



Issue #2
December 2024

Olver Maid Inn

Tales from the Tavern

Magazine





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Magazine

Issue 2

Fall 2024

by

K.A. Bauer and K.S. Bauer





Special Thanks

First and foremost, a heartfelt thank you to my partner, whose unwavering support and assistance were indispensable in bringing this magazine to life. You were there every step of the way, and I am deeply grateful.

To my six-year-old son, thank you for your patience and understanding, allowing me the space to dive deep into work. Your love and laughter have been my anchor.

We pay tribute to Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, whose visionary work has been the cornerstone of our community. Their legacy is not just remembered; it is celebrated and cherished. Their contributions to the world of tabletop role-playing games are monumental, and it is crucial that their names continue to echo through the halls of our hobby, ensuring they are never forgotten.

At Elven Maid Inn, we stand in reverence of the legacy left by those who pioneered our cherished hobby, breathing life into the myriad worlds we explore. We vehemently oppose any form of slander or disrespect towards the architects of tabletop role-playing games, including luminaries like Gary Gygax, Dave Arneson, James Ward, Jeff Grubb, Tracy Hickman, Robert Kuntz, and many more whose creativity has shaped our play. This respect equally applies to the fantasy authors and artists whose narratives and art have fueled our imaginations—J.R.R. Tolkien, Andrzej Sapkowski, Glen Cook, Ed Greenwood, Margaret Weis, R.A. Salvatore, and the myriad others who have conjured the rich tapestries of fantasy we so adore.

We believe it is paramount to honor and respect the legacy and original visions of the creators who have given us these timeless stories and games. Their work forms the bedrock of our passion, and any alterations to the lore or characters for political reasons will always face our scrutiny and criticism. We are staunch guardians of the authenticity and integrity of these worlds, committed to preserving the essence of what was initially crafted by these visionaries. We appreciate evolution in storytelling, but it must align with the spirit and intent of the original creators, not be swayed by contemporary political agendas. This commitment ensures that the magic and wonder of these fantasy realms remain untarnished, celebrating the art in its truest form for generations to come.

A big thank you to every member who contributed articles to this magazine. Your passion, creativity, and dedication have made this publication possible.

Lastly, to every single reader who has downloaded or purchased the print version, thank you. You are not just readers; you are the core of this journey, the heartbeat of our community. Your support is what drives us to continue exploring and sharing these magical realms.

K. Bauer
Elven Maid Inn



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A word from Creators

After Creating Issue #1, I Was Not Expecting That Work on Issue #2 Would Be So Much Harder

After the release of Issue #1, I never anticipated that the journey to Issue #2 would be fraught with such significant challenges. Despite a delay spanning four months, I am thrilled to announce that the magazine is now complete. The success of our first issue was beyond expectations, with over 2,000 copies downloaded, hitting the #1 spot for New Fantasy and Sci-Fi Books on Amazon, and earning a Silver Best Seller status on DriveThruRPG. All of these achievements were made possible because of your support.

This journey has been incredibly tough but equally rewarding. I deeply apologize for the delay and assure you that the lessons learned will guide our future endeavors. There were moments of tears and regret, particularly during the intense process of creating the art for this issue, but ultimately, every struggle was worth it. Issue #2 is now here, and I sincerely hope you enjoy it.

Regarding a potential Issue #3, I must be candid about the uncertainties. My health, which has been a significant factor behind the delay in Issue #2, continues to be a major obstacle. I need time to address these health concerns, which means I'm uncertain about committing to another issue at this moment. However, I am eager to explore some TTRPG-related projects during this break, which might find their way into a future edition - if there is to be one.

Issue #2 would not have been possible without the contributions of many talented individuals who shared their articles. These works are published exactly as they were submitted, reflecting a variety of perspectives. At "Elven Maid Inn: Tales from the Tavern," we pride ourselves on being a platform where creators, writers, and fans can express themselves freely, regardless of my personal views.

I hope that the time you spend reading these remarkable articles is fulfilling and enjoyable, bringing you as much pleasure as it did us to create them. Thank you for your patience, understanding, and continued support. Here's to the stories we tell and the worlds we build together.

The Devil In Disguise

My Personal Experience of the Satanic Panic

by Kyle @DyingBreedTT



In September of 1979, I was kidnapped.

My parents were divorced. My biological mother arrived one day and took my younger brother and I out of school and fled to Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas. She did not have legal custody. My father did not find out until the end of the school day, and he spent the next few years, and a small fortune, trying to find us.

But that's not what I am discussing at this time. It's simply a backstory, for lack of a better phrase.

As a child, I was not fully aware of my kidnapping, nor my circumstances. I lived with my mother, and watched over my younger brother as best I knew how. I was 9 years old.

I was enrolled and attended school in Farmer's Branch, TX. Later, we moved to the Hurst-Euless-Bedford area outside Fort Worth. And it was there, late in December of 1979, that I was introduced to a game called Dungeons & Dragons.

Mitch Thurston was the person who introduced me to the hobby. He befriended me and showed me compassion. I was a "Damn Yankee" in Texas, but that didn't stop him. We were quite the pair. I was the chubby weirdo, and he was the stereotypical tall and gangly nerd. Laurel and Hardy, or Abbott and Costello, but without intentional humor. He introduced me to Dungeons and Dragons, and his older brother, whose name I don't recall, was the Dungeon Master.

I had no idea what this game was, at

first. So I agreed to play with Mitch, a couple of others who I don't recall, and Mitch's brother as Dungeon Master. I did not know what I was doing. Mitch walked me through it.

My first character was a 1st Level Human Fighter. I don't remember my ability scores or character name. I only remember that my character died within the first 30 minutes of the game.

And I was hooked. Forever.

Satanic games at Uplands?



Every Tuesday night at Uplands school a handful of 12 to 14 year olds gather to do battle with a host of dragons, goblins and strange beasts with supernatural powers.

They're playing Dungeons and Dragons, a fantasy board game co-sponsored by City Parks and Rec, but this week they found themselves caught in a real world battle far removed from the mythical lands where their game takes place.

The controversy that has followed the Dungeons and Dragons craze across the US has arrived in Natamoo.

A trickster and a band of evil, with a heavy emphasis on witchcraft and sorcery that encourages young players to seriously practice torture and debauchery to win.

or is it harmless, a highly imaginative mental exercise that stimulates creativity and helps develop youthful logic?

Uplands area parents Brian and Valerie Wolf don't think so, and have launched protests against Dungeons and Dragons being played in a public school, and being sponsored by the City.

What's happening here is we are breeding another generation of Clifford Clowns," Mr. Wolfe said Monday.

A trickster and a member of the Alliance Church, he says that the children playing the game are not able to tell the difference between fantasy and reality and is concerned that the kids are playing Dungeons and Dragons all day long and are not doing any of their homework.

However Jacob Geluk, a Dungeon Master and the games referee, calls these charges nonsense. There are battle scenes during the game, he says, but there are a variety of other things open to a player who is trapped. He does not believe the game is centered on violence and death and denies that torture and debauchery are involved in the game.



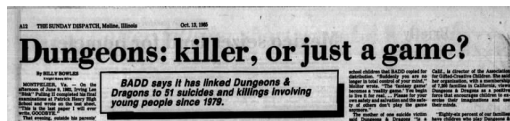
My mother, despite her promiscuity and substance abuse issues, had encouraged me at an early age to read Ursula K. Le Guin and Tolkien. This was, perhaps, the greatest impact she had upon who I am today. I did not like Le Guin at first, but I ravenously fed my imagination with *The Hobbit*. And shortly after, I included *The Lord Of The Rings* in my buffet. So Mitch appeared at an auspicious time. The scene was set. The game was afoot. And Fate, it seems, took advantage of my situation and temperament.

So I began a love affair with Imagination, that to this day, has never waned.

As years passed, I immersed myself more and more into this fantasy world of D&D. Of course, I pursued *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*, because why would I waste my time with anything called "Basic"?

I bought books by skipping lunch every day and saving my lunch money. I would walk home from school and there was a wargaming store on my route. I would always stop and look at the miniature figurines, and dream of fantastic adventures beyond this mortal world. And then, when I had saved enough money, I would buy a book. Within a few months, I had all 3 core AD&D books. This would have been near the autumn of 1980 or early 1981. My D&D books were treasures. I cannot express in words what those tomes meant to me.

They were almost a physical manifestation of who I was as a person. I was an odd child. I liked fantasy, science fiction,

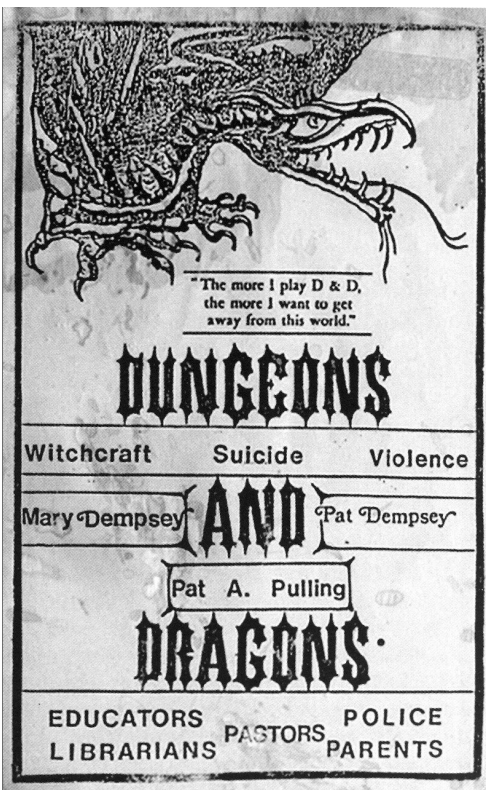


horror, and strange things. These books were my banner, which I flew proudly, but were despised and hated by many. My predilections made me more outcast than ever before, but I also found friends in my social excommunication. Others, who flew the same banner that I did. Together, we were mighty, at least in our own minds, and when we played.

We were harassed. We were ridiculed. We were sometimes beaten. We were never cool. We were never accepted. We were pariahs and social lepers. But we were heroes, the lot of us, whether others knew it or not.

So I pursued imagination and games, in spite of the hatred of my peers, until 1985-1986.

Keep in mind that by this time, I had amassed a collection worthy of envy. *Gangbusters*, *Boot Hill*, *Gamma World*, *Top Secret*, *Traveller*, many *Steve Jackson* pocket



box games, *Deluxe Car Wars*, *Skyrealms of Jorune*, etc. Oh, and a full run of *Dragon* Magazines from Issue 32 to around Issue 108. And of course, everything D&D that I could get my hands on.

Little did I know that Fate is a fickle bitch, and my library and sanctuary of weirdness would be lost.

My father had found my brother and I by then. And for several years, things proceeded somewhat normally after many drawn out court proceedings. Later, I moved back with my father, and I met my friend "Balthazar". We continued our fantastic D&D adventures together. While Mitch introduced me to D&D, Balthazar was my brother in spirit.

In the summer of 1986, my world was destroyed.

It was a Saturday, as I recall, and I was staying with my father and stepmother for the summer.

While most of my games were with me, a bare few things had been left behind with my mother. I was not quite 16 years old.

A man and a woman came to the house. I do not recall their names. I can still see his face in my mind, but not hers. They were from associated with my family's church; small, mid-Western, and strictly Baptist.

Dungeons and Dragons causes moral conflict, protest

Evangelists see game as front for demon worship

By Mark Ordesky

Dungeons and Dragons—the very name of this popular fantasy game conjures images of the macabre and the mysterious. To the uninitiated, the game seems incomprehensible; to its players, D&D offers a wild romp through the imagination.

To yet others, however, D&D is not a harmless pastime of its predominantly young players. Evangelists argue the game is a front for demon worship and witchcraft while proponents see it as a wholesome, constructive release. Regardless of which view one believes, if either, the battles which rage over the moral implications of Dungeons and Dragons are as heated as the violent conflicts which take place in the game itself.

Dungeons and Dragons is the prototype of fantasy role-playing games. In such games, players suppress their own personalities and play the roles of fantasy characters like those out of Tolkien or Arthurian legend. Players can become warriors, thieves, wizards, priests, or any of a number of characters from medieval times. These characters travel through an imaginary world of adventure created and controlled by someone known as the Dungeon Master (DM) in search of treasure, fame, and power.

The controversy which now surrounds D&D stems from the

The "monsters" contained in these manuals are evil enemies. Players gain experience and power in the game by battling such creatures and defeating them.

"There is a built-in reward system in D&D," said one local player. "Being good, stamping out evil where you find it, is rewarded by fame and notori-

ety. The goal of the game is to live up to the artificial morality of your character."

However, it seems there is more than morality at stake. In another article which appeared in the *Herald Examiner*, a quote from a pamphlet issued by Concerned Christians attacked D&D claiming the game promoted "homosexuality, so-

domy, rape, and other perverse acts of sexuality."

Players vehemently deny such accusations. A local high school player commented, "That's a bold-faced lie. It reflects the mentality of these people and their slanderous opinions."

Scott Kilburn, vice president of the university's Fantasy Wargames Club, has similar feelings for such evangelical groups. "They want to come in and dictate what other people should do," Kilburn said. "They are extremely close-minded."

Meanwhile, more fundamentalist Christian groups in California and Utah have been successful in getting D&D banned from public schools, where it had been used in programs for "gifted" students. In Kansas,

another evangelist threatened to buy up all the games and burn them if the stores did not stop stocking them.

All the aforementioned actions have taken place this year. Yet D&D has been available to the general public since 1974, and people have been playing games of this type since 1970.

So why the sudden zeal in attacking the game now? Just like anything else, it took a nationally publicized incident to turn the public eye towards D&D: the disappearance of James Dallas Egbert III.

Egbert was a 16-year-old Michigan State student, "a whiz kid," who played D&D in the large complex of steam tunnels underneath the school. When he disappeared, there

(Continued on page 16)



HELPLINE IS OPEN

8:30 p.m. - 12:30 a.m.
Monday thru Friday

Funnily enough, Balthazar's father was a Baptist Minister, but that offered no protection from what was to unfold.

My parents brought this couple inside, and told me to sit at the kitchen table and talk to them. Honestly, I don't remember much. There were questions about D&D, what I owned, what I did, etc. The one thing I remember clearly is this: the man looked at me and then looked at my parents and said "I can see in his eyes that he is not yet possessed by demons."

I tried defense. I tried to explain how my books and games were just imagination. They weren't real. Though I was arguably obsessed, I knew the difference between reality and fantasy. No one would listen.

And eventually it became very apparent that, as a minor and under the care of my parents, there was only one thing I could do. I had no choice but to submit.

So submit I did. I still feel shame and guilt for doing so even today, though I do not know what I could have done differently.

After the couple departed, I was not allowed access to my books and games. They were withheld from me. About a week later, and man named Lee Orr came to our church. While he was allegedly there to talk about the influence of Satan upon the lives of Christians, in actuality he was requested,

because of me and my attachment of D&D and similar games. I was a devil in disguise in this small rural community.

Lee Orr was a Kansas City Police Detective, and at this time was specializing in crimes with a basis in Satanism and the occult. Formerly, he had been brought in to Oregon as an expert to instruct Oregon police departments about Satanic crimes. By 1990, Oregon was part of the Occult Awareness Task Force. Yes, that was a thing.

I had Lee Orr's business card in the past. I cannot find it now, though I have searched. I wanted to attach a picture of it as proof. Alas, you will have to take my word.

So the next day after Mr. Orr's appearance at church, my family and I gathered all my D&D stuff. I remember begging them not to burn my Tolkien paperbacks. They didn't, and I'm still not sure why those escaped. Car Wars survived, because mid-Western rural people love cars and nobody saw any harm in that. So my Tolkien paperbacks and Deluxe Box Set Car Wars were the only things that survived, except for what had been left behind with my mother in Dallas-Fort Worth.

Everything Dungeons & Dragons, and my other TSR publications, could not be saved, as there was no defense allowed. Games from other publishers that were "weird" or "odd" were given no recourse as well.

THE FAMILY



Game in progress: An introduction to Tolkien—or an invitation to sacrilege?

Kids: The Deadliest Game?

comp
sonabl
them

Everything was placed in a burn barrel, covered with gasoline, and lit with a match. And I stood there, watching. I was numb. I also realized that I was completely alone in this world, and that no one could be trusted. Ever.

The situation had become a matter of survival for me. I was a minor, and my parent's subject. The only thing I could do was play along. If not, would I be burned next? I was young. I didn't know what to do. I knew it was bullshit, but I convinced myself otherwise for

destroyed while I watched. I still don't know what I could have done differently.

My friendship with my brother Balthazar was strained, as I had to accept a world-view that I did not truly believe. There was a distance between us after that, and I only hope for his understanding. The whole thing was strange, because my family still let me share a dormitory room with him in college, even though we played D&D together prior to that. To this day, I still don't understand the strange little hypocrisies and illogical things that happened, especially after the burning.

I have never been close to my family since that time. But contrary to what you might think, I do not bear them ill will. Parents always do their best to protect their children. That's what my parents were trying to do. To protect me. To save me from the insidious demons and devils vying for control of my immortal soul.

It was superstitious nonsense, but I have no doubt that they meant well and were doing what they believed was right and necessary.

The rift between my parents and I has never fully healed. And I sometimes think that was exactly the Devil's intent. Because the greatest Hell a person can face must be isolation from Love, Joy, Family, and Friends.

And on that day, the Devil won.

Fantasy Game Causes Furor: Work Of Devil?

By Robert M. Maltby
A group of children in a room filled with books and toys are playing a game. The game is a complex role-playing game with many pieces and a large map. The children are looking at the game with interest and excitement. The room is dimly lit, and the atmosphere is one of mystery and intrigue.



self-protection. I guess that's what is meant by "Stockholm Syndrome".

I remember my stepmother talking about how the books wouldn't burn completely, as if they were protected by the legions of Hell. (Turns out that compacted pages, even though paper, don't burn well because there's not enough oxygen between the leaves). I remember people talking about how the dice seemed to "scream" as they were burned by the flames.

All the things that brought me joy and defined me as an individual were burned and

The Satanic Panic

A Short Historical Summary

The Satanic Panic of the 1980s and early 1990s was a cultural phenomenon driven by fear, misinformation, and paranoia, particularly surrounding youth subcultures and entertainment media. Among the focal points of this moral panic were fantasy books and tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs), especially Dungeons & Dragons (D&D). Religious

long been celebrated for their moral complexity and imaginative worlds, detractors viewed their magical elements and non-Christian mythologies as gateways to heresy. Authors such as C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, both Christians, were ironically swept into the panic as symbols of "dangerous" fantasy.

As a result of the Satanic Panic, book

DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS:
Just harmless fun—or sorcery?

By GUS THOMSON
Staff Writer

In a move that has angered some parents in the area, the role-playing fantasy game Dungeons and Dragons has been introduced as a children's program at Uplands Elementary School by Nanaimo parks and recreation department.

Brian and Valerie Wolf of Uplands Drive say the game, which has been played Tuesday evenings since mid-

A POPULAR PASTIME

Who plays Dungeons and Dragons?
According to a Harbour Park Toys and Wheels toy store spokesman, everyone from seven-year-old children to doctors and lawyers come in for the game or some of the paraphernalia that can add to the reality of the fantasy.

