

# The Coils of Hate

## (Virtual Reality book 3)

*Reviewed by Per Jorner*

Life in the decadent city of Godorno is not easy on the Judain minority. A shrewd people of mystics and merchants, they are often accused of usury and witchcraft and anything else that happens to be amiss. Now the ruler has declared them outlaws and mobs immediately form to go about waving pitchforks and smashing shop windows. The Judain, huddling in their underground congregations, just want to go and find the Promised Land where the Chosen People can live under the one true God. I have searched this premise long and hard for real-world parallels, but nothing seems to leap out.

Judain champion that you are, you decide city life is no longer to your taste. With pitchforks at your back you steal out of town on a barge, happy to leave that “stinking cess-pit” behind, and head for the upriver town of Bagoë, arriving there the next day or possibly the day after. With the world now open to you, you consider your options and... catch a lift with some barge-polars down to Godorno, where you sneak into town and return “at last” to “the hub of civilization”. Wait, what? Was there a reason for this little excursion? Maybe there's this awesome record store in Bagoë that you like to visit once a year, but, you know, it doesn't say.

Upon returning, you are astounded to find that your people are not doing so well. A plague and an earthquake have struck Godorno during the few days you spent hiking, and there is the small matter of rampant persecution. “All right, so I had some tiny indications of trouble myself, if you must count being chased by a lynch mob. But I thought after a little window-smashing we'd all slap each other on the back and make up! Like we always do! I only went away because - here, look, this is a really rare bootleg! Look at it. LOOK AT THE BOOTLEG.”

I was honestly hoping that The Coils of Hate would surpass Green Blood, but if it does, it's not by a lot. Mark Smith's writing lacks for some editing and the sheer number of inconsistencies, within and between sections, does little to help. When you're attacked in the street you are told there's no time to draw your sword, but if you have Streetwise there's time to strike up a conversation. Your rabbi and old friend Caiaphas is introduced with his “rumbling basso voice” twice, but his wife refers to you as “stranger”. The same Caiaphas chides you for your suggestion that one might offer resistance, then leaps up with a spear shouting that all must “go forth and die gloriously against the Overlord's men”. The rest of the Judain club him like a seal and get on with making up some proper plans: to “stay hidden, strike only at night”, because then no one can “say the Judain are cowards”. In order to “free the city from the grip of hatred and unreason”, you start a “campaign of assassinations”. As leader of the resistance movement you are given the pick of hideouts and choose “the best option”, but once in position you are told that “the other Judain have taken all the best bolt holes” and “you will find a better hideaway in time”. Which possibly explains why your advisers were giggling strangely all through the meeting. Serves you right for sitting out the earthquake, I guess.

One could go on. In 4 you can choose to “fling the trap door open”, but once in 61 this option has turned into “fling up the door and jump down into the cellar”, to which could be appended “like a moron”. In 7 you have a choice whether to “wait and see” or “walk out into the street”, but if you choose to remain in hiding, your first action in the next section is to “walk out into the street”. Even characters without Swordplay are good enough fencers to square off momentarily against Tyutchev the DMPC, “one of the greatest living warriors”, and Agility alone is enough to wound him a second time, but if you then go to 351, “he isn't even wounded”. In 144 you enter the Tower of the Sentinel and start climbing a staircase within, but in the next section you are climbing it on the outside. 180 starts with you outside the “topmost door” leading to the “topmost room”, then has you “walk on up a narrower spiral of stairs /.../ and at last pause before the final door.” I'm pretty sure this mangles the definition of “topmost”.

One could go on still, but that would take us, perhaps, too far into plot spoiler territory. It doesn't get better, though. There are repetitions, geographic and temporal confusion, bad continuity, missing exposition, unexplained reversals, shabby justifications, revisionist time

hops, several stupid loops, outright lies about what courses of action certain options actually involve, and some very questionable moralities. In what is possibly the biggest continuity error, you can have the entire Judain rebellion called off, only for the book to proceed as if this had never happened. One of the loops is funny because you are able to regain any amount of Life Points by continually sacrificing some of your Judain brethren. "Hey guys, you go fight the good fight for a while and I'll be over here resting. I mean, guarding my bootleg. OUR bootleg. The great bootleg of the Judain! I'll always remember you for your sacrifice... er, you, and you, and you as well, whatever your names are."

