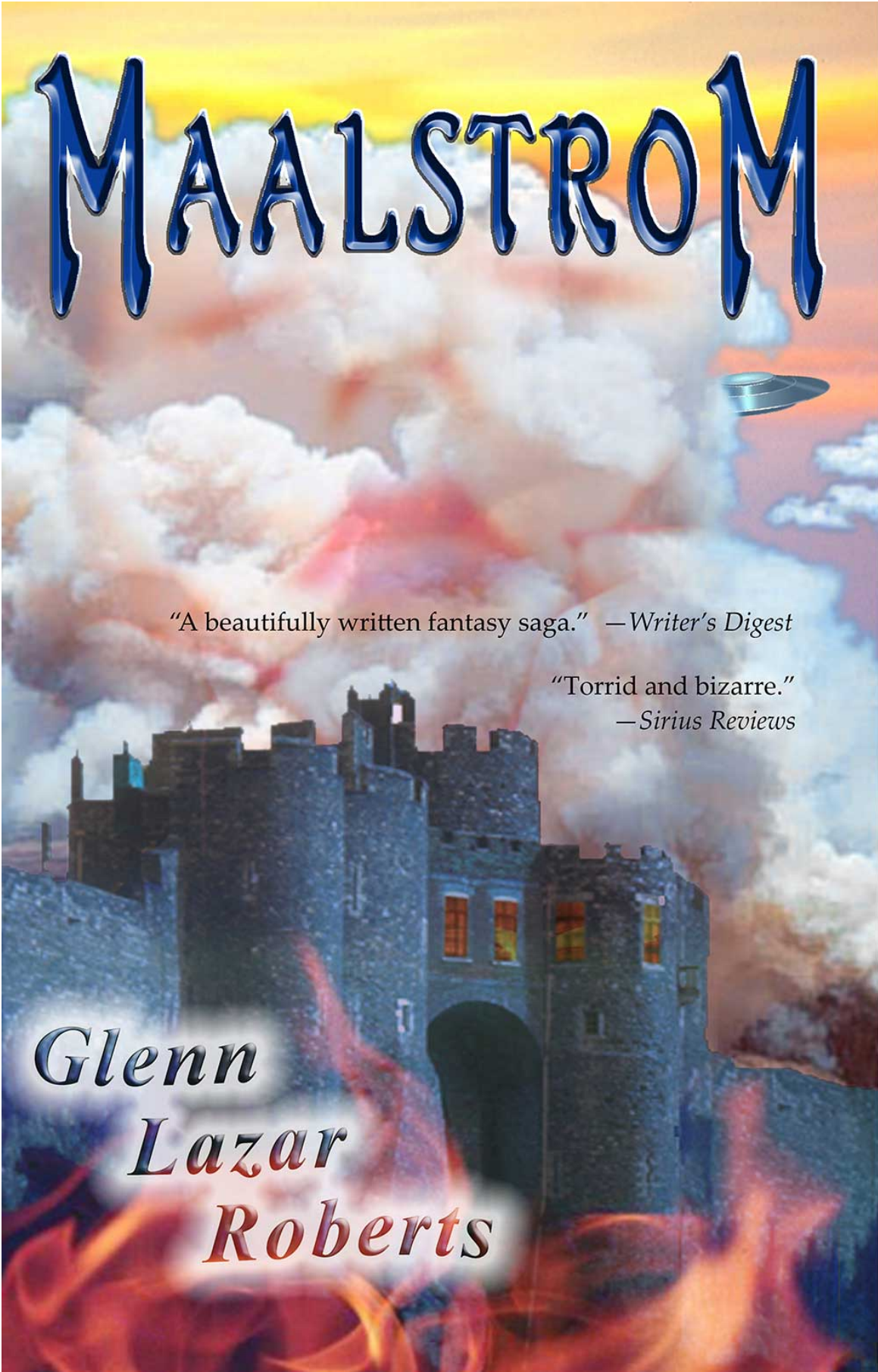


MAALSTROM

The background of the book cover is a dramatic, painterly illustration. It features a dark, multi-towered castle with several windows glowing with a warm, orange light. The castle is partially obscured by thick, billowing clouds in shades of white, pink, and orange, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. In the foreground, there are large, intense flames in red and orange. A small, dark, disc-shaped object, possibly a flying saucer, is visible in the sky to the right of the title.

"A beautifully written fantasy saga." —Writer's Digest

*"Torrid and bizarre."
—Sirius Reviews*

*Glenn
Lazar
Roberts*

Flores at Bay

“Aside!” Malag said. “You have no business here.”

As if chiseled in stone the intruder made no move.

Malag grimaced. “Speak, man! What do you here? You are not of Tumset, and you do not work for me. By what right do you interfere in my affairs?”

The man said nothing, but fingered the butt of his sword.

“I warn you. Only once more shall I ask. Who are you; and from where do you hail?”

A moment passed.

“A stranger.”

The slaver's lips twisted with sarcasm. “Nothing more? You have no name?”

The intruder lowered his eyes until they rested on a ring upon one finger. The ring bore the sign of the Turlicum.

He glanced up again. “You need not know it.”

Malag's eyes narrowed. Again he took in the common raiment and style of the intruder. Stepping back, he turned to his men. “Cut this dog to pieces. Then scatter them throughout the valley!”

Without hesitation, the two axe-wielders leapt forward. . .

MAALSTROM

by

Glenn L Roberts



Dark Lotus Books

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DEDICATION

To Edgar Rice Burroughs,
Robert E. Howard, and Mervyn Peake



*I flee to the Lord of Dawn,
from the Evil He created,
from the night when it falls,
from gilas who twist what should be straight,
from the One that Envies all.*

*I flee to the Lord of Man,
the King of Man, his God,
from the One who sneaks through portals,
who whispers evil in the hearts of men,
and the ways of selks and mortals.*

—The Holy Quran
Surahs 'Falaq' and 'al-Nas'

The dark man paused. A sparkle of glass caught his gaze, and a sweaty palm closed and slid within a pocket. He cocked his ear...silence. With a last shallow breath, he stepped forward and slipped the length of the shadowed corridor until an open threshold loomed, his amphibian features sterile of emotion in its soft trapezoid of light. An empty courtyard, overgrown with weeds and worts and lit by a trio of gibbous moons, led to a massive gate. Silently he crossed. At the portals he halted, his gaze impaled on the mad leer of Atasan, which thrust gargoyle-like from the carved rorewood, in its hatred of Vensor mocking all with egalitarian indifference. He gripped the jagged tongue, drew back the jaw, and breathed deep. One more step. A smile might have played on his face, had the shadows beneath the pediment been less dark, or had his face been capable of smiling.