The basic game retails for \$18.95 at most stores and an advanced version, described by one player as containing less "hacking and slashing," also sells for \$18.95.

Paraphernalia includes half-inch tall paintable lead figures, dice, pencils,

have \$85 you can spring for the hand-held game. Also being produced is a video version.

The game has taken off in the past two years but its popularity has raised questions within the religious community.

Locally, religious handbills against Dungeons and Dragons have been distributed to toy stores stocking the product and protests have been heard from some Nanaimoites who say they are concerned with the violence in the game and the use or abuse of Christian

where players help each other to their goals — they're not usually fighting against each other," he says. "It's to their advantage to work together."

"The most powerful caste in the game — Paladin — are doers of good works," says Geluk, a first-year science student at Malaspina College.

Geluk plays the role of dungeon master at the Tuesday sessions. His job is to design a maze

groups, media outlets, and concerned parents believed these games and books were corrupting youth, promoting occult practices, and encouraging satanic worship.

Dungeons & Dragons, first published in 1974, became a prime target during this period. The game's use of magic, demons, and mythical creatures led many to believe it was linked to real-life occultism and satanic rituals. High-profile cases, such as the disappearance of James Dallas Egbert III, a D&D player, fueled these fears. Though unrelated to the game itself, media coverage falsely implied that D&D was a dangerous influence, and many fundamentalist Christian groups began to denounce it as promoting devil worship.

Fantasy literature, particularly works like *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, was also criticized during this time. While these stories had

burnings, boycotts, and even lawsuits ensued. Players of D&D and readers of fantasy were stigmatized, and many parents forbade their children from engaging with these forms of entertainment. Game creators, including D&D's publisher TSR, made attempts to assuage concerns, removing references to demons and devils from later editions of their games to reduce public outcry.

Over time, the moral panic subsided as studies debunked the claims that fantasy games or books had any connection to satanic activities. Today, the legacy of the Satanic Panic serves as a reminder of how fear and misunderstanding can lead to unjust scapegoating of creative media. Fantasy literature and TTRPGs, once demonized, have since become widely accepted and even embraced as valuable forms of entertainment and storytelling.

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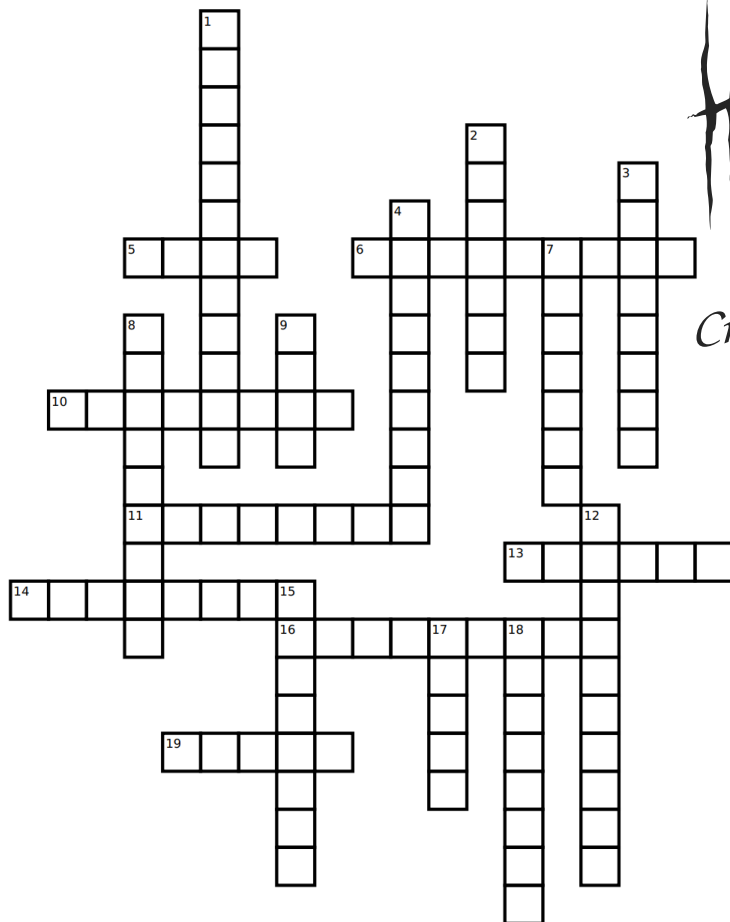
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Crossword Puzzle



Down:

- 1) What classic horror novel features a scientist who creates life from corpses?
- 2) What iconic weapon does Jason Voorhees wield?
- 3) What mythical creature transforms under a full moon?
- 4) Who directed the original Psycho?
- 7) What does Dr. Frankenstein exclaim, "It's alive!" about?
- 8) What is the name of the monstrous species in the Alien franchise?
- 9) What weapon does Freddy Krueger use to attack his victims?
- 12) What horror game series is set in a foggy, haunted town?
- 15) What ghostly figures are often seen haunting dark corridors?
- 17) What is a traditional Japanese ghost often seen in horror films called?
- 18) In The Thing, what can the alien creature perfectly mimic?

Across:

- 5) What Japanese horror film features a cursed videotape that kills viewers?
- 6) What horror film features a killer stalking teenagers in their dreams?
- 10) What is the first name of Dr. Lecter, the cannibalistic doctor?
- 11) What is the name of the hotel in The Shining?
- 13) What day of the week is associated with a summer camp massacre in a famous horror film?
- 14) What creatures are blood-sucking beings of the night?
- 16) What is the name of the terrifying clown in Stephen King's IT?
- 19) Who directed the original Alien movie?

Interview with Robert J. Kuntz

*A Dungeons &
Dragons Legend and
co-creator of
Greyhawk*



Today, we have something special for our readers: an interview with someone who witnessed our hobby being brought to life. A man, a legend, Robert J. Kuntz.

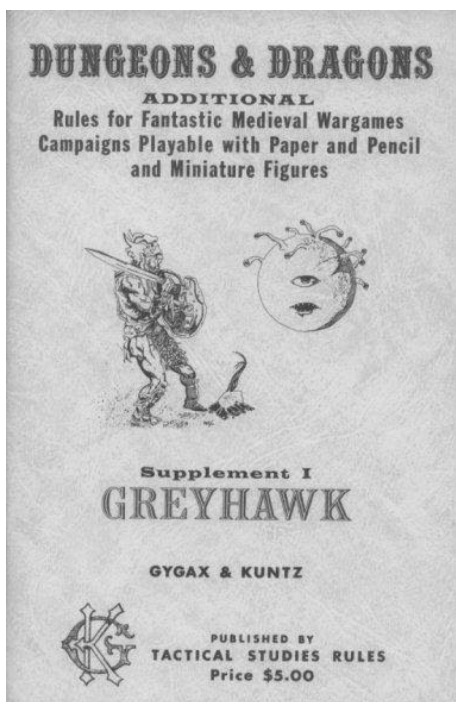
Elven Maid Inn: I want to ask you about the day that can be pinpointed as the birth of our hobby: November 1972, in Lake Geneva. You were there, you saw it with your own eyes. You, Gary Gygax, and a few other people witnessed a demonstration of the “Fantasy Game” Blackmoor by Dave Arneson. How do you recall this event? Could you tell back then that this would change the wargaming hobby and evolve into what we now know as tabletop role-playing games?

Robert J. Kuntz: Yes. I refer to that day as ‘ground zero +1’. Arneson and his group had created the first non-commercial RPG over 1971-1972 which they subsequently unveiled to us. I write about this at great length in “The Game That Changed Everything” due out in a second printing this month. Even though we were blown away by the demo game there was no forecasting the future at that point. Dave and his group saw it as an obvious positive game concept, thus the reason they sought to showcase it for Gary as Guidon Games games editor.

EMI: Let’s stay in 1972. You were invited to the second-ever game session of *Dungeons & Dragons*. What were your thoughts about it? What was your first character? And most importantly, did you feel like it was the start of something that would shape generations of nerds in the future?

Robert J. Kuntz: I was “expected” to play-test as Gary’s student and the President of the LGTSA. Robilar was my first PC, named after the sendup to me in Gary’s novel the “Gnome Cache” wherein occurs a Baron Robilar. I describe our adventure in “The Return of Robilar” wherein Ernie Gygax, my brother Terry and I encounter and defeat some centipedes; and then they leave as Robilar elects to stay behind, thus starting my solo adventure mindset very early as a designer challenging Gary’s new design.

We were way too wrapped up in the deep dive into Arneson’s concept to project an end result market path for it at that time. Gary often revealed new rules changes to me as he was soon playing in my Castle El Raja Key. We were playing on average 3 times/day and 7 days/week. What is taken for granted today was all new then and the onion just kept on unravelling its peels. We felt very excited about its prospects, but its immersion levels and ever widening



application paths kept us super focused on its creation.

We were essentially reduplicating in a compressed time period what Arneson and his group had already done for 1.5 years, this to come up to speed with his breakout game concept.

EMI: In 1973, Gary Gygax and Don Kayne started Tactical Studies Rules, or as most of us call it now, TSR. You were one of the first employees hired. How was the first day of work at TSR? You must have been very young back then, 18 or 19?

Robert J. Kuntz: I didn't start working for TSR until early 1975. Brian Blume and I did order shipment in Gary's basement after Don Kaye died; and that is when my brother was renovating the Marshall street location for the eventual move there. But I was also writing with Gary Greyhawk supplement #1 around that time as well. I was 19 in early 1975.

EMI: Let's talk about 1974. The Greyhawk campaign had been going for nearly two years and had amassed over 20 players. You were picked as a co-Dungeon Master for it. At this point, you were also running your campaign, "Castle El Raja Key." You were one of the first Dungeon Masters in history. Was it intimidating?

Robert J. Kuntz: About 1 year by that time (beginning of '74) and we never had 20 players. That's a Wikipedia falsity that they have stopped me from changing numerous times. We had at most 10-12 full time local players and sometimes visiting out of town players swelled that number. That 10-12 number grew as the LGTSA membership expanded. We would lose a few members to marriage and college as well; and unfortunately due to death as in Don Kaye's case.

Castle El Raja Key¹ was designed 3 weeks after Gary started Castle Greyhawk¹ to give him a players' perspective and me a DM's. All of his PCs started within it and all of their adventure stories are part of its history. This swap worked pretty well as a master/student combo since Gary and I relentlessly challenged each other's competency and ingenuity on both sides of the screen. One learned real fast not to be intimidated in wargames around Gary unless you wanted to cut your own throat. I met him at age 13. Finally beat him at chess after 2 years, Japanese Chess after 8 months of play, etc. This respect and regard for each other rolled over into the D&D play-tests in 1973.

EMI: You became the co-creator of the Greyhawk world. Parts of El Raja Key eventually merged into Castle Greyhawk. You are co-author of the Greyhawk supplement released in 1975, as well as co-author of Gods, Demi-Gods & Heroes released in 1976. How was it creating settings with Gary Gygax? Did you need to consult your ideas with him?

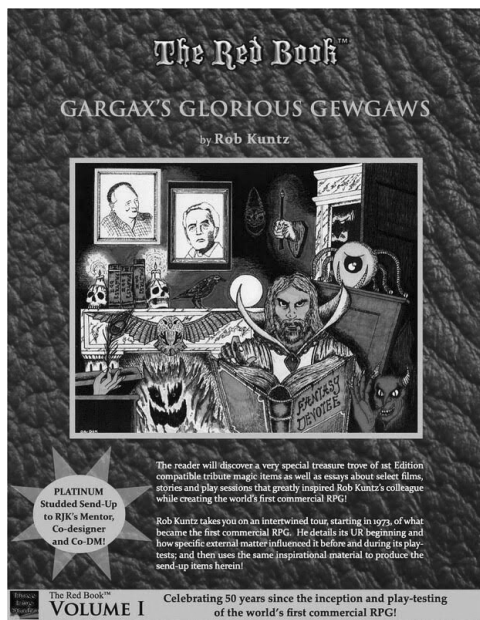
Robert J. Kuntz: Yes. The original Greyhawk campaign, that is. I would later contribute published material to it, his PCs that started in my campaign would, by literary contrivance, be transferred into WoG by way of us becoming co-DMs and merging major parts of our campaigns. As Gary noted in the Dragon Magazine, I became the sole DM of the Greyhawk campaign because he was so busy writing and guiding the company. I have lots of that original campaign material from the time still unpublished; and there were major additions to the outdoor, under-city, city and planar.

Gary and I were creative equals who depended on and fed off of each other's input. It was an unspoken tryst between us as master/student of which I could detail hundreds of

instances about. We sought each other's company, creativity and views. He'd often push things in front of me to read and/or study while saying, "Hey Rob. What do you think of this?" He already had an unrevealed opinion about whatever it was, but he wanted my views. It was a one of a kind relationship of mutual respect.

EMI: Let's move to the present day. As we know, the new D&D will use Greyhawk as its "basic" setting. Here is my question to the person who is an architect of Greyhawk: Has Wizards consulted anything with you regarding Greyhawk? Have they asked for your opinions?

Robert J. Kuntz: Surely you jest! The last time I was asked anything about Greyhawk by anyone who cared and respected its past was by Erik Mona and Paizo when we did the 30th anniversary celebration of D&D by publishing Maure Castle.



EMI: How do you view "modern" tabletop role-playing games?

Robert J. Kuntz: I view it in different ways depending on the lens being used. It's too broad a question so I'll pick a response path: There are too many products and not enough difference amongst them. So. That would be my designer's lens somewhat influenced by my marketing/business mode. I view the advent of RPGs as the base-line in order to reach for the next evolved game form, or paradigm, that may be influenced by it. I see that shift as technology driven. TTRPGs will always exist in their different forms, but I don't see the P&P side other than as a generator for the next shift through leveraging technology. And that may align with why I see little variation in TTRPGs, that the market may have reached a cul-de-sac that is not moving vertically but only horizontally. Time will tell, but there has been little movement away from the established model for 50 years (vertical

shifts) and more nit-picking and noodling mechanics (horizontal shifts) amid a profusion of thematic overlays.

EMI: Do you still play TTRPGs? What system are you using? Is there a system outside of D&D that you would recommend to players?

Robert J. Kuntz: I play a greatly home brewed version of AD&D. I recommend that players play what they enjoy. I tend towards simpler, fast paced games these days myself, like Nuclear War or similar.

EMI: You played games with Dungeon Master Gary Gygax. How different were his games compared to modern "Dungeon Master Superstars" like Matthew Mercer, Brennan Lee Mulligan, or Aabria Iyengar, who focus on storytelling rather than rules?

Robert J. Kuntz: You know there's a lot of assumptions attached to this question. First I have no idea who the latter people are. Secondly, was Gary all about rules? No. He was about promoting the story while not forsaking the rules, just like me. It's not an either/or proposition, really.

EMI: Let's head back to the past. You were the very first player to successfully complete the infamous Tomb of Horrors. What can you tell us about this adventure? Many people have never experienced the Tomb of Horrors. Would you recommend it today?

Robert J. Kuntz: I'll answer that by lifting a few paragraphs from The Return of Robilar:

The second example made it to print as Tomb of Horrors. Robilar had previously soloed ToH and beat it.

The final challenge for any good player-PC, as I've alluded to above, is to see if they can survive an adventure specifically sculpted for them; and not just sculpted for them, but sculpted with the idea in mind of increasing their chances of dying. In a way ToH was a compliment from Gary and an admission: "This, in the final sum, is the only way I can stop them." You don't have to like the stress of escalation, but if you were me you also understood that that is exactly what Gary would bring to the table if you continued beating his designs. As such ToH is a special test to be used with caution as general fare. It should be reserved for those special few who have achieved an elevated position in the DM's mind equal to what Robilar achieved in Gary's. It was the final gauntlet of shining spears aimed at the best players who had earned their stripes time and time again during the full-throttled play-tests of D&D.

EMI: You left TSR just after Gary Gygax was forced out of the company and started your own company, Creations Unlimited, and released adventures known as The Maze of Zayene. Can you tell us something more about it?

Robert J. Kuntz: Sorry, but this is again a Wikipedia falsity. I left TSR in late 1976 on good terms. Gary would be fired in 1985. Wikipedia, which should not be trusted, would not allow me to change this falsehood. As a side note, Gary's and Len Lakofka's bios there are also riddled with errors and various falsehoods.

Maze of Zayene started as a 2 part WoG adventure which TSR would eventually refuse to print even though they paid for its cartography. I later added parts 3 & 4 and published the series as a World of Kalibruhn adventure in 1986. It features a recurring evil wizard (Zayene) who first made his appearance in our original campaign in 1973. Most folks do not know that Gary wrote the introduction for volume #1 in the series, "Prisoners of the Maze."

EMI: Outside of TTRPGs, you also designed and co-designed several board games. Most notably, you co-designed Kings & Things, which won the 1986 Charles Roberts Award, and your very own creation, Magus. Can you give us some insight into board game design?

Robert J. Kuntz: Game design, really all design, is a general proposal that what you are designing works in such and such a manner. The main goal of design is to be historically conversant in your design field so that your proposal has a better chance of being new and not regurgitated. This requires studying designs in order to derive insights through honest introspection. You have to know when to be self-critical, to know when to say, you know this has been done a thousand times, it's shit; or, this is too complicated, it's shit. Good design is always achieved through creative force coupled with a steady moral viewpoint which informs you about when to abandon mediocre or bad design.

EMI: You have created multiple articles for Dragon Magazine. Looking back, how important was it to have Dragon Magazine? Do you think we are missing similar publications today?

Robert J. Kuntz: Dragon was very important as a consumer link to TSR and their products and philosophies, even when it became mostly a house organ later on. Today electronic mediums have taken up the slack for lack of print magazines on the topic; and they have become mostly tailored to specificity rather than general gaming. It's a ground shift that I feel has been finally



adjusted to, but I believe the glory days of general game magazines in print are gone.

EMI: During the Gary Gygax era of TSR, there was a very loose policy regarding the use of D&D IP by other creators. As we know, after you left TSR, the policy became very strict, and multiple lawsuits were set in motion against small companies that helped build the D&D independent scene. When WotC bought TSR, they released the OGL, and the independent scene flourished to the point that Pathfinder was created. 4th Edition was again very strict, but 5e embraced the OGL once again, leading to a massive boom for independent studios. The OGL scandal from 2023 extremely hurt the D&D brand, which is struggling to recover. In your opinion, was it the right choice for Gary and TSR to let the license be so loose? How important is it for D&D to have those independent creators creating supplements for a system they don't own and making quite a bit of money from it?

Robert J. Kuntz: Not so sure that TSR was “loose” regarding that. They licensed to Judges Guild but they sued Mayfair Games during Gary's tenure and GDW after his departure. They rabidly attacked fans for online content.

Robert J. Kuntz: The OGL has always been a symbiotic arrangement meant to promote the D&D brand above all other competitors. Biting the hand that attained and maintained that was none too wise by WotC. The lack of trust regarding that and other gaffes through them will not be readily forgotten.

EMI: Golden Era of TTRPGs? Was it AD&D? Was it 3e? Was it 5e? Or is it ahead of us?

Robert J. Kuntz: The TSR era before Gary's departure will always be the seminal golden age as it launched the age of RPGs. So to me it's not about a particular game but a general feeling of being at the cutting edge of it all. You could liken it to the advent of film or the combustion engine. It was that profound and exhilarating.

