

SID NERD

MAN OF GAMES

 Publio

Man of Games

Sid Nerd

2013

Publio Publishing

All rights reserved!

PART ONE: GAMES OF UNCERTAINTY

1

This world here is a hard one. More real than other worlds. Here, hundreds start moving upon a single word, and don't let their voices be heard. They move, march in the direction wanted. They don't know anything impossible because it doesn't exist. And any time, these hundreds can become thousands. They will become thousands. One move is enough, and they multiply. They bring fire and carry fire. They can be brought to battle at any time. They exist for their master. They don't exist without their master. These have gathered under a roof and could just as well live forever. But they won't.

Here, there is no night and no day. There is only time that passes according to one's fancy. According to the master's fancy, because as he is the master of everything that is here, he masters time, too, which is something else that only exists here. It isn't there anywhere else. That which isn't there in the World, doesn't exist any more. It used to be. A long time ago.

And the World has widened, extended, deepened, heightened. It has become itself.

Itemo is standing on the hillock. His followers are gathering down below. They are not in a hurry but rather used to the idea that they never have to go anywhere in time. This is the age when no clocks yet exist: one can learn from the course of the sun when morning, noon, or dusk is coming.

Itemo is just standing, although he should be in a hurry. Itemo is action itself. Waiting around is not him, perhaps someone else. Itemo. When he arrives, that's when things begin to happen. On the hillock, everyone can see him and his speech is heard by everyone, because 'the words' aren't coming out of his mouth. Someone says them instead of him - they hear them from the heights, like an annunciation.

Itemo is standing on the hillock, he can also hear 'the words'. They have been bestowed on him, they are his, already his now. He will be the one they follow, all those who had heard 'the words'. Of course, only if that almighty someone also wills it so.

The followers, too, just like Itemo, are moved by the master. They are standing in the glimmer of dawn, multiplying, now a handful of them coming, now suddenly becoming more of them. The master is moving around them but they cannot see him. They follow unspoken orders. Slowly, the will of the master becomes plain: that village, over there, on the lakeshore, must be overcome. The lake, which is a sea at other times but can be a river, as well, is full of real water. In the village, the little houses are identical, they were made according to the same pattern. They are scattered around, the entrance of most of them looking onto the lake. The crowd behind Itemo is multiplying. They are getting marshaled into a marching order, three or four to a row, and the line is long enough; there are already about three hundred of them standing. Then the force that moves everything here launches them, too. In smaller troupes, they move forward. More forward. The troops overtake one another, on and on, then develop into a chain. From the village, no one can any longer escape, it has to be this way. The master has prepared the attack, provided for the means for

it, too.

In the village, no one suspects anything because this, too, has to be this way. The people of the place stand on the sandy earth, perhaps looking at the lake, as well? At this time of day, the surface of the water is empty. Light casts onto the water, everything else is veiled in twilight.

Then the signal arrives, the crowd starts, rushes. As fast as lightning the movements. They strike down the huts. Very soon, some of the tiny houses burst into flames, with their inhabitants burning, too. The whole is a mute-great howl; smaller and bigger fires light the landscape. And the surface of the water reflects barbaric, murderous lights.

The postman went his rounds on a bicycle. This area was considered a villa district, and perhaps it was, indeed. Bigger and smaller family houses stood in irregular lines, with trees dispersing their shadows in between. The postman could sense the scent and taste of air; this is the way it is in early spring. The sun was shining but didn't have any power yet while the earth jealously guarded the frost in itself, hardly letting it go. On the trees, buds were springing up now, leaves were born.

The postman was only substituting for his colleague, he didn't know the area very well.

Upon the ring of the bell, a woman looked out, then rushed shiveringly through the small yard. Obviously, she was a married woman, not a maiden, but not old, either. Her hair was light-colored, making her open-faced at the same time. She must have been no more than thirty-five. There was something in her glance that raised a pleasant feeling in the postman, but this, too, only lived for a moment and then no more trace was left of it. The postman was doing his job.

