

Ring of Fire series

by David Brin, 1950–

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As deeply roiled and troubled as we all have been, ever since the Ring of Fire brought disruption to our time, sending all fixed notions a-tumble, how seldom have we pondered the greater picture—the “context” of it all, as up-timers so concisely put it?

I refer to the event itself, the very act of carving a town out of twentieth-century America and dropping it into the Germanies, three hundred and sixty-nine years earlier. Engrossed as we have been, in the consequential aftermath, we have tended to wave away the act itself! We beg the question, calling it simply an Act of God.

Indeed, as a Lutheran layman, I am inclined to accept that basic explanation. The event's sheer magnitude can only have had divine originating power. Take that as given.

As to the purpose of it all? That, too, remains opaque. And yet, one aspect by now seems clear to most down-timers. By winning an unbroken chain of successive victories, the Americans and their allies have at minimum forced a burden of proof upon those potentates who condemn up-timers as satanic beings. To many deeply religious folk, there is a rising sense of vindication, even blessing about them.

A consensus is growing that "America" was not named for some Italian map-maker, after all, but rather for "himmel-reich," or heavenly country. Or so goes the well-beloved rumor, nowadays, spread especially by the Committees of Correspondence.

And yet, be that as it may, "the Will of God" leaves so many other matters darkly unexamined, even by speculation! Indeed, these appear to be ignored by the Grantvillers themselves.

Among those neglected questions, one has burned—especially harsh and bright—in the mind of this humble observer.

What happened to the village of Milda, nestled in a bend of the small river Leutra in Thuringia, when it was erased from our time and reckoning by the Ring of Fire, replaced by fabulous Grantville?

To many, the answer would seem obvious—that it was a simple trade.

A swap!

And hence, the bemused neighbors of Grantville—West Virginians of the United States of America, in the year 2000—received, in exchange for their departed metropolis, a few bewildered, terrified seventeenth-century Germans, hopelessly archaic and primitive, of no practical use at all, except as recipients of kindness and largesse until—amid the welcoming spirit of that blissful nation, they would merge, adapt and transform into boring-but-content citizens. Of little import, other than as curiosities.

A trade? A swap? Oh, perhaps it was so.

Only, dear reader, let me endeavor to persuade you that—in the immortal words of the up-time bard and balladeer Ira Gershwin—it ain't necessarily so.

* * * * *

Kurt, Baron von Wolfschild, stared down upon a long column of refugees.

For that, clearly, they were, hundreds of them, shambling with meager possessions balanced atop heads or strapped upon backs. And, alongside the road, for as far as he could see with his foggy spyglass, many articles the migrants had abandoned, so that children might ride shoulders, instead. Those scattered discards were punctuated by an occasional old man or woman, shrilly insistent to be left behind, so that a family might live.

Such telltales were all too familiar to a knight whose own demesne suffered this very same fate, not so long ago.

People... my tenants, villagers and farmers... who counted on my brothers and me to protect them. Cut down like wheat, or else scattered to the wind.

These fugitives were a grimy lot, as clouds of dust hovered in both winding directions along the bone-dry road. In a bone-dry land, he pondered, rising on his

stirrups to scan every unfamiliar horizon. This hilly countryside wasn't exactly a desert—Kurt had seen the real thing, guarding a Genoese diplomatic mission to Egypt, almost a decade ago. Here, trees and shrubs dotted every slope. Indeed, some distance below, through a southern haze, he could make out green and fertile fields. *At least, I think that's south.* And far beyond, the shoreline of some lake or small sea.

Still, the scouts had not been drunk or lying. This was clearly not the green-forested dampness of central Germany. Nor were these Germans, shambling below on open-toed sandals. Both women and men wore robelike garments and cloth headdresses, scarves, or turbans—it was rare to spot exposed hair, except among the weary-looking children.

Now, some of the more alert refugees appeared to take notice, pointing uphill toward Kurt and his men—twenty *Landsknecht* cavalry in battered helmets and cuirasses, with two dozen pikemen and ten arquebusiers marching up from behind. Murmurs of worry arose from the dusty migrants.

Not that Kurt could blame them. His own company of mercenary guardsmen had a pretty clean record, protecting merchants through the hellscape that recently stretched from Alps to Baltic. But no civilian who still had any grip upon reality would be placid at the sight of armed and armored men.

“What's that language they're gabbling?” complained the young adventurer, Samuel Burns, from his oversized charger to Kurt's left.

The Hollander sergeant, Lucas Kuipers, shrugged broad shoulders, looking to his commander for orders.

Kurt listened carefully for a moment. “It... sounds a bit like Hebrew... or Arabic... and neither. Perhaps something in between. I can't speak either of them well enough to tell. You'd better send a rider back to fetch Father Braun.”

“Hebrew? So many Jews?” Burns shook his head.

“Braun won't want to come,” Sergeant Kuipers said. “The villagers are terrified, since we all passed through the Mouth of Hell.”

A good name for it, Kurt thought. Just over an hour ago, it had seemed that Milda and its surroundings were, indeed, being swallowed by some fiery gullet, amid a shaking, noise and painful brilliance that just had to be infernal.

“They think that it's the end time,” Kuipers went on, in thickly accented Low German. “Especially after hearing what happened to Magdeburg. Half of the peasants seem bent on setting fire to their hovels, then throwing themselves on the flames.”

Kurt shrugged. It was all right for the sergeant to raise a point. But a commander's silence should speak for itself. And so, with hardly a pause, Kuipers turned in his saddle to shout for a courier. *Two*, since one horse would be needed to bring the priest, if the Jesuit was wanted in such a hurry.

“*Gut.*” Kurt nodded. A sergeant who thinks is worth his weight in coppers. Maybe even silver.