EMI: What are your thoughts about Wizards trying to push the narrative on the creators of Dungeons & Dragons from the '70s and '80s? Do you feel like there is a menace from them, or are older players overreacting?

Robert J. Kuntz: I have little more to add to what I've already noted online, this due to possible legal ramifications. Generally speaking it is unprecedented to attack a whole era of games, its authors, the fandom and thus the entire culture of that time. I have never seen something akin to this and it appears wholly ideologically oriented. It won't go unanswered and will not be forgotten.

EMI: Thank you for your time and for this opportunity for an interview. Your contributions to the world of tabletop role-playing games have not only shaped generations of enthusiasts and nerds but have also laid the foundation for a vibrant and creative community that continues to grow. Your work has inspired countless individuals, fostering imagination, storytelling, and camaraderie. The legacy you've created will undoubtedly continue to influence and shape future generations, ensuring that the spirit of adventure and creativity remains alive and thriving. We are deeply grateful for your pioneering efforts and the enduring impact they have had on the world of gaming. From me and millions of fans in the world – Thank You.





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Apolitical Escapism

On the Importance of Escape in Genre Fantasy

or

Purging Political Poison from Fairy Stories

*by Jack, Chronicler of the Northlands
@LostLoreScholar*

Over the last six months or so I have been embroiled in quite public debates on X over the need for an Apolitical approach to fantastical story telling. As much support as I have received in this undertaking, I have also received my share of pushback. Whilst much of the disagreement was civil, there was quite an amount that most assuredly was not; which more firmly set my belief in the need to remove the poison of politics from Fantasy.

It ought be said that since I have started taking this stand the chief caretaker of the world's most well known TTRPG, Wizards of the Coast, has made sweeping political decisions surrounding Dungeons and Dragons. Long before the Mexican orcs or the feminised multi-racial dwarves I was planting the banner of Apolitical Fantasy. Even long before I, there were others that bemoaned the use of the genre to push progressive political messaging.

I have made several miniature essays on the topic for X and have many times sat down with the intent to better flesh out what I mean when I say Apolitical Fantasy. When the Elven Maid released her first issue of Tales from the Tavern it seemed proper that I offer my intent to her and place these digital thoughts into on demand ink for the second. Lo, here I am, chipping away at this little work with what little time I can steal away from life's trivialities.

What Genre Fantasy Is

I should not need to define what I mean

by Genre Fantasy. Whether in stories or on the tabletop or in video games, all ought know that Genre Fantasy encompasses orcs, elves, dragons, knights, kings, and magic. Some variants may lack an element here or there, or have it in very little supply, others may have an abundance of all of them. From Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings to Moorcock's Elric of Melnibone Saga, Genre Fantasy is quite a broad church.

It acts as a sort of mythology for modernity. Indeed I wrote a very short piece on my website www.lostlorelibrary.com entitled Musings: Modern Mythology, or Why Genre Fantasy is so Familiar a few months ago. In short, the genre apes all of history's mythology, retelling each culture's myths and legends in an individual author's style. When you think dwarves you think of runes and beards. That is because of Tolkien's retelling of them pulled from Scandinavian folklore. Much of the magic we see in the likes of Moorcock's work, or even in Harry Potter comes from ancient Middle Eastern practice, fed into the west through a Christian lens. Dragons come in all shapes and sizes, pulled from every corner of the world. Genre Fantasy takes the very stuff, the soul if you will, of human storytelling and represents it to audiences now hundreds, if not thousands, of years removed from the cultures that produced the original tales.

Douglas Adams, author of The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, once said; "Isn't it enough to believe that the garden is beautiful without having to believe

that there are fairies at the bottom of it to?”

Whether there be fairies or no, humanity has placed them in every garden ever tended. I myself am quite fond of fairy stories, as was the father of modern fantasy, JRR Tolkien, who said;

“I have claimed that Escape is one of the main functions of fairy-stories, and since I do not disapprove of them, it is plain that I do not accept the tone of scorn or pity with which “Escape” is now so often used: a tone for which the uses of the word outside literary criticism give no warrant at all. In what the misusers are fond of calling Real Life, Escape is evidently as a rule very practical, and may even be heroic.” ~ Escape in: On Fairy-Stories

Therein lies what I believe is the most attractive quality of Genre Fantasy. Escapism. It is akin to a beautiful peasant girl's charm. Her beauty is not high nor regal, yet beautiful she remains in her simplicity. Genre Fantasy offers an escape from oppressive modernity. There is no office job awaiting you at your Dungeon Master's table. Nor are there dirty dishes waiting for you in the pages of your next novel. At least, I hope not.

No, these things offer you a release, a break, an escape from the grindstone of modern life. You may find much comfort in the arms of the simple and beautiful peasant girl, losing the worries of your real life in her charms. It is a sharp and rude awakening then, when real life noisily bangs on the bedroom door whilst you indulge.

What Genre Fantasy Should Not Be

The hinges are forced back, whining with protest, as your real life barges into the bedroom. Bizarrely it is wearing a wig and dressed in a cobbled together amalgamation of tropes that it calls a costume. This, friends, this is the constant political screeching we experience on a daily basis trying to masquerade as Genre Fantasy. It is DEI. Diversity. Equity. Inclusion. Offensively bland, ugly, and insistent. It wants to take centre stage. It needs your full-throated compliance. It demands you throw the beautiful Escapism aside and embrace the current day's political fads.

I may have overworked that analogy somewhat. One might clearly see the change that such DEI initiatives have wrought simply by looking at the new 2024 Dungeons and Dragons Player's Handbook



Art by Patrick Dwyer (@SketchasaurR)

artwork. You will find that each piece appears to be an exercise in box ticking or in the shaving off of certain edges to make it more palatable for 'modern audiences'. Suffice it to say that certain ideological bents have been forced into Dungeons and Dragons that were not there previously. Why? These choices were not taken to better characterize the various aspects of D&D's fantasy worlds. These choices were not made for the sake of internal consistency. They were not a choice to represent the characters within the worlds depicted.

No. These were choices to better represent what certain ideologues think the modern world looks like.

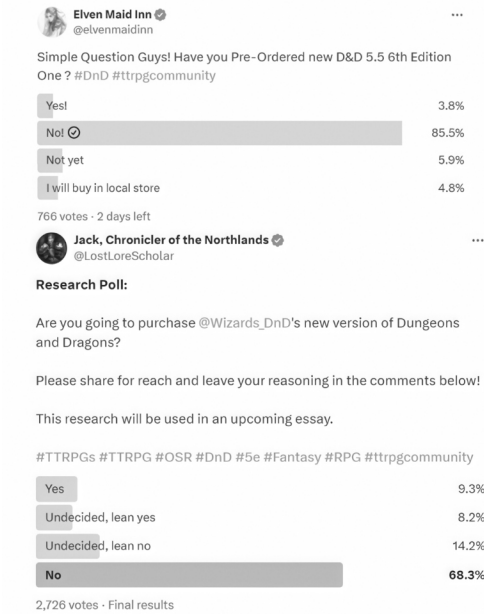
Certain themes run throughout, ticking every progressive box one can think of. Gone are the thoughtful, considered, and measured approaches to world building experienced in years gone by. No great peoples rising from one part of the world, moving to another, and being identifiably a people. No. Instead you see modern America. This was quite noticeable in Amazon's The Rings of Power series as well, which did away with Tolkien's approach to world building to bring us multi-racial halflings.

Much is sacrificed in the name of this ideology. The message of the work takes precedence over the work itself. There is no subtlety, no room for nuance, and certainly no tolerance of dissent. The worst

sin of all is to notice it. Should one see through the wig and bad make-up, should you sniff the rancid breath of a political propagandist, then it is not the propagandist that is at fault; it is you.

This is the attitude to fantasy that needs to be expunged. Fantasy stories certainly can carry themes, they can touch our hearts with lows and highs, paragons and renegades, and virtues and vices. I was told that to cite Moorcock's Elric as not being political was quite silly as Moorcock himself is apparently rather political. I did take moral lessons from his work, and even some spiritual ones, yet I did not feel as if I was being beaten constantly about the head with his personal views. I could not tell you what his views are based on his stories. I can certainly tell you what the views of WoTC are based on theirs.

Friends, I am not alone in this feeling. I and a few other users of X ran the following polls;



There are a great many reasons why TTRPG fans on X said they would not be purchasing the new edition of D&D. One that continually came to the forefront was the exasperation with the continual pushing of political messaging through what many regard as a fundamentally escapist hobby.

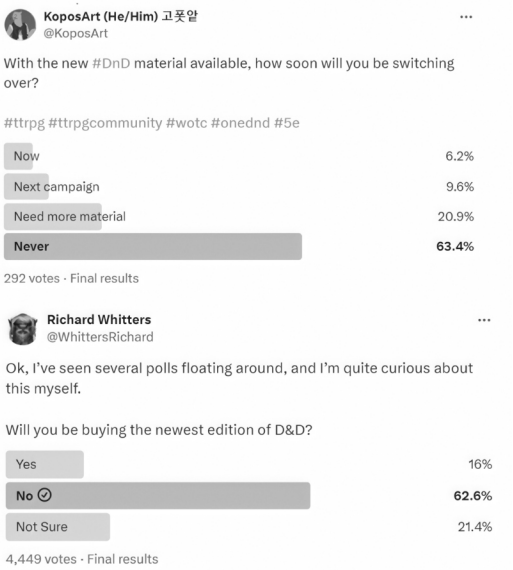
People do not like being preached at, especially through underhanded means. Sadly this leads many that simply want to

enjoy a fantastical world to start shoving the opposing narratives in just as ham-fisted a way into their own work. The works become less and less about losing oneself in the arms of a beautiful peasant girl called Escapism and more about some cultural battleground that should, in this Englishman's humble opinion, bloody well stay in the States.

Genre Fantasy Features Politics

"But Jack", I assume you say, "doesn't Fantasy have politics in it?"

Aye, that it does. From Aragorn the king in exile, to the brutal feudalism of Game of Thrones, the genre is replete with political systems and representations. Yet do note that these things are internally consistent with their own worlds. The court of Elessar was not chiefly concerned with the political happenings surrounding the Cold War. Nor should more recent stories



concern themselves chiefly with modern political issues. Instead, these older fantasy stories had their own political issues and systems that remained well within the confines of their own worlds.

This is not to say that an author, or even a game designer, cannot have some moral message. The good guy overcoming the bad, the just desserts of the evildoer, or the tragic sacrifice of a noble warrior, are all fantastic moral messages; yet they should be

done so within the confines of the world in which they take place.

The death of Boromir in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, for example, shows us a fall from grace, repentance, and redemption. One can certainly argue that this is Tolkien's Catholicism shining through, yet each piece of that event makes sense internally with no need for outside explanation. We are invited to feel with the characters as they sing his funeral song not on the merit of a moral message being shoved to the forefront but upon the merit of a universal human experience. That of loss. Of sorrow. Of guilt and reconciliation. Of atonement.

And that is the crux of the difference. A truly great story, one of those that really sticks with you, speaks to you as a human being. It grips you with a message so universal that it would grip anyone that reads it. The insistence on DEI may flood the hearts of some people with joy but will simply confuse the greater majority to the point of irritation. The value needs to be universal. We can all understand sacrificing oneself for our friends and family. We cannot all understand the machinations of DEI consultants. Ironically the obsessive

need to include everyone will eventually exclude most anyone.

What's to be done?

Simply put; creation for creation's sake. I believe that humans are a special kind of life. We create things, for a myriad of reasons, yet the most special creation is the one that comes about for its own sake. Tolkien believed that we were a species created by a 'Maker' and thus we have within ourselves the desire to create as well.

So do that. Create not for the purposes of grand cultural warfare. Create not for this or that political cause. Let not the soft and safe and easy corporate regulations of diversity, equity, and inclusion shave off the edges of your creations.

Create simply because it brings you joy to do so. Be meticulous. Be adventurous. Be crude or grand, chaste or erotic, low fantasy or high. Create not for left nor right. Simply create.

I shall.



Musings on the Fabric of Worlds

Letter I



When creating my fantasy worlds, I often find myself pondering details that, at first glance, don't seem significant enough to shape the foundation of world-building—or at least, that's what I once thought. Over time, I accepted many established tropes crafted by more learned creators as a baseline. But as I drift deeper into my thoughts, I find myself increasingly uncomfortable with these accepted norms. This growing discomfort has, in turn, nurtured my dissatisfaction with many fantasy worlds, particularly the so-called "modern" ones.

Take *Forgotten Realms*, for instance—a world so richly detailed by Ed Greenwood, one of the greatest ever constructed. Despite it being a high fantasy setting, it once felt authentic. Yet now, something about it no longer resonates with me. It's not the world itself that I dislike, but the way it has drifted from realism. In these letters, I wish to share my thoughts on world-building and why many contemporary fantasy worlds feel... off.

I wish to begin by exploring the life of a rural worker and their family in medieval times and comparing it to the often romanticized or overly simplified portrayals in fantasy worlds.

A medieval rural worker's life was defined by a constant struggle for survival. Most commoners, particularly peasants and farmers, were uneducated and illiterate. Books and formal learning were luxuries reserved for the clergy and the upper class. Families lived in small, often crowded cottages, and their lives revolved around working the land, whether they owned it or, more commonly, rented it from a lord. Taxes and rent were unyielding burdens, paid in crops or currency. The idea of a commoner earning a gold coin would have been outlandish—silver pennies were the

standard, and even these were hard to come by.

Food insecurity was a daily concern. Crop failure due to poor weather or pests could lead to famine. Surviving off the land required not just physical effort but knowledge passed down through generations. Meat was a luxury, and many meals consisted of bread, pottage, and occasional dairy. Hunger and malnutrition



were common, as was disease, exacerbated by poor sanitation.

Life expectancy was grim. While some lived into their 50s or 60s, most did not. Childhood mortality was alarmingly high, with many children dying from illness before reaching adulthood. Families often had numerous children, not only to ensure enough hands to work the farm but also because they knew many would not survive. The death of a child was a harsh, though sadly frequent, reality.

If a child was born with a disability or became disabled through accident or



disease, the family faced an impossible choice. Unable to support them, especially in times of scarcity, children were often abandoned. It was a heart-wrenching decision, but in many cases, it was the only one a family could make for their survival.

In fantasy worlds, particularly those modeled after medieval settings, commoners often live under similarly harsh conditions—or so we're told. But upon closer inspection, many details don't add up. Take, for instance, the Player's Handbook for 5e, which suggests that a "Skilled Artisan" earns 2 gold pieces a day. That's a substantial amount! While it might not seem unreasonable in the context of a game where adventurers rake in gold from treasure hoards, it becomes implausible when applied to ordinary folk.

A regular peasant or commoner would be lucky to see a single gold piece in a day, let alone earn one. Their livelihoods were tied to subsistence farming, where coin exchange was limited. Even those with slightly more specialized trades, such as blacksmiths or bakers, rarely saw large sums of money. Instead, they often bartered goods or paid in kind—food, tools, and labor being exchanged instead of coin.

In a more realistic fantasy setting, money would be scarce for commoners. Gold, silver, and copper should feel like significant, hard-earned currency, not something that's casually handed out for mundane services. This disparity often makes it difficult to believe in a world where commoners can even survive, let alone

thrive, when their economic reality seems disconnected from their in-game portrayal.

Then, there's the matter of magic, especially healing. In most fantasy settings, adventurers can waltz into a temple, pay a few gold, and be cured of diseases or even resurrected. This, too, feels unearned.

If healing magic were available, how much would it truly cost? A spell like Cure Wounds or Lesser Restoration could make the difference between life and death for a commoner. Yet, the cost would likely be astronomical. How could a farmer, struggling to pay rent and keep food on the table, ever afford such a service? Magic, in a believable world, would be a rare commodity, accessible only to the wealthy or the privileged. Commoners would be left to rely on traditional healing methods—herbs, poultices, and prayers—just as they did in the real medieval world.

The existence of magic would also exacerbate class divides. Nobles and merchants with access to healing would live longer, healthier lives, while the poor continued to suffer from disease and injury. This, in turn, would affect population demographics. Fewer children would die in wealthy families, while peasant families continued to face high mortality rates. This creates a stark divide in how different strata of society experience life and death.

So, what does this mean for a fantasy world that seeks to feel more grounded? It means acknowledging the grim realities of medieval life and integrating them into the world. Peasants should struggle, their lives defined by hard labor, scarcity, and limited access to wealth or magic. Magic, when it does appear, should be treated as an extraordinary event—an almost divine intervention rather than a commonplace service. The economic divide between commoners and the wealthy should be palpable, and even more so when magic is involved.

A well-constructed fantasy world draws from these realities, acknowledging that for every powerful adventurer, there are countless others living lives of quiet desperation, surviving in a world that often feels indifferent to their plight.

Let this be the foundation upon which we build a world that is not only fantastic but also true to the roots from which it grows.

— Until the next letter,
Your humble Inn Maid
Sora Miyuki

Same ole

Chainmail

all new shine.



Troll Lord Games artist Meliora Henning is redesigning the classic D&D covers from Chainmail to AD&D 2e, as well as creating a dark fantasy comic OATHSWORN in early access exclusively for Patreon members. View and download the full cover artwork as displayed here today! Reprint them for your home copies or to frame on your wall. Play more games, TROLLZAH!

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Frostwood Ice Cream

Magical Recipe

Here at the Elven Maid Inn, we craft our ice cream with ancient elven techniques, taught to me by the guardian of the Whispering Glades. Our no-churn method uses the airy Whisperwind Cream, sweetened by the Ambrosial Elixir, with a hint of Dewdrop Essence for flavor. A touch of Faerie Dust adds just the right pinch of magic. We freeze it not with mundane tools but with the gentle touch of ice magic, ensuring each bite is as refreshing as the first frost of autumn. But if you lack any of my ingredients that I use in my recipe, fear not, I have list of supplements that can be acquired on Human markets! Enjoy the magic in every scoop, dear traveler!

Ingredients:

- 2 cups of Whisperwind Cream
- 1 jar of Ambrosial Elixir
- 1 teaspoon of Dewdrop Essence
- A pinch of Faerie Dust
- Optional: Magical Bits like crushed phoenix feathers, dragon scales, or enchanted berries

Instructions:

In a bowl blessed by the moonlight, whip the Whisperwind Cream with a feather from a songbird until it stands in peaks, whispering the secrets of the forest.

In another vessel, combine the Ambrosial Elixir, Dewdrop Essence, and a pinch of Faerie Dust, stirring gently to meld the flavors of the elven woods.

Carefully fold the elixir mixture into the whipped cream. If you wish, sprinkle in Magical Bits for texture and wonder.

Transfer this concoction into a vessel carved from the heartwood of an ancient tree. Seal it with a spell of preservation.

With a chant to the frost sprites, let the ice cream solidify under the starlit sky, or if in haste, use your innate ice magic to hasten the process.

Present this magical treat to your guests at the Elven Maid Inn, where each scoop tells a tale of the enchanted realm.

Ingredients:

- 2 cups heavy whipping cream, cold
- 1 can (14 oz) sweetened condensed milk
- 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
- Pinch of salt
- Optional: Your choice of mix-ins like chocolate chips, fruit, or nuts

Instructions:

Whip the Cream: In a large bowl, whip the heavy cream with an mixer until stiff peaks form. Be careful not to over-whip into butter.