"Good morning, madam, I've brought a letter."

"The question is, for whom?" The woman's voice wasn't like anything. Every day, the postman heard a hundred voices; that day, it was the forty-third.

"For Mr. Rudolf Donn."

"Then try it from the other side," the woman indicated it to him with a subtle move of her arm. "He also lives in the house but has his own section with a separate entrance."

The postman went to the corner, turned in, found a little gate open, and stepped into the yard. On the back side of the house was another door. He felt like being watched but couldn't see anyone. A tiny window on the door, that was what popped up:

"Good morning! I am Rudolf Donn!" a voice said. The forty-fourth that day. Not sympathetic, not nice. And not indifferent, either. A bit hostile. Impatient.

"I've brought a letter, good morning," the postman handed it in through the slot. He couldn't see the receiver. The addressee. The letter disappeared, the little window snapped shut. The postman halted for a moment more but because he heard no sound from within, and nothing happened, he grasped that there is nothing to wait for. Why would he remain here? He started back towards his bicycle.

2

The hospital wasn't large. In any event, a middle-sized town out in the country wasn't entitled to a larger one. Pavilions in a park, a few multistory buildings; on the first one, from the side of the broad street leading there, the main entrance had the name of a saint above it, as is the custom hereabouts. Perhaps this, too, is an allusion to the idea that here, the sick can only be helped by a miracle? The man, whose mind these thoughts crossed, halted helplessly in the little hall.

He was pale and looked like forty-five. He was only thirty-seven. His suit had several years on it, obviously. He moved uncertainly. When someone spoke loudly next to him, he winced and drew away. Black hair, black eyes, bloodless lips, well-worn shoes. He felt like a stranger in his clothes. In the hospital.

Finally, he caught sight of the information desk, but waited until another person got to know what he wanted. Then he took his place:

"Good morning, sir," the young woman smiled half-officially.

"Good morning. I am looking for my sister. She is here somewhere. As far as I know...she wrote...at the 'cancer department'."

"The name please, sir."

"Rudolf Donn."

"Not yours, please; the name of the sick person."

"Nina Donn.... But no, she is registered here by her married name, I think. Nina Stornin."

A minute later, he already left the building, walking across a hospital yard. The sun was about to set. The yellow light was now only sitting on the upper branches of the half-naked trees. But as Rudolf wasn't interested in this, he didn't see any of it. Only the aim mattered: Room 107 on the first floor of building C.

He got there. A smell of hospital, sickness, misery. Disinfectant floor cleaner liquid, lotions, whiteness, whiteness. Strangers on the floor, in the rooms. Perhaps the present shadows of their former selves. Tomorrow, maybe they won't even be shadows.

And Nina.

A shadow herself, although a living one. Only one bed in the small room. It seemed as if Nina were one with the bed. She was one with the bed. They had flown into one. They already belonged together. In the twilight, Nina and Rudolf could hardly see each other's faces. There was no need to see, anyway. They had known each other for thirty-seven years. Nina was four years old when Rudolf was born. That has become the Stone Age now; it never was. Only the present.

"No change?" Rudolf asked, and they both knew what he meant. This here. The sickness. The hospital. The treatments. The chance.

"Nothing with me. And you?"

They both knew. Rudolf shrugged and sat down on the edge of the bed:

“Even worse.”

“Aren’t you going to change your mind? Won’t you forget?”

“No.” Rudolf was determined and this soothed his sister. Nina sat up on the bed, tucked a pillow between the bed’s inclined section and her back. It was warm in here, perhaps a stale warmth. The woman’s face now emerged out of the twilight. It was sharp. It was a knife. A pointed nose, eyes with rings under them, tired skin. When she leaned forward, she cleft the air:

“You remember our vow...?” Nina’s voice died off; she coughed. The light blanket slipped off her shoulders. Rudolf saw bones, bones hardly covered with skin. Nina didn’t have flesh any more, only bones. A coughing skeleton-human. Possible to see through even without an X-ray. Very little was left of her. Very little by now.

