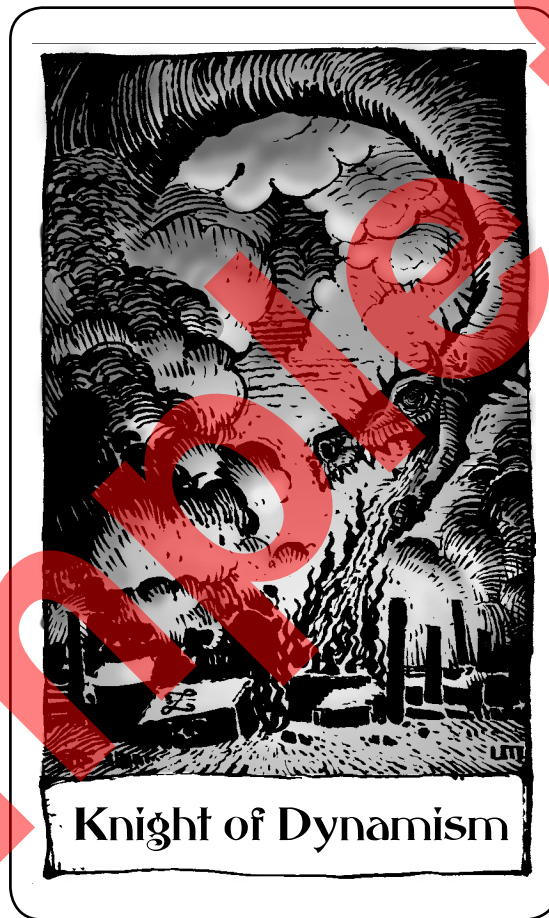


Tales of Magick: Dark Adventure

Action Chronicles for Mage: The Ascension



Frustration is the fuse
The flame is hate
Tick, tick, tick, Detonate
- L7, "The Bomb"

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Prelude

By Kathleen Ryan



Alexander Gericault waits patiently at the counter of a small bakery. He sips strong black coffee from a plain white mug and sets it back into its ring-stained saucer.

The quiet rhythm of conversation and cutlery around him shatters in a cascade of glass and china.

A heavy, thick-haired woman at the cash register shrieks and begins scolding the busboy. He fires back a stream of curses and complaints — half in broken English, half in his unrecognizable native tongue — ending clearly in, “I quit!” He spits on the floor before the cashier, throws down his apron and storms out through the kitchen.

Gericault keeps watch steadily on the front windows.

Directly behind him, at a table for two, an elderly lady digs through her handbag and pulls forth a pillbox. She fishes out two pale-green tablets and places them gingerly in her mouth. Her pink tongue flicks briefly over thin, cracked, red-painted lips, and she takes the medicine with a glass of water and a grimace. She stares hardily at the waiting cup, soiled plate and vacant chair opposite her own. With her right hand, she empties the pillbox into her husband’s coffee; with her left she picks up his spoon and begins stirring. Her expression never changes.

Gericault catches sight of his subject in the street outside. He pays for his coffee, tips well and rises.

As the Nephandus passes a young girl — a college student sitting alone at the table closest to the door — she wipes a fallen tear from her journal, stops writing poetry, and begins composing her suicide note. He smiles kindly at her and leaves the little coffee shop.

Gericault walks like a businessman today. In well-cut gray slacks and a slightly rumpled white oxford shirt, he looks like any other cubicle-dweller on lunch break — he even gives the impression that his coat and tie are hung up next to his keyboard, waiting. His face and hair are selected to match, and entirely commonplace.

He steps onto the sidewalk with the exact posture of a man who has worked desk and mouse one year too many, and not a soul looks at him twice. A wave of tourists surges past and he adjusts his pace to match. From the curb side, screened by the sightseers, he scans the group ahead.

He spots the red-haired alchemist easily: A tall, gangly, boyish man, head and shoulders above the crowd — slouching, then standing straight and moving well, but obviously uncomfortable with himself, his height and his fellow travelers.

To the young man’s side, a teenage-girl in overalls. She hops along like a broken spring, alert but easily distracted. She seems to do most of the talking.

She turns suddenly with an emphatic, double-handed, splay-fingered gesture and barks something at the other man walking beside her — the oldest of the three. He wears sunglasses, though the light does not quite call for them, and stalks along like a tiger, though there is no need for that, either. He tries to play it strong and silent, but the sharp-tongued kid beside him erodes his composure. His stony face breaks in aggravation and the two argue for a whole block.

An Asian man in his mid-30s looks back at the fight and throws the redhead a wry half-smile. He clearly means it to be reassuring, but too much worry shows through the mask. The younger man trots to catch up with the leader and they walk on, talking quietly.

The Nephandus notes the drama, almost grateful that Amanda has found these companions. If it were only her and the priest he had to follow....

The priest drops out of sight again, and Gericault curses.

With effort, he finds him — an old gray man in a pale-blue polo shirt and wrinkled twill trousers. He is the slowest walker, and says little. The stream of pedestrians winds around him without taking much notice, and even Gericault finds it hard to focus on the frail, stooped figure.

Beside the faded cleric, Amanda Janssen floats along the sidewalk like a pillar of fire. Men stare. Women approve or envy. Children smile and point at the pretty lady — and Gericault knows that not one will remember her clearly after her passing. If they see her again in other clothes, they will hardly recognize her; if he stops one of her admirers and asks what she looks like, the person will find no real words, only vague comparisons. Her features are indescribable and therefore as anonymous as his own.

The Nephandus tears his gaze from her reluctantly. At last he catches sight of his other quarry.

