



# ***ACTION!***

***Writing Better Action  
Using Cinematic  
Techniques***

**IAN THOMAS HEALY**

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**Ian Thomas Healy**

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## INTRODUCTION

*Excerpt from Pariah's Moon by Ian Thomas Healy, Copyright 2011*

He heard a rustle and footsteps behind him and turned to see three men—two Elves and a Dwarf with an eye patch—had entered the store. One Elf and the Dwarf split up and headed toward different aisles. Giele's hackles raised; he knew a flanking maneuver when he saw it. The third man, tall and broad-shouldered, ducked to avoid a low-hanging collection of lanterns and smiled without humor at Cianid. He wore a hat with a shallow brim and a quail feather stuck in the band. His blond hair fell about his shoulders, framing a handsome face that spoke of good breeding. Over a blue silk shirt, his soft leather vest had been dyed black but for the decorative fringe work, which was the color of dried blood. He rolled a match back and forth in his teeth and walked with a bully's swagger.

In spite of the heat of the day, he sported a long, dark coat.

He wore a single pistol on a belt across his waist, riding high for what must have been a cross-body draw. The pistol's grip was well-polished and the edges of the holster were scuffed from use.

"Howdy, Cianid. You havin' trouble with this stranger?" He ducked to avoid a low-hanging collection of lanterns and smiled without a trace of humor. His drawl was much stronger than most of those Giele had heard so far in Verigo.

A muscle twitched in Cianid's jaw. She had history with this man, and not of a pleasant sort, from what Giele could infer. "He's just a customer, Rarik."

Rarik. So this was the man who'd been so free with his knife upon Shali. The slow burn of righteous fury started to spread outward from Giele's heart to the tips of his fingers and toes.

Rarik plucked an apple from a bin and polished it on the sleeve of his blue silk shirt. "And so am I. How much?" He jingled his purse as he took a bite.

The other Elf and Dwarf had moved into positions where they could attack Giele without being caught in each other's crossfire if they chose to do so. They all wore pistols, but Giele's was in one of his saddlebags, and his bow in its case outside with his horse. All he had on him was the knife given to him by the 136th. He winced at the irony. They often joked in the Army about the futility of bringing a sword to an archery battle, and here he had brought a knife to a gunfight.

"On the house, Rarik." Cianid's clenched jaw stood out in sharp relief.

His eyes widened in mock surprise. "Oh ho, so you're giving things away, are you?" He stepped toward her. "What else is free today?"

"Easy, Scarface." The Dwarf cocked his pistol and pointed it at Giele when he started to move. Giele never even saw him draw it. "This ain't none of your business."

Cianid stood her ground as Rarik circled her, looking her up and down in appreciation. His eyes lingered upon her like a hungry cat regarding a pigeon. "I've told you before and I'll tell you again. No."

"Come on, little filly. I ain't gonna hurt you. I just thought maybe we could get to know each other a little better is all." He took another bite of apple and wiped juice from his chin with the back of his hand.

"I'm not one of your whores." She put on a brave face but the quiver in her voice betrayed her fear of him. Giele shifted his weight onto the balls of his feet.

He stopped behind her. She stiffened as he leaned forward to speak into her ear. "Ah, but you should be, with a face and a body like yours. You could be one of my high-priced attractions. Don't you agree, boys? Wouldn't you pay real crowns for a piece of this ass?" He slapped her rear and she jumped away as if scalded by his touch.

The other two thugs murmured their agreement. Giele's fingers found the iron handle of the heavy cooking pan where it rested amid his pile of supplies—a poor weapon, but better than nothing. He hadn't moved his hand more than an inch since the men first entered the store. He moved it another inch.

"Get out of my store, Rarik. I want no part of your business."

"But I want part of yours." He leered at her and licked his lips. "And I always get what I want."

"The lady asked you to leave, friend," said Giele. "Perhaps it would be best if you did."

Rarik spun to face him and took another bite of apple. He chewed for a moment and then spat it back in Giele's face. "You're that feller everyone's raisin' a stink about. The marked man. I already done threw you out of my place today. I'd be doin' this town a favor if I shot you where you stand."

Giele made no move to wipe the fragments of apple from his face, but tightened his grip on the iron handle. "Seems rather like I could say the same thing about you." He kept his voice low.