Watching the riders depart, he only half listened as Kuipers began shouting at the infantry, arraying them in some kind of presentable order. Of course, the pikemen and arquebusiers weren't part of Kurt's *landsknecht* company, which had only been passing through Milda, escorting a small commercial caravan, when the calamity struck. These footmen were a motley assortment of local militia and

grizzled veterans, augmented by deserters—from both Tilly's Catholic army and Protestant Magdeburgers—fleeing the atrocities to Milda's north. That siege, according to breathless reports, had come to an end as forces of the Austrian emperor and the Roman Church performed a feat of butchery surpassing the massacre of Cathars at Beziers in 1209. Perhaps even matching horror stories from the Crusades.

Hell's mouth, indeed. What more do we deserve, for allowing such things to happen, and murderers to enrich themselves?

The new infantry recruits seemed grateful to have found employment with Kurt's company, not the richest guard unit, by any means, but one that seemed at least free of taint from this latest soul-killing crime. Moreover, Kurt, Baron von Wolfschild had forbidden any man to ask religious questions of any other. There would be none of that.

Kurt watched the couriers gallop across a broad pasture, then ascend a rough, recently blazed trail over a shrubby hill, disappearing beyond the crest to where...

The terrain beyond that point was stark in Kurt's mind, if just out of sight. There, a new, shiny-smooth ridgeline jutted a few feet above the natural topography. A perfect circle, it seemed, a couple of imperial miles across, centered half a mile west of little Milda. Within, the pines and birches of Thuringia still trembled from recent disruption, in stark contrast to these slopes of cedar, cypress and scrub oak.

Now that I think on it. This does resemble the Levant...

From here, he could see the true extent of Milda's *plug*, taken fiercely out of Germany. A large hill or small mountain loomed on the other side. There, the circle's shiny-sheer boundary loomed *above* the plug, and even seemed to arc a little over one of Milda's hamlets, surrounding the local mill.

We'll have to survey water sources, not only for drinking but to reestablish the pond and millrace, he pondered, then shook his head over the strangeness of such thoughts. Clearly, he was keeping a shocked mind busy with pragmatic fantasies, rather than grappling with what's obvious...

...for example, that the refugees below could only be another group of damned beings, like the hapless Germans who had come to join them, through Hell's Mouth. This outer circle did not much resemble the description in Dante's *Inferno*. But then, Kurt's Latin had been rudimentary when he read it.

At a cry, he turned his head to see young Samuel pointing south, not at the refugees but upslope-east a way, where clusters of figures—several score, at least—were descending rapidly from a rocky passage, perhaps a narrow pass through the hills. An ideal lair for bandits, he realized.

Metal flashed in the sun. A woman screamed. Then another. And then several terrified men.

My heart. Should it be racing like this, if I am already dead? How could a corpse or damned soul feel this familiar mixture—of fear, loathing and exhilaration—that sweeps over me, before combat?

Hell or not, this situation offered a clear enough choice. Pure evil was afoot, and Kurt, Baron von Wolfschild had means at his disposal to deal with it. Indeed, he reckoned it unlikely that there was anything better to do.

"Sergeant. Please get the infantry moving. Cavalry on me.

“Then have the bugler announce us.”

* * * * *

“Wow,” John Dennis Flannery said as he turned a page, and noted the hash or pound symbol # denoting a minor scene break, at exactly the right moment in this story. His left-hand prosthetic slipped and the sheet went floating off his desk... to be caught by the author, who gently placed it atop the pile, face down.

“Wow,” John repeated. “It’s even better on second reading. The rhythms, the beat and tempo of prose. They’re... very modern.”

“Modern, truly? Like fictions of the twentieth century? I am so glad. I tried to break so many down-time habits of what you call *flowery prose*, concentrating instead upon the main character’s *point of view*.”

“Right. The hardest thing for a novice to grok, even back in America. Point of view. Show us the world, the situation through your protagonist’s thoughts and senses. And especially through his *assumptions*. Things he takes for granted. Heinlein was the master of that technique.”

“Yes, I studied and copied many of his story openings, until the method became clear to me.”

“Only next you segue...” John used his right-hand claw to shift five more pages to the other pile... “into a seriously cool *battle scene*, during which the baron character coordinates his *landsknecht* cavalry and the Milda militia to defeat bandits bent on rape and murder. Thereby winning devotion from a few of the most important refugees. Of course anyone will recognize your inspiration.”

“Of course. From the way Michael Stearns rallied his West Virginian mine workers to defeat a horde of Tilly’s raiders, thus earning the admiration of his future wife. Do... do you think the *homage* is too blatant?”

“Who cares!” John shrugged. “It’s seriously good action!”

“I am so relieved that you think so. I know that I can still be prolix and garrulous. For example in my prologue—”

“Oh, don’t worry about that.” John waved away the author’s concern. “Prologues are supposed to be like that. Heck, it will help prove that the creator was an authentic down-timer, and not Jason Glazer or me, ghost-writing it.

“Still, what I want to know is *how* you picked up these techniques for point of view and action so quickly. How did you learn it all so fast?”

John’s left hook clanked against his spectacles as he pushed them back a bit. They kept sliding down his nose and he wanted to see this fellow, who could be everything he and his partners were looking for.

Don’t get your hopes up too high.

“The boardinghouse here in Grantville where I am staying... the landlord has a complete collection of *Analog* magazine, which he guards like a wolfhound! But I talked him into letting me read selected stories. Eventually, he warmed to me and began enthusiastically choosing—even explaining—the best ones for me.”

“Old Homer Snider, yeah. He makes me wear gloves when I come over to copy a story for the zine. He must really like you.”

The author wasn’t wearing clerical garb, today. Just a down-time shirt and trousers, modeled on up-time jeans and a pullover.