“I remember,” Rudolf’s mouth had dried out. What he didn’t want to think about, he had to think about. As always, whenever Nina came to his mind. Because together with Nina, past had returned. “But believe me, it isn’t easy. My resources are getting used up.”

“This, too...will...change,” Nina coughed a little more. One of her hands unexpectedly flew out from under the blanket. All-bone all-claws grasped the man’s arm. “You will do what is necessary. Those...you know who....” She would have said something else but was overcome by such a bad cough, accompanied by a shortness of breath, that for a while, she was merely panting. Rudolf kept on nodding:

“I haven’t forgotten anything. Our time will come.”

“Your time.” And although Nina didn’t say why she narrowed the circle to her brother, it was enough for her to nod. And Rudolf let his glance skim round, the pair of eyes obeying like a faithful dog, racing over the machines that stood on wheeled legs next to the bed, over the white walls, over the top of the small cabinet on the other side, over dinner leftovers. It was then that he saw: into Nina’s other hand, which had been under the blanket until now, a real tap had been beaten with several tubes, and from a transparent glass, drops were dripping downwards. A small tube was transferring the drops into the patient’s body.

The glance returned. The eyes connected. Nina breathed painfully.

“Soon I will be transferred back there...into another building. It has no name, only a number. That’s where I will be finished. Don’t come any more if you don’t want to. You will be...notified. Rudolf...”

The man leaned closer. The bed creaked under him. As if it had been designed for merely a patient emaciated to forty kilos. It could not carry two bodies, no matter how thin. But Nina only waved, already out of air, out of voice. The instruments attached to her must have given some kind of a signal in the checking room, because the nurse came rushing in.

“Please sir, do leave the patient now. She is very exhausted.”

Rudolf watched Nina for a while longer. The woman lay with her eyes closed. She was panting. Suffering. Dying. And this might still continue for weeks.

He stepped out onto the hospital courtyard and cut through the beautifully landscaped

garden. It was getting dark fast. Rudolf was in a hurry. He never even looked round. *Out here*, only fear could be expecting him. Just let him get home. It will be good *in there*. It is only good there.

3

“Quantar chooses to fight!”

The cry resounds along the landscape. It can also be heard where the lakeside village was recently set to fire, and where only smoldering ruins sprawled around. One of them was still smoking.

Itemo’s name is now Quantar, his people are the Antars, and every member of them is determined. They are already gathering on the shore. The enemy lives on the other side of the lake. So they could walk along the shore, from two directions at the same time, going round it from left and right. But the master ordered Quantar, who is his favorite hero, to cut through the water – the surface of which is not ruffled by any wind or breeze for the time being.

There are plenty of ships and boats. They even drag a few rafts there, this is also the master’s work. These have simple, rudimentary sails, merely pieces of cloth, stuck loosely onto two vertical rods, called masts – when the wind catches it, the sail will bulge out and the raft progress. Some of them can only take three or four warriors; onto some others, twenty to thirty people are hanging on, and remain on deck. They burn with desire. The wind brings on primitive songs from somewhere; quietly, for the time being. They were only meant for them, so they are the only ones hearing them. They are on their way to conquest. In their imagination, all of them are already murdering, although they haven’t even started yet.

But as soon as the last one has launched, someone casts them out of the bay. The wind comes suddenly, at first it isn’t exactly blowing into the desired direction. But Itemo-Quantar, the master’s favorite, knows that things will be back to normal soon. And indeed, all sails are tensing. For the time being, the wind is weaker but at least it orders the ships into a line. And the rafts left out of it on the edges will eventually be brought back.

The wind swells the sails, the music is louder and louder, and in front of Quantar’s two hundred warriors, the lake comes to sight, with its yonder shore still far away. But not much longer.

Rudolf knows it is never silent here.