"What was that? What did you say, you boar-rutting moon-faced son of a diseased whore?"

He took one more step toward Giele, and that was close enough.

#

We all know what's going to happen next; we've all seen this scene, or a variation of it, played in dozens of different movies. Most writers, though, get all skittish and twitchy at the idea of writing something as complicated as a fight in a general store. How many times have you found yourself facing an incipient action scene with trepidation? Maybe you wrote a couple lines, then quit. Or maybe you skipped ahead. Or maybe you just knocked your hero on the head so you wouldn't have to write it.

The fear of action scenes is all too common among writers today, and in this book, I'll give you the tools to overcome that fear. Instead of fearing your action scenes, you'll look forward to them with all the anticipation of a kid on Halloween afternoon. But first, let's look at how we got here in the first place—why action scenes are the bane of so many writers.

## IT'S HOLLYWOOD'S FAULT, OR, WHY JOHNNY CAN'T WRITE ACTION SCENES

I'm going to go out on a limb here and assume everyone reading this has seen a movie. If you've never seen a movie, well, you probably shouldn't be reading this book because you have a barn to raise and a beard to grow.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and before, writers had far more leeway to write action than they do today. Outside of live performances, books were the only game in town when it came to entertaining people. Consequently, readers had to imagine whatever the writer described, sometimes without any frame of reference at all. Motion pictures changed all that. Suddenly, filmmakers could take their imagination and, through the use of carefully-planned stunts and special effects, film exactly what *they* were imagining. By committing those images to film, they shared their action scenes as they intended them to look with mass audiences. Instead of audiences having to imagine, they could sit passively and observe someone else's imagination.

For example: *The two men, one garbed in shining black and the other in soft brown, battled across the floor with their laser swords.* I'll bet most of you immediately pictured the Darth Vader-Obi-Wan Kenobi duel in *Star Wars: A New Hope*. Your memory of the scene as it was shot filled in the details without me describing them. If I'd written that sentence as part of a story that involved neither of those characters, you'd still think of the movie scene, because that's how motion pictures have affected the modern reader—by giving us a common frame of reference. For a century now, from the earliest silent films loaded with dangerous and creative stunts, to the shootouts of the Westerns, to the car chases of the '60s and '70s, through the martial arts movie craze of the '80s and the CGI era after that, action scenes have become indelibly imprinting upon our minds. We've become a visually-oriented culture instead of an imagination-oriented one.

So what's a modern writer to do to reach this jaded reading audience?

## DIRECTING THE SCENE

To effectively create an action scene that meets both the needs of the story and the needs of the reader, you must think more like a movie director. This means that you must consider not only the characters and their goals, but their *motion* through a given scene. Action scenes require characters to be in motion, and the effective description of that motion is what makes the difference between a good, cinematic-quality action scene and a merely adequate one. By making this transition from good to great, your action scenes will be exciting to read, memorable, and have a visceral quality that will have your readers turning the pages, desperate to keep up.

*Blocking and staging* are terms for the motions a character performs during the course of the scene and in what order. Example: Joe enters the room, spots his opponent, Bob, and charges to attack him at the room's center. Those are three simple stage directions one might find in a script, but they're just as effective to use when planning out an action scene in a novel.

*Scripting* is the dialogue of the characters uttered during an action scene. It's neither necessary nor welcome to place every single shout, grunt, or groan inside quotation marks. This is, after all, an action scene. But in movies, characters always seem to find enough time to carry on some kind of conversation during action scenes, whether taunting their opponents, arguing with them, calling for help, or uttering pithy zingers. Depending upon the tone you're trying to create, dialogue can be a good addition to any action scene that demands cinematic quality.

*Choreographing* is the planning of specific stunts performed by the characters in your scene. Choreographing is not the same thing as blocking. In the above example, the blocking of Joe is to enter the room and move to meet Bob. Once they're engaged in actual combat, choreographing takes the place of blocking. If Joe swings with a heavy left hook and follows it up with a knee to the nuts, that's choreographing. In other words, choreographing is the blow-by-blow breakdown of any given action scene, the interaction of characters.