He placed one leg within the aperture—and froze.

Chapter 1

THE CITY OF GLASS

“How could they do it?” Not in a hundred years has such an outrage been permitted. Have assemblymen become slaves and servants, crawling to perform every whim of my enemies?”

Flores stalked the narrow avenue, his lean legs once more outpacing his companions. About him rose chalky clouds of dust and a raucous clatter of beasts and children, grunting and shouting with abandon. A knee-length vest of intricate blue and silver, drawn about his tunic, proclaimed his role in the Municipal Assembly, the supreme ruling body of the city of Ven. His appearance, from tanned boots to close-cropped beard, portrayed wealth, dignity, and privilege; his almond-colored face, an alert intensity tempered by patience and pain.

At his side jogged Mosum, friend, and loyal to Flores in the assembly, Mosum now informed his colleague of its happenings between wheezes, his arms aloft to prevent dragging his tunic's voluminous sleeves in the street. Behind them strode Lasmer and Isav. Of common origin, they were employed by Flores as captains of militia, and grown rich for their talent. Only Flores and Mosum sported the apparel of Simet-sa, the aristocracy of Ven; only the nobles had not been raised in the Orphanage after their spawning in the Temple of the double sun.

Lasmer jostled merchants and commoners, who halted to stare, curious to see nobles on foot. “Calm, Flores. I think we should be cautious.”

“Yes, caution,” broke in Mosum. “They are angry and have closed the debate.”

“Caution? Vacillation, you mean,” growled Flores. “No, sirs, that would end us.”

A clump of struggling children overtook them and squatted in their path, tossing dirt and dust in the air. They stretched out empty hands. Flores scowled and the boys dashed away.

“Petition to address the assembly,” suggested Mosum.

“Petition?” Flores' eyes popped in disbelief. “Like an embassy from conquered vassals? Crawl before insult? Ha! Not a day will pass but the city will hear of this. I'll batter their ears with my speeches! In the marketplace or in the assembly, I'll speak, petition or not. All of Ven will know—and especially the assembly! The name of Sruk will be as of the god of fire—”

Mosum and Isav caught their breath and halted.

“—odious and shunned.”

They resumed their march. The little band turned off the avenue onto a thoroughfare lined with spires that led toward the plaza and the marketplace. The traffic grew with throngs of grimy peasants, indolent watchmen, nobles in sun-shaded litters, and mobs of tradesmen and poor. More urchins sighted their expensive trappings and followed in their wake calling for money.

Lasmer addressed Mosum. “Sir, who introduced the motion?”

“It was the Venerarch's.”

“I had guessed.”

“The man is mad for gain,” said Flores.

“He questioned the purpose of your speech on Soorkrul,” wheezed Mosum.

“Who assuredly assassinated our colleagues, Jaz and Clesp.”

Mosum nodded. “Then you accused the Triumvirate of undermining the authority of the assembly.”

“When they accused *me* of undermining the morality of Ven.”

“And you left in protest.”

“A mistake—and Sruk was prepared. But what of our faction: Sorel, Hem,

and Latkin? How did Sruk sway their votes?”

“He did not, Flores!” exclaimed Mosum, slowing. “They are loyal still. But after your dramatic exit, Sruk turned the debate to...‘domestic issues.’ Most unkind things were said of the personal lives of all. It was then that Sorel and Hem decided to, um...defer to your ‘tactical example’?” Mosum toyed with his fingers while Flores rolled his eyes.

The fat aristocrat nodded. “Yes,” he continued, “they too boycotted the assembly. It was commendable, but rash. I stayed, but the Triumvirate shouted me down. I protested till I was hoarse, then Sruk seized the floor and in his speech tried and hanged you. He blamed the House of Turlicum for all the city's woes. Disrespect for the Eunuch Guild and the Holy Law of Ven became the worst of evils, and finally all condemned it. He even criticized your toll on the city gate.”

“Was it voided?” inquired Lasmer.

“Abolished!”

“And what of our fees for dock space on the Suma? asked Flores.

“Untouched,” wheezed Mosum, falling behind again. “Sir, they are all aware of their importance to your house. Your enemies have influence, but the day has not come when assemblymen would deprive each other of their sacred rights as noblemen.”

“Perhaps. But the day *has* come when they will abolish my seat in the assembly,” clipped Flores.

The walls and shops that lined the thoroughfare retreated to either side as the street emptied into the city's central plaza. The traffic flowed without pause into the square where it merged with a tide of masculine faces.

Flores and his companions turned leftward, proceeding along a wall of baked brick and mortar that separated the plaza from the assembly grounds. Eight feet the wall rose, shielding the brain of Ven from the city proper. Behind

were gardens where trees swayed, occasional branches drooping over and down to shade passers-by. Beyond the trees rested the assembly hall. Like a hill of gems, the edifice sloped, bright, domed and glinting. The oval dome was composed of *irsrem*—"tear-glass"—called such because once its essence was annealed with the mineral corta, the glass formed a cross-worked pattern of lucent drops, each tear forming an iridescent prism stronger than iron. Irsrem had made Ven great. Luxurious and cheap, the city's inhabitants erected irsrem plates over walls, irsrem domes over roofs, and fused the material into high pinnacles, so that the city seemed to shine with starlight at mid-day. Even the priests of the Temple, that citadel in the midst of Ven, as dark and silent as the city was light and alive, would nod with appreciation when offered the glass-smith's treasure.

A trio of guardsmen behind the assembly grounds-gate grew nervous at the little band's approach.

"Uitem," said Flores. "Why so slow? Open, if you please."

