

Excerpt 2 from

Gamer in a Strange Land

Being the first in the

Chronicles of an Elder Geek

4. Unholy Alliance

“I am not given to respecting or believing braggarts,” said Vulzhugar after a few seconds. “You do not know my enemies, nor do you seem capable of harming even the least of them.”

“You are absolutely correct, Master. That’s why I said I’d *help* you destroy them, if you would be so kind as to indulge me. Approximately how many books do you own?”

Again, Vulzhugar thought for a few seconds before answering. “I fail to see the relevance but see no harm in answering that. Just over six score.”

“So between 120 and 140 books, then. I’ve told you how inexpensive books are on my world. My fiction library alone is over 500 books—and I’ve read far more than that. And that doesn’t even count the Internet.” Vulzhugar raised an eyebrow at the unfamiliar term. “My pardon, Master. The Internet is—well, imagine many computers, thousands or even millions, some such as this one, many much more powerful. Imagine that they are scattered all over the world. Imagine that they could all communicate, so that the user of one computer could read the information on another. That, in essence, is the Internet. It’s like having a book that is all the books in all the libraries in the world.”

The stranger’s claims were shocking, if they could be believed. At the time, I had complete memory of perhaps 250 books of arcane knowledge and dozens of treatises and papers, as well as another 100 books that my students thought useful; I could summon these to my physical pages in moments. This stranger claimed to have a personal library that would have beggared a king to buy it.

“The reason I mentioned all that is that my rather voracious appetite for reading has gained me a lot of general knowledge and quite a bit of specialized knowledge that won’t be found elsewhere on your world. Much of it will have useful applications here.

“So I ask for a chance to prove myself. Who is your most immediate real enemy? I shall provide the method for his, her or its destruction. Naturally, if I fail, you’ll see to it that I die in exquisite agony just before you add my carcass to your legion of zombies on steroids. Fair enough?”

I had never seen Vulzhugar in so many indecisive moments before—but then, the stranger was outside all experience. Time crawled as the archmage mulled over the offer.

“I see no harm at this time in humoring you,” the archmage said at last. “Naturally, if I think you are wasting my time, I will void our bargain, and in a manner most hideous for you.”

“Right. I’d ask you to shake on it, but I don’t think either of us particularly wants that. Before you go assign the loyal minions to guard me and watch my every move and report back to you, would you describe to your humble slave who it is you wish destroyed?”

“I task you with finding a way to destroy Harol-Dárim, his followers, and the army he thinks to bring in the spring to defeat me and capture my ancestral fortress.”

“Hmmm...that seems to be more than one enemy, but I’m game. What makes him your most dangerous enemy? As Sun Tzu wrote, know yourself and your enemy and the battle is won.”

“Harol-Dárim is a champion of the Lucent Church, a strong warrior said to enjoy divine protection. He has talent as a military leader. Last summer, he led a smaller army into the northwest pass into Luchren to reduce Fortress Taingil, which had been seized from its former baron by a mercenary company turned to banditry about seven years ago. The mercenary leader, Bearhald, was known to be canny in battle, but apparently not canny enough.

“My informants tell me that Harol-Dárim intends to strike here next year.

“That he intends to come here next would not be cause for alarm. He cannot simply besiege my fortress; one cannot starve the dead. The fortress itself is too hard to storm, and the stone here is firm enough to withstand sapping for a long time.

“This he knows as well as I. Yet he plans anyway. He has with him several priests of his church, no one of them my equal in magical might, but together—I cannot be certain. Already they weave spells against me, and I against them.

“I know he also has the help of Tárlyma, Ward of the Highwald, the current high priestess of the goddess Aldyth. She will bring her other priestesses and the Wardens, a band of warriors trained in stealth, forestry and mountaineering. Holding the mountains around the pass against them will be questionable.

“Attempts to assassinate Harol-Dárim have, of course, been made. None have come close to succeeding. Spells I’ve sent against him have likewise failed; he enjoys powerful protections.”

“Right. Killing him would probably be enough to cause the army to fall apart, but I expect that you want complete annihilation to serve as an example to others that your power is supreme? With perhaps a few survivors to carry the warning to others?”

“That is an ideal outcome.”

“Very well. Perhaps you should summon guards, Master. With your permission, I’d like to go up to the battlements to observe the terrain around the fortress, since it will be one of the likely killing grounds.”