Taking the example of Joe vs. Bob a little further, we can identify the characteristics of each part of the scene:

Joe flung open the door [*Blocking*]. Bob smirked at him from across the room, raised his hand, and beckoned to Joe [*Blocking*]. "Come get some," he said [*Scripting*].

With an inarticulate yell of rage, Joe charged across the floor as Bob dropped into a fighting stance [*Blocking*]. Joe launched a heavy left hook at Bob, but the man ducked underneath the blow [*Choreographing*]. Before Bob could respond, Joe drove his knee hard in between Bob's legs [*Choreographing*].

Bob turned the same color as the floor, grabbed himself, and collapsed [*Blocking*].

Poor Bob. If only he knew the fundamentals of action scenes, he might have given a better accounting of himself. Let's see if we can teach him.

## **Part 1: Defining the Action Scene**

## WHAT IS AN ACTION SCENE?

At its most basic level, an action scene is an expression of plot or character development through violence.

*Wait, violence? Is that really necessary?*

In a word, yes. We're still essentially the same cantankerous hominids we were a hundred thousand years ago. Ever since the first proto-human got angry about something done by one of his neighbors and picked up a rock to bash the other fellow's head in, we've been solving our disagreements through violent acts. And over the millenia, we've gotten very, very good at it.

We may use the trappings of civilization to try to curb our instinctive violent cores, but in the long run, virtually anyone is capable of committing violence at some level. Because of that, action scenes in media play to our low brains. Perhaps it's some kind of Jungian racial memory, but when we observe others in action, it gives us a kind of catharsis we haven't been able to obtain socially for thousands of years. That's why an action scene has to be every bit as important and planned out as a dramatic conversation, an erotic encounter, or a beautiful description. Readers crave that kind of feeling, and it's up to you to provide it.

*Can an action scene be nonviolent?*

Sorry, pacifists. No, it cannot. Because action scenes are defined by some level of violence, you cannot have a nonviolent action scene. Scenes without violence are driven forward by other impetuses, such as dialogue or emotional content. Sooner or later, though, a character will choose to take action which is counter to the goals of another character, and that will beget violence.

Your best bet is to make sure it's a good scene.

## WHO IS INVOLVED IN ACTION SCENES?

I've already hinted at this above. At its most basic level, an action scene involves two characters: the Hero (the narrator or focal character of the narrative) and the Opponent. The Hero is, of course, who your story is about. The Hero has a goal of some kind, and the Opponent has a goal which opposes it. That opposition creates the conflict which is the root of all action scenes (and indeed, all fiction). Without an Opponent, there can't be any conflict except the Hero's internal conflict, and that type of conflict cannot be resolved through action scenes.

When I say Opponent, I don't necessarily mean it *has* to be another character. If your Hero has to defeat a series of mechanical traps that will try to kill him before he reaches the Golden Cup of Valhalla (or whatever), those traps are Opponents; their goal is to kill him, while the Hero's goal is to survive. Opposite goals equals conflict equals action.

The problem with using non-character Opponents is that their goals can't change in response to the actions of the Hero. In the example above, if the Hero decides to forgo the traps and the Golden Cup to go party with Heidi the Valkyrie instead, the traps can't get angry and come after him. If you want real excitement and drama in your action scenes, Opponents should be characters. Let's look at the four essential types of conflict in literature and why three of them don't really work as a basis for action scenes.

### *Character vs. Self*

This type of conflict stems from a character having a problem with him- or herself. This makes for compelling drama and loads of introspection. Unfortunately, what it doesn't lend itself to is action. Unless you're going to have your character beating himself to a pulp in a bathroom, internal conflicts just aren't resolved by the external means of action scenes. Let's let our poor, conflicted characters figure themselves out and move onward to the next kind.

### *Character vs. Society*

At first glance, this might seem to work well for the basis of an action scene. Your character is fighting against something about his society. Doesn't that make him a rebel, prone to action? Well, no, not really. In this type of narrative conflict, the characters' issues are with social norms, mores, and other cultural factors. You can't really write a character having a fistfight with racism, for example. That's not the same as battling *agents* of society, but that's a different type of conflict.