“I believe he sees me as a... convert.”

“To science fiction?” John laughed. “Yeah. I guess there’s always been an aspect of proselytizing religion to—”

He cut off abruptly with a sharp hiss, as pain lanced up his arms from the stumps at both ends. Vision blurred for a few seconds, till he found his visitor leaning over him.

“Mein herr... Mr. Flannery. Shall I go for a doctor?”

John shook his head. “No, just... give me a second. It always passes.”

The author returned to his seat and pretended to be busy with papers from a leather valise, till John finally shifted in his chair with a sigh.

“You can see why we’re subsidized by the state, and by the USE Veterans’ Foundation. A man who loses his legs can still do skilled tasks like machinery assembly. But a man without hands?” He lifted both arms, letting the question hang.

“Intellectual pursuits, of course.” The visitor had a choked tightness in his throat.

“It’s busy work.”

“I beg to differ, Herr Flannery! What you are accomplishing, with your zine, is so much more than giving war amputees something to do!”

He gestured past John’s office, piled high with manuscripts and proofs, toward the main workroom, where a dozen men and several women bustled about the tasks of a publishing house, one of just a few that had not moved from Grantville to the modern, bustling, capital city of Magdeburg. All but two of the staff bore major disabilities, yet hurried busily to meet deadlines.

“Well, my own disaster wasn’t from battle, but a freak industrial...”

“Perhaps, as an up-timer, you underestimate the powerful effects that this literature is having, across Europe and beyond. Except in countries where it has been banned, for the insidious, underlying assumption of science fiction, that *change* is a permanent fact of life! And that any child, of no matter what mean background, can become an agent of change. No, Herr Flannery. You are still potent. Your *hands* now guide minds upward, gently pushing them to ponder how things might be different than they are!”

“Well, that can be dangerous in these times. There are many out there, in both low and high places, who consider science fiction to be heretical, blasphemous, and radically revolutionary.”

“Making you popular with the Committees of Correspondence, of course.”

John shrugged. “A connection we don’t publicly encourage. We get more than enough death threats. And, only last month, a crude pipe bomb. Fortunately, we discovered it in time. Still, I try to open all the packages myself since, as you can see, I have little left to lose.”

He lifted both prosthetics into the light.

“Ah, but we shall soon put a stop to that!” commented a youthful voice from behind John. He turned to see Hercule Savinien casting a lanky shadow through the doorway. The sixteen-year-old editorial apprentice had survived Charles de La Porte’s futile infantry advance at the Battle of Ahrensbök, with only a severe limp, thanks to twentieth-century field medicine. He now flourished a *poignard* dagger of considerable heft.

“An elegant blade like this may be obsolete for matters of honor,” the young man said, in thickly accented English. “But it still can suffice as a letter-opener!”

John frowned, pretending more anger than he felt.

“Hercule, go stick that prodigious proboscis of yours into someone else’s business. Unless you have some good reason to be bothering us?”

The boy’s eyes flashed briefly with a mix of warning and fierce intelligence... but that heat swiftly lapsed into a tolerant grin.

“Jason and Jean-Baptiste have galleys for the next issue ready, when *monsieur l’editeur* will deign to look them over.”

“Hm. And I assume *you* already have?”

“But of course.” A gallic shrug. “The usual mix of TwenCen reprints and hack melodramas from my fellow primitives of this benighted era, who could not emulate Delaney or Verne, if their very lives depended on a *soupcou* of creative verve. If *you* had any *real* taste, you might look closer to home. Possibly in-house, for—”

“Your time will come. That is, if you drop some of your own preening pretentiousness. If you focus. Learn patience and craft, as the deacon here has done.” John gestured toward his guest. “Now get out!”

Hercule Savinien’s grin only widened as he delivered a flourished bow that would have served in any royal court—though conveying a shameless touch of wry sarcasm—and departed. John stared after the apprentice for an instant, then shook his head. Turning back to the visitor, he carefully used the artificial gripper of his right-hand prosthetic to shift, then pluck up the next page of the manuscript, having to clear his throat, before he spoke.

“Now, where were we? Ah, yes. What is... what’s so cool about this story of yours—unlike so much of the *sci-fi* we get submitted here—is that you’ve taken a speculative premise based upon our own shocking and strangely transformed world, *extrapolating* it into a plausible thought experiment of your very own.

“This notion, for example, that the Ring of Fire wasn’t a simple *swap* of two land-plugs, one of them shifting *backward* to become powerful and destiny-changing, while the other one, shifted forward to the year 2000, would be inherently harmless, pathetically unimportant... I never realized how *smug* that image was. How self-important and based on unwarranted assumptions.

“In other words, how very *American!*” John laughed ruefully. “But you point out that it may not have been a swap, at all! It could instead be a *chain*. A sequence, shuttling a series of spheres of space-time ever-backward, one following the other, like—”

He shook his head, unable to come up with a metaphor. The visitor nodded, though with some reticence.

“At the Grantville high school, I never fail to attend Demonstration Tuesday. They once showed us a *laser*, whose magical medium is capped, at both ends, by inward facing mirrors. At the time, I was struck that perhaps the Ring of Fire was like such a device, only with *destiny* as the active medium...”

“Whoa. What a way-cool idea!” John reached for his pencil with the special grip-end.

“Only then, later the same night, it came to me in a dream... a dream that was so much more than...”

The author paused, staring into space, then shook himself in order to resume. “Well, it came to me that perhaps there might be mirror *after* mirror, after mirror...”

His voice trailed off again, as John scribbled.

“Huh. Of course the implicit paradoxes abound. We’ve assumed that either Grantville’s arrival *changed* the former timeline, erasing and replacing the one we came from, or else it started a new, *branching* timestream that leaves the original one in place. The new one that received Grantville will gain advantages and get many boosts and head starts as a result, but also some losses. Either way, Grantville is making a huge difference.