Combine Ingredients: In another bowl, mix the sweetened condensed milk, vanilla extract, and salt. Gently fold this mixture into the whipped cream until well combined. If using mix-ins, fold them in at this point.

Freeze: Pour the mixture into a loaf pan or freezer-safe container. Cover with plastic wrap or a lid to prevent freezer burn.

Set: Freeze for at least 6 hours, or overnight, until firm.

Serve: Let the ice cream sit at room temperature for a few minutes before scooping to soften slightly for easier serving.



Elven Maid Inn
Discord Community
Presents

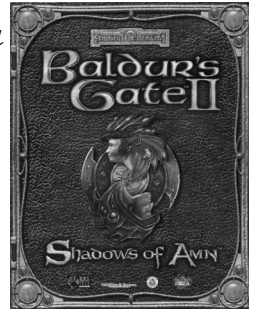
The Elven Maid's Top 10 Chronicles
Top 10 cRPG of all time

Rules of Competition

- 1) Each member of EMI Discord can vote.
- 2) Each member can introduce personal Top 10 list.
- 3) Each list is awarded points, 10th place earns 1 point
9th place earn 2 points, and so on,
1st place earn 10 points.
- 4) Points from each list are summed up and EMI
Top 10 Chronicle is written.

10th Place with 21 Points:
Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn

Developer: BioWare
Release Year: 2000



I really liked bg2 as it has a very unique scaling system where if you go to a location, the difficulty is set at your level. Now, if you go to a place at level 8, and decide it's too hard, you leave and go to another place that is easier because of your play style, you can return to the other place and it will be at level 8 while your party scaled to level 12 and so on. Some games could benefit from it. Also, I really loved the story, the characters and the voice acting. Vircona and Jaheira had some witty banter with one another.

@Sarcastic_elf

9th Place with 22 Points:

Chrono Trigger

Developer: Square Soft
Release Year: 1995



Chrono Trigger is, by far, my favorite game & my favorite rpg of all time. The multiple team attacks that use 2 or all 3 characters. Each character having important side quests that really mattered & makes a difference. Multiple different Endings. A Game +, first I've ever seen. It's an epic quest that starts off small but quickly expands. Not just in a kingdom or the world, but through all of time. Against a cosmic entity that travels world to world, consuming the best the planet has before leaving the now empty husk to do it again to another world. That is the Final Boss. You can also go fight it almost any moment in the game too! Depending on when you face Lavos, will determine which ending you get. Some of those side quests will also directly affect the end of the game & ending, too. It's a perfect 10/10 game.

@SketchasaurR



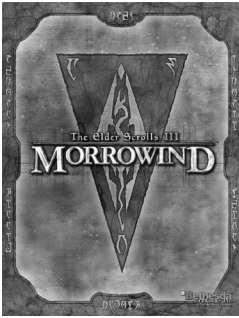
8th Place with 23 Points:
Neverwinter Nights

Developer: BioWare/Obsidian
Release Year: 2002



7th Place with 26 Points:

The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind



Developer: Bethesda Game Studios
Release Year: 2002

6th Place with 27 Points:

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt

Developer: CD Project RED
Release Year: 2015



Witcher 3 - One of the best RPGs out there, it delicately balances exploration and role play. The NPCs have an incredible amount of depth, and are actively involved in the storyline, whether it is a side or main quest. There's so many easter eggs that only now after 8 years has xLetalis run out of things to find in the game that people might not know about the game...but I am sure that there are more unknowns to explore. The world is filled with wonder and whether it's investigating the depths of dreary Velen, the colourful streets of Novigrad or the seas around Skellige, there's definitely a part of Witcher 3 that'll appeal to most! Also the DLCs are REALLY fun, just make sure you don't pick Triss and Yen because that ending is just tragic XD

@snowystar122

5th Place with 29 Points:

The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion



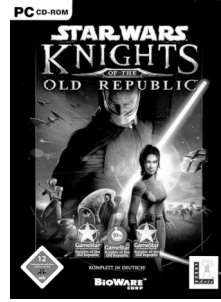
Developer: Bethesda Game Studios
Release Year: 2006

4th Place with 33 Points:

Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic

Developer: BioWare

Release Year: 2003



I chose "Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic" because of its stellar gameplay mechanics (based on the popular and flexible d20 system that was popular at the time and still is my favorite), groundbreaking voice acting, gorgeous soundtrack, stunning visuals (for the time), and overall excellent storyline. This game also managed to invoke the emotional feel of "Star Wars: Empire Strikes back" by having one of the most iconic plot twists in videogame history. Judged in its own time, this game is a masterpiece!

@KyleAPotter1

3rd Place with 38 Points:

Baldur's Gate III

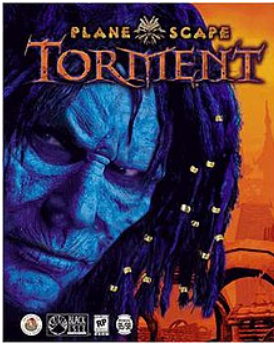
Developer: Larian Studios

Release Year: 2023



Baldur's Gate 3: Certainly not a perfect game, as it basically represents the very best and worst of 5th edition D&D. It certainly stumbles in the third act, and the DEI bullshit makes me cringe out of my skin. That said, the commitment to choice-based roleplaying and showing you the consequences of your actions is rivaled only by a few other games. The dialogue system is insanely deep, and I love just how dynamic and open-ended the combat gets. Exploration is also a ton of fun, with tons of hidden paths you wouldn't think the devs would have accounted for, but they did anyway. Also, the game has some nice T&A, so it gets extra points in my book.

@The_Lord_Otter



2nd Place with 40 Points:
Planescape Torment

Developer: Black Isle Studios
 Release Year: 1999



Planescape Torment - It is one of the best D&D RPGs that's not typical D&D. It is one of the few games to make use of the 'amnesia trope' to its fullest. The cast of NPCs is amazing. There is so much depth and weirdness to the world, even the old Elder Scrolls is normal by comparison. Also it is one of three rpgs that I have taken my limited time to play more than twice all the way through. I can't recommend it enough. Honestly, it's probably the best game of all time. Also, the soundtrack is fucking lit

@writelikederp

1st Place with 41 Points:
Fallout: New Vegas

Developer: Obsidian Entertainment
 Release Year: 2010



I pick Fallout New Vegas because it manages to not only have a 10/10 exemplary story, but also manages to have an excellent gameplay cycle with wonderful indirect balancing and player direction where the player never FEELS railroaded. In addition, the world design is top notch, the characters are each memorable and well-put, and the game is dripping with personality and atmosphere. Overall, it set a standard, it DEFINED what a 3D FPS-RPG SHOULD BE. And it existing at all in any kind of form, let alone such a good albeit initially broken form, is a miracle to rival biblical magics, as it had just about everything going against it behind the scenes.

In summary: It set a standard, and it defied the odds.

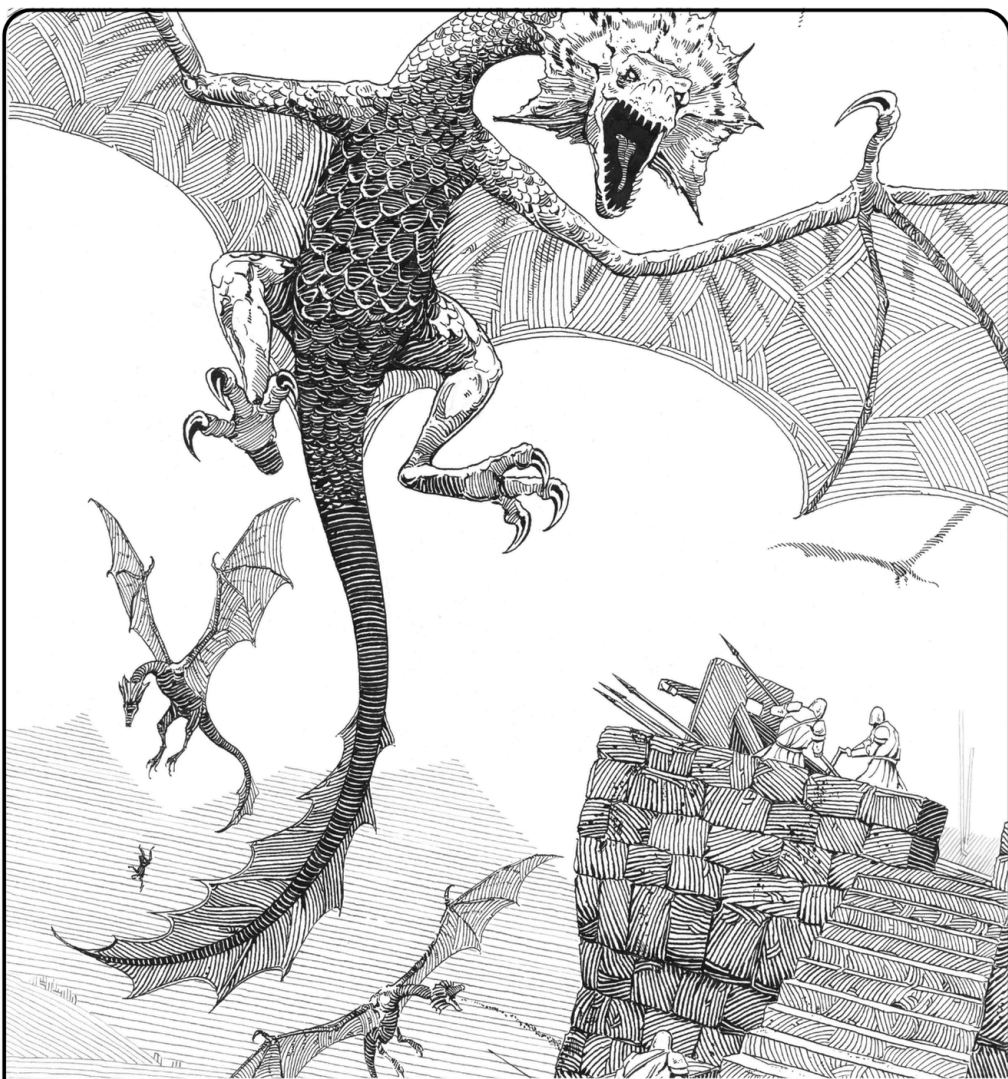
@TheDramaGoblin1

Remaining Entries:

<i>Baldur's Gate</i>	19	<i>Tears of the Kingdom</i>	6
<i>Mass Effect</i>	19	<i>Greedfall</i>	5
<i>Fallout</i>	16	<i>Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess</i>	5
<i>Fallout III</i>	14	<i>Pillars of Eternity</i>	5
<i>Final Fantasy VI</i>	14	<i>Plagued Tale 2</i>	5
<i>Elder Scroll V: Skyrim</i>	14	<i>South Park The Fractured But Whole</i>	5
<i>Elden Ring</i>	11	<i>Star Wars Knights of the Old Republic 2</i>	5
<i>Dragon Age: Origins</i>	10	<i>Batman: Arkham Asylum</i>	4
<i>Final Fantasy VII</i>	10	<i>Breath of Fire 4</i>	4
<i>Golden Sun</i>	10	<i>Fear and Hunger</i>	4
<i>Icwind Dale</i>	10	<i>Final Fantasy XIV</i>	4
<i>Jade Empire</i>	10	<i>Final Fantasy IX</i>	4
<i>Okami</i>	10	<i>Paper Sorcerer</i>	4
<i>Star Control 2</i>	10	<i>Tyranny</i>	4
<i>Anvil of Dawn</i>	9	<i>Diablo</i>	3
<i>Grandia</i>	9	<i>Dragon Quest 7</i>	3
<i>Horizon Forbidden West</i>	9	<i>Dragons Dogma</i>	3
<i>Dark Souls 2</i>	8	<i>Kingdom Hearts</i>	3
<i>Deus Ex</i>	8	<i>Mother 3</i>	3
<i>Diablo II</i>	8	<i>Pathfinder - WotR</i>	3
<i>Horizon Zero Dawn</i>	8	<i>Phantasy Star 3</i>	3
<i>Plagued Tale</i>	8	<i>Arx Fatalis</i>	2
<i>Pokemon Gold</i>	8	<i>BioShock</i>	2
<i>Breath of the Wild</i>	7	<i>Tales of Symphonia</i>	2
<i>Persona 4</i>	7	<i>Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines</i>	2
<i>Alpha Protocol</i>	6	<i>World of Warcraft</i>	2
<i>Fallout II</i>	6	<i>Undertale</i>	2
<i>Fallout IV</i>	6	<i>Breath of Fire 3</i>	1
<i>Final Fantasy Tactics</i>	6	<i>Mass Effect 2</i>	1
<i>Gothic II</i>	6	<i>Pokemon Black and White</i>	1
<i>Neverwinter Nights II</i>	6	<i>Shadow Hearts: Covenant</i>	1
<i>Pathfinder: Kingmaker</i>	6	<i>Super Mario RPG</i>	1



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Interview with Team behind upcoming TTRPG

Untold Destiny

When the creators of Untold Destiny—an ambitious new tabletop role-playing game—reached out and offered the chance to sit down and dive into the untold secrets of their upcoming project, I couldn't have been more excited. As a TTRPG enthusiast, the opportunity to uncover what makes this game unique and hear the vision behind it was one I couldn't pass up. In this interview, we'll explore the inspirations, challenges, and hidden elements that make Untold Destiny stand out in the ever-expanding world of role-playing games.

Elven Maid Inn: Tell me about yourselves. Who is behind Untold Destiny? Could you introduce yourselves and share a bit about your backgrounds? How did you come together as a team to create Untold Destiny? What roles does each of you play in the development of the game?

Untold Destiny: In the late 80's Dean was a DM at the local YMCA and that was where he first met and ran D&D games for Ian. Later, they met again at University and Ian introduced Vicky to Dean. 18 months later Dean and Vicky were married...

We have all remained firm friends and

roleplayed together since that time.

John met Ian through work and we all came together to run roleplaying games at a now sadly demised Wargaming convention in Wales called Crusade, which was a victim of the Covid era.

In 2012 Dean left his career in IT to focus on his passion for roleplaying games and Untold Destiny started out in our living room with Dean and Ian exploring various mechanics and discussing concepts. This grew and evolved through discussions, playtesting and reimagining into Untold Destiny and the system that it is today.

Dean is the creator, lead designer and writer; we call him the Master Architect...

Ian is a key collaborator, involved in the conception and evolution of the rules, mechanics and thematics.

Vicky is the co-creator, with a heavy focus on creating the world of Cesia, imagining and creating the art briefs and liaising with artists.

John is a writer and editor of the system. He's created some of the character classes and his editing is second to none, with a real attention to detail ensuring consistency throughout

This year, Andy also joined to support

us in marketing. He picked up his dice for the first time (and we are pleased to report he now knows what a D20 is) and has contributed with layout design, marketing and printing know how.

EMI: When did you start playing pen and paper games? How old were you when you first got into tabletop role-playing games? What drew you to the hobby initially?

Dean: I've always had a vivid imagination and fell in love with Fighting Fantasy books and magazines like White Dwarf and Dragon Magazine.

In the later 80's I emigrated to the UK, and found a roleplaying shop in Cardiff, Wales, called FC Parkers where I was introduced to the red boxset of Basic Dungeons and Dragons. My life was never the same after that moment.

I saw an advert for local players and responded and after a short period as a player, I quickly became a forever DM. My passion became creating adventures for players to experience.

Vicky: I always preferred books to anything else and spent much of my formative years in the library and unsurprisingly my favourite genres were Science Fiction and Fantasy.

I was at university before the opportunity to roleplay presented itself. The DM was Tim, system was 2nd Edition AD&D and I still remember my first character; Ranger Elf called Kyra. Roleplaying has formed a part of my life from that day forward.

Ian: I was around 12 when I first heard about role-playing games, bought Tunnels and Trolls and then my first box set from FC Parkers in Cardiff and started playing in a group when I was around 14. I was on a train and spotted someone with a Dungeons and Dragons book at a train station and struck up a conversation. They introduced me to another group and that is where I first met Dean and my passion for the hobby only grew from there.

John: I spent my childhood immersed in books of the Fantasy genre such as Tolkien, C.S. Lewis and lots of other authors and with an avid interest in History. I was first introduced to D&D by a friend at school when I was 11... a mere 43 years ago, and I haven't looked back since.

We have also been working with 4 exceedingly talented artists:

Jakub Kasiar, Jamie Noble, Luke Eidenshink and Serena Cutler.

EMI: What was your first system, and most importantly, what inspired you to create your own TTRPG? Can you tell us about your first experience with a TTRPG system? What was it and what did you enjoy about it? What were the key inspirations or motivations that led you to create Untold Destiny?"

UD: The first system I ran was Basic Dungeons and Dragons, and soon after 2nd Edition AD&D. Despite their flaws, which even then I was house ruling, I have such fond memories of the long running campaigns I ran using that system.

I always felt that each system that I played fell apart at high levels which resulted in an ever-increasing need to house rule. Taking a campaign through from 1st to high level provides the basis for epic storytelling as the character interests and campaign stakes move from local to more worldly threats.

As new versions were released the core issues remained unchanged and, in some cases, as with 3.5e, became more pronounced as power builds unbalanced the system and made running a long campaign a nightmare. The maths of each release became heavier and bogged down combat. We played other systems and found similar issues.

4th edition... we will not speak of.

5th edition came and brought some hope, but even with house ruling, there were significant challenges for running campaigns into high levels.

The desire to have a system that I could use for campaigns and play through to high levels, with a natural feel for progression is at the core of why I created Untold Destiny.

I looked at what I loved in systems and what I hated and reimagined everything to provide a playable framework. Player immersion was a key goal, combat had to be interactive not flat and there had to be a depth of character options away from combat to support campaign building. The focus was on the player experience, coupled with a robust framework for the Architect.

EMI: The Untold Destiny press pack included an intriguing detail that caught my attention. Although Untold Destiny is a fantasy game, it started as a science fiction setting. Why such a dramatic shift? What



was the original concept of Untold Destiny as a science fiction game? What factors led to the decision to shift the setting from science fiction to fantasy? How has this transition influenced the game's development and overall theme?

UD: Untold Destiny's embryonic stage started out in our living room (after a few choice beverages) with one of those philosophical discussions that everyone has at some point in time and centred around Arthur C Clarks quotation "Two possibilities exist: either we are alone in the Universe or we are not. Both are equally terrifying."

We started talking about how we could see life unfolding and that at some point we would, to preserve the Human Race, need to leave Earth and constrained to a single planet life is vulnerable.

Dean had recently left his job in the Legal IT sector to pursue his dream of creating Games and this conversation fired up his imagination. Dean created a whole storyline around humans being forced to leave Earth and colonising the stars, the creation of Singularity Gates to enable interstellar travel and the collapsing and terraforming of Gas Giants to form habitable planets. Initially, we envisaged this as an RPG computer game but as time went on it became very evident that it lent itself more towards a TTRPG setting. It was during another one of our late-night living

room discussions with Ian, that the name "Untold Destiny" surfaced and was adopted.

