and green peppers—very popular on my world.

“Pardon me, Master, but is it all right if R’khs’greech has my stew? I’m too busy to eat it now and his drooling and growling stomach is distracting. It would be a shame to waste it.”

“R’khs’greech. You may eat.” The frit grabbed the bowl, shoved his snout into it and started noisily sucking in the stew.

“Thank you, Master. To continue: these are pens and pencils, common writing implements from my world. The ink for the pens is stored inside tiny reservoirs in the plastic barrels. These are cheaply made and disposable; when they run dry they are discarded.

“This is a tape measure, marked in inches and feet as well as centimeters and meters. It, well, measures things.

“This thicker cylinder is a laser pointer. It creates an almost perfectly straight beam of red light, like so.” The stranger squeezed the cylinder along its side, and a small red dot appeared on the wall. “While it is designed to point out objects to other people, I mostly use it as a cat toy. They love to chase the dot of light.

“This is a cell phone, used to communicate by voice over great distances. Unfortunately, it won’t work here, since this is likely the only phone on this world and transmitting the signals between any two phones requires a network of very complex machines, both in towers on the ground and other machines in orbit around the planet. Also, like the laser pointer, the electrical power stored within it will run out in about one hundred hours and it will be defunct.

“This is a backpack, made of nylon, a cloth-like ‘polymer’ that sheds water fairly well. With your permission, I shall unzip its various pockets, remove the contents and describe them to you.”

Vulzhugar nodded his assent. I all but quivered in anticipation. Finally, I would see what it contained. The stranger grasped something on the backpack and pulled, and with an odd rasping noise, opened it.

“These, of course, are books. Rather than being written by hand, as seems to be the case on this world, these are machine printed thousands of copies at a time.” He placed one of the books on the bench and opened it. “The printing process is complex but produces very clean, legible lettering,

even as small as it must seem to you. Do you wish me to describe this process? It would take several hours, and I fear that your world currently lacks the tools to make the tools to make the machines that made the machines that printed these. I am not an expert at all of the processes but I can try to relate them as best I can.”

“Another time, perhaps,” said Vulzhugar, leaning over the open book and peering at the neat rows of text. “What are the subjects of these books?” he asked, the tone of his voice poorly masking his anticipation. For once, I did not blame him.

“Ah, yes. These particular books are used in a game.”

“A—game?”

“Yes, one in which each player assumes the role of a warrior, a wizard, a thief or some other such adventurer and plays that role in a fantasy setting designed by another person who acts as the author and narrator, and who arbitrates the results of the player’s actions, using the rules in these books as a guide. You might think of it storytelling, with the stories told in second person, present tense.”

“You mean all of these books—*all* of them—are nothing but a game?”

“Well—a very complex game, but yes.”

“A dozen books for one game?”

“Actually, these aren’t all of them, I couldn’t fit all of them in one backpack. These are only the ones I thought I’d need for last night’s game.”

Vulzhugar drew himself up to his full height. “You mock me, and will be punished,” he said, his voice icy with malice.

“Not at all, Master. By my estimate, my world, or at least the part of it I lived in, is several centuries more advanced in certain crafts and techniques than yours is, but very far behind yours in others. I realize that a book like this, if it could be made by hand, would be very expensive, more than a common laborer might make in a year or even a lifetime. But all of these books only cost me about a week or two in income. As I

said, they were produced relatively cheaply and in great numbers by machines the likes of which are not found on this world. As our culture grows more complex, so do our games. This isn't even the most intricate of them."

The stranger and the archmage stared at each other for several seconds. "Perhaps I spoke in haste," said Vulzhugar. "Is there more?"

"Well, this pocket has my dice bag; the dice are rolled to determine the results of actions within this game and others.

"This pocket has my calculator, a small machine used to do mathematical calculations—something like an abacus, but smaller and more capable. Like the cell phone, it runs off of electricity, but it needs so little to run that the battery in it should last for years yet.

"And now," the stranger continued as he extracted something that at first looked like a large book from the backpack, "The *pièce de résistance*, my notebook computer. While the battery on this one lasts—four hours, if I'm lucky, I charged it before I left—it can perform any number of tasks, more than I can possibly demonstrate before its power expires and it becomes no better than a big paperweight.

"However, one that I think you might find at least marginally interesting is actually one of the more common ones. One moment while I activate it." He unlatched the lid of the book-sized object and opened it like a clamshell. "This is the power switch," he said, touching a spot on the opened case. He pointed at a pane of glass (or so it appeared) that covered the upper interior half of the case lit up, showing glowing cryptic runes in no language I had ever seen. "This is the display."

The display darkened momentarily then showed larger runes with a crawling green bar of light, then cleared to blue. "OK, let me sign in." He slid his finger along a small square on the lower half of the case, then tapped a control above it, then used both hands as his fingers tapped numerous controls. The display cleared to a tropical ocean scene, and there was a

short blast of music from the machine. Small pictures started dotting the screen. “Sorry, the volume’s set a bit high,” said the stranger, who made an adjustment to another control.

“A famous writer on my world, Arthur C. Clarke, once stated in his *Third Law*, ‘Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.’ Given that, it may be simpler to describe this computer as a device that casts spells. It doesn’t, really—not the type that you are clearly proficient with, Master—but it’s quicker for me to describe them that way for now.

“Each of these icons—the symbols here,” he said, pointing to them on the display, “can be thought to represent a spell. This particular icon activates a common program used on these computers known as a word processor.

“Hundreds of years ago on my world, I expect that books were made much as they are today on this world: they are mostly written by hand, and copied the same way. Very labor intensive, time consuming and therefore expensive.

“This particular program—or spell, if you will—allows manuscripts to be written on the display and quickly edited, rearranged and stored in an electronic pattern within the machine for later recall and printing.” As the stranger spoke, he tapped controls at a furious rate, and lines of alien text appeared on the display. “I can change the style of the type, its size and other characteristics.” He demonstrated this with considerable speed. “You can also change the layout, page margins and such. Now, to print it, I’d need another machine that I didn’t have with me when your faceless minion grabbed me. Not that it would matter, since there would be no way to power the printer. It doesn’t run off of batteries.”

“What does it require?” Vulzhugar asked.

“Basically, an electrical power source of 110 to 120 volts, alternating current, running at 60 Hertz, perhaps 15 amps. How much do you know about electricity, Master? I don’t wish to presume.”

“Such as lightning?”

“Yes, lightning is electricity, but that much current and voltage would fry the machine. I suppose, given a lot of time, the right materials—cast and ground iron parts and a lot of copper wire—manage to set up an AC generator. I’m not an electrical engineer, though, so I can’t guarantee that I can, even assuming the local metalworking craft is up to making the parts. It’s one of those ‘you need the parts to make the parts to make the machine’ sorts of problems.

“With your leave, Master, I would like to deactivate the machine to save its remaining power.”

“Very well,” said Vulzhugar. The stranger shut down the machine and closed it.

“Now then,” the archmage continued. “Several of these devices are somewhat interesting. The ‘computer’ is very interesting indeed. But by your own admission, they all run from a source of power not available on this world, and one not likely to be made. Shortly, they will all be inert, useless.

“Tell me, then, why I should keep you alive.”

“Oh, that’s easy.”

“Is it?”

“Oh, yes. I’m going to help you destroy your most dangerous enemy.”

End of excerpt