And anyway, it cannot be. There are four people living down there in the large L-shaped house. The two teenagers make noise from morning till evening, except for when they are at school. And even if they leave in the morning, they come back in the afternoon, slam the doors, go to town and come back and leave again. They ride their bicycles on the streets of the villa district, sometimes coming here into the garden in flocks, shouting. They never talk quietly. Perhaps because then they wouldn’t hear one another, with the musical din always in their ears, arriving through a small cable.

Rudolf only finds his rest at night. But it frequently happens that he can’t sleep, so he goes about his business. The house stands on the corner, turned against the crossing of the two streets.

The traffic is scarce, not many noises are born. Back when he moved up, he first had the floor soundproofed. Everything else was built only after that.

When he goes to bed in the evening, Nina comes to his mind. But his thoughts soon turn elsewhere. There are so many things he would like, at the same time. And he hopes that they will happen. After all, it's been almost three years now...yes, three years. He moved up into the loft, transformed it. Now this is his nook at the conjunction of the two wings. With a lot of space, a whole lot of it. He has as much as those four altogether, down there. True, the roof up here slants inwards, and sometimes he has to stoop down to avoid bumping his head. But he is used to it, and it's good as it is.

Morning mist rises above the water. The shore is already near. Quantar knows that the mist is also the master's work, so that they can be protected and cloaked. He commanded his men to be silent, and it's as if even the exotic, wild music had grown quieter. If they were rowing, now every stroke of the oars could be heard. But there's no noise at all. The power of the wind is diminishing; now it's only the impulse that's carrying the two hundred warriors on their rough-and-ready boats towards the hostile shore.

In the mist, there is no seeing when they arrive, anyway. Next to a pier, little fishing boats are sleeping. Everything is asleep here, the enemy is nowhere. But behold, the huts reveal themselves out of the mist. They must be about thirty. "We are more, a lot more," so Quantar; he is sorry that not everyone will have their share of the enemy. On the deck of the larger boats, the flammable oil is brought in containers.

The wind dies off because this is how the master willed. Quantar's ship is the first to dock beside the pier. The leader jumps off, his comrades follow him. The order of silence is still valid. Some of the smaller boats and rafts land on the sandy shore further off. Warriors set off from there, as well. Quantar finally utters a cry, although not in his voice; his voice goes out to the WORLD, and suddenly, the martial music is here again, rather loud:

"Attaaack...!"

4

Rudolf sat down in front of the computer.

He rarely surfed the Internet, actually only clicking on a few places as a rule, looking through their offers, the producers' news, if any. Sometimes several days would pass without him sitting down in front of the monitor. There was little space here. He built his quarters himself, thin artificial walls separated his table and his bed. Further away was another cubicle with a shower and toilet. That was enough for him. And there were the stairs leading down to the other side of the house. He reached the street through a severed little piece of the garden, and here his visitors could enter his place, as well. But they could only get as far as the little door built into the wall. They always brought something. Delivery boys with his lunch or pizza, ordered on the Net, couriers with the goods. Sometimes the postman, less and less frequently. No one else was any longer looking for Rudolf.

He fingered the keyboard in a familiar way, frequently ending up at the same place. Every site, every address was listed among the “frequently visited” favorite sites, so he clicked there automatically. He ran through the address list, clicking with a practiced hand on the searched-for one. That which interested him today.

They were offering mockups. In the beginning, he was amazed at the wide selection but very soon got used to it. Today, he was already picking among them fastidiously; wouldn't accept just anything. He scrolled fast through the railway carriages, rails, and accessories; he didn't need them. But he halted at the boat and ship models. Among these, he studied the small ones at length. But he didn't order any of these now, either. Large, colorful pages unfolded on the fair-sized screen. The man slowly pushed the sights downwards, then back upwards, and continued turning the pages. Here, they have tiny houses on sale, most of them as big as a larger apple. People of various ages and lands used to live in them. They were schematical. Here, he already gave a thought action and entered the virtual store to order rather real objects for just as real money. He transferred the money, went on. Domestic animals. Horses, cattle, exotic buffaloes, mules, llamas, yaks, goats, sheep, pigs. Then plants. Artificial firs, palm trees, thuyas, pine trees, with foliage, for digging into the earth, to be stuck down, standing on a base. Smaller groves, forest segments in one part. Rudolf still went on turning the pages. Bridges in all kinds of styles and sizes, made of wood or artificial stone. Straight ones, bulging ones, donkeybacks, suspensions, or railway bridges with a pair of rails. Further, further.