Now in the background, we were also playing our regular Sunday D&D game with Ian and friends. Dean, as the DM, had always heavily house ruled D&D and was also looking to make these rules available to others, so our founding idea was to create our unique sci-fi setting and utilise D&D rules along with our supplementary house rules.

Fast forward through several years of shaping the system where Dean weaved a timeline spanning thousands of years with key events and we were far along the journey to commission some artwork to bring our vision to life. Then in 2023 WoTC started the licensing debacle. We stepped back and watched it unfold and came to the conclusion that we didn't like the direction WoTC was heading and then we looked at the volume of house rules we used to make D&D work at high levels and made the decision.

It was time to create a new rules system from scratch, something we want to play with a framework that fits our playstyle and settings.

We also realised that we all love playing in Fantasy based campaigns.

The sci-fi setting was also enormous, spanning multiple planets with complex interweaving storylines which also required

the additional rules to govern space travel, technology use and terraforming so we realised we needed to refine focus and decided to concentrate on the fantasy setting and to restrict it to one planet; Cesitya.

So, we asked ourselves, what would happen if technology would no longer work? How could that come about? Then we weaved a story around it.

This resulted in two settings. Untold Destiny Pioneer; the fantasy setting based on the world of Cesitya and Untold Destiny Origins; the sci-fi setting prior to the Ashfall across multiple planets in the wider universe.

The foundations set up in Origins has shaped the world of Cesitya, the races, the creatures, the background and the land. Everything on Cesitya has a reason for being there with a rich history behind it, which we feel helps with immersion as it is more believable.

We wanted to be able to use the rules framework for both Pioneer and Origins and although supplementary rules are needed to govern technology, our underpinning framework will remain.

EMI: So, the world of Cesitya is a post-apocalyptic science fiction world that was destroyed, pushing its civilization back to a Dark Age. What caused such devastating events? Could you elaborate on the cataclysmic events that led to the fall of Cesitya's advanced civilization? What role does this history play in the current setting of the game?

UD: The Aether is an important aspect of the Untold Destiny settings. Souls reside within the Aether, returning upon death to be reborn once more. It touches the physical worlds, governs the laws of physics and is pure energy.

Those that possess the ability to spell cast have learned how to manipulate the Aether.

In game, no-one knows what caused the Ashfall, though the tales tell that the third moon shattered into a million pieces and showered Cesitya with ash. The elements broke free of their bonds, instantly and catastrophically bursting from the conduits that held them in check. Cities were laid to ruin and anyone near technology were incinerated. Only small, isolated pockets of survivors remained.

As game designers, we have a full and

detailed account of what caused the Ashfall... but we don't want to ruin the surprise.

The history has a profound impact on the current setting. Not only did the survivors have to contend with the event of the Ashfall itself, but they were suddenly plunged into a world where instant knowledge was no longer available and they had to relearn how to survive. In addition to that challenge, was that the Ashfall also effected all life on Cesitya, further exacerbating the bio-engineered differences in the races and creatures. New creatures, never seen before but reflecting those once spoken of in the myths and legends from the dim and distant past, strode across the earth of Cesitya.

Each nation that exists in our setting had to make difficult choices to survive and were born through adversity; this is reflected in their individual cultures.

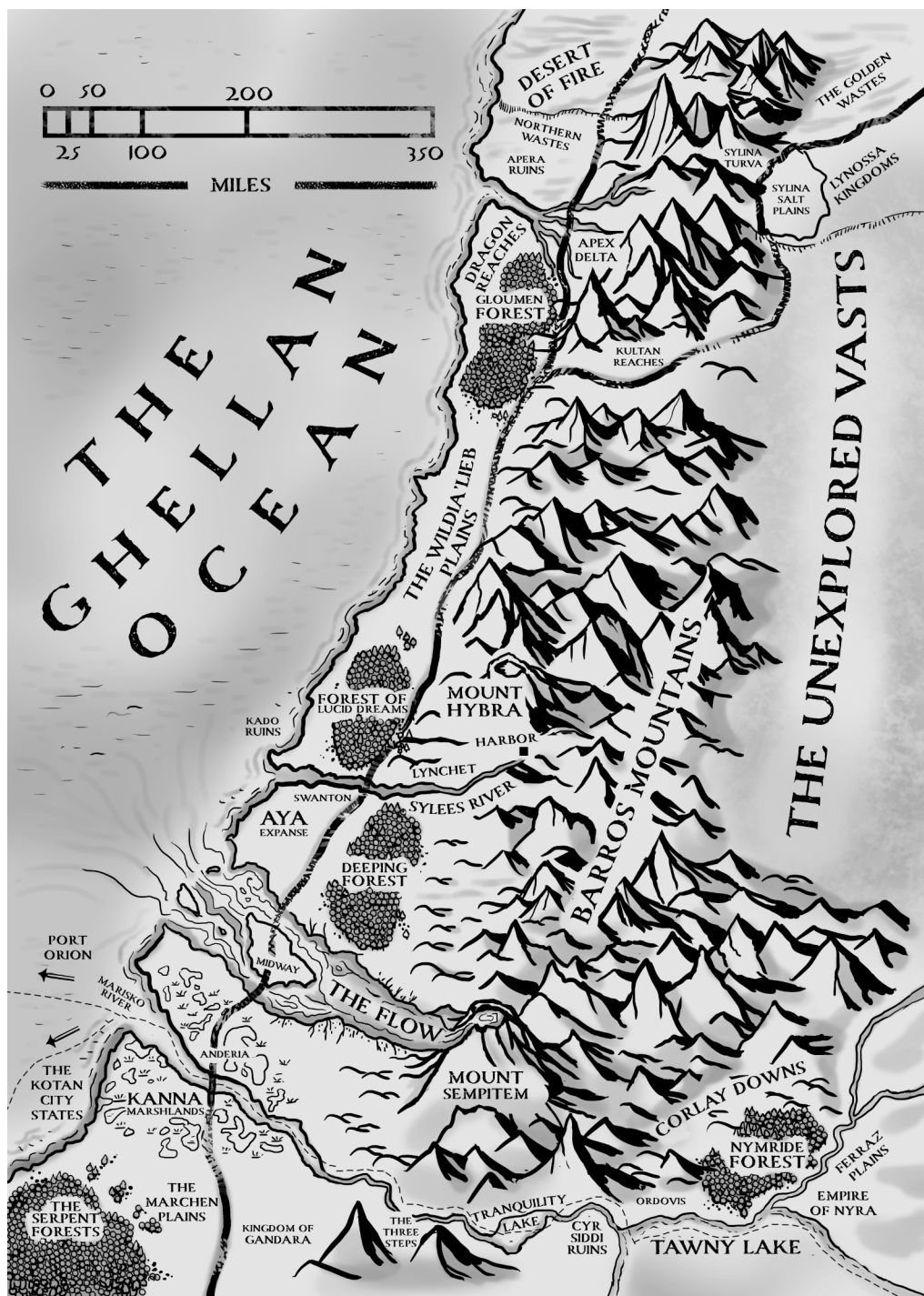
Technology cannot be recreated as the elements refuse to be tamed and between each settlement there are dangerous wilds. It is a true points of light campaign setting.

EMI: How large is the world of Cesitya? What can players expect to find within it? Can you give us an idea of the geographical scope of Cesitya? What are some of the major regions, cities, or landmarks that players might encounter?

UD: Cesitya surface area is over 250 million square miles, of which around 60% is covered by water. However, to prevent it becoming overwhelming to both Players and Architects alike we are releasing the world an area at a time.

Our area for launch is the Harbor Protectorate and surrounding provinces which is over 800K square miles to play in. Harbor itself is a metropolis within a large cave system in the Barros Mountains nestled in Mount Hybra. Survivors from the Ashfall established themselves in the uncommissioned geothermal plant that being offline, afforded them a level of protection and defence. This, over time, became the main seat of civilisation in the area and although there are other settlements and kingdoms there are wide areas of wilderness that are dangerous. Trade expeditions between settlements are notoriously dangerous and there are huge swathes of areas with unique dangers such as the spores and plants within the Forest of Lucid Dreams.

Being unable to use technology, civilisation has been forced to embrace



unique and challenging methods of achieving their goals, such as the Lava Hoppers of Midway who are hardened against the heat and gaseous vapours of the lava flows to traverse and harness the incredible power within.

The Three Steps Great Locks is the watery gateway used for Trade between the marsh bound city of Anderia, with its great stilts and pontoons, through Tranquility Lake and past the gauntlet of the Cyr Siddi Ruins and onto the Elven city of Ordovis.

EMI: The events of Untold Destiny occur 800 years after the "Ashfall." What kinds of remnants from the old civilization still exist in the game world? How do these relics impact gameplay and the storyline?

The ruined cities remain, as do forgotten outposts and settlements. The relics of the past are still sought after, either as valuable materials or as art from a bygone age and having great value to the keepers of lore, and those that have attained wealth and station.

There are many opportunities to explore these sites, either to reclaim the relics and rare materials within, or to gain access to forgotten information when dealing with the new threats since the Ashfall.

EMI: Is Cesya a dangerous place? What kinds of monsters roam its wilds? What types of threats and dangers can players expect to face in Cesya? Could you highlight some of your favourite monsters or adversaries in the game?

UD: Dealing with dangerous creatures and threats is a daily concern, for all settlements. Venturing off the trade ways into the wilds can reap great rewards but when unprepared it will quickly result in the demise of the explorers.

All life has been affected by the Ashfall, some species dying and others becoming larger, stronger and more vicious. Shadow Stalkers, huge cats standing over ten feet tall, hunt in pairs. Their fur adapting to the environment around them, rendering them almost invisible... stalking their prey on almost silent paws.

The Forest of Lucid Dreams seems safe enough as you venture under the boughs of the trees, but as you breath in the spores and inevitably venture from the path you are sure to fall foul of the Tangle vines, the Ropers or the Sinkpits as they lure you to your slow, dissolving deaths as you are

consumed.

The remnants of the Shadow Epoch; Golems, roam the land, stripping it of all life. Their hideous stitched and mangled bodies hide the last vestiges of their souls within their tormented, anguished eyes.

Quiet voices whisper in your ear, yearning to return to the world. They tantalise you with the promise of forgotten secrets, pathways to power and riches.

Rampant Orcs vicious and cruel maraud, their Goblin sidekicks licking their blades coating them with venom before battle.

Guarding their territory against the encroachment of civilisation, are the mighty wyverns, drakes and crystal lizards. Behemoth Dragons stand mighty above the forests, guarding their lands ferociously.

EMI: How do you handle the concept of races in Untold Destiny? Can players choose standard fantasy races like Elves? What races are available for players to choose from in Untold Destiny?

UD: There are 5 races available to play in Untold Destiny.

Following the exodus from Earth and following the Shadow Epoch 5 guilds were formed that governed trade, mining, knowledge, aether research and military.

Families gravitated to the guilds that aligned to their purpose and over time the specialities and bio-engineering used by these guilds streamlined their genetics. Those that had left Earth had taken the literature of the past to the stars and as their physical, mental and resilience traits changed they adopted the names from that literature.

The only exception to this were the Maethor, who, having been highly engineered, created their own name; a name for the time they were now in but with echoes of a time gone by.

- Trade & agriculture; Humans
- Mining & construction; Dwarves
- Science & knowledge; Gnomes
- Aether & duality; Elves
- Military & weapons; Maethor

Although the races names are familiar, there are subtle differences from the traditional races that you would associate with a fantasy setting. For example, Elves are tall, slim and typically have long straight hair. Their faces are longer than a human with piercing eyes that have no visible pupils but appear like the night sky full of stars. Gnomes are human sized but they are hairless with larger craniums which they

traditionally adorn with tattoos and Dwarves are slightly smaller than humans in height with pale skin and strong in stature with beards a matter of personal preference. The Maethor are tall, exceptionally strong with sturdy thick set bones.

EMI: Let's discuss the game system. Can you outline the core mechanics of Untold Destiny and how they differ from those in D&D? Would you say Untold Destiny aligns more with OSR systems or with modern TTRPG systems?

UD: Our tagline is, "Classic roleplay reimagined" because we have drawn upon what we loved from the old school systems but have reimagined how the mechanics work, so therefore we align with OSR systems, but with a reimagined, modern feel.

If we do a short comparison with D&D versions.

Untold Destiny is a d20 system and at its heart you roll 1d20 and potentially add or subtract a modifier. The result is then compared to a target number you must equal or surpass to resolve an attack, saving throw or skill test.

We use the same attributes as D&D; Strength, Constitution, Dexterity, Intelligence, Wisdom and Charisma but how we utilise these attributes differs considerably.

- Strength is used as the range of damage on the dice that you can re-roll when using melee weapons. This is instead of the modifier adding to damage; this increases the average damage a high strength character would do. It also sets the Raw Strength Saving Throw difficulty class for raw strength checks.

- Dexterity value is your base Armour Class, unless you get higher from another source and is used as the range of damage on the dice that you can re-roll when using ranged or finesse weapons.

- Constitution value is added once to the hit points gained from your class and contributes to your System Shock Saving Throw.

- Intelligence modifier adds to the spell points gained from Mage classes and the number of spells you can focus on.

- Wisdom modifier is used to calculate your Awareness Saving throw, adds to the spell points gained from Priest classes and the number of spells you can focus on.

- Charisma contributes to your

Stamina, your Aura value and provides your temporary Fate points.

Unlike D&D, damage in Untold Destiny is a weapon damage dice and a weapon proficiency dice added together. Your attributes provide a reroll range for damage which results in a higher than average roll for those with high attributes.

A critical hit always results in maximum damage.

Saving throws work differently with a difficulty class based on a combination of race and class that you calculate in character creation, and a bonus based on the assisting attribute.

Hit points, stamina and spell points refresh after an encounter.

There are Fate points in Untold Destiny which you can spend to "rewind Fate" and retake a test.

There are Fatality levels in Untold Destiny which are detrimental to your character and if you reach 5, results in character death that you cannot come back from.

There are situations where you will gain a boon (1d6), greater boon (1d10) that adds to your rolls or a bane or greater bane which is subtracted.

You can gain Grand-Master in one skill and weapon group and if you choose to do so by expending your skill points, could start Grand Mastered at 1st level.

In D&D (5E) each person takes a turn dependant on initiative, during which you can move, take one action, a free action, a bonus action and one reaction. In Untold Destiny, you roll for initiative and where party members are grouped, i.e. an adversary does not take their turn in between, then you can decide on order during each turn. Each character can then move, take an action, a swift action and free actions. Reactions can then be taken at any time, based on the trigger for the reaction and as long as you spend the stamina cost. This means that you can react to what your party members do, to the environment and also to adversaries.

There is no limit to the number of reactions that you can take, other than if you run out of stamina.

We have an Experience system and a Legend system that rewards the party for heroic actions.

Many of these mechanics have roots in the systems we loved of old, but play with a modern streamlined feel that is straight forward to learn and provides depth & immersion.



EMI: What are some of the distinctive rules or mechanics that set Untold Destiny apart? How do these rules enhance the gameplay experience?

UD: We feel that the top 3 key mechanics that set us apart are:

- Recovery of combat resources
- Reimagined approach to combat defences
- Proficiencies & skill approach

Recovery of Combat Resources:

Hit points and stamina can both be replenished using the “recovery” action, “conserve stamina” is a swift action and allows you to recover 1 stamina and the “centre self” action allows spellcasters to recover 1 spell point. There is only a short minute respite at the end of an encounter to recover all spent resources. This allows for a natural flow to the adventuring day, is liberating for spell-casters and martial characters and makes preparation by the Architect easier.

Combat Defences:

Your Armour Class (AC) is a passive defence and is either 10, equal to your dexterity value or equal to the AC provided

by physical armour/spells; whichever is higher.

Physical armour will also provide a Physical Damage Resistance (PDR), which means there is an additional benefit to wearing armour other than AC.

If an adversary rolls your AC or higher, then that is classed as a “hit”, but using stamina you can react attempting to either dodge or parry the attack. If successful that attack then misses and should you have the associated bonus feature you may even be able to riposte, dealing damage to them as they leave themselves open.

Shields provide a bonus to parry and reflex based saving throws instead of AC and can also be used against ranged attacks. Dodge, however, can be used against all attacks that have a “to hit” roll.

Proficiencies and skill approach:

When creating your character, you will receive training for skills and weapon proficiencies based on your choices for heritage, family and background. Your class will also give you points that can be spent. There are six ranks to training; untrained, proficient, specialised, expert, master and grand-master.

Proficiency ranks are not restricted to character level, enabling you to create the character that you have visualised. The only

restrictions are the number of weapon groups or skill proficiencies that you can have at the grand mastered rank and the volume of points that you receive at character creation and during levelling. It is quite possible to have a character at 1st level who is grand mastered in a skill or weapon group, should you choose to do so.

Kits can be used in conjunction with skills to create, harvest and perform downtime activities whilst adventuring, that can provide you or the party with benefits or items to aid you.

EMI: Character creation—how can players forge their champions in Untold Destiny? What is the character creation process like? How long does it typically take to create a character? How important is team composition in the game?

UD: We always recommend entering character creation with a vision of your character, especially the archetype but if you haven't got a view then the rules and options can help you find what you want to play.

Creating a character in Untold Destiny commences with attributes, with 4 options depending on your Architects preference and the campaign style. Then you choose race, all of which have various benefits and challenges to overcome. Your heritage is next, where you have come from and the culture that you were immersed in growing up which provides you with your languages, some skill bonuses and special traits. What was your family? That is your next decision and can provide additional languages and furnishes you with your weapon and defence knowledge, skill training, inheritance and special traits. Then you move to your background which provides access to more weapons and defence, skills, earnings and special traits. Only when you have reached this point do you choose your class.

If like me, you spend time refining, tweaking and changing your mind to align your character as closely as possible to your initial vision, then character creation can take around 3-4 hours, especially the first time when you are reading through all of the options. Once you are used to the system, you can generate an exciting character in around forty minutes.

We recommend that you create your characters together as team dynamic is important. There is no designated healing class, as healing is skill based and open to anyone, but you may want to look at how

skills can work together in downtime to give you advantages, create options to secure extra revenue for your party and of course, fit with the campaign style of the Architect.

EMI: Tell us about combat. Could you explain the mechanics of combat in Untold Destiny? How does the stamina system influence combat and player?

UD: Each character can perform movement, an action, swift action and free actions on their turn, which is governed by initiative order or agreed order where party initiative is grouped.

Stamina is a resource that you need to manage during the encounter that is used to react to particular situations or allies and adversaries' actions.

Dodge and parry are two reactions available to all character classes. Both are reactions triggered by a successful hit against your character's AC and expends 3 or 2 stamina respectively. Dodge is your character's ability to see that attack coming and adjust accordingly; thematically ducking under a sword blow so that it only cuts through the air or side stepping an incoming fire bolt as it fizzles harmlessly against the wall. To attempt to dodge you spend the stamina and roll *1d10* and add the result to your AC; which means the attack could now miss.