Two men walk at a peculiarly deliberate pace one half-block ahead of him, dressed in suspiciously bulky coats, their eyes fastened on the backs of Amanda and those with her. *There’s a pair who could use practice in the art of the Unseen*, thinks Gericault. He focuses his senses and takes their measure: There are minor wards protecting them, armor beneath their clothes and weapons at their hands, but these two are cannon fodder against real Craft. He smiles proudly, anticipating Amanda and her knives wading through the pair’s dumb flesh.

The tour group drifts up the steps of a museum. Gericault skirts the cluster, keeping an eye on the obvious hunters and scanning the crowd for others.

New parents push a stroller by him.

A trio of elderly men shuffles into earshot, debating politics on behalf of the entire street.

A tight knot of young people brushes past, laughing and mumbling about classes and dorms, parents and money.

In their wake, Gericault catches a gust of patchouli, a whiff of smoke and a blackened, bittersweet odor that he knows well. He breathes the scent in deeply. He lets the vapor rest on his tongue. *Burnt man-flesh — brands — old brands, and a greater sacrifice more recently. Beautiful children, whose are you?*

With the most cautious, fleeting touch, he probes the fringes of their clothes, their skin, their souls. He expects spelled-weapons and burn-wards and finds them. The rites for such magicks are common enough. But the girl laughing loudest carries a twisted, unnamable tattoo — burnt, cut and painted into the curves of her pelvis, back and belly. The Nephandus recognizes the thing and wonders what shadow-brother of his dared carve *that sigil* into living flesh.

He invades the girl's thoughts delicately, unwilling to reveal himself to whatever may watch over her. What he seeks is high in her heart — her skirt chafes her naked skin at every step, and with the pain she cherishes the memory of the knives, needles, hot coals and strong hands of the man who inflicted the scars. She cannot help but look for him, and Gericault follows the reverent glance to her idol.

He walks alone on the other side of the street, his black wool coat open to the wind. He wears dark-blue jeans, a hand-woven pullover and, despite the chill, sandals.

The silent observer withdraws from the girl and her master, and looks ahead. Amanda, he realizes, has seen something. She lays a finger on the priest's arm and soft words spread the alarm. The message passes up to the stalking man and leader. Quite casually, the six trade places. In loose formation, they continue walking. But now the fighters are at the points, the three weaker bodies are the center, and the team has eyes all round — even the rear is covered; the chatty teenager revives her argument and skips along half-backward.

Gericault approves of their preparations. They can handle the hired muscle, he is certain, and though the branded acolytes might be able to kill one or two members of the Second Seven, Amanda should survive.

At the next intersection, the Nephandus "influences" the traffic: Amanda and her party make it across and the bullyboys are permitted to follow — but the branded students have to wait. In his own turn, Gericault comes to the curb beside them and pretends to check his watch. He takes a silver pin from the cuff of his sleeve and pricks his palm. Before the bloody tip dries, he stabs the student closest to him in the nape of the neck. The tiny weapon nearly disappears into the skin.

The boy is dead without time to blink and Gericault starts the body walking when the lights change.

From the victim's cooling brain, he drags the name of the murder cult's master — their philosophy professor Shelton Bruntee — and enough of the trappings of their masses to recognize the hand of Helekar behind the hunt. Under the Nephandus' direction, the corpse follows its fellows from the crosswalk, but Gericault waits at the new curb. He then crosses the main street and sets purposefully after Bruntee.

The Euthanatos clearly anticipates an enemy. Though Bruntee walks quickly enough to keep his disciples in view, Gericault can feel the mage tracking the zombie, the pin, the slender thread of control — the thread coming closer, the power chasing after him.

Gericault catches up and the two walk abreast at the extreme edges of the sidewalk. By unspoken consent, they climb the steps of an old apartment house — each half-turned to the other, eyes lowered, defenses high — and enter the deserted lobby.

Face-to-face now, they study each other. The professor's body sags slightly with age — 50 will capture him soon, if Gericault does not — but the sloppy looking extra weight is muscle, and his left hand holds an old-fashioned straight razor. Bruntee stands ready, like an old lion. His hair is black, gray and wiry, brushed or blown back from the forehead into a wild mane, cropped raggedly at the shoulders. Five leather cords are visible around his neck — human skin, Gericault "remembers," tanned and toughened to hold amulets the dead boy saw. The Euthanatos' powerful jaws are red-raw, but scrupulously clean-shaven.

Neither mage looks to the other's eyes.

The attack comes without warning and without a movement — Bruntee strikes through the abyss — an assault like a battering ram forged of a black hole. Gericault, pleased by the challenge, resists in kind — the consuming ebon fires of the pit swallow the emptiness; their forces match precisely.

Bruntee draws on deeper magicks. The lance of his mind against Gericault's. The claws of his spirit on the roots of Gericault's soul. Even the fangs of his Avatar strive to drain Kali's lifeblood from Gericault's very being. The Nephandus counters them all and methodically brings more weapons to bear.

Sparks fly from Bruntee's hair, the floor cracks beneath his feet, tiny slips in time confuse him. Though he weaves his own shields, clasps his hand over the blade of his razor for blood and power, and destroys three amulets in the attempt, he cannot break the stalemate Gericault forces upon him. The process reveals every detail of his capabilities and knowledge. Sweat breaks out on Bruntee's forehead. The strain of the casting paralyzes the Euthanatos, and though no one or thing but the Grand Harvester Voormas has ever frightened him, Bruntee watches in terror as the mage before him steps closer....