“Granted.” Vulzhugar muttered under what passed as his breath and the four shamblers returned. “Follow,” he commanded, gliding toward a door. The stranger fell in behind, followed by R’khs’greech and the shamblers.

I was in shock. I found it hard to believe what the stranger said, and was most dismayed to hear that he was so willing to help the vile archmage. Yet, in my enchanted

crysteel prison, there was nothing I could do about it. The stranger blithely spoke of destroying a holy warrior, army and priests following Hælos, the Lucent God. I could never convince R'khs'greech to help me; he lived in mortal fear of the archmage.

I was still mulling over the implications of this unholy alliance when I heard the stranger's voice approaching. "...the position of the West Tower is most useful. It's well away from the rest of the fortress and looks down the pass, giving it an excellent field of fire. The steep, rocky slopes on either side of the pass have many possibilities, too."

Vulzhugar, the stranger, R'khs'greech and the shamblers re-entered the laboratory as the archmage replied. "If the Wardens of the Highwald do not hold them. Otherwise you will not be able to drop stones from them into the pass."

"If I'm right, we'll drop the Wardens into the pass—along with a few hundred tons of stone. The method I have in mind is rather cliché, admittedly—fodder for dozens of stories on my world going back to *A Connecticut Yankee in King's Arthur Court*.

"The new vocabulary you magically imprinted on me seems to have words for saltpeter, sulfur and charcoal, but none for gunpowder, so it's possible that it hasn't been invented, or at least refined enough to do more than burn fast. Is that so, Master?"

"Those three substances are familiar to me, as well as a powder made from it, but as you say, it only seems to burn. I fail to see what good that will do. There are plenty of other incendiaries."

"Yes, but prepared correctly, the gas expansion of the burning powder is so swift as to cause an explosion—and a fairly destructive one, at that. It was used on our world for centuries until more sophisticated and deadly explosives were developed. However, I don't know how to make those, and the tools are probably not available to make them, especially given the time constraints. I might manage guncotton but I

don't know remember how to make it stable; one little goof could blow the fortress to rubble. Best to go with a simpler solution that gets the job done and leave the fancy stuff for later.

“We can rig charges in deep holes along the ridges to cleave tons of rock down on an invading army. A decent catapult or a small trebuchet on the West Tower can be rigged to lob gunpowder bombs laced with nails and scrap iron into the pass. What the concussion doesn't kill the flying metal will chew to pieces. It might be better to use a few small catapults rather than one large one, that way one breaking won't halt the attack. We'll have to test it, of course, but the height of the tower and its position above the pass should allow quite a range.

“Since you have access to both ends of the pass until the winter closes it, it would be easy to bring up the supplies we'll need from the Dashrin Provinces to the east, out of sight from your enemy. Surprise is just as important as destructive power.

“If you like, I can make a small sample of the correctly made gunpowder to demonstrate its effectiveness. There are certain details I'll want to test before we make it in quantity anyway, and we'll want to set up the manufacturing well away from places we don't want blown up in case of an accident. In fact, several small powder mills would be better than one large one—one explosion won't shut them all down.

“Naturally, other methods and details may present themselves to me, I've only had an hour or so to think about it. What do you think, Master?”

“I think all of this is just talk until you can demonstrate that it can work. Nevertheless, it shows promise. Prepare your demonstration. If it is successful, it will please me to set this plan in motion.”

“Thank you, Master. If I may ask a small boon of you?”

“You may ask.”

“As you can see, I’m not a young man. I could use the help of someone quick and clever for certain tasks in the coming months. Might I borrow the services of R’khs’greech for the time being? To start, he can find me warmer, drier quarters within the fortress so I don’t come down with pneumonia and die before the plans come to fruition.”

“Such a small request? Good. I dislike slaves that ask for too much. You will have rooms in the keep. R’khs’greech will fetch what you need. He will also send for me when you are ready for the demonstration. Do not leave these rooms once there until I give my leave or the shamblers will destroy you. Do you understand?”

“Perfectly, Master.”

Without another word, Vulzhugar turned and left. R’khs’greech and the shamblers remained.

R’khs’greech turned to the stranger and said, “What is your wish, Master?”

“I wish never to be called Master. I wish to be no one’s master.”