When he reached the end, the last large section, his motion slowed down. Well, that was the one. If he started now, he could choose from about fifty types. Not wanting to “mix” the goods any more, he narrowed down the circle. This had its meaning, its pleasure, too. He contemplated, enjoyed each page at length. Then he went through the selection; not in a hurry with this one, either. After all, he had time. As much as he wanted. And finally, the symbolic cash rang again. He didn't even have to submit his data, name, and address. He had an identification number in this webstore, he was a regular customer. An old and dear customer who could always be counted on. He never ordered a little amount. When the courier came, he would ring the bell with a sizeable parcel at the back door.

Itemo stands opposite the high priest's house.

Again, he had a different name than last time - if he had any name last time, if he had any before. A multitude has gathered around him but at a respectful distance. Soldiers with lances are standing beside, as well, and a few of them behind him. The crowd flooded the courtyard, they even made a fire because the night was cool. Itemo's hands are tied, and yet, the man stands with his head cast upwards, almost proudly. Already blood trickled down his face: just recently he was beaten, mocked, beaten again.

Behind the walls, the high priests and the elders are holding a counsel, but nothing of this could be overheard on the courtyard. The doors were still closed, and this crowd was noisy. Soldiers and common folk aren't friends of silence, they are much rather scared of it. They are afraid that if they are surrounded by silence, something will speak up inside. Someone.

Themselves. So they rather bathe in the sea of noise.

Itemo is already used to being placed into the forefront. Any other role would be narrow for him. But now to be on the forefront promised something bad. The crowd was just gathering in. Someone made sure that there are more and more of them, some of them had already gotten onto

the walls, and even beyond the walls. They couldn't fit inside, couldn't see anything, but their passion flew towards Itemo like fiery arrows.

A voice spoke. It's always one voice speaking, although sometimes endeavoring to be different. And still it's the same.

"If you are Jesus Christ, say it to us!"

Someone in the name of Itemo-Jesus answered:

"If I say it to you, you will not believe it!"

The crowd flare up, the men shake their fists menacingly. The women are standing more to the back; very few of them came, they have no voice. It was the soldiers who started but the citizens join in, as well:

"So you are the Son of God?"

"You said it," answers the one who stood before them, although everyone was mute. But the master was there nearby. He is always there. He is the movement, he is the voice.

Pilate has also arrived by now. The accuser pointed indignantly to the solitary figure spearing up in the centre of the courtyard. The fires that were lit, scattered everywhere, cast flitting lights, now here, now there. The shadow of Jesus was cast onto the stone wall, to disappear soon and wander on.

"We found that he misleads the people, and forbids the payment of the emperor's tax. Verily, he claims himself to be king Jesus Christ!"

Pilate's question in the master's voice:

"Are you the king of the Jews?"

"You say it!" arrives the answer of Itemo-Jesus. The fires were still fluttering, but now for a while, nothing happens. Perhaps the fires will extinguish and have to be re-lit again, if the master decides to continue the trial of Jesus? But he may just as well decide otherwise.

5

Rudolf lay on his back. His eyes opened into the dark.

He was thinking of two worlds. One of them perhaps does have its boundaries, the other one doesn't. One of them was the one under him - the big house, the street, the other houses, the country, the continent, the Earth and the cosmos. He rarely ever thought of these now. He too used to think this was the world. But no.

The other one - it was here, around him. He could achieve anything he wanted. He could reach back to the past. Crowds got into motion upon his one word or even thought. What was the outer world worth if up here, any time, he could create a new one; thousands and thousands of them?

And they would all be the way he would like them to be.