Two vermin-based challenges may serve to closer illustrate the mutable twilight world you find yourself inhabiting. The snake room is full of snakes, separating you from the exit as they are wont to do. Separating you from the snakes are five platforms, too far apart for you to jump from one to another. You may therefore be tempted to navigate the room using a vague arrangement of dangling ropes of doubtful physical properties, but apparently large parts of what actually happens during this acrobatic outing have been left out, and it's up to you to figure out what they are. It's easy to get the impression that ropes and platforms alike are moving around in some way when you're not looking, since only in retrospect can you work out what a denomination like "the rope" or "the next platform" must actually refer to. Moreover, if you happen to walk or run across the room, there's no reference to its special geometry, again making you wonder exactly how the platforms actually work. As a finishing touch, add in an uninformed life-or-death choice, because that clearly provides the excitement the room was otherwise lacking.

The promise of delicious cake leads you on to the spider room, but again you are separated from your reward by something dangerous and icky. The spider room immediately turns into the spider \_roof\_ since the ceiling is disintegrated, allowing the spider - which actually spans the entire width of the room, roof, whatever - to descend from directly above. So far I have no problem with this. Once killed, the pest "hunches up against the ceiling". There. First problem. I'm not sure why being killed would cause anything to collapse up rather than down, but more to the point there is no ceiling. If there were any bit of ceiling left the spider would have had to pass directly through it to get to you; if it could do this the ceiling would presumably not need to be shattered in the first place; and if there's a second ceiling above the first ceiling initially sandwiching the spider (which would be an oddly intriguing arrangement), the book should not have said that there was just the one ceiling. There are other problems. If you use thrown weapons to kill the spider, they are said to be "out of reach high in the dead spider's web". It isn't said what this web, not mentioned at all before this point, is actually suspended from. It isn't said why your weapons would come anywhere near the web; the spider was explicitly resting on top of the ceiling and from there it only moved down towards you. Maybe, like the "topmost door" turned out not to actually be topmost, the structure that "tops the tower" does not in fact top the tower.

There's no way to properly visualize this freakish double-exposure quantum reality because the information given simply doesn't add up. One might just as well shrug and assume that critical and extraordinary circumstances have been left out of the descriptions (greased rails, invisible flying gnomes, servo motors, portals). It seems to me that a mess such as this could only have been written by a person who a) was too detached from the scenario to pay any mind to details, and was content to simply turn out a number of likely words in succession, or b) knew perfectly well that things weren't adding up, but figured he was getting paid anyway, or c) suffered from a tragic lack of short-term memory but soldiered on bravely (and then got the result past the misty-eyed editors). It's as if every other paragraph Mark Smith came back from putting on a new kettle and went, "What was I on about? Oh, spiders or something. In a tower?" And this is what the entire book is like. Some books may struggle with details; this one can't even keep a grasp on the context, and either it doesn't notice, or it doesn't care. This just isn't how you do it.

Separating readers from the end of this review (i.e. cake) are these bullet point notes:

\* Terry Oakes' internal art is a little more appropriate this time, varying in attractiveness from the sinister lepers and caged corpses to the unimpressive Jade Warriors. The pictures for 72 and 303 aren't visible from the paragraphs in question. The picture of the Tower of the Sentinel should probably be at 144, but has been placed opposite 235-236, which is not near any relevant paragraph. Also the tower is depicted as round, but according to 50 it has

corners. In the art for 107, the representation of the application of the chains and that of the application of the jewel are both wrong (that the text subsequently gets it wrong too doesn't really help). The picture for 281 shows Skakshi having drawn two daggers from a belt across his chest, but in the text he draws them one at a time from his boots.

\* Further examples of remarkably bad transitions: 86 to 227, 100 to 153, 27 to 75, 23 to 203 (which is odd no matter how you get there), 171 to 155 (wtf), 166 to 152, 193 to anything and then anything to 316 (seriously, wtf), 191 to 250 (it would have worked as an option in 188), 207 to 362, 197 to 43, 319 to 266, 415 to 413, 72 to 167 (I still can't believe how wtf this one is).

\* The end of 315 looks like there are missing options, unless the book is just daring you to put it away and do something else.

\* In 302 you are given the option to leave the trade road and go north ("through brigand territory"), and if you do so you are said to be heading towards Burg (with no single reference to brigands). But if the map in Green Blood is to be believed, the road in question goes straight east, and Burg is far to the west of Godorno, with Bago and the Palayal river in between. I suppose the road leading only to bag-end Burg might be termed "trade road" as well, but if this is what we're talking about I would have to wonder what's up with the crazy horse galloping in a straight eastward line out of Godorno and then doing an unmentioned hairpin turn before stopping, traversing two rivers in the meantime. And it still doesn't explain how leaving the road will take you closer to Burg than following it.