"Sir Flores," the man averted his gaze. "I have been directed to forbid—"

At a signal from Flores, Lasmer snatched the keys from Uitem's belt and unlocked the gate. Flores swept into the garden, strode up the broad steps of the assembly hall, swung wide the portals, and paused at the end of the corridor. For a moment he listened, then pushed past the protesting doormen into Ven's debating chamber. The chamber was a large oval room with several tiers of benches abutting the walls between the several entrances. Upwards of a hundred assemblymen, with their retainers, scribes, and consorts, sat in attendance to the city's affairs. Most were attired like Flores: jewel-encrusted vests over delicate tunics, rich embroideries of blue and silver covering their garments. Pelts, cushions, and voting boards lay scattered upon the floor and tiers.

Before the casual attention of the nobles clustered a delegation from the

subject city of Nasvetin, waiting to be noticed. An elderly assemblyman of lush and impeccable appearance spoke in a dry monotone. “In total, the capital counted, in tribute and in toll, 158,500 mir this past year. For each of the last several years we have discharged about 135,000 mir, and therefore we have accumulated—”

“Sirs, I shall not waste your time!” Flores turned to show he addressed the entire assembly. “I come to bear you a warning.”

The assembly lapsed into silence, awaiting the words that would prove insanity, or treason, and complete the ruin of the noble House of Turlicum.

Flores threw his hands high in a flourish. “Yes, you may loll in dignity, though I stand violated before you. But don't weep on my behalf. Weep on yours! Sirs, what is a man without his tribe? He is alone and pitiable, but remains a man. But what is a man without his divine father, Vensor? He is less than pitiable; he is nothing! He is without soul, honor, or sustenance. When a loose brick falls from a wall and hits a man, he knocks the wall down or repairs it so others may not be hurt. If a ros seizes a child and rends it, men know to kill the beast before it hunts again.

“Simet-sa, as I have warned you many times before, I shall warn you again. There is a conspiracy in Ven that seeks all our liberties—a conspiracy of vain and ambitious Simet-sa who scorn the holy laws of Vensor, a conspiracy aimed at nothing less than the imposition of a tyranny in the style of Nesos of Neset!”

As a rising squall, a chorus swelled to drown him out, offended and disbelieving Simet-sa laughing and mocking Flores. However, many were quiet and some nodded agreement. The man to whom Flores referred were well-known. Termed by their enemies the Triumvirate, Numsenmur, Sruk, and Sendas sat close together, their advocates and allies about them. Calling themselves the Loyalists, they now led, after their recent parliamentary victory,

the strongest faction in the assembly.

Sendas rose. He was of average height, but heavy, and frequently said more than he meant, which best explained the continued attention of his audiences and the distraction of his co-conspirators. His wealth and powerful Molersal clan best explained his comrades' continued allegiance. Gripping his sides, he thrust out a shaven chin.

“Those words, sir, are lofty indeed for one who but a few hours ago placed a few gold nuggets above the most sacred traditions of his city!”

The noble Simlet rose to join him. “Sirs, I repeat the charge our good colleague Numsenmur made earlier. The man you see before you, this self-proclaimed 'exemplar of righteousness,' refuses to deny the charge that he harbors a gila! By his own words, this man is in violation of the law!”

A second noble, Ust, rose from his seat near Numsenmur, his sleeve flapping. “Begone, beggar!” Ust glanced at Flores' hand, then sneered, “You have no right here.”

“Sirs,” continued Flores, ignoring the interruptions, “I now need no omen to foresee the future. A new evil shall emerge, one born out of the cabals and intrigues of the traitors in our midst, one growing like a rose of death from the ruins of Vensor's laws and justice. Slander me if you will, but none here shall forget my words!”

Flores whirled and strode out of the chamber. The assembly buzzed. Disgruntled opponents of the Triumvirate clamored as shouts and jeers sounded after retreating party.

Flores and his retainers returned to the bustling plaza where they were swallowed by the multitude. Ven, the gaudy capital of the Three Valleys, teemed with wealth and sprawled far beyond its ancient stony parapets. Caravans of hulking beasts, laden slaves from subject towns, swarthy dealers, irsrem armorers, and others on a thousand errands mobbed the square, crossing to the

market or to the many narrow alleys that opened on every side. The wealth of the wide valleys of the Tlaam, Hedronmas, and Suma, occupied by Ven's potent garrisons, drew them to the capital. And the city's population multiplied as Vensor rewarded their success with infants in burgeoning numbers, the citadel cranking high its gate and sounding the call for sons more often than any could recall. Irsrem glittered from a thousand structures. Of the cities of the three valleys, Ven surpassed them all in its taste for public gaudiness.

As the party walked back to Flores' estate, armed men in Flores' employ joined them, their martial purpose unconcealed. The Way of Murfenmas ran parallel to the Hedronmas. Estate walls angled outward, crowding the street, marking the sprawled villas and private courtyards of the Simet-sa of Ven, here, as in the rest of the city, encompassing too much, their lots too large. The walls of Ven being too narrow to contain them, the wealthier nobles bought villas in subject lands. But those who chose to reside on those far estates paid the political price for absence from their legislative assembly, so most did not, but remained within the confines of the capital.

As Flores and his retainers passed under the sculptured lintel of the Turlicum estate, several clansmen overtook them, manhandling a pair of somber and defiant youths. Lasmer spoke with the newcomers, then approached Flores.

"Another recruit was found," Lasmer said. "Stabbed." He nodded toward the captives. "These two were near the body. They are Serclaslers."

Flores gazed at the double suns, which were once again beginning to merge. Their rays outlined his slender features, accenting his full, protruding lips. His eyes narrowed.

"Make the proper introductions. Then return the bodies to our colleagues." He stepped away, and paused. "Since the assembly cannot keep the streets safe from ruffians, it falls on us to do it."

Flores' estate was similar to those of most Simet-sa, though larger. The

dwelling itself, rambling and cloistered behind glittering walls and grilles, possessed four floors above ground and several below. The bright ancestral hall occupied much of the estate; gardens and exercise yards the rest. At its apex, a gang of laborers installed more plates of irsrem and put up rafters for the installation of a huge glass dome in imitation of the assembly hall so that all Ven could see the rank of its owner. Waving aside a party seeking audience, Flores, bodyguards in tow, climbed ramps past armed sentinels.

Sandol, head of the Turlicum estate, stood near the entrance to Flores' chambers. "Storl is waiting."

Flores nodded and entered the adjoining room.

"Flores? Ah, my Flores!" Storl took his arm.

Flores returned the clasp coolly. "Is there something more that you wish, Storl?"