“What should I call you, then?”

“What would you like to call me, R’khs’greech?”

The frit’s hands rubbed his eyes in confusion. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Well, you have a choice. You can act like a slave to me, which I don’t want. I don’t know what I’d do then, I don’t really want to tell Mr. Scary Undead Guy that I don’t really need you after all, he might think it’s your fault no matter how much I tell him it’s not. The way I see it we both lose from that.

“You can act as an employee, but we both know that’s a farce.

“You can be an acquaintance and help because you’ve got nothing better to do. I guess I could live with that.

“Or you can be a friend, and help because you wish it.”

The frit’s whiskers froze for several seconds. R’khs’greech chuckled. “You had me fooled for a time,

Master. A human and a frit, friends.” The chuckles grew into laughter.

“Um...did I say something funny?”

R’khs’greech stopped laughing. “Humans loathe us. They hunt us for sport and our pelts. Where they bear us at all, it’s because we do the ugly jobs humans don’t want. To humans, we are thieves, vermin. A human kills a frit and it is nothing, stepping on a bug. But if a frit kills a human, even in self defense, the land runs red with our blood as humans kill all of us they find!” R’khs’greech voice was practically a shriek, his lungs heaving, his hands clenching.

The stranger waited for some time before answering. “I’m sorry, R’khs’greech. I really didn’t know. Things like that have happened on my world between humans for centuries.

“But I’m not from your world, R’khs’greech. I’d never laid eyes on a frit before. On my world, there is nothing like you except in stories. I haven’t been taught to hate and loathe you or your people and I see no reason to start. But I can certainly understand why you have reason to loathe humans.

“Despite that, you risked yourself to speak to me last night and tell what was expected of me. I had hours to consider what to do, without them I would almost certainly be dead now, one of the shamblers. I owe you my life, R’khs’greech. If anything, *I* should be serving *you*.

“It’s your choice, R’khs’greech.”

“N-n-n-m-m-m.” The frit thought for a long moment. Finally, he asked, “What do friends call you?”

“D.B.,” replied the man, smiling.

5. Names

“D.B.?” said R’khs’greech. “What kind of name is that?”

“Well, it’s not really my name, it’s the initials of my first and second names. My full name is Dillon Bertrand Russell.”

“Oh.”

“It’s not wise to give one’s full name where Vulzhugar is likely to hear it,” I interjected. “There is power in names.”

“Indeed?” said D.B. “So, if you’ll pardon the expression, what’s your story?”

“I am the Grimoire of Arcadym Larmach, master of occult lore and adept of arcane arts. I was tasked with recording and preserving his works and passing his knowledge to worthy students of the art. I have taught many students across many decades, accumulating their knowledge and passing it on to new students in turn.”

“Outstanding. And tall, dark and creepy is your current student?”

“Absolutely not! I would never serve one such as Vulzhugar. I will never allow a servant of evil such as he to abuse the knowledge I protect. He can destroy me but never will I yield to him a single secret.”

“Sounds like the two of you get along ever so well. I take it he did something unpleasant and permanent to your last student?”

“He did, and the same fate awaits you, whether or not you succeed in your heinous scheme to destroy Harol-Dárim.”

“Perhaps. And perhaps the horse will learn to sing.”

“What?”

“Nothing. An old story. R’khs’greech, do you have any of that stew left? I haven’t eaten all day. Unless you want more yourself.”

“Master has not—”

“—given you permission to eat. I know. But you’re *my* assistant now, right? So if I say you can eat when you want to, then you can, right? And I need my friend and helper to bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, not half-starved. So we both eat.”

“N-n-n-m-m-m. If you’re sure...”

“Absolutely. If it makes you nervous, just eat when I do, I’ll cover for you.”

“I will go stoke the fire and make more.”

“Cook it well, I don’t know what nasty bugs might be in it.”

“What?”

“Just serve it piping hot.”

“I will do that.”

With R’khs’greech gone, I was about to try to appeal to Russell’s better nature, but he spoke first.

“So. You’re a sentient book.”

“A grimoire, if you please,” I retorted.

“How did that happen?”

“I was first summoned by Arcadym Larmach to serve as the grimoire’s guardian, tasked with increasing the knowledge it contains, keeping it from the eyes of those who would abuse it, and passing it on to new students.”