\* 228 uses the word "inflammable" oddly.

\* Why does 308 instruct you to go to 160 instead of 100 when it just told you to delete the Sunset codeword, the checking of which is all that goes on in 160? Not that it should tell you to delete the codeword, since that's what creates one set of loops. 146 gets it right, even though it tosses the codeword idea overboard to do so.

\* 412 points to 413. 32, 163, 257, 319 and 355 point to sections across the page.

\* 148 presumably refers to the Satori codeword, so why doesn't it say so? As it is this doesn't have any actual effect.

\* Why are the chains treated as a possession, when you could obviously never carry them around? Except that when you do use them I must admit it does appear you run back and forth and toss them around at will all by your lonesome, but that's just another Death Star-sized plothole. 224 seems to indicate the book has in fact forgotten completely what the chains are and where they came from. It's a little as if a plastic sword-shaped cocktail stick had turned into a giant troll-hewing claymore because the author's notes only read "sword" - no, wait, it is EXACTLY LIKE THAT.

\* In 147 you "cleave the great tentacle in two" even though you may not have a sword. And in 375, after you are crushed between a giant monster and a castle, the book still finds it prudent to point out that "you lose the sword", again though you may not have one.

\* Oh, and the monster that smashes the castle to pebbles and then goes on to trample the entire city is the same monster that can't dislodge a single pillar from a temple portico. Maybe it's a holy pillar anchored with holy mortar and topped by a holy roof held down by holy gravity, it doesn't say though. I'm pretty sure the pillar doesn't still stand there once the whole city has been ground to rubble.

\* You can't have Agility in 44. Also it is somewhat ludicrous that half a day's walk from Godorno, when you get chased by horsemen at an initial distance of a quarter of a mile, and you are already "greatly weakened" by disease, you are still able to run on foot ahead of them all the way back to the city. In the final stage of the chase, "they are slowly running you down, urging their mounts to greater efforts". What kind of sensationally abysmal efforts were they putting in earlier in the day? I have difficulty reconciling on the one hand the image of horses thundering along with riders bent double and cracking their whips, and on the other hand the image of an exhausted cripple wheezing and shuffling at the roadside, and the distance between them getting only fractionally smaller.

\* In the fight in 283 you “get your back to a corner, making it difficult for the soldiers to press their advantage”. How about the fairly adequate advantage of being able to poke all their swords straight into your unarmed ass? I mean, how do you defeat three armed guards from a corner if you have no weapon and no martial skill? It doesn't say, there's just a cut and then you “step over the soldiers' bodies”. I find this slightly unnerving, who is this guy?

\* In 345 it is explained that your amulet grows hot when danger threatens, but your leather jerkin “protects” you from this heat so that you don't even feel it. I'm sure there's a genius explanation for this arrangement but it doesn't say. The amulet is then ripped from your neck, “scattering the links of the fine gold chain across the cobbles”. I'm no chain physics expert but it seems to me that it should be exceedingly difficult to pull a chain in such a way that more than one link breaks and falls off. Chain links aren't beads on a string. Maybe there's some kind of amazingly impractical “break one, break all” chain technology I am unaware of, but again it doesn't say. And then finally when you're ambushed it says that “if only you hadn't lost your charm amulet it might have warned you of the danger”. Duhhh, no.

\* In 135 you must again touch the amulet before you can tell if it's trying to warn you of anything, but this time after it burns you, “you have dropped the pendant” and it is “too hot to pick up”. But it was hanging around my neck? Help. I do find it very amusing though that you sustain injury trying to scan for danger; I can imagine the amulet piping up, “Told you.”

\* The Charms option in 246 should read: “If not, but you have...”

\* In 282 an arrow fired at you while you're invisible turns invisible as well, but in 263 dust thrown at you while you're invisible remains visible.

\* In 40 you can hear “moans and screams” from Grond while inside the Overlord's Palace, which is separated from it by the width of the entire city. I don't think we know how big Godorno is, but we know it takes several minutes to ride a galloping horse along the street inside the city gates, and Grond is a stone fortress with “ten-foot thick walls”. From this information I think we can deduce that the protagonist has ears the size of a cricket court.