"No! You've done enough! The crisis has passed and I'm grateful. I shan't keep you. You're busy. I have brought gifts." He jerked his thumb toward the next room. "Something special." He grinned. "If you don't like them, send them away! You're busy. I'll go."

Storl exited and Sandol re-entered the room. The chief opened another door, and Flores, having guessed the nature of the gift, gazed upon a pair of castrated youths, gaudily painted.

Flores turned to Sandol. "Send them back to the Eunuch Guild." Once they had gone, Flores shook his head. "Will Soorkrul never cease his attempts to infiltrate this house?"

Flores entered his private chambers and pushed the heavy door shut. The rooms of the head of the House of Turlicum, lineage unbroken since the awakening of Vensor, lay in a T-shape. The first several were conference room, antechamber, and bedroom. These were sparsely furnished. Crossing the T was a single chamber of simple construction and unassuming decoration. Flores'

study was built with tear-glass windows opening on three sides of his property in one wide sweep so that he could view gardens, barracks, and exercise yard with but a few steps. On the left flowed the River Hedronmas. On the right, crags climbed to the Falls of Sish. Between lay the city, with the vast dome of the assembly hall glinting among a forest of domes and spires. Beyond, at the highest point of the city proper, loomed the Temple of Vensor.

Objects lay about the study haphazardly. An enormous slateboard bearing smeared impressions of characters was half-filled with a cylindrical scheme, interspersed with notes and entries. A jewel-studded helm with preserved raven talons embedded on the crest hung from a rack, framed by iron and irsrem weapons. Several were blunted or chipped from use. A portable lattice-frame supported hundreds of parchment scrolls. Within a recess that protruded into the room from the nether side of the irsrem window was a small, translucent sphere made entirely of tear-glass, housing a species of hornet called leroo-sa. A glass panel separated the room's interior from the nest's denizens. The hornets arrived and departed as usual, taking no notice of Flores' entrance.

Flores sat and rubbed his right hand and forearm where a network of scars reminded him of the once-ripped flesh. With an effort, he straightened the fingers. He grimaced, and permitted them to re-curl. He kicked off his boots. As manservants hurried to proffer more comfortable garments, he discarded the entangling vest. The austerity of the room was relieved by a vast soft couch and the recent addition of a golden, thick-piled carpet. When the expected knock came upon the door, he was ready and joined his captains: Lasmer, Sandol, and Isav. The Turlicum Heir, Mesret, sat reluctantly. Too young to share in the decision-making, he glowered from some solitary concern.

“Lord Mosum has delivered interesting news,” began Flores.

“And how can we deal with it?” replied Isav tiredly.

“I refer to other news,” said Flores. “Hama of the Venholis has refused to

adopt at the next Temple spawning.

Several eyebrows raised.

“Some in the assembly did not expect this, but it does not surprise me. He is old; a minor noble. Now much encouraged, his eunuch hopes to gain control. But a man named Sorotir—a commoner—runs his estate. This Sorotir is our way into the Venholis clan. If Hama's consort and his cronies in the Eunuch Guild succeed in their plans, then Sorotir will soon be unemployed. The consort is a young man and will run things himself. If Hama's consort gains control of the Venholis, the Triumvirate, whom all eunuchs and consorts support, will be strengthened. We can prevent this by recruiting Sorotir. We may offer him rank in the Simet-sa. Or perhaps even the assembly. If he fears Hama's consort, so much the better.”

“Yes,” said Lasmer, “but of course the houses would never accept a commoner among their ranks.”

“That is so. Still, some probing may find he has some famous ancestor whose son was inadequately treated.” Flores' expression was unchanged, though his tone was unctuous. “Besides, commoners often show themselves more favored of Vensor than Simet-sa. More than one house was become indebted to their inferiors and their leaders forced to seek employment with other nobles. This Sorotir is doubtlessly mulling over his uncertain future. He may be interested in an administrative position, the water complex for example. In any case we could put his influence to good use.”

“What is the Venholis tax base?” asked Isav. “If Hama adopts no one before he dies, the house will dissolve. We could move to replace our lost revenue.”

“If they assembly allows us,” said Sandol. “It is difficult now merely to guard the interests of Turlicum.”

“You know their base, Sandol,” rejoined Flores. “They supply and regulate

the public weights in the marketplace—a most lucrative business. Their income is growing rapidly, even with the nobles' exemptions. Anyhow, he may retire soon. He almost ignores public affairs as it is. The loyalists themselves may move to appropriate. If that occurs he will resist, and his clan become our natural ally.”

“Either way—adoption or no adoption—there will be a scramble for the spoil,” added Lasmer.

“Let us not overestimate the rewards, though,” Flores said, “Until I regain our house seat in the assembly, we can neither help nor hinder in any debate which is more important. This must happen. I have made the Simet-sa to understand what they have done by ejecting me, so let us hope my seat in the assembly will soon be restored. The power of the Triumvirate increases without such acts.”

“I heard the Loyalists plan to give food to the commoners—” said Mesret.

“Perhaps so,” interrupted Flores. He chuckled. “No worry. We can buy them for less.”

Mesret closed his mouth and looked away.

“However, something must be done soon. Though we have accomplished much, the Triumvirate intend to wreck Turlicum. If we lose, life will become dangerous for our clan. And if our faction in the assembly loses to the Triumvirate, it will be worse—nothing will then stand between Sruk and the absolute subjugation of Ven. A massacre would ensue such as would strike the tyrant Nesos with envy. Ven and all the valleys would become too small for those on Sruk's list.”

His gaze drifted to the ceiling. “It is not the spoil of the Venholis that we need most, but rather my seat in the house. So let us use the impending crisis in the Venholis clan to create a diversion. We shall deliver a message to, let us say... Numsenmur. For the benefit of Numsenmur and Sruk, we shall claim that

this Sorotir of the Venholis possesses information on the defection of one of the Triumvirate to our cause. Which one does not matter. We shall apprise Sruk and Numsenmur of this in some subtle fashion, then see what may follow. In the meantime, I have other minor irritations arranged to keep the city away of its true enemies.”

The others nodded.