“Yes, you’ve said that before. What did you do before that?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, from what I hear, you weren’t created, you were summoned. So you were around before the book—”

“Grimoire.”

“—grimoire, then. What did you do?”

I hesitated. Russell had, after all, willingly agreed to serve the murderer of my former student. But telling him wouldn’t give Vulzhugar information he didn’t already have.

“I was a gnome, an earth spirit.”

“An earth spirit? An elemental?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t he choose another elemental spirit? I imagine a fire or water elemental would have been tough on the book, but why not an air elemental?”

“Hah. A sylph. As likely to forget what they were told a minute later. A sylph in a grimoire? What a notion!”

“I suppose Larmach would think them rather—flighty. Don’t you resent being enslaved like that? Wouldn’t you rather be free?”

“At first—yes, I hated him for doing that. But as time went by, I saw more of the world traveling with him, learning from him, and growing in ways I never could have as just a minor earth spirit. He gave me purpose I never had before, a purpose that outlived him and generations after him.”

“It sounds like he and his successors made you more powerful, too. Why don’t you just leave, then?”

“Vulzhugar is, unfortunately, much more powerful. The spells that bind me here would kill any who would even so much as touch my prison. He cannot make me reveal the knowledge he seeks and damaging me or destroying me would lose that knowledge as well. But he can prevent me from leaving.”

“Stalemate,” Russell said in his own language. “So you wait for someone to get you out. Sorry that I can’t be that person, I’m just a fat, aging ‘geek’”—another English word—“in way over his head. Vulzhugar has complete power over me. I know no magic; I’m no warrior or great hero. I only play them in games.”

“This is no game.”

“Now *there’s* a flash of the blindingly obvious. As I see it, my choices are to please Vulzhugar and remain more useful to him alive—or serve him as one of his undead minions. Do you realistically see any alternative?”

“No, but—”

“But nothing. You can’t very well expect me to defy him to save people I don’t even know, especially if doing so gets me dead—or worse, undead—and they will probably die anyway?”

“You don’t know that.”

“Neither do you. But you’re not next in line to become a shambling, brain-dead hulk to prove the point. I am. And I like my brain just the way it is, thank you very much. So if the pleases Vulzhugar to have me make explosives he can use to obliterate his foes, then I’ll do it. If he wants me to develop poison gases to destroy armies, I’ll do my level best for him.

If he says “jump” I won’t have the temerity to ask how high—I’ll jump as high as I can then beg forgiveness for not jumping higher.”

“You are an abject coward.”

“That’s me,” Russell agreed with a mocking grin. “Easy for you to say, he can’t kill you without losing what he wants, and he can’t make you an undead minion. Ah, soup’s on!” He finished as the frit brought back at tray with two large bowls of stew and two tankards of cheap beer.

“Have both beers for yourself, R’khs’greech. I’ll have my own brew,” Russell said, picking up and opening a fresh bottle of the soda.

“What is that stuff?” the frit asked.

“Hm. Here, try some,” Russell offered, pouring a small amount into a handy beaker and handing it to R’khs’greech.

The frit held the beaker to his nose, sniffed and dropped it, coughing and rubbing his nose.

The beaker fell to the floor as the frit scrambled to catch it. He missed and it shattered against the stone. He looked wide-eyed with terror at Russell, then at one of the doors into the laboratory, the last one by which that Vulzhugar had exited.

It began to open.

The archmage glided into the room.

“So, R’khs’greech,” he said, “You damage my laboratory equipment. You know what this means.”

R’khs’greech was shaking. “Please, Master.”

“Please, Master’ what?” the archmage asked.

“Please, Master, punish me for displeasing you.”

“Ah, R’khs’greech, how can I deny you when you ask so nicely?” the archmage said with another of his thin, cold smiles.

“By your leave, Master,” said Russell, “It was my fault for offering him some of my drink. He was unused to it.”

“Oh, are you offering to take dear R’khs’greech’s punishment instead? It was your fault the beaker broke?”

“Well—yes.”

“Ah.” The archmage pondered. “Very well, then. I shall punish you for the broken beaker.

“And I shall punish R’khs’greech for lying to me that it was his fault.” Vulzhugar’s smile grew thinner, wider and colder as he raised his hands to gesture.

“But—” Russell began to protest.