“In contrast, Milda Village would have very little impact, arriving in the year 2000—at most a few hundred confused villagers and traders, farmers and soldiers with antique weapons and antiquated technologies...”

“On the other hand, if Milda instead bounced *further back* in time, say another thousand years—”

“More like fifteen centuries.”

“Yeah, in your story, more than fifteen hundred years... then it implies branching after branching of *multiple* timelines! Each one offering a technological boost to more-primitive ancestors... no offense?”

“None taken, Herr Flannery.”

“In fact, why stop there? If you squint, you can envision *another* story about—”

John felt a tingle in his spine. A sense, soft but familiar, that he had just missed something important. He lifted his head from the notepad sketch that he had begun, depicting a trellis of possible histories. Now he looked, yet again at the author.

At his very distant facial expression.

John played back the conversation a bit. Then he twisted his hand-hook to put the pencil down.

“Tell me about your dream,” he said.

* * * * *

Kurt had been pleased, day before yesterday, to find a market fair in this part of Thuringia. His troopers murmured happily as the small *landsknecht* company rode into Milda, escorting three cargo wagons and two carriages of merchant dignitaries. Perhaps, this close to Jena, the locals felt some normality, especially with a university town between them and the fighting.

It was a small fair—three or four tents where locals compared garden produce and bragged over samples of their winter piecework, while tapping barrels of home brew and betting on wrestling matches—plus a “theater” consisting of a painted backdrop behind a rickety stage, for pantomimes and palmers, preaching repentance while lacing songs and bawdy jokes amid stern morality plays.

The illusion was brave, but threadbare, and it lasted only till a breathless rider came racing though, panting news of Magdeburg.

At least thirty thousand dead and the whole city burned to the ground, with detachments of Tilly’s killers now spreading even this way.

Half of the merchants wanted to turn around. The rest urged hurrying on to Jena. Their argument had raged on for hours, while a troupe of dispirited jugglers

tried to herd everyone back to the little fairground for the midday highlight—a march of the local militia, with burnished pikes and laughably archaic matchlock muskets. Kurt's frantic employers made the local inn so depressing that his *Landsknechte* took their beers outside, perching on a fence to heckle as pot-bellied volunteers high stepped, trying to look martially impressive in review.

Well there's no laughing at them anymore, he now thought, watching by firelight as two of the farmer-soldiers got stitched by a pair of midwives. Beyond the circle of light, barely in view, were two more forms, shrouded and still—a tanner's apprentice and the miller's youngest son—who had been less lucky during the brief, nasty battle.

It's my fault, of course, he thought. *If only I'd ordered my cavalry to use their pistols sooner. But who knew so many bandits would be terrified by a little gunfire?*

At least none of his *Landsknechte* had been killed or injured. They now mingled freely with the militia men, who had fought a pitched battle with unexpected bravery. Still, the mercenary guardsmen were in a foul mood. The robbers had nothing of value to pillage, beyond short swords of questionable value, and most of the refugees had scattered in all directions, leaving only a couple of dozen to be collared and prodded uphill, past the Hell Mouth ring, all the way back to Milda, for questioning by Father Braun.

And our special guests, he added, peering past the coals at a cluster of people seated along the edge of the pantomime stage, where all the assembled Germans could see them. Two middle-aged men, three women and four children—all of them apparently of the same family—dressed better than the average refugee... plus an elderly fellow with gnarled hands and piercing eyes, to whom everyone deferred, as if he were an abbot or bishop.

Hours ago, during the bandit attack, both of the younger men and one woman had tried valiantly to rally other émigrés and prepare a defense—*it would have been futile, of course, but at least they tried*—when the robbers' attention had been drawn away by a phalanx of approaching Milda pikemen.

The foe never saw Kurt's cavalry till it was too late.

Unlike the involuntary ones, who huddled under the half-tent behind them, this family had required no urging to ascend toward Milda, eagerly and gratefully following the pikemen while helping the wounded. Without displaying any dread, they had crossed the Hell Mouth boundary, staring at the transplanted disk of Germany as afternoon waned and Kurt rode about swiftly, inspecting the perimeter, setting things in order for nightfall.

Now, the family sat, cross-legged but erect, apparently more curious than fearful. When offered food, they spurned all meats and sniffed at the boiled potatoes, till the youngest woman smiled—an expression like sunlight—then nodded gratefully and placed a bowl before the old man, who murmured a few words of blessing, then began to eat with slow care. Gently urging the frightened ones, she got first children and then other adults to join in.

A noblewoman of some kind, Kurt realized. Or at least a natural leader, as well as something of a beauty... if you ignored a deep scar that ran from her left ear down to the line of her jaw. At one point, her gaze briefly locked with Kurt's—as it had after the battle—measuring, as if *she* were the one here with real power. Then

she went back to watching intently—whispering now and then into the old fellow’s ear—as Father Braun reported, at tedious length, what he had learned.

“...and so, after this extensive philological comparison, I finally concluded that they speak *Aramaic*, a tongue quite similar to Hebrew, and hence confirming that most of the denizens of this region appear to be *Jews*, plus some Samaritans, Syrians...”

The rest of the cleric’s recitation was drowned out by a mutter of consternation from those seated on makeshift benches and crowding in from all sides—a motley assortment of Milda residents, travelers, soldiers, teamsters, palmers, and shabby entertainers, almost all of those who were trapped here when the Hell Mouth snapped around Milda. Far too many to congregate within the small village inn.

Kurt frowned at the reaction. Not all of the murmurs were actively hateful. He figured most were only shocked to learn that a despised minority now apparently surrounded them, in great numbers. And at least some of these Jews were armed.