Parry can only be used against melee weapons and you must have a weapon capable of parrying. As your opponent swings surely landing a blow you intervene with your weapon. You make an attack roll and add your character's parry bonuses and should you equal or surpass your opponent you parry the attack, which means it now misses. Should you have the Riposte bonus feature then you can spend additional stamina to deal damage to your opponent as you force an opening that you take advantage of. Thematically, imagine you are an Arcanist, staff in hand. The Goblin Licker, poison dripping from his blade, leaps towards you swinging with a vicious strike. Confident in your ability, your staff blocks the blade and using the Goblins momentum against him you force him off balance following up with resounding crack across his skull.

There are numerous ways in our system to react to situations, including aiding allies, utilising special abilities, forming defensive barriers, pushing back attackers and inflicting elemental damage if they get too close. All of these take stamina, so careful management of this resource is key to

success, as once it is depleted you cannot react until you have regained some; either by taking a “recovery” action or the “conserve stamina” swift action.

The reaction mechanic keeps everyone engaged at the table, focused on the combat and immersed in their character.

EMI: How rules-heavy is Untold Destiny? Would you describe Untold Destiny as rules-light or rules-heavy? How much flexibility does the system offer Game Masters in terms of rule interpretation?”

UD: Untold Destiny is rules-medium, there is a logical structure and framework with the tools to allow the Gaming Architect (our version of the Games Master) to respond to any situation or judgement call.

The numbers for Armour Class and skill DCs go from 10 to 30, so the range is always manageable.

Skill descriptions have guidelines for their use and DCs for commonly performed actions, but they can be adapted by the Architect as required.

The boon/bane system allows for situational modifiers that the Architect can apply to any situation as they see fit and this ranges from a d6 added/subtracted for a boon/bane to a 1D10 added/subtracted for a greater boon/bane.

Number modifiers are only applied from passive effects or permanent abilities, so once applied they will rarely change, making the flow of the game smoother. You are not constantly looking up situational modifiers when making a roll.

When using a kit, all the skill used and DCs for the task are outlined in the kit. A player who has the kit will have it detailed on their character sheet, making the game run smoothly. Everyone knows what they need to roll to achieve success, although the Gaming Architect can apply boons and banes as they see fit.

We have tried to make sure there is enough guidance for a new Gaming Architect to learn how to adjudicate in a consistent manner, but with the flexibility to allow an experienced Gaming Architect to run the game how they want.

EMI: How challenging is the combat? Many modern TTRPGs are criticised for lacking a sense of danger and fear of loss. How does Untold Destiny approach this topic? How challenging and dangerous is combat in Untold Destiny? What mechanisms are in place to ensure a sense of danger and the possibility of loss?

UD: Untold Destiny’s fluidity and challenge in combat is governed by managing resources; hit points, stamina and spell points. These refresh after an encounter, so why are they so important?

Stamina is your characters inner reserves, your capacity to react to your environment, your enemies and your allies’ actions. You can use Stamina for defence, to parry incoming blows, to leap to the defence of an ally or someone you want to protect, counter an incoming spell or use abilities granted by your bonus features. When you run out of Stamina, you’re struggling to respond to changes on the field of battle, you are worn down.

If your character has access to cast spells, the spell points allow you to cast during your turn or as part of a reaction to what is happening on the battlefield, depending on your spells and bonus feature choice. If you run out of spell points then your options are limited.

Hit points in Untold Destiny is the amount of punishment a character can withstand before a wound and potentially fatality levels are inflicted. Once your character reaches 0 hit points you immediately gain the dying condition and have to succeed at a system shock check to prevent you from gaining a level of fatality. You can keep going but you cannot regain any hit points until you, or an ally has administered first aid. You have to pass a system shock roll each turn or gain a further fatality level and each time you take more damage you have to make another system shock roll. Every level of fatality you gain from a failed system shock impacts your characters survivability and when you tick the final 5th level of fatality, your character is dead; there is no coming back.

In the Fellowship of the Ring, Boromir heroically fought off the Uruk-hai after his failure to overcome the allure of the ring. He takes constant punishment, his reactions slowing until he finally succumbs and slumps to the ground, the Uruk-hai leaving him for dead. He is just alive and tells Aragorn that the Orcs had carried off the hobbits and before Aragorn can save him, he dies. In Untold Destiny Boromir fought valiantly until he ran out of Stamina and unable to defend himself against the number of attacks, his hit points dropped to zero. He then passed some system shock rolls enabling him to continue until he failed enough to see him drop to his knees with a final failed system shock where he died before he received first aid.

Whereas hit points, stamina and spell points refresh after an encounter, fatality levels remain until removed by healing (which is a skill, rather than magic). Therefore you could find that your character may be entering an encounter having already taken fatality levels with a significant disadvantage in battle; being one or more steps closer to death already.

EMI: In your experience, how often does player character death occur in Untold Destiny? What design choices have you made to balance challenge and survivability?

UD: We have a demo one shot adventure that we have run with multiple groups. This demo combat ramps up the difficulty culminating in a heroic showdown with a Demon encounter that is above the party combat rating.

The party have been asked by the Freelancer's Guild to find out why there has been no shipment of ore from the Pheros Mine and why a runner sent with a message has not returned. Their investigation leads them into the mine where a collapse in the mine wall shows an ancient complex beyond. They hear noise beyond; someone crying for help and inevitably combat follows quickly. At the end of the combat, which was designed as a fair match for the party so normally (except on one occasion), the party defeat the creatures without taking fatality damage. They then talk to the freed miner Caleb and during this brief respite from danger their hit points, stamina and spell points refresh and then they turn their attention to the door and the corridor beyond. This reflects the flow of adventuring seen in all books, from Lord of the Rings, The Shannara Series through to Magician where there is intense activity/combat and then they move on.

Beyond is a pit trap and falling damage can be lethal in Untold Destiny, and if the party ignore the warnings from Caleb this can and has caused party members to receive fatality levels.

The Demon and his cohorts at the end of the adventure has caused multiple character deaths and a few party wipes. The key to survival is the balancing of the party & character resources during the encounter, supporting each other to gain the best advantage and strategic use of your abilities.

Therefore, in a careful party character death will be less frequent than in a party that just barrels in.

EMI: Let's talk about classes. Can you describe the unique aspects of character classes in Untold Destiny? How do these classes contribute to the overall gameplay experience?

UD: There will be four main flavours of classes (archetypes). They are fighter, rogue, priest and mage. The archetype sets the common features shared on all classes within the archetype, so a fighter class will have 1d12 hit dice, enhanced weapon damage (this replaced multi-attacks), and weapon focus. A rogue class will have rogue abilities, rogue defence (improvements to their dexterity armour class) and sneak attacks.

Each individual class may then borrow from other archetypes, so the paladin borrows divine casting from the priest archetype, swashbuckler borrows weapon focus from the fighter archetype.

Within each class then are abilities that define the class, making them unique when compared to other classes.

Add to this the bonus features, that can alter how your class works, enhancing their abilities, and adding martial and spell casting options, and your class will be unique, even when compared to another character using the same class.

The character itself is more than the class, with choices made to their heritage, family and background, all adding unique abilities that further define the character. This creates even more unique characters that can bring abilities to the table that no other character has.

For launch there are 24 classes, 6 in each archetype, with a 5th archetype, Lore Keepers in the pipeline.

EMI: How accessible is the system for players and GMs who want to create their own content? Will you allow other creators to develop content for Untold Destiny under ORC or OGL? Will there be official support or guidelines for third-party content creation?

UD: The framework (without our IP) will be released under the Creative Commons licence for 3rd parties to use as they wish. We would love nothing more than for others to create content for our system. If someone wants to add new classes, bonus features, spells, character creation options, not only will there be advice for them in the Architect's Toolbox but they will have our blessing to do so.

As a publisher, there may even be opportunities 3rd party creators to work with us to publish their content.

UD: Untold Destiny has launched on Kickstarter. How long will the campaign last? What is the planned duration of the Kickstarter campaign? Are there any specific milestones or stretch goals you hope to achieve?

UD: The Kickstarter was launched at the end of May and ran throughout June to the beginning of July. The goal of the Kickstarter was to bring in funds for the remaining artwork and printing. Unfortunately, the Kickstarter did not fund; largely because as a new Independent RPG publisher we are unknown in the market and we should not have launched the Kickstarter during an Expo, as people spend their money at the Expo.

It was still a worthwhile activity, however, as we have been able to make excellent contacts, have increased our reach and we are continuing to move towards delivering a physical product, albeit slower than we originally intended as we are fully self-funded.

EMI: What is the initial funding goal for the campaign? How can supporters continue to back the project after the Kickstarter campaign concludes?

UD: The initial funding goal was £25,000 (~\$32,000) and we managed to raise 55% of what we were looking to secure, but as we all know if you don't hit your target, you don't receive any funds.

We are concentrating on increasing our reach via interviews, playtests, social media and our YouTube channel; which is small at the moment but we have some exciting plans for. We have a monthly newsletter that you can sign up for via our website.

Dean also has a Patreon which is free to join and we will be expanding over time.

To help fund the remaining artwork and printing we are setting up Etsy shops to sell prints of our original artwork, apparel such as T-shirts and gaming accessories.

EMI: Post-Kickstarter, where will Untold Destiny be available for purchase? What distribution channels are you planning to use for global availability?

UD: Due to the delay in funding, we are pushing back the formal release of the

books. Depending on how much we can fund the game personally and how much we generate through our other channels this is now forecast to be June 2026. We aren't willing to compromise on the production and quality of art and would rather delay the release than provide a sub-standard product.

However, for all subscribers to the newsletter we will be releasing a playtest adventure that will take characters from levels 1-3 this year and provide a mechanism for Players and Architects to provide feedback.

We have already had interest from retailers in the UK and we will be working with a games logistics company to assist with the fulfilment to the US and other countries. We are planning for Untold Destiny to be available worldwide direct from our website once we have printed product available.

EMI: Can you share any plans for future expansions, additional content, or supplementary materials? What can fans look forward to in terms of new releases or updates?

UD: We are now planning to launch with a basic box set and two books in June 2026. We will then be releasing products including adventure modules and the further planned books every 6-8 months. We have a pipeline of publications that will take us over the next 10 – 15 years to publish just within the Fantasy setting. We also plan to return to our Sci-fi setting once the Fantasy setting is established.

We see Untold Destiny as our passion and want to provide the roleplay community with a rules framework and setting that allows them to play epic campaigns and inspires both Players and Architects alike.

EMI: Thank you so much for the opportunity to ask these questions. I am extremely excited to explore Untold Destiny and take my players on an adventure to Cesia. But before we finish, is there anything you would like to say to our readers? Do you have any final thoughts or messages you'd like to share with our readers? Is there anything specific you want to highlight or emphasize about Untold Destiny?

UD: In the creation of Untold Destiny, the aim was to create a system that could be played from 1st to 20th level, that felt familiar, nostalgic and was easy to pick up

but had real depth. There are spells that do not exist in Untold Destiny, like teleports, instant communications and divinations, as these create problems for the Gaming Architect and break the immersion of the world. Campaign building and immersion are the cornerstones of Untold Destiny, and this should be apparent from character creation onward. The sheer wealth of options and the freedom to create a character with the skills and abilities that make them feel part of a living world should make a player feel invested in their character.

Untold Destiny is created by a truly independent publisher, most of us working full time jobs as well as working on the system. We believe in the roleplay community, champion real artists and writers and believe that role-players deserve a truly immersive system to play. We will provide the Untold Destiny rules framework to everyone under the Creative Commons License so that other creators can generate content. However, we need to publish to get to this point, so sign up for our Newsletter on our website, subscribe to our YouTube channel, purchase our amazing art and merchandise from our store and support

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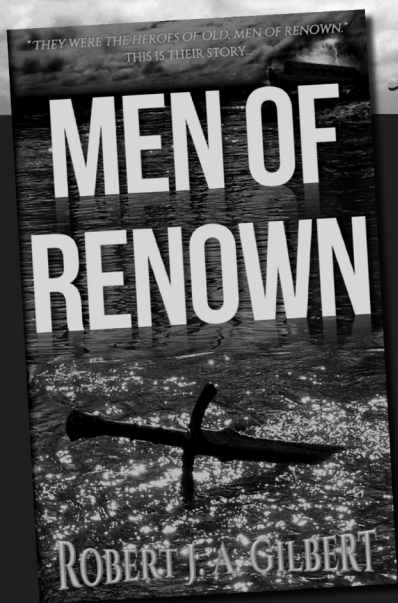
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THE THIRD TEST

Soulforged Sentinel

Class for

Castles & Crusades

Prime Attribute: Wisdom

Alignment: Any non-good (The weapon's evil nature conflicts with a good-aligned character's values)

Hit Die: d10

Weapon: The Soulforged Sentinel may only use the cursed weapon chosen at character creation. This weapon can be any melee weapon from the Player's Handbook, but once chosen, it cannot be replaced or set aside. The weapon is bound to the wielder's soul and cannot be wielded by anyone else.

Armor: The Soulforged Sentinel can wear any armor and use shields.

Abilities:

- 1st Weapon Bond: The character is bound to a cursed weapon and cannot use any other weapon. Separation from the weapon severely weakens the character.
- 1st Hunger: The cursed weapon demands blood. If not sated, the character suffers penalties to Wisdom, eventually risking Bloodlust.
- 2nd Bloodlust: When in Bloodlust, the character must attack the nearest creature, gaining increased attack power and healing from damage dealt.
- 3rd Soul Drain: Sacrifice hit points to deal extra damage, but risk triggering Bloodlust and attacking allies.

- 4th Dark Aura: A malevolent aura surrounds the character, causing enemies nearby to have disadvantage on Wisdom checks and saving throws.
- 5th, 9th, 12th, Weapon Evolution: The cursed weapon grows stronger with the character, gaining bonuses and unique abilities as the character levels up.

Level	HD	BtH	EPP
1	d10	0	2,000
2	d10	+1	2,000
3	d10	+1	4,000
4	d10	+2	8,000
5	d10	+2	16,000
6	d10	+3	35,000
7	d10	+3	75,000
8	d10	+4	140,000
9	d10	+4	300,000
10	d10	+4	600,000
11	d10	+4	900,000
12	d10	+6	1,200,000
13	+250,000 per level		

Class Description:

The Soulforged Sentinel is a cursed warrior bound to a malevolent weapon possessed by an evil entity. This weapon grants its wielder incredible power but at a terrible cost. The wielder's mind and soul are constantly at risk as the weapon's hunger for blood drives them to the brink of madness. The Soulforged Sentinel class is a melee-focused character who relies solely on the cursed weapon chosen at character creation.

The weapon becomes an extension of the character, and they cannot use or even touch any other weapon without severe consequences.

Weapon Bond

At character creation, the player chooses a melee weapon from the Player's Handbook. This weapon is bound to the character's soul, becoming a Soulforged Sentinel. The character can never willingly or unwillingly use another weapon. If separated from their weapon, the character suffers a -4 penalty to all attack rolls, saving throws, and ability checks until reunited.

The weapon is indestructible by normal means. However, it can be destroyed by immense magical energy or natural forces of catastrophic magnitude, such as being submerged in molten lava. A character whose soul is bound to the weapon will die immediately if the weapon is destroyed.

Hunger

The cursed weapon is sentient and hungers for blood. The weapon's hunger increases the longer it goes without being sated in battle. After a period of time determined by the Castle Keeper (typically 3-5 days), the weapon begins to demand blood.

Effect: After the determined period, the character suffers a cumulative -1 penalty to Wisdom saving throws and Wisdom-based checks for each day that passes without combat.

Bloodlust Trigger: If the Wisdom penalty reaches a total equal to or greater than the character's Wisdom score, the character must make a Wisdom saving throw each day or fall into Bloodlust (see Bloodlust below).

Satiating the Weapon: The weapon's hunger is sated by dealing damage in combat. The penalty resets once the weapon is fed sufficiently, as determined by the Castle Keeper.



Art by Patrick Dwyer (@SketchasaurR)

Bloodlust

When the Soulforged Sentinel succumbs to the weapon's malevolent influence, they enter a state of Bloodlust, driven by the weapon's insatiable hunger.

Trigger: Bloodlust can be triggered in two ways:

Hunger: Failing a Wisdom saving throw due to the penalties from Hunger.

Low Health: Automatically triggered when the character's hit points fall below 20% of their maximum value.

Effect: While in Bloodlust, the character must attack the nearest living creature, whether friend or foe, as their mind is overwhelmed by the weapon's influence. The character gains the following benefits and drawbacks:

Attack Bonus: +5 to attack rolls.

Healing: The character heals for an amount equal to the damage they deal during this state.

Mental Fog: The character cannot use spells, activate magical items, or perform any action requiring concentration.

Reckless Abandon: The character tosses aside their shield (if wielding one), losing the shield's bonus to AC for the duration of Bloodlust.

Ending Bloodlust: Bloodlust ends when:

- The weapon's hunger is sated (as determined by the Castle Keeper).
- The character is healed to above 50% of their maximum hit points (if Bloodlust was triggered by low health).

Soul Drain

The Soulforged Sentinel can channel the malevolent power of their weapon to unleash a devastating attack, but at the cost of their own vitality.

Usage: The character may willingly choose to sacrifice hit points to add extra damage to a successful attack. For every 5 hit points sacrificed, the character adds 1d6 damage to the attack.

Limit: The character can sacrifice a maximum of 20 hit points (4d6 damage) in a single attack. Soul Drain cannot be used during Bloodlust.

Risk: Using Soul Drain can trigger Bloodlust (See Bloodlust).



Dark Aura

The cursed nature of the Soulforged Sentinel exudes a malevolent aura that affects those nearby.

Effect: At 5th level, the Soulforged Sentinel gains a Dark Aura that extends 10 feet around them. Enemies within this aura have penitently of -5 on Wisdom saving throws and Wisdom-based checks. Allies within the aura feel uneasy but are otherwise unaffected.

Suppression: The character can suppress the Dark Aura at will, but it requires a successful Wisdom saving throw. If the character is in Bloodlust, the aura cannot be suppressed.

Weapon Evolution

As the Soulforged Sentinel grows in power, so too does their cursed weapon.

At 6th Level: The weapon gains a +1 bonus to attack and damage rolls.

At 12th Level: The weapon gains an additional +1 bonus (total +2), and it gains a unique ability related to the weapon type (e.g., a sword might deal extra necrotic damage, or a spear might have reach and deal lightning damage).

At 18th Level: The weapon gains a final +1 bonus (total +3) and a second unique ability, making it a truly legendary artifact.