Then their screams began.

They screamed, sobbed and choked for quite some time as both man and frit writhed on the floor, their bodies twisting under the agonies of Vulzhugar’s magic. I’d seen this done to R’khs’greech before. Watching it done to both of them was far more than twice as bad, even if Russell was a willing servant of evil.

Eventually, Vulzhugar lost interest and ceased his torturing magics. His victims lay in their own vomit and urine, struggling to breathe, spattered with blood.

“See that you clean up after yourselves,” Vulzhugar said. “And R’khs’greech, see that you take him to his rooms in the keep. He has a demonstration to prepare for me.” Without another word, he turned and glided out the door, which quietly closed after him.

Russell and R’khs’greech lay panting for some time. Finally, Russell managed to speak:

“Will we live?”

“Yes,” answered the frit.

“Damn.” They lay quietly for some time, too weak to move. Russell spoke again.

“The punishment is worse if you don’t ask for it, isn’t it?”

“Oh, yes.”

Russell laid and breathed, gathering strength to speak again. “I feel as if I just had the bends and was on fire at the same time, and I’ve never had either happen to me before. How many times has he done this to you?”

“I cannot count.”

“My god, R’khs’greech, how can you live?” Russell sobbed.

“Death is no escape from the Master—and another of my clan would take my place.”

“Another?”

R’khs’greech lay long before answering. “My clan lives in the mountains nearby, in land no human would want. The Master would send the Faceless to take members of my clan for his use. When we fought, we died, and the Faceless took his victims anyway.

“After my sister was taken, we discussed what could be done. The whole clan faced death if something was not done. The clan decided, and I volunteered to travel to this fortress to beg an audience with the Master.

“Following treacherous mountain trails, I arrived at noon and knocked on the main gate of the fortress and shouted that I wished to speak to the Master. I shouted and knocked, waited, then shouted and knocked again. This I did until the sun sank and shadows fell across the fortress.

“Finally, the gate opened, and the Faceless was there. He gestured to follow. He brought me to this room.

“On the table, my sister was strapped down, much as you were when he taught you the language. She was gutted like a fish, her organs placed in jars of liquid along the edge of the table. The Master was intent on his work, labeling the jar he had just filled with flesh he had cut from her.

“I saw her turn her head to look at me—she was still alive!

“In unthinking horror and rage, I screamed and leapt at the Master. He did not interrupt his task—did not even turn to face me—but he immediately struck me down. He punished me then as he did now. When he was finished, and I lay helpless, he said, ‘You have come to ask something of me. I suggest you do. You have precious little time to do it.’”

“I struggled for breath and looked into my sister’s tormented eye—the other was in a jar—then I said what the clan agreed that I should say.”

“I offer you my devoted service, Master, that you allow the rest of our clan to live in peace, unmolested by you and your servants. We are a poor people with nowhere else to go. So we offer you the only thing we have.’

“‘I see,’ he said. ‘And if I am displeased with your services?’

“‘Then you will do as you wish with me and another of my clan will come to serve you at your command.’

“He finished labeling the jar and put it down. He picked up a small, thin, razor-sharp blade, and with deliberate, careful strokes, cut my sister’s heart from her body and placed it in another jar of liquid. I watched as her life finally fled and her remaining eye went dull.

“He sealed the jar, labeled it, and placed it next to the others. ‘Your first task,’ he said, ‘will be to clean the mess you made on my floor, then clean this table and carefully store these jars on that shelf,’ he commanded, pointing. ‘If you drop one, it will be necessary to repeat my experiment with you or another member of your clan as the subject. Do you understand?’

“And I replied, ‘Yes, Master.’”

“‘Good. You would be wise to please me with your performance at this task if you wish to continue to serve me.’

“Then he left.

“After a time, I could move again. I carefully placed my sister’s organs on the shelf. I was shaking so bad, so afraid that I would drop a jar and her death would be for nothing. The task seemed to take forever as I moved one jar at a time, each held tightly in both hands.

“When I was done, I took my sister’s body and wrapped it in an old cloth. I wandered the fortress carrying her for a long time. I found oubliettes in the fortress deeps and entombed

her body in one of them. Then I returned and carefully cleaned the table and the rest of the lab.”

Time passed. “My God, R’khs’greech, how you must hate him,” Russell said.