### *Character vs. Nature*

Now we're getting somewhere. How many movies have this as their basis? It can be very exciting, watching characters as they flee molten lava, tornadoes, earthquakes, meteors, etc. There's room for lots of spectacle and insane action as Nature pushes on its merciless course. The main issue with this type of conflict when it comes to action scenes is the fact that Nature is not only merciless, but has no antipathy toward the characters. It may seem like the avalanche is trying to kill the characters, but the fact is that forces of Nature happen whether the characters are in the way or not. Yes, it can

create action, but an essential element of a true action scene is missing: the goal of the Opponent. Nature has no goals; Nature only exists. While this kind of conflict can sustain a story for awhile, eventually the reader will want to see a clear Opponent for the Hero—one whose goals work against the Hero. Overcoming Nature is possible but nowhere near as rewarding as overcoming an active Opponent.

#### *Character vs. Other*

This is the meat and potatoes of the action scene. When a character or group of characters enters into some kind of direct conflict with another character or group of characters (or machines, or zombies, or genius biker punks—you get the picture!), it becomes the catalyst for action scenes. In fact, all the other types of narrative conflict can make a story better if you can make the ultimate conflict personal: Hero versus Opponent.

Say your Hero is suffering from a mental disorder that is causing him to question his every move, paralyzing him. Okay, that's great, but if he discovers the root cause of his problem is that he was imprisoned and brainwashed by a sinister organization, he now has an identifiable Opponent, which makes his eventual victory (we hope!) much sweeter. Rebels against the Evil Empire is a noble cause, but when they're battling the Empire's top military commander, it becomes a personal conflict.

## WHERE DO ACTION SCENES TAKE PLACE?

In short, anywhere you want to set them.

I call the location of an action scene the *set piece*. Set pieces are crucial aspects of any action. Take two characters who are going to fight each other. Put them in a doctor's office. Now put them on a beach. Now put them in a crosswalk. Each of those scenes has the same basic conflict: two characters fight. But the setting itself necessarily dictates their actions within that scene. Characters in action will always interact with their surrounding environment, and that can be crucial in the development and resolution of conflict. Crashing through a picture glass window in a frontier town bar is quite different from crashing through a picture glass window on the 43<sup>rd</sup> floor of a Manhattan skyscraper.

A set piece doesn't have to be a static location like a room or a battlefield. Think about car chase scenes, for example. The road itself becomes the set piece, and the characters in their vehicles move through it.

When you're creating your set piece, take a little time to populate it with objects and bystanders. You don't have to mark every single item and person in a given location, but if the Hero and Opponent are going to interact with them in some way, give them a little thought and a reason to be where they are. If you really want your Hero to use a chainsaw against the zombies, he's not going to realistically find one in the pizza joint. He will, however, find heavy pans, two-handed pizza slicers (have you ever seen one? They're *wicked!*), and cooking oil. On the other hand, any number of interesting bystanders might be in the restaurant noshing on the Triple Pepperoni Heartburn Special when the zombies come. So if you have a mean streak toward Caucasian suburban thug wannabes, and have the zombies grab one when he trips over his pants because they only go halfway up his thighs, go right ahead.

Just make sure it all makes sense, because if your action scene doesn't follow the logic of the world you've created, it will come across as fake and hollow.

## WHY AN ACTION SCENE AT ALL?

Like all good fiction, it all comes down to conflict and the ways a character can choose to resolve it. Ultimately, these boil down to three possibilities. Any of these are legitimate means for dealing with the central conflict of your story, and be sure to weigh the pros and cons of each one when deciding your character's route.

*Avoidance.* The character chooses to avoid taking action in the face of conflict. This is the ultimate non-violent solution. This is a fairly common choice in the real world because people either don't want to get involved or else choose to involve themselves in a non-confrontational way. This is the equivalent of not answering the door when the Jehovah's Witnesses come calling.

*Dialogue.* The character chooses non-violent, active methods to resolve conflict. This often means the character argues his position or opens a negotiation dialogue with the opponent. This is a very common method of conflict resolution in the real world in a variety of circumstances. Dialogue is the staple tool of the courtroom drama, for example.

*Action.* Sometimes a problem is too serious to avoid, and the time for dialogue has passed. In those moments, an action scene must suffice. Or, as Padme Amidala described it in *Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones*, "aggressive negotiation."