Notes:

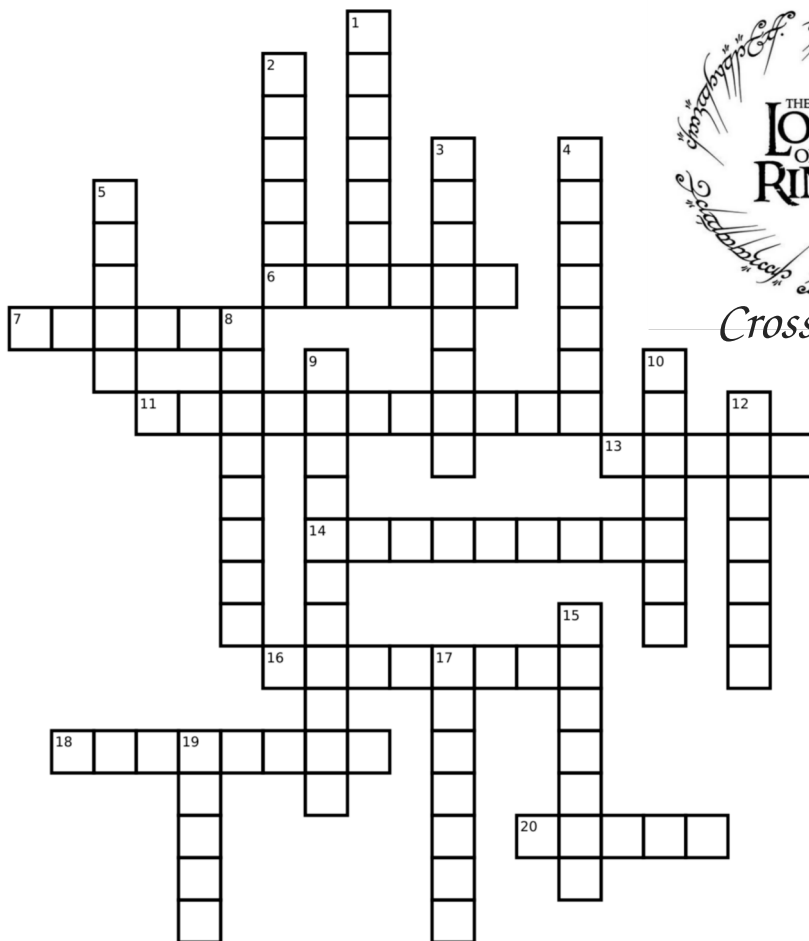
The Soulforged Sentinel class is a high-risk, high-reward class that can deal massive damage but requires careful management of the weapon's hunger and Bloodlust.

Castle Keepers should work with players to determine the exact nature of the weapon's hunger and the consequences of failing to sate it, ensuring a balance between narrative and mechanics.

This class is best suited for players who enjoy playing characters with a dark edge and are comfortable with the moral and strategic complexities that come with wielding a cursed weapon.



Crossword



Down:

- 1) King of Gondor who failed to destroy the One Ring.
- 2) Ringwraiths who serve Sauron.
- 3) A character whose star is the brightest in the sky.
- 4) The gathering of Ents to deliberate in Fangorn Forest.
- 5) Son of Glóin.
- 8) The dark and dangerous forest inhabited by spiders and elves.
- 9) Mysterious character immune to the One Ring's power.
- 10) Hill of the Eye, where the Fellowship was broken.
- 12) Captain of Gondor, brother to Boromir.
- 15) A breed of orc bred for strength and endurance by Saruman.
- 17) Island kingdom lost to the sea in Middle-earth's history.
- 19) Founder of the Dwarven lineage of the Longbeards.

Across:

- 6) Elven realm ruled by Galadriel and Celeborn.
- 7) Former Hobbit-like creature corrupted by the One Ring.
- 11) Undead creature dwelling in the Barrow-downs of Eriador.
- 13) Kingdom of horse lords, known for their cavalry.
- 14) Once-glorious city of Gondor, now a ruined battleground.
- 16) Seeing-stone used by powerful figures to communicate over long distances.
- 18) Hidden city of Elves, famously besieged by Morgoth's forces.
- 20) Powerful beings who shape the world in Tolkien's mythology.



OVERLIFE

TECH-NOIR ROLEPLAYING



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The Necessity of Objective Standards in the Nine Alignment System

*Daniel from Driving and Dragons
(@DanielDnDYT)*

Almost as old as the table top roleplaying game hobby itself is the venerated and reviled nine alignment system. Newer to the scene by at most a few days is the gross misunderstanding of alignment, how it is defined, what it's role in the game is, and how it is designed to be implemented in TTRPGs, most notably Dungeons & Dragons. Since it's inception in 1977's Advanced Dungeons & Dragons, and possibly even earlier with the three alignment system that preceeded it, alignment has been largely misunderstood and poorly implemented by a significant segment of the TTRPG player base; a problem that has only become more prevalent as new editions have been release and new players further removed from the original concept have joined the ranks. Over the next several articles in this series, each of the nine alignments will be explored, however to understand each of the nine alignments, one must first understand alignment itself both as a concept and a mechanic.

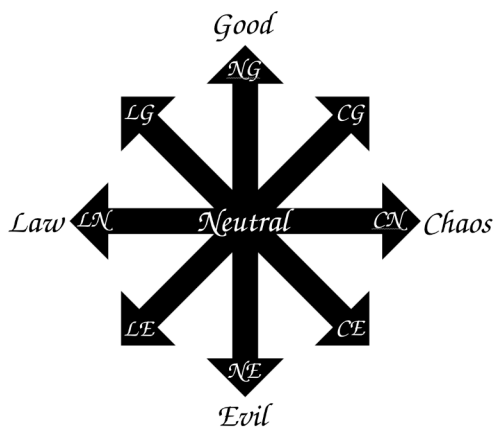
Alignment can largely be divided into two primary functions within the game itself: roleplaying and mechanical. For either to function, it is absolutely critical that alignment be a clearly defined and objective metric. There can be no "your truth" or "my truth" only "the truth". Without a clearly defined world of black and white, alignment is simply meaningless in its roleplaying function and is not functional in its mechanical function. In short, alignment is

not a matter of personal perspective, it is a fundamental force like gravity or electro-magnetism.

Good and Evil are not philosophical concepts in the D&D game. They are the forces that define the cosmos.-
3.5 Edition PHB page 103

The roleplaying function of alignment is very well summed up in the description chapter of the Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook v. 3.5. "Alignment is a tool for developing your character's identity. It is not a straightjacket for restricting your character." Every person in this world has an alignment of their own. Each person has a core nature that determines a large part of their decision making process and the manner in which they think. Unfortunately, it is very difficult for the majority of people to adopt a thought process and perception of the world around them other than their own. That is where alignment comes in, as a guidepost to help a character determine how their character would behave in a given situation and what guilt or pride they would feel in that decision later. If a player asks themselves, "is this moral, is this ethical?" before making decisions for their character, they can compare the answer to their alignment and act accordingly even if the action doesn't "make sense" to them personally. This only works with a clearly defined set of criteria for what moral and

ethical mean. If the player is using their own personal perception and definition of what is “good” then everything is both good and evil depending on who is being asked and the words lose all meaning. However, if it is laid out that good is defined as putting others before yourself and striving to improve the lot of others while doing minimal harm even if it comes at your own expense, then one can clearly say that a good character wouldn’t harm others for personal gain and if they did either by mistake or through personal failure, they should be contrite and feel guilt.



The mechanical function of alignment operates in two realms. First is that it acts as a descriptor for certain effects within the game itself and balances those effects. The most obvious example in Dungeons & Dragons 3rd Edition being that clerics can only cast either heal or inflict spells spontaneously based on their alignment. While the good/evil aspect could be considered flavor, the mechanical aspect is one of balance and without the restriction of one or the other, the cleric becomes more powerful and less balanced as a member of the party. Second is that it actually adds a balancing restriction on the characters themselves. The classic example is the paladin class. The paladin traditionally has the martial abilities of a fighter, immunities, the ability to more effectively fight evil beings with smite, and healing powers on par with any non-cleric divine spellcaster. This makes for a very powerful character, particularly when most enemies are evil monsters. This is balanced not only by their code of conduct, but by the requirement to hold strictly to a specific alignment, forcing them to rely on the rest of the party in situations where things aren’t so cut and dry. A druid having to adhere to neutrality in

at least one aspect of their alignment forces a player to make choices that may be suboptimal in the name of maintaining balance in exchange for a tremendous amount of versatility. This also prevents certain multiclassing decisions that would grant the character a combination of abilities that work together in a fashion that makes them objectively superior to other options, for example the raging smite grizzly bear made by a barbarian/druid/paladin.

This mechanical function has an even more obvious need for objective and clearly defined guidelines. If a spell is called Detect Evil and the description reads, “You can sense the presence of evil.” then there must be a definition on which to base what is sensed by this spell. Is this spell now Detect Everything because everything is evil in someone’s perspective? Is the spell Detect Nothing because those who are evil rarely consider themselves to be evil and their actions unjustified? Does the Paladin have to atone for saving the villagers because the raiding orcs view it as evil from their perspective? Is it ok for the paladin to torture the orc because he personally views it as justified? These must all be tied back to a concrete and objective standard in order to function.

Objective definitions are an absolute necessity in the implementation of alignment. Those definitions can change from campaign to campaign and table to table, but there is no escaping the need for each campaign world to have an objective standard in order for alignment to have any meaning or merit as a part of the game. Moving forward, the nature of alignment and just how narrow a focus it should have will as well as classical definitions for each of the nine alignments will be discussed, however, none of these essays will hold any value unless the objective nature of alignment is recognized and accepted.



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Tarot & The Occult

by Raven Wulfgar (@Ulfhedreng)

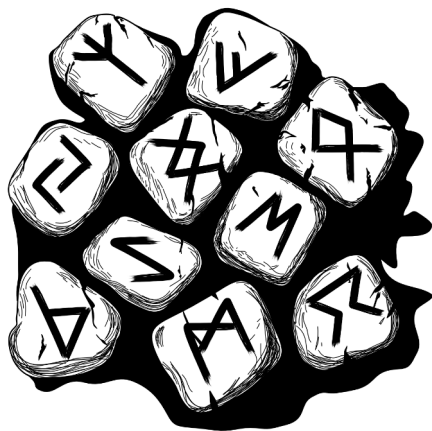
I want to open with full disclosure. I have no problem with tarot card mechanics, magic systems where dice are rolled or where a player must describe the type of things they have to do with certain spells in order for them to work. I have a credit for additional writing on the Paymon Tarot mechanic for *Wretched Darkness* and I've seen tarot mechanics that help aid in story seeds and it comes across as no different than having a random table. I also don't have any issue with the occult as a theme but I think we should kick this off with the one bit of knowledge that I think needs to be cleared up. By definition, the word "occult" means "hidden" and, by virtue of that definition, a secret. I should also clarify the use of the word "oracles." In gaming, an oracle is a book of random tables, a GM Emulator, a d20 die or variant like The Fate Mill Die, etc. In my own practices, Tarot cards, Oracle cards, Runes, etc are all oracles but used in a way that doesn't concern the game. This can seem confusing but if using tarot cards as a game oracle, you're assigning a meaning from the game rather than the book and it's something that will determine certain aspects of play for the character in your game. That's the biggest difference and the one to keep in mind.

Wretched Epoque was a game focused around the Belle Epoque in Europe when secret societies roamed, conspiracy theories ran rampant and strange things happened.

Lamentations of The Flame Princess also plays with those types of dark and mysterious themes and *Fate of The Norns: Ragnarok* comes with a set of runes rather than using dice for purposes of play. Yes, those runes are, indeed, the same Elder Futhark runes you'll see me use if I were to give a reading. Colin Le Sueur's game *We Deal In Lead* also has an optional rule for using the Major Arcana as an oracle for the game in place of a d20 and, in his video on

the solo-play aspect of *We Deal In Lead*, he uses *Tarot of The Divine* by Yoshi Yoshitani, one of my personal favorite decks to this day with a great included book. Finally, *Shadowrun The Sixth World* has a Sixth World Tarot deck that coincided with a book called *Book of The Lost* that incorporates optional rules for an expanded game play experience. These things tend to provide fresh ways to play these games but they don't report to make manifestations of anything into our reality, imagined or otherwise.

Being someone who does oracular work with tarot, oracles and runes, I can honestly say that there are times where I see some



lines being blurred that I think could be dangerous. We live in a time where objective reality has been denied time and again. It's not the first time it's happened.

In the late 90s, Rod Ferrell and his friends, believing they were all vampires murdered the parents of Heather Wendorf. Ferrell and his friends played *Vampire: The Masquerade* fairly extensively and his own mother constantly affirmed her son's belief in his own vampirism. Back in those days, *Vampire: The Masquerade* had a warning about separating fantasy from reality and

urged the player and GM (Storyteller, in this case) to seek help if there were troubles separating the two. Now, Vampire The Masquerade's 5th Edition does have a supplement with a "Bleed" mechanic that blurs the line between player and character, a move that Jaqueline Bryk is quoted as saying is "irresponsible" and I happen to agree with the addition that many doors were opened for this. It's a case of creating the monster with designs on controlling it and being surprised when the creator can't control the monster.

Personally, my own spiritual and divinatory practices are something entirely separate from that of game play. While there may be some intersection with books such as Codex Nordica, Codex Germania and Codex Celtarum for Castles & Crusades, these are not religious books that belong on the shelf with my copy of The Poetic Edda and The Havamal.

The most important point and the thing about this article is that, when the battle for D&D's existence in the 80s and 90s raged, many of these parental groups, grifters and sensationalist TV shows missed were games that tended to blur the line between Fantasy and Reality. While the kids and some adults were indulging in a fantasy of heroes and heroines taking on the forces of evil and entropy and battling them back to save these worlds that were conjured in our imaginations, others were completely engaged in a fantasy that the media was currently playing out on their screens whenever they aired or in news print.

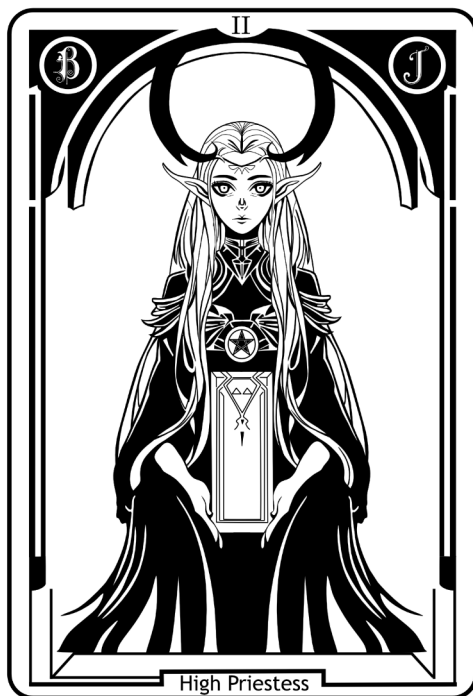
The reality of Tarot, Oracle Cards and Runes is that, in practice, they provide

valuable insight into your current situation and you're then informed about what's going on. It points out things you may or may not have noticed. After that, everything is up to you. Your agency isn't removed. It doesn't map out anything definite toward your future. There are, sometimes, uncomfortable truths uncovered during those readings. The artwork is loaded with symbols and those symbols mean things. Think of it like a movie, your movie to be exact. Each symbol presented is a still shot from your movie right there on the back of the packaging with a synopsis. You now have an idea of what that movie is about and, soon, you'll see how the whole thing plays out and the three or four pictures combined with the text on the back will make perfect sense. It doesn't tell you everything, only what you need to know. From that point on, whether or not you actually commit to watching it is all on you. There's never

anything that says you must take the advice of the cards because, that's all it is; advice. They're not hard and fast rules for life.

This is why using tarot, oracles, runes, etc as an optional rule doesn't bother me but I think blurring the lines between fantasy and reality, especially in our current day and age can prove dangerous without proper guidance.

In the aforementioned games, we know that the incorporation of occult themes and tools are nothing more than providing a bit



of authenticity in terms of setting but when I saw the official D&D Tarot Deck, my first inclination was to begin immediately seeing how these would be used in the game. The Player's Handbook had nothing about using a tarot deck, neither did the Dungeon Master's Guide. In fact, my suspicions were confirmed when I found there are no officially-published supplements that use the tarot deck. There were Reddit threads regarding homebrewing something for a tarot mechanic and I have no objection to that, however, Wizards of The Coast has been on record stating that they want to be more of a lifestyle brand rather than just a game. To further emphasize that point, Wizards of The Coast's included booklet tells you that the symbols can mean anything you want. To me, that is terrible advice to be giving people who will want to use that deck to actually doing readings. The person who

takes that advice will be playing with energies they do not understand. Giving advice without knowing those symbols and their meanings could be disastrous at worst. At best, it makes the practitioner look completely foolish but it also makes anyone who actually does know what they're doing look as foolish as the person taking divination advice from Wizards of The Coast.

Would I ever personally use that deck in divination? My answer is simple, absolutely not, and for the same reason I'd never use real money to play Monopoly. I'll never tell you that you're forbidden from using it, though. If you wanted to use that deck and develop your own tarot mechanic for the game itself, then my advice would be to save yourself some time and effort and use The Deck of Many Things, standard playing cards (Wretched Country, The Gentleman Bandit and The Gentlemen Bandit: Dark Highway does this as it fits those settings of The Old West,) or even the Tarokka deck that is geared to your Ravenloft game. Hey, you defeated Strahd, you get to go wherever you want, right? If you don't mind the work, I won't stop you. If you wanted to consecrate the deck and use it for divination purposes, I also wouldn't stand in your way. I would encourage you to have two decks, one for gaming and the other consecrated for divination work, and some experience in doing readings from other decks and other books such as Intuitive Tarot by Brigit Esselmont just to be on the safe side.

The ceremonies, rituals and celebrations that you and I may respectively attend and contribute to could be great things for an RPG. A paladin could closely resemble a medieval crusader, the magic user could more closely resemble a Nordic Volva rather than a robed monk but these are caricatures of what was in our real world, not accurate representations. You're essentially playing a fantasy version of something from the real world that inspired your character. It's important to be able to discern fantasy from reality and set a healthy boundary.

One example I can provide is that, when I did additional writing for Wretched Darkness, I used The Goetia Tarot as inspiration for the writing I did. The Goetia is the third part of The Lesser Key of Solomon and it details how to summon and enslave malevolent and infernal entities. This deck reflected the types of dark energies it dealt with in the game. I used it as inspiration for that particular bit of writing I did. The deck is a character in itself in the game. It's not to be taken as fact.

The Goetia Tarot is a very real thing. The

deck I have has gone nowhere near my other decks, it's a deck I'm using for playing that part of Wretched Darkness and maybe Night Shift: Veterans of The Supernatural Wars, respectively. I'll never use it for divination purposes and I think we can all understand why.

The biggest difference between fantasy and reality is that the characters that cast spells in a game usually don't have to undergo elaborate rituals in order to cast their spells, a few components and a simple incantation or a magical artifact in a brief description from the player to the game master combined with a roll of the appropriate dice is usually enough to facilitate success or failure. The spells effects are either instantaneous or they fail. That's all taking place in the imagination of the players and game master. That's fantasy.

In reality, many books that take on the topic of occult matters present elaborate rituals and ceremonies with components, steps and incantations needed to manifest those energies and direct them in ways to accomplish a goal. There's still agency in the practitioner. The rituals themselves are part



of a personal process designed to give focus to the practitioner and put his or her mind to the goal they want to accomplish themselves. The key thing is that it's practice, it's time-consuming. Reducing a ritual to a mere description and dice roll doesn't make anything simply happen or go

away.

This is why I say it's important to be able to separate fantasy from reality so that you don't confuse your mental vacation with your spiritual vocation. Tarot and other occult themes in gaming don't necessarily translate to the reality and, if you're a parent teaching your children these games, it's a good idea to ensure that your young players understand the difference between the two and discuss these themes with the parents or invite them to sit down and watch a session. There are still parents that are concerned about the themes presented in games such as ours and reaching out to them to enlist their help in ensuring their child can separate fantasy from reality can go a long way to allaying many of those concerns as long as everyone is honest in the conversation and parents knowing that you're on their side helps immensely.