“Now,” Flores leaned forward and pointed a finger at Isav. “I want a new levy from the Orphanage. Two dozen—ten year old's—healthy only. Lively, but no troublemakers.” The finger moved to Sandol. “Go to the docks. Post men on our quays, get what's owed us, make it clear to all the boats that the docks are still ours.” The finger continued to Lasmer. “Visit the glass-smiths; they think that they are the nobles and we the commoners. Tell them we'll see the tax on irsrem doubled if we lose our privileges.

“We've got to move fast now and show the Triumvirate that Turlicum's interests were unaffected by my ejection from the assembly. Sandol, when you return, we'll discuss the garrison payments—it's time we rewarded our vassals.”

The meeting ended and all exited, except Flores. He entered his workroom. Crossing to the hive of the leroo-sa, Flores sat upon a small stool and awaited a moment when the surface of the nest was clear of hornets. Then he slid the glass panel to one side. Ignoring the angry buzz of the hive's inhabitants, he placed his palms on either side of the nest. The hornets ceased moving. Flores shut his eyes and allowed his mind to wend through the tortuous path in search of the center. Hexagonal chambers enveloped him, beckoning, blocking, opening, closing about him as he sought the innermost chamber through dark and glittering tunnels. He felt an obscure tug and turned down a previously unexplored path, only to encounter a cul-de-sac. Suddenly he could not move. As if enmeshed in clay, he stared upon a vast clouded hexagon, unable to turn, while a buzzing grew, churning his mind, then a wind leapt up

and a shadow loomed upon him from behind.

He opened his eyes. In the bright daylight of the afternoon suns, he looked upon an orange hive cooling rapidly to green, then blue, then violet. When it had again assumed its former iridescent state, he released his grip. The hornets stirred and resumed their activities, again oblivious of Flores.

Once again he had failed to find the invisible, elusive core.

Grunting, he procured an irsrem dagger, and departed by way of a back stairway. Descending slowly in thought to the ground floor, he entered the rear gardens. Here flagstones trailed to disappear among trimmed bushes, trees, and blossoms. A pond rippled, fed and drained by a meandering rivulet. From the right, hidden by a belt of verdure, a dull clacking drifted, accompanied by occasional shouts and thumps. The house militia trained constantly in the exercise yard; their mounts, the amphibious reven-na, required unstinting attention. A high wall encompassed Flores' land. The stream, channeled from the Hedronmas, flowed through an iron grating set in the wall.

A warbling of birds drifted on the breeze, and Flores paused to savor the moment. He sighed. Though he had seen only fifty-six of the short Maalstrom years and wielded extraordinary influence for such limited experience, it seemed the years were slipping by at an accelerated pace. The callow youth, who had stared wide-eyed as his father lay dying on the steps of the assembly hall, cut down by rival Simet-sa, was gone. His father's assassins too had passed, assassinated in turn. In Ven, rising stars had a way of being suddenly extinguished. The warring factions had swelled and collapsed, then reformed under new ambition. Of his father's enemies, only Sruk remained, one of the two power brokers of the Triumvirate, self advertised as the "Venerarch" for his donations to the poor—with funds collected through the grain tax, Flores noted cynically. Sruk's arguments frequently swayed the assembly of the Simet-sa to the Triumvirate's purposes. Then there was Numsenmur. When Flores thought

of the chief of the Serclaslers, he saw in his mind's eye a mausoleum—unadorned, rock-cut, silent, at its gate an invisible presence, topping it a life-sized figure of Numsenmur standing motionless, soldier's pike by his side.

The image faded and Flores paused beneath a leafy tree to rest in its shadow, which lay across a low stone bench beside the estate wall. His eyes drew shut, and he slept.

When he awoke, another brief day of twelve hours had passed. The suns were gone. Dusk's heavy pallor was deepening rapidly, and a gathering of moons etched the tinseled sky. Flores rubbed his eyes before realizing that something had struck him. A pebble had caused him to wake. Above the garden, spires of the palace glittered. To the right, the estate wall vanished in rows of thick greenery. To the left, the wall turned the corner at the riverbank and doubled back. A soft bubbling wafted as the rivulet cascaded over artificial falls. Belatedly, Flores realized his peril. Lulled by the garden and the quiet vastness of the Maalstrom night, he had committed the gravest error possible for a Vensor politician—he was alone.

A second pebble bounced. Eyes darting, Flores leaped to his feet. Then he saw it—a figure beside round bushes, edging closer. It waved its arms. A scroll unrolled and flapped. The man seemed unarmed and again gestured. The intruder was startling. Almost naked, his limbs and torso were strongly muscled, his hair was trimmed short, and he had evidently just come through water, as attested by the water dripping from his limbs.

Flores though he looked like an assassin and grew calmer. If assassins looked like themselves, they would kill no one. A lost petitioner, he thought, or a new reticent underling. He could summon the estate guards with a shout. Some would doubtless be near, though invisible in the twilight. Noting that the man was unarmed, Flores approached. Stepping forward, the stranger pointed behind Flores and upwards, as if to direct his glance. Flores was reluctant to

turn. The man continued to say nothing but worked his mouth, waved the scroll, and pointed. Finally, curiosity prevailed, and Flores turned to look.

The man sprang. A hand clamped Flores' mouth, and another gripped an arm, and Flores was dragged into the bushes where the stranger crooked one arm about his throat as if to throttle him, then inexplicably paused. He looked at Flores, arched his brows and nodded toward the bench that the noble had just quit.

In the gathering darkness, a dim silhouette could be seen upon the bench, a stubby iron sword weaving evilly. Flores noted: iron for evening; an iron blade would spark with starlight. The figure hopped to the ground and peered while a second shadow descended from the tree. For half a minute, the pair searched. Finally they exchanged glances, re-climbed the tree, and were lost to sight. Moments later, they reappeared at the coping and slid over the estate wall.

Flores let his breath go. The Triumvirate had never come closer to ending the House of Turlicum. Only now did he realize the habit he had formed of resting on this bench at twilight. It was inevitable that his enemies would learn of it. As the sun's last pale light died, his savior turned and discovered Flores' upended dagger resting just behind his neck while they lay. The stranger went limp and released him. But for the arching of his brows, the stranger—and perhaps Flores as well—would have died.

Flores stood. "What is your name, servant?" His distrust had only subsided, not vanished. Surely the intruder knew the penalty of assaulting a noble. "Well, speak! You have done your duty well. I am not like some other nobles. I reward those who assist me, even if they violate the law by laying hands upon me."