During his travels, Kurt had learned how most prejudices were as useful as a hymnal in a privy. *Anyway, we don’t have time for this.* He stepped into the light, clearing his throat. Those nearby swiftly took the hint—from a nobleman and commander of their little army—to settle down. Certainly, the village headman and masters, seated on a front row bench, seemed happy to defer.

“What about our other guests?” Kurt pointed to a trio of grimy men who were clearly soldiers, staring fixedly at the coals, with bound wrists. Though clean-shaven—unlike most of the local males—they appeared to be in shock. As Kurt had felt earlier, when he inspected their confiscated weapons... short, *gladius*-style swords and skirted leather armor, of a type that looked so familiar.

“I was unable to gather much from those three,” Braun said. “They were found wandering just outside the Hell Mouth, having apparently taken the brunt of it, near what seems to have been the outermost wall of some fortification.”

Kurt had examined the wall in question, just before nightfall. Most of the stronghold must have been sliced away by the Hell Mouth, vanishing completely when Milda’s plug of Thuringia displaced whatever had been here, before.

I wonder where that plug of land wound up, with its garrison of armed men. Perhaps they are now back where we came from?

If so, they would stand little chance against Tilly’s raiders. From what he could tell, these locals had never heard of gunpowder.

“Well, never mind them. What else did you learn from the refugees?”

Braun nodded. “My smattering of Hebrew might not have sufficed. Certainly I doubted the testimony of my ears... until this young woman made my task much easier by speaking to me, at last, in rather good Latin.”

The beauty with the scar. Kurt stepped forward and switched from German.

“*Est quod verum? Tu loqueris?* You speak Latin? Why did you not say so before?”

She whispered in the old man’s ear. He nodded permission, and she met Kurt’s gaze with confident serenity.

“*Et non petisti,*” she replied to his question. *You did not ask.*

Kurt’s initial flare at her impertinence quickly tempered. Courage was acceptable coin, and he liked women who made eye-contact. So he nodded, with the faintest upturn at one corner of his mouth... then turned and motioned for the priest to continue.

Braun sighed, as if he dreaded coming to this part.

“With her help, I questioned every person about the *name* of this region, into which we find ourselves plunged. They all replied with great assurance and consistency.”

“It’s hell!” screamed one high-pitched voice, possibly a hysterical man.

The Jesuit shook his head.

“Nay, it is Judea.”

Kurt nodded. He had already suspected as much, from the terrain, foliage, and much else. Around him, Catholics told their rosaries while other voices spoke in hushed tones of the Holy Land.

“Then it’s *worse* than hell,” cried the same pessimist. “Tomorrow we’ll face a thousand Turks!”

Father Braun raised a hand.

“That might have been true, had a mere shift in location been the only aspect of what happened to us, today. Only there is more, far more shocking than that.

“It appears, my dear children, that—by some great wonder achievable only by divine will—we have also been transported through *time*.”

This brought on silence so deep that only the crackling logs spoke. Indeed, it seemed that most of the villagers and travelers and soldiers merely blinked, assuming that the priest had shifted to some non-germanic tongue.

Kurt stepped closer to the firelight. *Someone* had to look and sound confident at this point, though his own calm was more a matter of numbness than *noblesse*. Anyway, he already had guessed the answer to his next question.

“What is the date then, Father?”

“Ahem. Well. There are discrepancies of calendar to take into account. It’s difficult to narrow down precisely. That is...”

“Priest—” Kurt gave him the full-on baron-look.

The Jesuit threw his shoulders back, as if defying fate even to utter it aloud. In so doing, he revealed a build that must have once—in a former life—been that of a soldier.

“The date is seventy, or seventy-one, or two or three, or perhaps seventy-four years... after the birth of our lord. We stand above the valley where he dwelled as a child, within sight of the sea where he preached and fished for souls.”

Kurt nodded, accepting the finality of a diagnosis, already known.

“And the poor people who we see, shambling along these roads in despair? What calamity do they flee?”

He was envisioning Magdeburg, only much, much worse.

Father Braun met his eyes.

“It is as you suppose, Baron von Wolfschild. They are escaping the wrath of the Roman emperor-to-be, Titus, who has, of late, burned the holy Temple itself. And the city of Jerusalem.”

* * * * *

Jason was having none of it.

“Come on, Johnny. It’s a great story! The fellow clearly studied Piper and de Camp, in all those *Analog* zines he read. He’s a natural. Anyway, weren’t we looking hard for some down-timers with talent?”

Before John could answer, Sister Maria Celeste emitted a curt cough. She had been adjusting the pads on Jason's wheelchair, which kept bunching up, he fidgeted so.

"And what am I, *signore*? Chopped kidney? I have submitted to you several fine *fantasies aeronatical dei mondi qui sopra*, based upon discoveries made by my father. Yet, all you have seen fit to publish of my work are a few short poems. While you endlessly encourage those two rascals to believe they hold promise, as writers!"

She nodded toward the front door of the Literary Home for Wounded Veterans... where a pair of figures dressed in black tried to seem innocuous, failing to conceal daggers at their hips. A nightly charade. Caught in the act, thirteen-year-old Jean-Baptiste murmured—"We're just goin' out for a—for some air, messieurs."

The older boy, Hercule Savinien, simply grinned, as if daring anyone to make something of their evening ritual. Again, the flourished bow.

"*Macht die Tür zu!*" one of the other vets shouted, unnecessarily, as the lads slammed the door behind them.

"Traps and snares and trip-wires." The nun shook her head. "Romantic dolts! They should be working for *Spy Magazine*, and not *Galaxy*." She turned her attentions to John, helping him to remove his prosthetics.