## EXERCISES

1. Take an action sequence from your favorite movie and break it down according to *Who*, *What*, *Where*, and *Why*.

2. Analyze camera angles and compare them to narrative focus. How does a panoramic shot of a battle compare to a closeup of a character in that battle? In a narrative, how does a global, omniscient narrator change a reader's perception of a battle from a close, limited narrator?

## **Part 2: Building Blocks of Action Scenes**

## THE STUNT

*Excerpt from Pariah's Moon by Ian Thomas Healy, Copyright 2011*

Giele whipped the pan out, up, and across Rarik's face. It rang with the impact of iron on bone as Rarik flew backward into the middle of the aisle. Giele whirled around as the Dwarf shouted and fired his pistol. The bullet hit the pan with such force it almost twisted the handle from Giele's grasp. His hand went numb from the vibration of the metal. He glanced down and saw the bullet embedded in the pan's bottom. God's Blood! It had almost burst through the thick iron and into his chest.

The one-eyed Dwarf aimed again, pistol raised up toward Giele's head. He hurled the pan at the Dwarf. He tried to duck, but the iron edge caught him behind his right ear. He went down as fast as if Giele had shot him.

Giele yanked his knife from the scabbard strapped against the small of his back just as Cianid brought a jar of preserves down on the other Elf's head. His eyes rolled back and he dropped, bleeding blood and raspberries.

"Nicely done." Giele sheathed the blade again.

"Idiot. I had things under control until you got involved. Does trouble follow you everywhere or do you have to seek it out?"

#

The *Stunt* is the basic building block of the action scene. Think of a Stunt as a single camera shot or closely-related shots in film. All action scenes, even the most complex, can be broken down into a series of Stunts. A Stunt is either a single action undertaken by a character, or a brief flurry of related actions. There are four Stunts in the example at the beginning of this section. They are:

1. *Giele hits Rarik with the pan.*
2. *The Dwarf fires his gun at Giele.*
3. *Giele throws the pan at the Dwarf.*
4. *Cianid hits the Elf with a jelly jar.*

Stunts have several qualities. They are generally brief, often lasting only a single sentence. If the Stunt has several actions relating to it, it could last as much as a paragraph, but that is the longest it should go. If you are writing a Stunt and it seems like it should be broken into more than one paragraph, you are writing multiple Stunts. Think like a director. If you would yell "Cut!" after an action to reset for the next shot, that's a completed Stunt. A Stunt can be described at its simplest in a single sentence, like the examples above: *Character does something.*

Stunts always occur within a single set piece. Characters performing Stunts don't have to stay rooted to one spot, but if they move significantly within the set piece, it's probably multiple Stunts. Because Stunts are brief in real time, there isn't much room for dialogue, lengthy description, or internal monologuing.

One of the most important aspects of a Stunt is that it and of itself will never

resolve a main conflict. The equivalent would be spending two hundred pages setting everything up, only to have your Hero walk into a room, draw his pistol, and fatally shoot the main Opponent. Can that happen? Yes. Is it anticlimactic and a poor way to resolve the book? Most probably. A Stunt can be part of a larger sequence that resolves a main conflict (more on that later) but single, solitary Stunts have different uses for a plot.

A Stunt can be used as an effective means to introduce either a new character or a new subplot. These are when isolated acts (of violence, remember) have long-reaching consequences for the characters of the story. Luke Skywalker is about to be killed by a Tusken Raider on Tatooine when Ben Kenobi's arrival scares off the Sand Person. A young boy watches helpless as his parents were gunned down by a mugger in an alley. That boy grows up to become Batman. Both of these events were simple, single Stunts that led to important plot points.

Isolated Stunts can also work to develop characters further. In *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, a swordsman confronts Indiana Jones, swinging his weapon in a vicious, threatening display. Indy, in turn, pulls out his gun and shoots the man. On the surface, this is a simple, entertaining moment in an entertaining film. It's memorable, which is a key aspect of isolated Stunts both in film and in fiction. It also helps to define Indy's character better. The audience instinctively understands that he's not going to take the hard path if a simpler opportunity presents itself. Throughout the series of Indiana Jones movies, this personality trait is repeated time and time again, where Indy applies more direct methods to solving problems than working out complicated solutions.