The intruder did not answer, but pointed to his mouth and worked his lips. Then he placed his hands about his throat.

Flores' eyes widened. "You're mute!" He scratched his head. "Still, you are a good man. How long have you worked for me? You do not? Then how did you get into these gardens? They are off limits to all but my retinue."

The man pointed to the back wall of the estate, the parapet by the river, then pointed up and made pantomimic gestures to indicate climbing. Flores glanced at the parapet. The vertical surface was blank with no adjacent trees or handholds.

"I don't understand."

He handed Flores the scroll.

Flores read the caption scrawled in spidery Vensor script. "FST. That must be Flores-Sumvensor-Turlicum."

The stranger nodded, and Flores resumed reading:

I need to speak with you. I have information that may be worth your life. Only in person. You can trust my slave, Tilsis. If you permit, he will bring you to me tomorrow evening in secret and in safety. Only alone. Please trust. You have nothing to fear.

-CNS

Flores' brows crawled up his forehead as the intruder again motioned toward the back wall.

"You climbed the wall, ten feet high, to deliver this?"

The servant spread his hands and bowed.

Flores sheathed his dagger. "Can you tell me who this CNS is?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Can you return tomorrow after dark, the same way? In secret?"

He spread his hands.

“Then do so.” Flores gazed at the shimmering stars that spanned the horizon. “Some say that nought occurs by chance. But others that there is nothing *but* chance. I wish to know. I will come with you to meet this CNS.”

As Flores watched, the damp body turned and loped through the garden. With little effort, the intruder hurdled a low hedge, and, attaining the rear wall, scrambled nimbly up the sheer face. Within seconds, he sank over the top. Flores was glad it had not been he sent to murder him.



For maps, pictures, and original illustrations, be sure to purchase the print versions of MAALSTROM and THE SELK KING. These paperbacks, and other works by Yours Truly can be had at www.equuspublishing.com.

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For maps, pictures, and original illustrations, be sure to purchase the print versions of MAALSTROM and THE SELK KING. These paperbacks, and other works by Yours Truly can be had at www.equuspublishing.com. There are only two books in the Maalstrom Series. I had originally conceived the story as a trilogy, thus the occasional references to what seems to be a third book, but I never wrote the third book. I may still write a short story “prequel” at some point, but the ravages of time seem destined to prevent this. Thank you for your time and kind attention.

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If you enjoyed reading

THE SELK KING

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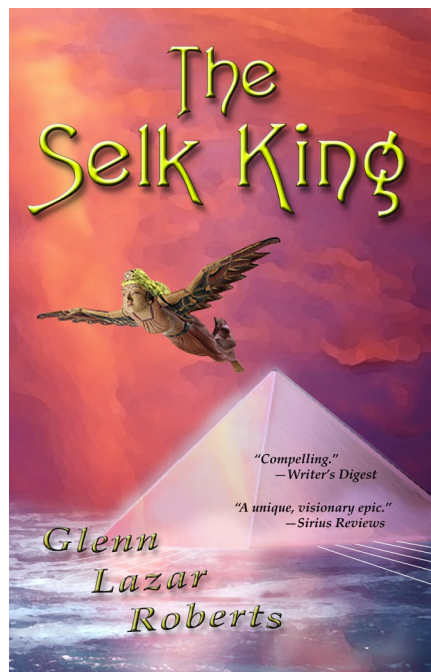
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Don't miss BOOK 2 in

THE MAALSTROM SERIES

From Dark Lotus Books

“THE SELK KING”



Flores pursues abducted Amina to the Island of the Dead, recruiting a ship and a crew to rescue her. A new roster of misanthropes appear: Fish, slave of the Golden Cyclops and the eternal whirling sceptre; the senile miser King Kot, whose “piebald raiment awaits.” On the island, Flores, like Dante, ascends the many levels of Ra’Allah, or Heavenhell, climbing an intricately carved tower of black basalt from its baser regions to the cloud-driven city of the malkops, or selks, which is constructed entirely of the diamond-hard tear-glass called irsrem. After many delays in strange locales, Flores leads his clansmen in a climactic invasion of the city in the clouds. Behind the Veil secrets lurk in this thinking man’s swashbuckling fantasy tale with non-stop action.

REVIEWS of The Selk King

“Compelling. Any sci-fi enthusiast would love this book.” —*Writer’s Digest*

A great sci-fi fantasy story. If you like a sci-fi fantasy story then this is the one for you. The story line was fantastic and intriguing and the characters were developed and interesting. A good read!” — Marilyn Vine, *Vine Voice*

“A complex feat of world-building postulating a bizarre yet philosophically intriguing and enterprising alternative to Evolution...” —Mallory A. Haws, *The Haunted Reading Room Reviews*

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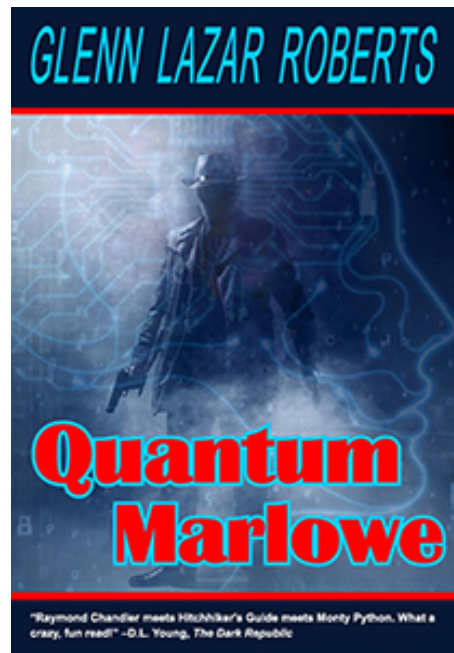
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AND MORE SCI-FI / FANTASY NOVELS

By

Glenn Lazar Roberts

“QUANTUM MARLOWE”



Pete Marlowe, a tiny but tough private detective, is having a bad day. Two mad scientists abducted him, lopped off his pinky finger, and installed a red button that enables him to walk through walls. Now they are blackmailing him to do their bidding. Can “Pinky’s” street smarts survive the scientists’ border-jumping between dimensions? Or is Pete destined to be marooned in a parallel universe? Quantum mechanics meets hard-boiled detective in this classic film noir take-off of the famous novels by Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett.