"Oh, what's the harm?" Jason said. "They think they're protecting us from assassins. And the wires are always gone, by morning. Anyway, now that your father has also moved to Grantville, won't you be too busy—"

"For writing? Typical man! Your condescension is insulting, as if a woman cannot develop her art while caring for others. I am tempted to report you to Gretchen Richter. Or, better yet, perhaps I will start up my *own* magazine. One dedicated to truly fabulous tales, unrestrained by your confining Rules of Extrapolative Storytelling!"

Despite her bellicose words, Maria Celeste's tone was as gentle as her caring touch, as she rubbed each of John's stumps, in turn.

"I..." he sighed. "I'll be your first investor."

Jason snorted. "Softie!"

Fortunately, conversation became impossible for a while, as the sixth member of their little commune—Vaclav Klimov—performed his own nightly ritual, cranking up the scratchy old stereo system with *Up on Cripple Creek*, by The Band.

Jason muttered. "I swear I'll strangle Klimov, one of these days." Still, he tapped the armrest of his chair, keeping time to the song. And if this home for reclaimed lives were to have a nickname and an anthem, well, John figured they could do worse.

Sister Maria Celeste moved on, tending to the other fellows—efficiently, so she could return to the small cottage next to Grantville's new college, where her elderly father now both studied and taught. While Vaclav played DJ, swapping disks though a selection of blood-rousing tunes, John watched the door. And when the boys returned—pretending to be sneaky—he gave Hercule an eye roll.

I know what you're doing. And I know that you know that I know.

Almost lost under those eyebrows and behind that nose, Hercule's left eye winked. Then with a sweep, he was gone with his young friend. Leaving John to muse.

But do you know that I know your real secret, my young friend?

Caught up in a manhunt ordered by Cardinal Richelieu, just one year after Grantville arrived to upset Europe's teetering balance, scores of French subjects—mostly-bewildered—had found themselves drafted into the army that Richelieu sent marching toward the Baltic. For the youngest of these involuntary recruits, like Jean-Baptiste, the duties of a drummer boy meant no lessening of hardship or danger. Indeed, the generals were under orders. These special levees were to be given places of honor. In the front ranks.

Given what a slaughterhouse Ahrensbök became, it was fortunate that Hercule and Jean Baptiste... and Jason on the other side... got out with their lives. So many did not.

Fortunately for Jason's prospects of staying out of prison, Klimov only had the stamina to play DJ each night for half an hour or so. The evening serenade ended with another upbeat ode—"Joy to the World." After which peaceful quiet ensued. Soon, beyond the crackling fire, John was able to imagine no Grantville... no Germany roiling in change... no world wracked with upheaval. Only the universe, spinning on and on.

Or, rather... universes.

At last, Jason resumed where he had left off.

"It's one helluva yarn. That big battle at the edge of the Hell Mouth had my heart pounding! Roman siege ladders and catapults against pikes and matchlock muskets? That girl, hurrying back in the nick of time after fetching a *prince* and his men. A descendant of Judah freaking Macabee? Who would expect a seventeenth-century German writer to even know about that guy?"

"Well, in fact, even medieval Christians spoke of Macabee as one of the Nine Worthies," John said. "But I admit, it's solid stuff."

"Okay then. I say we publish it as a serial. As-is."

John sighed.

"No way. Not without removing some of the explicit names. And changing the afterword. And even, so, we'd better brace for trouble."

"You're that afraid of fundamentalist terrorists? Screw 'em! We'll be doing our bit for freedom of speech."

"It's not that so much. Though this could unite both Protestant and Catholic extremists in fury." He shook his head. "No. What concerns me is how *sincere* this fellow seems to be. When he told me about his... dream... I could tell he was holding back. *Vision* might be the word he really meant."

John sat up and leaned toward his partner. "Look, I agree, he could be the first great down-timer science fiction author! I'd like nothing better. But we have to be careful, Jason. He needs guidance, and I don't just mean editorial."

"Because he thinks it may have been *more* than just a daydream? That it all really happened? Huh. It wouldn't be the first time."

"Exactly. Even in our own cynical, materialistic and scientific age, folks were human. And human beings tend to give great credence to their subjective

imaginings. *Delusion* is our greatest talent! It can be among our finest gifts, when imagination takes us on grand journeys, that still leave us rooted in reality.

“But it’s also been a curse. All of history was warped by sincere men and women, convinced that a delusion was real.”

“Hmph. Yeah, well, science helps.”

“Yes. Science teaches us to say the mantra of maturity—*I might be wrong*. But half of our citizens couldn’t grasp that concept, even back in 2000. Picture how hard it is where we find ourselves. Here. Now.

“In fact, I do think this fellow gets it. He’s hungry for knowledge and I’ve talked him into enrolling at the college. With any luck, we may squeak by and he’ll become this generation’s Asimov or Clarke, a creator of stirring thought-experiments. Instead of...”

John let his implication trail off. But, after a long pause, his partner finished the sentence for him.

“Instead of a prophet.”

* * * * *

Lucilius Bassus was a canny old soldier. Kurt knew the type. The man wanted, above all, to achieve his assigned mission—the final pacification of Judea—with as little further fuss as possible. Bald, clean-shaven and a bit shriveled, wearing a white toga with red trim, the general eyed Kurt carefully while introducing his second in command, Lucius Flavius Silva, then offering Kurt a seat in his command tent.

Bassus raised an eyebrow but said nothing when Kurt motioned for Sarah to sit beside him on another camp stool. The rest of the Milda party remained outside, under a flag of truce, watching the highly ordered busy-ness of a disciplined Roman camp. Scowling, Lucius Flavius Silva remained standing in full leather armor, as his commander seated himself on a cushioned bench.

“I was told that your factotum would be a male priest,” Bassus said, as servants mixed wine with water and served goblets. Sarah refused, with a soft smile.