The most important aspect of a Stunt is its inclusion in more complex series of actions within a scene, and that is what is called the Engagement.

## THE ENGAGEMENT

*Excerpt from Pariah's Moon by Ian Thomas Healy, Copyright 2011*

Rarik whispered something to his one-eyed Dwarf friend Vilnius. Giele narrowed his eyes. They were plotting something. The Dwarf nodded and ran back up the street along with two of his companions. "At least now we're even, five on five," called Rarik. "But even with that drunkard mage, you're out-gunned."

Giele tightened the pull on his string. "And you're a coward, Rarik. It takes a real big man to attack a bunch of unarmed natives, kill them all, and burn their homes to the ground."

"They ain't no better than stinking animals. I gunned them down where they stood." He laughed. "Even a rutting cow's got more sense than that."

Rarik's men put their hands to their holsters like they were about to draw.

Giele felt Wioo take a step forward and knew the young Hork must be blinded by his rage. "Easy, brother," said Giele in Horkish. "Our moment will come." His blood pounded in his ears and he knew the time for battle was upon them.

"You're wrong, Rarik," said Tarvy. "The Horks are a civilized people. More so than some of the Elves on this street. You're a murderer."

Rarik held up his hand to stay his men. "Padre, I ain't got no quarrel with you. You can go. You too, Cianid. We'll settle this later, you and I. This is just between me and the marked man."

"We'll stay," called Cianid. "I'd rather stand with this Pariah than roll over and rut with the likes of you."

Rarik's face grew uglier, if such a thing was even possible, and he stepped back. The tension in the air grew palpable as the other men raised their guns. Giele's gut tightened along with his bowstring. Flames appeared at the ends of Piprel's hands. Wioo crouched down in preparation for a leap to action. Giele aimed the tip of the arrow for a spot just below Rarik's throat.

Rarik's face twisted with contempt. "Arrows and spears, sticks and magic. Don't you rutting drippers know this is the Age of the Gun?" He raised the pistol and fired it up into the air.

A steam whistle rent the air and a clanking monstrosity roared around a corner up the street. It looked like a carriage but without any horses or oxen pulling it. It belched black smoke from its boiler as it charged across the dust. One of Rarik's men sat on the driver's box and worked levers, while another managed the boiler and fed it chunks of black rock. Vilnius crouched down behind a heavy wooden shield in the front, a maniacal grin on his ugly face.

A multi-barreled rifle protruded from the vehicle's nose, and the barrels began to spin. The gun thundered and spat flame. The stink of gunpowder and ash mixed with the soot from the boiler to create a gut-twisting miasma. Giele tasted the dust kicked up from the vehicle's wheels.

Rarik dove out of the way as the horseless carriage hurtled past.

Bullets tore past Giele as he loosed his arrow, only to see it shatter against the wooden shield. Cianid fired her shotgun at Vilnius but the pellets struck the wooden

shield before him. Tarvy ducked out of the line of fire and dodged into a doorway. Flame jetted from Piprel's hands, incinerated the man running the boiler, and set the rear half of the vehicle on fire. The mage's face was white with terror, but he clenched his fist with success. Then a bullet struck him in the side and he fell.

"Piprel!" Giele shouted.

Cianid was closest. "I've got him. Go!" She grabbed the mage's collar and dragged him from the line of fire.

Giele and Wioo both turned and pelted for safety, weaving as they sprinted down the street. The one-eyed Dwarf swept his gun barrels back and forth, trying to mow them down, blanketing the street in a hail of lead. Giele knew they weren't going to make it and that any moment he'd feel bullets tearing through him.

Suddenly, hope! Brokorn and Efraya hurled into the street from between Skria Woodyard's Bowyer and Fletcher and the *Goose Creek Gazette*. For once, Giele was grateful the stubborn beast had disobeyed his orders. Without missing a stride, Giele and Wioo grabbed onto their antlers and swung up onto their backs.

The Greatdeer raced up the boulevard, the steam-powered monstrosity behind them belching and churning in relentless pursuit. Giele leaned down over Brokorn's neck and urged more speed out of the giant buck. "Split up! I'll draw his fire!" Giele shouted at Wioo. The Hork hunched down and leaned over. Efraya angled hard to the left. Vilnius tracked his gunfire toward Giele, and Wioo saw his opportunity. He wheeled around on Efraya, balanced for a moment on the Greatdeer's back, and then sprang high into the air with his spear over his head.