And yet, he was thinking of those down there now. The nearest ones. Cora, Erik. Lena, Peter. At times, he only kept repeating it thoughtlessly, in a hushed tone: Cora. Erik. Lena. Peter. Adults, children. Usually, he only did this when something had upset him. Like for example the noise down there. In the summer, when he opened the roof windows. The children played on the courtyard, sometimes they invited buddies; the noise was bigger.

But now it was still cool, outside too. And it was nighttime. Twilight too was only a part of the world down there, something that went with it. The pleasant feeling lurked in Rudolf that in this manner, too, he could stand up against those down there. There, every daytime was followed by nighttime, and the other way round. Regularity was a prison. Unaccountability was freedom, he said now in a hushed tone, contentedly.

He got up if he wanted, could switch on the light and he was already prepared to...what, indeed? Not even what he put on is indifferent. The self-constructed toga? Or the cloak of medieval pilgrims? The crusader's tunic with a red cross sewn onto the back? Or a leather gown, with steel buttons on it, imitating real armor? He had ordered such a one for himself, too, in a fitting size. But he also had an artificial royal robe, a crown made of brass with colorful glass "diamonds"; he had a scepter, too. And if it had to be, he can grab the sword himself...

And no one could have a say about when he did what. He could play background music, recite texts, march to and fro.

And he could never be, he would never be alone; not any more. After all, he had *his own people* here. Thousands and thousands, and if he wanted it, they would be even more. Imagination doesn't set any limits, and not even *these* could mean an obstacle. They rather meant help.

Without them, it would have been bad. Rudolf could not even imagine any longer what his life would have been like if he had gone on living in that other world, if at that time, he had continued it there. He didn't even want to think about this: when it came to his mind, he shook his head. He even shook the thoughts out of his head, getting rid of them. If he looked out of one of the roof windows, he could see strangers. He can see anybody. It was not good, any stranger can be an enemy, too. Enemy.

Here, it is good.

Nuboá's name is whispered all around the Lime-tree Region.

Whether that region got its name from the large number of lime trees wasn't important, so no one thought about it. This is how the rolling land, situated far away from the sea-lake, is called. Hereabouts, no one ever saw a large water.

At this time, Governor Gortys dominated the Lime-tree Region. It is rumored that the king himself sent Gortys to this region. He brought a lot of soldiers with himself. At that time, no one asked whether he was really nominated to the governor's seat. He declared that those who don't obey will die. It went as simply as that.

And indeed, this is the way it went. The way it had been going - for a good many years now. The governor's soldiers were present in many villages, and also in the only city of Lime-tree Region, where the governor's palace stood proudly. Proudly, because it was embellished, rebuilt, enlarged

after the arrival of Lord Gortys. The largest prison of the region could be found there, too. Gortys haughtily proclaimed that he knew of everything that happened in his country; and at times, this seemed to be the case, indeed. Someone said a few bad words about the tyrant, and if he did that in the morning, he was already dragged into prison in the evening. If he spoke in the evening, the armed men went for him the next morning. Gortys was rumored to have informants everywhere.

Nuboá was an escaped citizen, or was he a descendant of peasants? No one knew. They heard of him but no one saw him. Rumor had it that he is organizing a rebellion. They knew that he did exist because Gortys's people were indeed thoroughly searching for him. Gortys's cavalrymen assaulted villages one by one in smaller troops, and searched through every single house. They didn't know that at times Nuboá was hiding in earthen corn silos and they were only a few steps away from him. They never learned that he actually had been in their hands, posing as the owner of a hut, with his crying wife standing beside him, well-trained toddlers calling him Father - although it was Nuboá. Legends circulated about how different he could be, that even those who had seen him several times before couldn't recognize him. Because there were such people, too: his warriors, his mates. They gathered together at night, rarely during the day. Then the strings of bows thrummed, arrows swooshed in the darkness, soldiers collapsed with a coarse, muffled cry of agony in their throats.

At dawn, Rudolf hears Lena's voice. The girl is screaming:

"Daddy, daddy, this water is very warm...!"