\* 140 starts, “The leap was further than you thought”, then goes on to give a completely unrelated and non-cumulative reason for your failure to make the leap. As if... someone was typing out leap-related sentences at random?

\* Why isn't the diamond among the things you can sell in 235?

\* In 244 Charms is used to create a frightening illusion, but in 341 this is done with Spells.

\* In 137 and 400 it is said that Hate “cannot abide to touch you, for your soul carries none of the taint on which it thrives. /../ It cannot tolerate the presence of goodness within its very being.” But you can get to this point and still be responsible for your share of killings and betrayals and, oh, I don't know, A CAMPAIGN OF TERROR. But worse even than that is the implication that of all the countless people in the city who were arbitrarily snatched up by Hate, not one was “untainted” or innocent, or at least not nearly as good as you, the superhero.

\* Juvenile Review Humour 1: You can surprise Tarkamandor the Sage at his workbench busily polishing his staff. Tee hee hee snort snort.

\* Juvenile Review Humour 2: The case for a gender-neutral protagonist: “Lucie runs her hand over your chest.” Giggle giggle giggle cough.

There are a few things that The Coils of Fear does better than Green Blood. One is skill use: there are no longer long battle sequences, although there are still spell choices. These often kill you off based on some arbitrary logic, which may or may not square with logic invoked in similar situations elsewhere in the book. I'd rather the book didn't try to make you feel stupid for something that was entirely made up for you. I also don't like that it sets up “traps” for you, where using a skill will mean needing some other, specific skill in order to survive, but this is only done a couple of times. Only two skills are practically worthless this time around and this is quite possibly preferable to having convoluted reasons for including them (but then again Green Blood already set a precedent for excluding skills entirely).

Another improvement is the general setting and mood. Green Blood had a very vague setting and conflict where things never really came together. Here the environment is a crumbling, darkening city and that in itself provides for a tighter and more characteristic backdrop (although there was room to breathe more life into it, for sure). It's a pity that your actual exploits in this setting are so erratic and sketchy and that friends and villains alike are so badly handled. The haphazard way that sections are connected means that everyone involved comes off as helplessly inconsistent and oblivious, and successfully dealing with them isn't rewarding so much as random. OK, so a lot of the people you meet are mad or at least half-mad. What's your excuse?

So as not to be guilty of holding back any two-edged praise, I'll mention that I eventually gained some equivocal appreciation for the portrayal of Lucie, the floozy. Her character, if you take an unfocused look at the entirety of your possible run-ins with her, will seem crafty, frail, double-dealing, selfish, flawed - that is to say, very human. Ironically this is not least because in this context, apparent inconsistencies are not necessarily a bad thing, but can instead serve an evocative function. However, in no single game will there be a proper "Lucie arc", but rather her behaviour (and yours) will be queer, ungrounded and annoying. Her depth is more of a meta-phenomenon that emerges when information is selectively freed from the book's structure and causality - or to put it cynically, when freed from the hands of the author.

The diamond heist sub-adventure is all right. It's short and makes little sense, but... it's all right. Because sneaking is fun and everyone wants more thief adventures and likes to complain about Midnight Rogue not delivering. Remarkably this quest also sports the book's only blatant example of non-copy-and-paste: each approach has its own description of your arrival at the shop.

For the most part, however, the things you see and do end up being rather lacklustre, and even when it looks like the book has managed to summon up some powerful image (like the march of the lepers), the sound of a ball dropping is always just around the corner and nothing ever really pays off. To my mind such a book cannot even rise to the level of half-decent; there are worse things than being just a piece of uninspired handiwork and here's an example. The Coils of Hate is akin to a jigsaw puzzle with a nice-looking picture on the box and pieces that on closer inspection lack the potential to interlock. Definitely there are books with less characteristic themes. Certainly there are books with more random victory conditions. Absolutely there are books with worse use of mechanics. Surely there are books with shorter attention spans... no, I really have my doubts about that. I don't think there's a book except possibly Green Blood which can approach the same level of pure concentrated being wrong as this one, and not even Green Blood made me want to shout, "No, it wasn't like that, you moved the &##!@ goalposts for your &##!@ convenience, stupid &##!@ amnesiac book!" The crimes of The Coils of Hate are that of its plot-powered nemesis - it threshes wildly, it is intrinsically offensive, and it drips purple goo onto your sofa.

As for how it ends, I won't tell you that... oh, OK, I will. You play the bootleg back to Hate and it's a really rare bootleg and you get on a barge and discuss it and things. Roll credits over river sunset. Aww.