“I stepped through the wall and the molecules that formed the gypsum and paint on the building that was the pride of Ciudad Juarez again became impenetrable. Outside, I re-attached my finger. Pinky. I smiled at the nickname. Pinky this, moronista! I told you no jail could hold me. Who the hell fucks over his worst enemy, gives him the keys to the Universe, then fucks him over again? Well, that’s their hard luck. *When Pinky gives them the finger, they stay fingered. I’m just that kinda guy.*”

REVIEWS of Quantum Marlowe

“Raymond Chandler meets Hitchhiker’s Guide meets Monty Python. What a crazy, fun read!” —D.L. Young, author *The Dark Republic* series.

“Just wow. Quantum Marlowe is a fun romp that mixes the detective genre with science fiction. It brought to mind authors like Terry Pratchett and Douglas Adams. Funny, vivid, and often strange, this book is its own adventure and worth the journey.” —jddehart

“Marlowe is fearless, funny, savvy, and brave. Cracking good action mystery...funny, sardonic and fast-paced. Loved every minute!!” —Kelly Watley (5 of 5 stars)

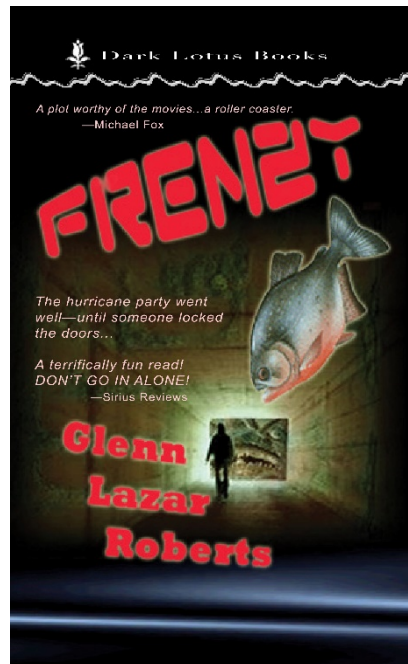
“Quantum Marlowe is a quirky tech noir which features a gritty, fast talking detective, traveling through parallel universes and dimensions to track down a powerful relic. Once he obtains it, Marlowe must outmaneuver a drug-pushing mafia queen, mad-hatter scientists, and a gang of hardened killers, in order to keep it and return it to its rightful place. The clever narrative takes us through a high-stakes, high energy quest while introducing intriguing ideas of quantum dynamics... An entertaining joyride that challenged the reader with its complexity and layered nuances.” —Felicia Mack Little, author of *Scions of Darkness*

“Glenn Lazar Roberts is one of the finest writers of unconventional prose in contemporary fiction. His wonderfully inventive plots and mastery of the language place him in the company of Calvino, Burges, Gass...” —C. Thorman, author *Holy Orders*

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And Horror from the latest Laboratories of Science...

“FRENZY”



The hurricane party went well—until shattered windows forced the party-goers into the Cancer Research Center's basement. Their only escape is through pedestrian tunnels, a labyrinth of neglected spark-lit corridors that are rapidly flooding. Leading others to safety through the maze, pretty biologist Carmen Niles falls into a deadly scheme involving a biker drug gang, psychics, stock fraud, and one-minute piranhas made by experimental computer 'genechips'. A roller-coaster plot that leaves the reader guessing the next twist through the very last page.

REVIEWS of Frenzy

“A terrifically fun read! Glenn Lazar Roberts squeezes a lot of horror, mystery and plain old fun into his new novel, *Frenzy*. Its pages are filled with a host of quirky characters with monikers such as “Wild Bill,” “Carm,” and “Cracker,” and the brisk dialogue and tight plot will keep the reader guessing until the final page. My suggestion? Grab a copy as fast as you can, turn down the lights and read this fast-paced novel. —Jerry Mohrlang, author of *Sarawak* and *Mujahidin*.”

“This is a superb novella to pop in on and be thrilled with. Lots of twists and turns, lots of pop back-and-forth banter, and plenty of surprises. It’s written as a thriller with a subtle supernatural element mixed in. The author’s style makes it an easy read, with a quick paced flow. Several fully developed characters, each with their own unique story thread, lead to a well orchestrated avalanche of pandemonium. For those looking for entertainment, especially some thriller / horror, this is a good choice. Will help the day at the pool or trip on the plane fly right by. Definitely recommended.” —Troy F. Tinsman

“A plot worthy of the movies! *FRENZY* by Glenn Lazar Roberts is a perfect example of building

tension... Just when you think you have it all figured out, the plot twists again and sends you giddily in a different direction.” —Michael Fox, author of *Theater Boy*

“Glenn Lazar Roberts’ fabulist thriller [has] skillfully woven topical issues—cancer research, technology, fraud—through a hair-raising plot. *Frenzy* is a super story. The reader turns pages eagerly right up to the astounding resolution. A must-read.” —Carolyn Thorman, author of *Holy Orders*.

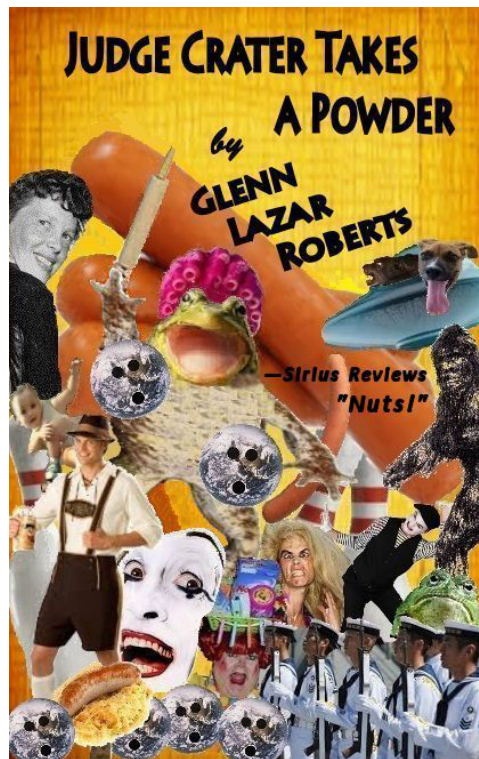
In FRENZY, Glenn Lazar Roberts takes the ideas of the physicist Stephen Wolfram on cellular automata and pushes them to the limit, weaving a tightly plotted thriller that is perfect for hard-core science fiction buffs.” —*Sirius Reviews*