“No. I dare not. *We* dare not.”

6. *Para Bellum*

Russell and R’khs’greech gained their feet, moving like old men a day from their graves. Without a word between them, they managed to clean up the floor and themselves and Russell’s clothing. Russell cleaned his spectacles and put them on.

“Come,” R’khs’greech said, “I will show you your rooms in the keep.”

That was the last I saw of Russell for a long time.

What could I say to give them the courage to face such implacable evil? They were doomed to be slaves, then doomed to be another pair Vulzhugar’s shamblers when they could serve him no more alive. Harol-Dárim and his legion were doomed to destruction—if not by Russell’s plots, then by Vulzhugar’s.

And I was trapped for all time.

I would hear of Russell’s activities on behalf of the archmage, but I had lost interest. I sank into deep melancholy, trying to think of a way to anger Vulzhugar enough to have done and destroy me. As my mood darkened, even this was forgotten.

I heard the distant explosion that heralded Russell’s successful demonstration.

In the following days, it was clear that much was going on in the fortress as Vulzhugar and Russell prepared for war. Over the days and weeks that followed, I would hear snatches of the man’s speech as he discussed preparations with Vulzhugar or R’khs’greech as they passed near the lab:

“We need all the saltpeter we can possibly get. That’s the main ingredient, and I’d rather have too much than not enough and lose the battle by running out—

“—a sulfur wagon arrived today, we should have a hundredweight or two of charcoal prepared—”

“—damn shamblers in Mill Two almost blew the place up; we’ll have to change the procedures so those brainless zombies don’t send a week’s production into orbit—”

“—fuses are still giving us trouble, the burn rate isn’t consistent—”

“—the catapults on the top of the West Tower have been tested and ranged, and four dozen powder kegs are in place—”

“The shamblers have to finish digging the holes for the charges on that cliff before winter sets in, if Harol-Dárim moves early in the spring and they aren’t ready—”

“—army is wintering in Luchren, the archmage’s spies tell him that Harol-Dárim is recruiting from the city of Auchüss there—”

On occasion, I would see R’khs’greech enter the lab to do something for Vulzhugar there; apparently the mage hadn’t completely dispensed with the frit’s services. He seemed in better health; his fur wasn’t patchy anymore and he moved more quickly and precisely.

The same could not be said for Russell when I finally saw him again. After winter snows had started to fly, he reported to Vulzhugar with four shambler guards around him. The man had lost weight; his hair was shot with gray; his face haggard; his eyes were dark and bagged behind his spectacles from what must have been many sleepless nights. His voice was heavy with fatigue as he spoke.

“The last of the supply wagons has unloaded and left, Master. The shamblers in all four mills should convert the remaining ingredients into gunpowder long before the end of winter. My estimate is that we will have just over one hundred kegs, not counting the powder needed for the cliffside charges.

“Harol-Dárim is in for a hot welcome this spring.”

Vulzhugar’s chill smile was visible under his hood. “I am well pleased, slave. You seem to have fulfilled every one of your claims—so far.”

The mage leaned forward, still smiling. “Are you feeling quite all right, slave? I am concerned for your health. It wouldn’t do to have you expire with your promises to me yet unkept.”

“I’ve...been working very hard for you, Master.”

“Indeed you have, slave. Still, I see no reason why you cannot rest a bit, now that all that remains to do is to oversee the powder mills. With the coming of spring, I shall send for more ingredients.”

“Begging the Master’s pardon, but we probably won’t be able to make more powder before Harol-Dárim attacks. What we have should be enough to obliterate an army three times the size of his.”

“I have thought of other uses for this powder. After we have dealt with Harol-Dárim and the fools that follow him, I will allow you to oversee the production of more of it.”

Russell sighed wearily. “It shall be as you wish, Master. Have you decided whether you will be in the West Tower when the battle starts? As I pointed out, they will almost certainly have their magic users attack and destroy the catapults. Without your protection, you agreed that they could and likely would.”

I knew that they didn’t stand a chance without magical protection. Vulzhugar pursed his lips.

“You seem very anxious to have me there.”