The driver never had a chance.

Wioo came down on the driver's box. His spear punched through the driver's chest and out his back, streaked with blood and entrails. Wioo gave an ululating hoot to celebrate his success and dove off the burning vehicle.

A bullet smacked into Brokorn's haunch and his leg collapsed, spilling Giele into the dust. The carriage bore down on them. Brokorn scrambled to one side, limping from his wounded leg while Giele hurried into the stable where he'd bought his horse all those weeks ago. "Watch out!" Giele cried to the Dwarven stable girl just as the vehicle crashed into the door and blocked it with a heap of smoldering wreckage. The young Dwarf lass screamed and ran as fast as her stubby little legs would carry her. She disappeared out the rear entrance. Giele dove for cover as a bullet whistled past his head.

#

We've covered the Stunt as the basic building block of the Action Scene. When we take a series of Stunts grouped together in a set piece, it forms an *Engagement*. An Engagement is an action scene involving multiple Stunts, tied together to form a complete plot point. The example scene above is set along the main street of a frontier town (the set piece) and contains several distinct Stunts. If we analyze the scene in detail here's what we learn:

*Set piece:* The dusty, main street of a frontier town with buildings like a newspaper office, bowyer shop, and stables.

*Heroes:* Giele (Narrative Focus), Wioo, Cianid, Piprel, Tarvy

*Opponents:* Rarik, Vilnius, other unnamed men

*Stunt 1:* The Steam Carriage attacks

*Stunt 2:* Giele fires an arrow at the Steam Carriage

*Stunt 3:* Cianid shoots her shotgun at the Steam Carriage

*Stunt 4:* Tarvy retreats.

*Stunt 5:* Piprel uses magic against the Steam Carriage and kills one opponent, but gets shot.

*Stunt 6:* Giele and Wioo flee before the onrushing Steam Carriage

*Stunt 7:* Giele and Wioo mount their Greatdeer and are chased by the Steam Carriage.

*Stunt 8:* Wioo counterattacks and kills the Steam Carriage's driver.

*Stunt 9:* Giele's Greatdeer is shot and Giele retreats on foot into the stable.

*Stunt 10:* The uncontrolled Steam Carriage crashes into the stable.

Does that seem like a lot of stuff going on in just a couple of pages? Most of those Stunts are single sentences, with a few stretching into short paragraphs. Analyzing that Engagement provides the full scene breakdown. When you want to write your own Engagement, start with a scene breakdown. Don't worry if it's dry; you can dress it once you actually start the process of writing. By doing a detailed analysis like this ahead of time, you'll find it's much easier to keep the flow of action progressing in an orderly and logical way.

Order and logic are very important parts of an Engagement. You must establish a sequence of events that works within the context of the story and makes sense from a continuity standpoint. You don't want your characters to be fighting on a rooftop and suddenly have to dodge traffic, for example, because you forgot to move them to street level during the course of the scene. Actions taken by the Heroes and Opponents must be logical and consistent with the qualities of their personalities. Would a devout nun pick up an assault rifle and fire it into a crowd? Probably not... unless she's been pushed "over the edge" to take the irrevocable action of killing. Would your sniper villain charge at your hero, brandishing his gun and yelling like a lunatic? Unlikely. As you plot out the Stunts within an Engagement, be sure you take into account the cause and effect of prior actions so the scene flows.

Engagements have several important qualities, all of which should be present for the scene to work most effectively. An Engagement must contain a minimum of two distinct Stunts, each one characterized by its own specific defining points. Most Engagements contain many Stunts. The Stunts must be related to each other, using a character or group as the bridging influence from Stunt to Stunt. It's important to have the common thread running through all your Stunts in an Engagement or else the scene will lose any sense of continuity and flow.

One of the most important aspects of an Engagement is that it must take place in a single set piece, and the characters must move through that set piece in some way. As Stunts are characterized by single, brief actions, Engagements are characterized by motion within a set piece. The set piece of an Engagement doesn't have to be a static environment; a chase down a busy highway or a space battle amid a field of whirling asteroids are also suitable set pieces for Engagements.