“Father Braun is no longer with us,” Kurt answered. While his Latin was improving, he still glanced at Sarah. She gave a slight nod. No correction needed, so far. “Our priest left suddenly, hurrying north, to Ephesus. This noblewoman has consented to help you...” he stumbled over the words. The correct grammar.

Sarah finished for him. “To help you, great Lucilius Bassus, to communicate with your loyal German auxiliaries,” she said, gesturing an open hand toward Kurt.

That was the story the two of them had concocted, yesterday, after word came that the general had arrived in the Galilee with six fresh cohorts. The core of his legion, ready to advance and wipe out this infestation of strange barbarians. Only the messenger brought a codicil, that Bassus was willing to talk, first.

It’s all one big misunderstanding, went the fabulous lie that Sarah translated into flawless Latin.

These aren’t enemies. They are fierce German mercenaries who were attached to the Fifth Legion and left behind to garrison this area, when the Fifth returned to Macedonia. Apparently without properly informing the mighty Tenth.

It's not our fault that your centurion, Sextus Callus, attacked us, killing our Roman liaison officer and forcing us to defend ourselves!

Kurt left it to Sarah to spin out an elaborated version, while he tried to convey a best impression upon Bassus—that of a tough and wily, though semi-literate, soldier who cared, above all, about sparing his men further bloodshed, and getting them back to a distant homeland someday, with honor and pay.

Exactly like you, old man.

In terms of casualties, the Judean Revolt had been the worst war in Roman history. Moreover, while plunder from the Temple was being paraded before Vespasian and Titus, back home in the Forum, only the battered Tenth Legion *Fulminata* remained to do mopping up—eliminating half a dozen holdout fortresses still held by Jewish zealots. Saving the toughest nut—Masada—for last.

Kurt had feared the worst. A vengeful commander, prideful and overflowing with fury over the defeats that his subordinates suffered in these northern hills, starting with the small garrison that formerly resided where Milda now stood—charged with preparing a thousand slaves for transport to the wharves of Akko—all taken away by the Mouth of Hell.

Deprived of that expected income, Sextus Callus had come aggressively, ruthlessly, and obstinately—responding to every failure with double strength. The final loss, two weeks ago, cost Rome almost two entire cohorts, assailing the smooth walls of the Hell Mouth with siege ladders, arbalests, and catapults, in the face of pikes and limited gunfire. And better cavalry than they ever saw. Though far too few guns and horses to make the hardened, stubborn enemy flee.

Tough bastards, Sergeant Kuipers finally acknowledged, with soldierly respect, after the Sadducee prince Ezra and his band slammed upon the Roman rear, just in the nick of time, leaving only a handful of legionaries alive. Ezra had wasted no time, directing his Galilean recruits to arm themselves with captured weapons and armor.

Even victories stink to high heaven, wretched and odious to any decent person's senses. Only this time, while bodies were gathered for burning, with respect to Roman custom, Kurt's thoughts had roiled around how little gunpowder remained, a mere volley or two, with production slowed to a crawl as the new dam filled too slowly, behind Milda's rebuilt water mill.

There was so much to do, like expanding the smithie enough to make cannon... even recasting a church bell into a single two-pounder would be better than nothing, *which is what we now have*. If they could find one—he wasn't sure if church bells even existed in this day and age.

Or training locals to hold a pike without flinching and letting down the man next to you. Plus planning how to feed Milda's expanding population of ragged refugees. Teaching local farmers advanced, seventeenth-century technologies like the mold board plow, the horse collar, the wheelbarrow, could double production and eliminate any excuse for slavery—that is, if war could be kept off their backs.

And there were expeditions to send forth. Samuel Burns—now perhaps the only native English speaker on the planet—led a wagon and some guards to trade for sulfur, by the shores of the Dead Sea. Georg Stahl, the bravest merchant, volunteered to head east and find the Parthian trade route, seeking copper for a

new distillery. While mad Johann Blisterfeld yammered about making a printing press and taking it (someday) to Alexandria, of all crazy ideas.

Finally, as if Kurt had too little cause to fret, there was Braun, raving that he had to run off. To Ephesus, of all places! Pursuing an angry old man who Braun deemed to be *more dangerous than all the world's legions*.

"All I did was read to him from the Epistles. And some of Revelations," the priest said, coming to realize what he had done, two full days after Sarah's uncle and brother departed on stolen horses.

The implications only dawned on Kurt himself some days after Braun departed. In fact, they made his head spin so fast that he pushed the entire matter out of his mind. Survival first. Survival first.

Now Kurt watched the Roman general's eyes, while Sarah spun their contrived tale. How the Fifth Legion must have neglected to inform the Tenth that German auxiliaries were holding these hills for Rome. (Shameful!) And how all their records and documentation had burned in the fighting. And that (alas, regrettably) Kurt had always left to others the tedious details of business—others who were now dead. And how he counted on Roman honor to live up to the mercenary's contract anyway! And how his men had not been paid in months, and would the general kindly see to making up the arrears?

What a ridiculously bold fabrication! And yet, on the plus side, what alternative explanation could there be, for a small army of Germans to appear in this far land? The savage folk who had destroyed the legions of Quinctillius Varus in the Teutoburg Forest, a few decades before. And hence Rome's most respected source of fierce auxiliaries?

He's not buying it, Kurt realized, watching the old general's face.

On the other hand, he is weighing the costs.

So, Lucilius Bassus, what are your options? You can bring the whole legion against us, an entrenched force of uncertain size, with weapons rumored to include hurled thunderbolts. And risk losing so many men that the Jewish Revolt might reignite across this land.

Or you could decide to be pragmatic. Accept a way to save face and salvage something from all this.