“Of course. You are the only one that can protect the catapults. With all due respect, we’ve been through this before. We can have many bomb catapults and hire more men to operate them—which means bringing in mercenaries from the Dashrin Provinces and figuring out how we can trust them and worrying that their positions will fall into the hands of the Wardens lurking in the mountains, since to give them good

fields of fire in the fortress would interfere with the second line of defense. Most of them probably wouldn't be captured, but if the foe turns even a few on us things could go very, very badly.

“Shamblers can't operate catapults unsupervised, and they certainly can't aim and range them.

“That's why we agreed on the three on the West Tower: the tower can be protected and it has a perfect view down the pass. That view is why the tower was built in the first place.

“So we can either put several catapults around and risk having them captured and used against us, or put all our eggs in one basket—the West Tower—and *guard the basket*.

“I considered many ways to guard the Tower and presented them to you. I first asked if static magic defenses created by you but not maintained by you would suffice. You told me that they would not last long under a sustained magical attack. Then I asked if you could maintain them at a distance, and you said that you could, but only at the expense of your personal magic defenses. So the answer to that one is no—you can't sacrifice the king in a game of chess. I asked if there was anyone upon who you could call that could magically defend the tower. You rejected the idea out of hand.”

Vulzhugar continued to ponder. “Very well. I can see no flaw in your reasoning. Nevertheless, I am uncomfortable with occupying a forward position in the battle, especially in the presence of so much of that powder.”

“That's why I have water barrels placed to douse the gunpowder stored in the West Tower with the pull of a cord. They won't stop an explosion, but they'll stop loose sparks or flame from becoming an explosion. I don't want to be blown up, either, and I'll be standing next to you, firing the catapults. And if we lose the West Tower, we'll probably lose the fortress and the battle. We both know Harol-Dárim's order of battle. The boy is coming armed for bear. Fiendish dire bear.

With maximum hit dice. The West Tower is the fulcrum of this battle.”

Russell waited for a response, and when none was forthcoming, he sighed. “Master, if you are displeased with the plan I have presented and labored on these past months, I beg you to tell me. I will submit to your punishment and join the ranks of your shamblers as one of them. Perhaps you now have a better way of destroying Harol-Dárim that you have not shared with your humble slave and no longer need my services.”

Vulzhugar stood thinking for quite some time. “Very well,” he said at last. “Unless I find a better use of my time, I will provide protection for the West Tower. You are dismissed. Rest now. Finish the powder production. I will send for you when I have other use for you.”

“As you command, Master.” Russell turned and trudged from the laboratory.

As winter deepened, I found it impossible to maintain my gloomy mood. It gave way to a certain resignation. Harol-Dárim or Vulzhugar would prevail and nothing I could do could change the outcome. All I could do was wait.

So I waited.

The last of the gunpowder was moved through the underground passage to the West Tower and stored. With little else to do, R’khs’greech once again worked doing various scullery tasks, including cleaning the laboratory. He was as healthy as I had ever seen him; apparently working for Russell had done wonders for his constitution. Eating regularly can do that, of course.

Once, sometime after midwinter, R’khs’greech was sneezing profusely as he cleaned the laboratory.

“Caught a cold?” I asked.

“No. Experiment in D.B.’s lab.”

“Indeed? What was the experiment?”

“Horrible. Was showing the Master a use for the extra sulfur. He called it a “stink-bomb”. Said that mixing them in

with the thunder-powder bombs might further panic unprepared troops. Made a huge cloud of smoke and stench like a thousand rotten eggs. So bad even D.B. fled. Master was amused.”

“I take it Vulzhugar was unaffected?”

“No. His magic must have protected him.”

“Or he has no sense of smell.”

“Maybe.”

That ended the conversation for some time. The frit quietly and carefully polished glasswork that was already clean.

“How is Russell doing?”

R’khs’greech polished for sometime, then answered, “He waits.”

“Waits? For what?”

“For spring. The battle. His death.”

“His death?”

“The Master knows how to make the powder-of-thunder now. After the battle with Harol-Dárim in the spring, he says the Master will kill him.”

“Why does he think that?”

“He knows the Master does not trust him, and he does not want there to be any chance that the thunder-powder secret may find its way into the hands of a foe.”

“What about the other things Russell can teach him?”

“D.B. does not think the Master will care.”

“So if the outcome is the same, why does he help Vulzhugar?”

“He says—” The frit paused.

“He says what?” I prompted.

“He says, ‘I want to see if I am right.’”

End of excerpt