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BOOK 1

Adventures of Maggie, the Radiated Lesbian Nun

“JUDGE CRATER TAKES A POWDER”



In this hilarious satire, J. Edgar Hoover, head of the FBI, recruits Judge Crater and Amelia Earhart to help uncover a conspiracy of aliens planning to flood the Earth to prepare it for colonization, with cowardly Mafia, recipe-obsessed nuns, space-folding transvestites, incompetent Nazi spies, cow-mutilating aliens, evil mimes, and dueling bible-quoters. Orson Welles tries to warn the public with his Martian broadcast, and future Social Justice Warrior Maggie is born on the planet Bogland. Will snowflakes, marshmallows, and the easily offended find Safe Spaces inside? *Heyll NO!* Will the reader

find lots of laughs? *Heyll YES!* Political Correctness may never recover from this inspired work of eccentric mania.

REVIEWS of Judge Crater Takes A Powder

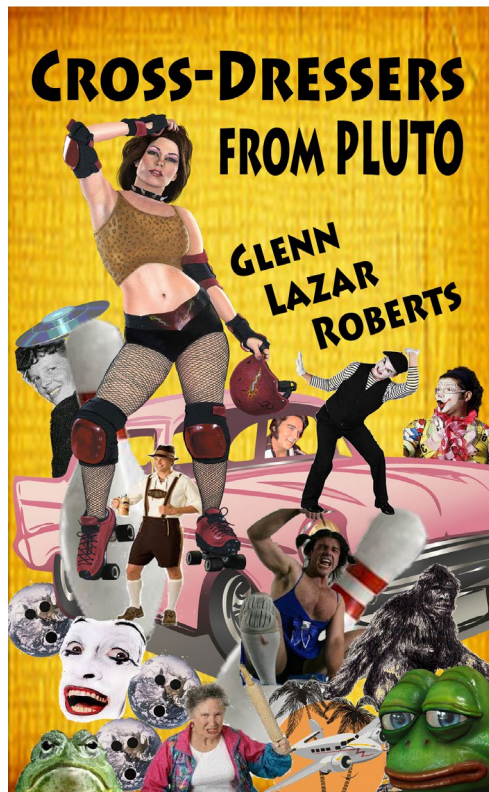
“Roberts interweaves historical fact with castles in the air, dubiousness and irony to create a fast-paced narrative filled with the almost plausible as well as out-and-out incredible in this sardonic romp... For those who like a bit of sarcasm swathed in quirkiness and screwball circumstance, Judge Crater should prove to be a worthwhile read. Happy to recommend for those not easily dismayed, repulsed, or daced.” –M.M.

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BOOK 2

Adventures of Maggie, the Radiated Lesbian Nun

“CROSS-DRESSERS FROM PLUTO”



Pop the Thunderbird wine and break open the nopalitos, because Maggie the Radiated Lesbian Nun is igniting fires and breaking hearts across the galaxy. Raised in a secret convent in Area 51, young Maggie is caught up in alien plans for global warming in this hilarious satire of political correctness featuring Amelia Earhart, J. Edgar Hoover, Elvis Presley, Jimmy Hoffa, D.B. Cooper, Howard Hughes, and more Evil Mimes than you can shake a stick at—which is highly recommended.

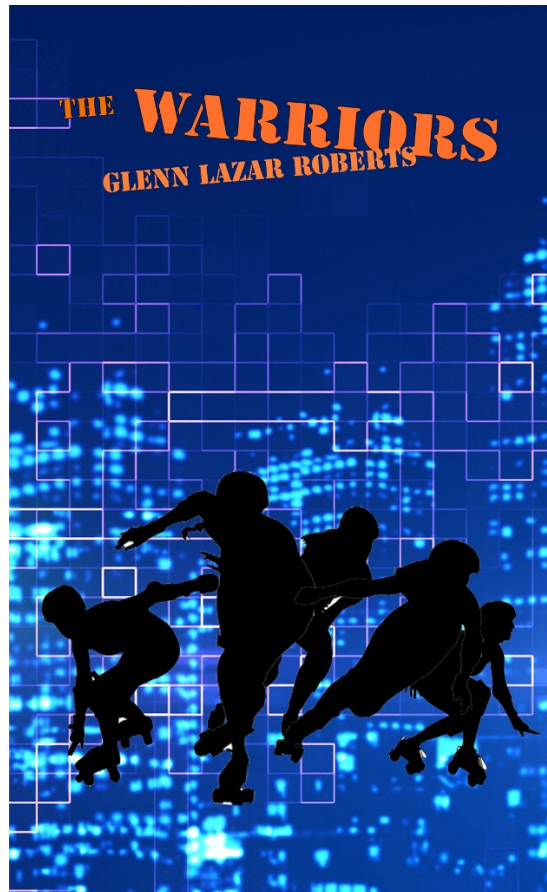
REVIEWS of Cross-Dressers From Pluto

“Nuts!” —*Sirius Reviews*

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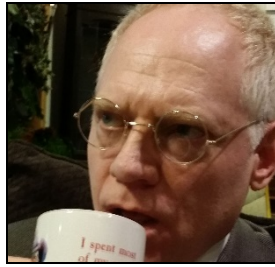
!! Don't miss BOOK 3 of Adventures of Maggie, the Radiated Lesbian Nun !!

“THE WARRIORS”



Maggie and her all-girl roller derby gang are framed for murder and pursued by every roller derby gang in Las Angeles in this sci-fi parody of the 1979 cult movie The Warriors. Will the Evil Mimes succeed in their plans for global warming? Can Maggie and her little band of Social Justice Warriors stop them?

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Glenn Lazar Roberts is an attorney and writer of sci-fi, horror, satire, and adventure fantasy novels. Glenn has taught college, professionally translated Arabic and Russian, hosts a writing critique circle, and has edited the work of many aspiring writers. He credits an eclectic group of famous authors for inspiring him to write, including Jack Vance, Robert E. Howard, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Mervyn Peake, H.P. Lovecraft, Arthur C. Clarke, and H.G. Wells, among many other Masters of the Art. "I love language. I am perpetually afloat on a sea of script."

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