Sarah finished. In the ensuing silence, Kurt saw Lucius Flavius Silva scowling—even seething—exactly what Kurt would have expected of the man, whose infamy came down fifteen hundred years. But Silva wasn't the one who mattered. Not while Lucilius Bassus lived.

That figure sat completely still. At least a minute stretched. And another.

Finally, the general stood up and took a step forward, with outstretched arm.

"Dear comrade, please accept my deep regrets over the rash mistakes of Sextus Callus and his foolish centurions. This was entirely my fault. I should have sent Silva here, who can count his toes without referring to a wax board and who can tell a foe from an ally. Isn't that right, Silva?"

The younger officer blinked, then nodded. Though Kurt thought he could hear the grinding of teeth.

"Yes, General."

Kurt took the offered hand of Lucilius Bassus, not palm to palm but each gripping the other's forearm, bringing both men close to each other. Almost eye-to-

eye. And the old man's grip was like iron. Only Sarah's presence, just behind him, gave Kurt the strength he needed to maintain that gaze contact... till Lucilius Bassus grunted, nodded, and let go.

"And now," the general asked. "I would appreciate your advice, Baron von Wolfschild, as to how I can turn my back upon the Galilee while duty calls my legion south."

* * * * *

"*C'est tout la? Mais il n'est pas complet!*" Jean-Baptiste complained after finishing the last page of the manuscript. "How can it end there? This will infuriate everyone, across the continent, demanding to know what happens next!"

Hercule nodded.

"I think, *mon cher ami*, that is the desired result."

The thirteen-year-old—though a veteran of war and privation—still had innocent eyes that now widened in delighted realization.

"Ah. The work of a devil, indeed. Readers will champ eagerly to buy the next issue. And some will fantasize stories of their own, that diverge, like the branchings of a river delta. Perhaps some will even write them, following the young Englishman to the Dead Sea, for example. Or Father Braun to Turkey and Greece, chasing after that mysterious old man. Do you have a clue who it might be?"

"I have suspicions. But I will leave that for you to divine. Or the author to reveal for himself."

"Bastard," Jean-Baptiste sallied. An accusation that Hercule accepted with a nod. In fact, though, he had read an earlier draft. The original version that contained some more details.

James, had been the elderly Jew's name. A Jew... and a Christian... and a powder keg. Omitting that name was one of just a few places where John Flannery had put his foot down, demanding that vagueness replace specificity, for survival's sake.

Discretion, Hercule thought. *In my other life, I apparently had none. Though I should not be ashamed of it. My modest fame on that timeline was colorful, at least. But here, with this second chance, I must school myself, if my work is to achieve real importance.*

He blew out the candle, plunging their tiny attic room into darkness. Beyond the little window, he could see by moonlight the mighty towers of Grantville, one of them four stories high, and in his minds-eye he envisioned the sky city of Manhattan. The fabulous Paris of Zola and Rostand and Bardot.

There were muted, rustling sounds as the gay couple in the apartment below settled down for the night. Here in Grantville, that didn't seem to be a problem. And it drew Hercule to ponder the accounts told by his own biographers, so varied, so contradictory. *I cannot have been all of those things. Some must be mistaken. Anyway, I do like girls. Though, I also hate whenever anyone says don't-do-that.*

He shook his head. Life was open before him. Only that mattered. Stay bold! But maybe act less out of reflex. Make fewer mistakes.

From the pallet nearby, a soft voice asked:

"Have you read any of your own plays, yet?"

Exasperation.

“We agreed not to do that.”

A long pause.

“I went and read one of yours,” Jean-Baptiste admitted. “*L’Autre Monde*. The one about visiting the Moon? It’s really good! I guess you always had it in you to be a science fiction author.”

Such admiration in his voice. Oh, the irony.

“I also tried to read one of mine,” the boy went on.

“*Bien? Alors* then, what did you think?”

“It was all manners and people playing tricks on each other in drawing rooms and trying to get sex. No action at all. I didn’t understand or like it much.”

“Well, you’re just a kid. Your balls probably haven’t dropped yet.”

“You’re only three years older!”

“But I was a soldier.”

“So was I!”

“Drummer boy.”

“Yeah? Well you have a great big—”

“Don’t say it,” Hercule warned, with a flash of the old, cold rage.

“I’m sorry,” Jean Baptiste murmured in a small voice. And Hercule remembered his oath, never to let the lad come to harm.

“Forget-about-it,” he growled, in English. “Anyway, I agree with you.”

“About what?”

“That we can both do better, this time around. Write better. Aim higher.”

“I thought you said you weren’t gonna read what we—”

“Well, I lied. I read it all.”

Silence, then, in hushed tones...

“Is it true, then? Did you *invent* science fiction?”

“Invent... Nah. That other me wrote silly stuff, mostly.”

Hercule stared at the ceiling, envisioning a very different moon and sun and planets, all aswarm with fanciful creatures.

“But fun,” he added in a very low voice. “Way, way fun.”

He turned his head toward Jean-Baptiste. To that dim shadow across the little room, he almost said: “*You have far more talent with words and drama and characters than I’ll ever have. While I’m crazy enough to imagine or dare anything. Just think of what we could write together, combining your strengths with mine.*”

But the words went unspoken.

Instead he commanded, gruffly, like a big brother.

“*Allez dormir.*” Go to sleep.

Silence reigned for a time. Though the quiet had texture, as electric music played softly, somewhere across town. There were motor sounds, a brief glimmer of headlights passing in the night. Far distant, he thought there might be the drone of an aeroplane. Miracles, brought to this gritty, hopeless world from a marvelous future. A future now bound to change.

“Good night, Cyrano,” his young friend whispered, breaking open their secret, for an instant.

And—also for a moment—he answered in kind.

“Sleep tight, Molière.”