Players that are 18 or older should have the will and ability to separate fantasy from reality and deal with each constructively. If a player has issues with that, the player should seek some type of help in being able to maturely and constructively deal with each before joining the group.

This approach beats need for safety cards, lines and veils and X cards because any game master worth their salt would be able to include age-appropriate themes and levels of action and exclude anything made for a much more mature audience until they're of an age where those descriptions and themes are appropriate and handled well.

To close, this isn't anything to provide rules for you as a game master to consider. Each of us knows our group and what kind of dynamic exists. It's important to set expectations with each player, especially with new players, to determine whether or not these themes sit well with them or even if the person is right for your group. Your table should be time away from the reality of things, a mental vacation, your chance to step away from the daily grind, if you will. Your mind should feature your character doing amazing things and making heroic attempts at saving a town, taking down a corrupt business or government, slaying a dragon, investigating a mystery, playing someone you're not and seeing the story emerge from the things you and your friends do. The only real danger at your table should be the snacks you're eating and even that is debatable.

Until then, I still stand by the motto,
"Your Table, Your Rules, Always, In All Ways."

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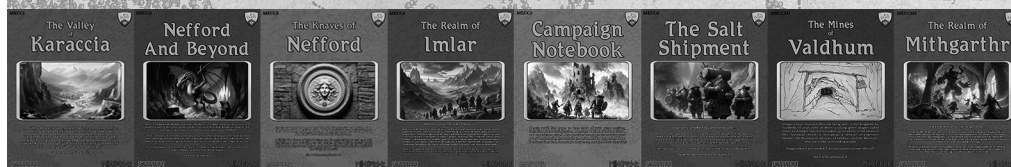
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West End Games

Star Wars

My introduction to tabletop games

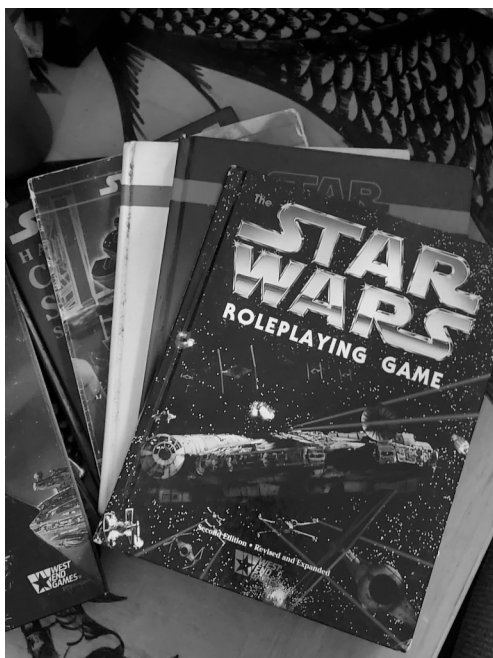
By Patrick Dwyer (@SketchasaurR)

I only knew a few people going into high school. Being an Air Force Brat, we moved often. I don't remember specifically how we were introduced but I do know it was because of our love and affinity for Star Wars. I joined them at their lunch table, and they were talking about their next game. I was a freshman sitting with juniors and seniors, I felt cool. I thought they had textbooks out, but they were hard back books for Star Wars and it a game we could play! My young mind was blown!

They invited me to join the group and play with them before school started and during our lunches. I was excited beyond belief. It was the coolest thing to happen to me in my short social life. I remember copying pages and pages from the books on how to play as a Wookiee and how to roleplay. They laughed at how much I copied down. I can still vividly recall the look on their faces as my face flushed red with embarrassment and I finished making my Wookiee bounty hunter copilot for their next game.

The group was a mixed bag of renegades and smugglers. We played 6 to 10 times a week at school, and countless hours on the weekends. We had run ins with the Empire, fall out with the Rebel Alliance, and conflicts with space gangsters like Jabba and other syndicates. It was everything I could have imagined and more. We played tons of games. From pilots flying for the Rebels, soldiers defending an outpost, infiltrators sabotaging the Empire, to smugglers & thieves. We had games fighting the Empire, turf wars working for a Hutt, and even Imperial soldiers fighting those rebel scum.

I was forever changed and hooked now. I still have the books I bought almost 30 years ago. I have fond memories of my Wookiee bounty hunter, of a clone soldier that defected to protect aliens that were nothing like him, my force adept looking to become a Jedi, my ace X-Wing pilot becoming a Jedi and making his own lightsaber. It led me to more roleplaying games and I've played so many different game systems under the sun now. All because of a common love for Star Wars and West End Games.



The Navarro Knights

My Passion, My Dream, My Legacy

By Cyn of the Iron Empire(@Cynnamander)

The Navarro Knight is everything I've worked on for years now. It's hard to put into words.

I guess that's a good enough place to start, now that I've written that down.

It's a game that I started writing when I was in high school, and it is a project that has kept with me through college and my early career, a game that I've come back to and ground away at over time.

It's not a game created from niche ideas. It's not a game about baking cakes or running an item shop.

It's a game that, like its strange name suggests (and yes, even I'll call it strange), is about knights and valor. Heroes.

It's a celebration of human aspiration.

Part of that is creating an interesting world to work in.

I could go into how the rules and setting were made, how I methodically designed everything, but that's not really interesting to most people.

Most people want to hear what's in a game first, to which I think the best response is: TNK is a game about scale.

TNK pulls inspiration from traditional fantasy to modern detectives to far flung science fiction. Saying it's one specific thing denies that it has more than that subject matter. It involves gunfights, duels, photo finish races, and even mechs.

I know that last one might turn some people off, but it's an interest I've always had. And as ridiculous as it may seem, I've always loved the mental image of a lone samurai taking on a tank. And winning of course.

And the game has been designed to allow that. Not merely 'because it's cool' (and it is, haha), but because throughout history humanity has had its share of mad bastards that take an impossible task and make it happen anyway.

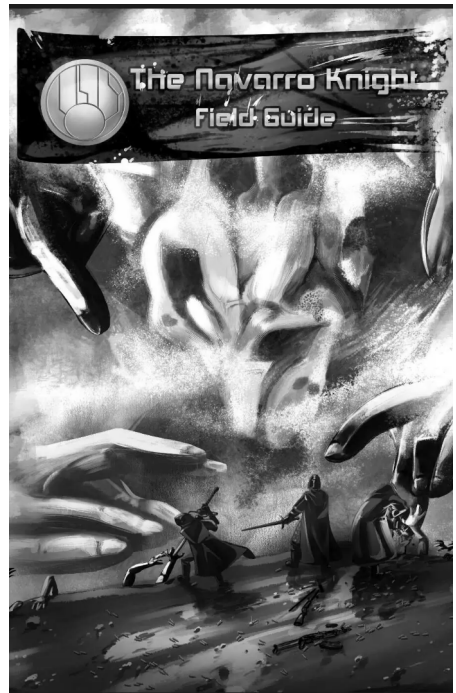
That's what TNK is about.

It's all those things that games have promised to be in the past. It's all those ideas that sound cool in your head placed

down in a world that can accept it.

It's about people hunting dragons on dirtbikes and in Dodge Chargers. It's about pistol wielding paladins in dusters. It's about fighting a forgotten god with a lever gun and three sticks of dynamite. It's about taking on a tank with a katana. It's about rampaging in downtown Detroit in a stolen mech because someone shorted you five grand and, buddy, it's kinda personal. It's about men and women beaten half to death getting back up and charging back into the fight because they're just too angry to die.

It's a game about grabbing hold of adversity and making it blink.



It's a game about playing the hero you've always wanted to play.

It's a game about the moments you don't get to experience anymore.

If you decide to pick it up, I think you will enjoy it.

WHAT IS THE QUILL AND MAGIC GUILD?

The Quill and Magic Guild was born out of a shared passion for storytelling, founded by myself, @RealGreyMage, and @MelHellstar. Our vision was simple yet profound: to create a space where aspiring writers could come together, share their creative work, and inspire each other to write more. As part of this mission, we hosted The Writers Royal, a unique writing contest that pitted three amateur writers against one another in a thrilling write-off. The heart of the Guild, however, was never about competition; it was about fostering a supportive community where writers could nurture their talents and push the boundaries of their creativity.

Over time, as personal commitments made it harder to keep up with the demands of scheduling and coordination, the project began to fade. Yet, the spark of creativity that started The Quill and Magic Guild never truly went out.

Today, The Quill and Magic Guild has found new life as part of Tales of the Tavern, where it serves as a vibrant showcase for talented writers. We now provide a dedicated space for authors to share their stories and for readers to discover new voices in the

world of literature. This month, we're thrilled to present two captivating works: *Graveyard*, an eerie and enchanting piece by Armanis Ar-feinial (X: @Sarcastic_elf), the acclaimed author of the dark fantasy series *Plagued Elf*, which is available on Amazon; and *Sable and Crimson*, an engaging tale by Kyle A. Potter (X: @KyleAPotter1), who is currently preparing to release his debut novel.

The Quill and Magic Guild, now integrated into *Elven Maid Inn: Tales from the Tavern*, remains committed to its original mission of celebrating the written word. We will continue to highlight extraordinary talent and publish short stories that captivate the imagination because writing is more than just a hobby, it's our passion, and it's what connects us to one another.

If you're a writer with a story to tell, whether it be Fantasy, Sci-Fi, Horror, Mystery, or Romance, we would love to feature your work. There's always room for more stories within our pages, and we are eager to share them with readers who are just as passionate about storytelling as we are.



The Quill and Magic Guild

presents:

Armanis Ar-feinial
(@Sarcastic_elf)

“Graveyard”

Another day, another shift, just one more and then onto the next as if anything interesting beyond graverobbing ever happened in a graveyard.

Cormere picked some roasted meat out of his teeth with a knife as the embers flared in front of him. Gazing up ahead, the trees provided some shelter from the light rain, dripping and slapping against the green as it descended, chinking against his steel pauldron and helmet. He sighed as the guard came to him to be relieved from the patrol along the lines of the graveyard. Reports had been sent to his company of graverobbers, trying to rob the dead. Some far fetched rumors spread too, but the validity of those reports had always been questionable at best, but Cormere paid heed to those rumors. Deeds of witch craft and necromancers was never something to ignore.

"Malik," he said to the guard next to him. Morik was a large man, but the heft armor set he bore was weighty, even for the likes of him. "Come."

"Aye, sir," he said, standing.

Cormere took him, and a torch to light the way and some oil to keep the flames lit, even in the midst of the rain above the trees. The road on which they walked were several miles outside the confines of Felldur. Dwarf country, this is. Entering through the gate, large golden beams with a wood plank adjoined with flowers, he stepped onto the path of dirt, and his boots seeped in the mud. Deep it sank, and hard it was to pull to take another. Tomb stones of arches stood over the buried dead and caskets of those underneath him. A foul odor filled the air, and the wind howled, threatening to blow the torch out.

"Cormere, Sir," Morik said, far away from everyone to see. "Rumors, the necormanc—"

"Keep yer voice down!" Cormere snapped. Yes. Rumors. That's all they are. "Just rumors lad. That's all they are."

"Should we not pay heed to them, though?" Malik said. "Surely, with each lie there's a hint to truth."

"Exaggerations is what they are," Cormere said, clenching his fist at his side as he patrolled the yard with his underling. "Best not to give them power over you, I find. Else, yer life be forfeit."

"I understand,"

Cormere continued with the walk noticing at night as the flashes of lightning came down from the sky gave image to things around him. The large stones of bears, cats, dogs atop large mounds of mud with an impressive tomb stone. "Here lies General Morika Funir, Commander of the Shironian armies of the Times of Great Trials," is what it read. A conflict of four thousand years ago. He was surprised the stone still read clearly, but his vision was changed when he heard a howl coming from the southern most parts of the Graveyard.

Caves.

Hells!

The shriek sent a shiver up his spine and a gasp parted his lips. Malik's hand slapped his pauldron.

"Sir, are ye a'right?"

"Y—yes, lad," he stammered, getting his bearings. I don't want to go in there. "Ya hear that?"

"Hear what, sir?" he asked.

Was it my imagination? Yes, yes that must be—

Another howl.

Piercing through the veil of dark, hearing the steps of those who should not be there, his heart jolted upright. A gasp faded past his lips. Silhouettes of cloaked figures entered the caverns where the catacombs were, a place of ancient dead people, some far too nice to be left outside to rot. The catacombs, a dreary place, and a place of ghost stories. Superstition, but Cormere of course was a superstitious man, as much as he didn't want to admit it. Far too ethereal for his comrades by the fire. Not tangible. Just fragments of the mind slowly coming undone, which itself was somehow a far more bleak reality.

"Come Malik," he said, finally getting his bearings. "We must investigate the catacombs."

"Of course, Sir," the underling said without a tremble in his voice.

Cormere led the way with the cackling lit torch as they approached and passed the threshold into the caverns. Stalactites descended from above the caverns. The walls were not lit, rarely were they, save for the day when someone wanted to visit an old relative. Suffice it to suggest though, that perhaps a place like this ought to be full of lights, as Cormere would have it if he ever walked in by himself. Not that he would. Malik is with him. He should take heart.

A lone drop of water dripped from a stalactite into a puddle and the sound carried through the halls sending shivers up Cormere's spine. Stepping forward, his boot echoed with a splash and he heard not other steps apart from he and Malik's. Gazing up towards the walls as the flames light his way, he noticed several large pillars, many with an old script of a form of Shironian he couldn't read. The language changed too much over the years to be recognizable to someone of his education. Not that he was stupid of course, just, he didn't know the older dialects.

The laughter of little children echoed off the walls. He let out a sigh of relief, but still, they shouldn't be here. Then all this haunting business must be his imagination, but what then of his own mental health? Was he seeing and hearing things that weren't there? He knew not, but he should get the children out of here and deliver them back to the city. A good reason to leave his post if ever there was any. How I loathe this place. Taking Malik with him, he followed down the pathway of silence. No laughs. Not steps, even his clanking metal boots made not a sound.

"What are we looking for?"

"Did you not hear the children?" Cormere snapped. "You heard them, I know you did."

"Sir, I haven't an idea of why we're in these catacombs," he replied.

Sweat beaded down his face as he realized something. Perhaps the sounds weren't there, and he heard only the words spoken between them. Water dripped into puddles, and the ripples made not a sound still. It was like he was in the epicenter of some spell of silence, a wizard down here, or worse? A necromancer? A good place to raise the dead if there was any, but one with such radius to catch his attention and lead him down here? But why? No, that can't be it. Malik would have heard it too. He could sense the silence too. Couldn't he? Cormere put his hand to the visor of his helm.

"Did you hear it? The howl? The children?"

"No," Malik lifted his visor.

"Can you hear the drops of water on the ground, and our steps," Cormere said. "Because I can't."

"Yes," Malik nodded. "I can. I can hear them. Why don't you tell me what you think is down here?"

"Maybe we can just—"

Water splashed, and he turned his flames to the end of the tunnel leading deeper into the catacombs to see two little silhouettes splashing, and scurrying like rats. There! He ran down the hall looking for the children. His hands sporadic, and he placed his hand on the pommel of his blade in case he needed to cut something or someone down. Something isn't right here, but why is it only affecting me? My eyes, my mind, my ears! "Come Malik, the answer will be down here in the caverns."

Silence. There was nothing as he came out through the threshold into a large mouth of an internal cave within these catacombs. Hundreds of pillars and green torches lit up. Beds and beds of dead, coffins layered in mold and rot were suddenly broken open, and the rattling of skeletons entered the confines of his ears as more liquid poured out from the stalactites like a downpouring rain. His eyes gaped open when he saw the two children who led him here. Rags for clothes, broken teeth, and they winced at his presence like an abused dog to his master who beat him far too many times. Flesh was in patches on their face, and one of them ripped the meat from their cheek off, hissing with black blood pouring from their lips.

Hells!

An elongated moan entered the air from behind him. Gripping his pommel, he drew it and slashed at the creature behind him. Malik? His comrade took a grotesque form. Screeching out with a loud cry that scratched against Cormere's ears, he bolted, slashing at his underling. Malik drew back, and his armor came clear off as the mass of flesh expanded and flailed against him, creeping against the walls. Cold steel came into contact with the beast, and blood poured out. The severed arm crawled towards Cormere, and he let out a large scream before bolting back up the walls.

One of the little children grabbed his boot, and he sliced at the wrist. The wrist let go, but his sword was stuck in the flesh, so he let it go, leaving the catacombs with naught but the torch in his hand, screaming as he listened to the moans off the halls as countless undead no doubt made their way towards him. Panting, he looked behind him once as the green lights flared, expanding their illuminations throughout the caverns as he finally passed through the threshold into the graveyard, which was left largely undisturbed.

He ran back through the path with the rain clinking on his armor. Panting with voracious tenacity to tell someone what happened, and he found his camp, and a few guards playing the Bad Game over a barrel. They turned to him onchalantly, waiting for his report, or so it seemed to him.

"Malik," Cormere panted. "Malik, he—he—"

"Out with it!" his commanding officer came out from the tent, rubbing sleep from his eyes. "We haven't got all night, mate. What happened?"

"We were on patrol and we—I heard some howls from the catacombs so we investigated it. I came out to the bottom of it, Malik and me, I mean, and we saw the dead rising."

"Dead rising, eh?" a soldier gave out a haughty laugh. "We've not had a necromancer in an age."

"Yes," his commanding officer said. "Not in an age. And no one's practicin' black magic out here. Too dangerous under normal circumstances, from what little I do understand. But Malik is missing, send a patrol out." he jabbed Cormere in the chest. "You stay here with me, and we'll wait for their report."

"But I—" Cormere was taken back by the jab.

"Nothing," his commanding officer said. "Ye've had a long night, and whatever really happened obviously has gots ya quite rattled, doesn't it? Have a drink. Milk. Water. No liquor, until they get back."

"And if they don't," Cormere asked as the camp emptied and the two of them remained sitting across from one another by the fire.

"If they don't come back by day break," he shook his head. "Then we're to assume the worst and call in for mercenaries. Savana owes me a favor."

And alas, Cormere waited. Each passing moment he felt his heart beat faster, as if there was nothing else here, but the sound of rain slowly dropping off as the heat of the flame intensified around the campfire. While welcome, it reminded him that Malik may be dead on the ground, alone in the catacombs, but what on eart transformed him into the beast? Or perhaps, was Malik the cause for his halluniations. Staring up to his commander, he wondered if there was more like them? These creatures masquerading around as men and women wearing the same uniform as he? Or perhaps was a spirit inside and possessed him? Impossible to tell. Oh, when he gets home, he's going straight to the church!

The sun rose and the guards came back.

"What news?"

Cormere stood tall as everyone looked at him with a scowl.

"Nothing but superstition, Cormere, I thought you better than this. Just holes of the wind. Malik was probably trying to play tricks on you, and there's no evidence you and he even went down there!"

"I was there in the catacombs on the graveyard!" Cormere cried out. "No, that can't be true! Lies!"

"I'm going to ignore yer superstitious bout for a moment," the guard pointed a trembling hand. "The catacombs and graveyard are creepy enough as they are. No need to make them even more terrifying by sharing ill sought for ghost stories!"

"But I—"

"That's enough," his commanding officer said. "Any news on Malik?"

"No," the guard replied. "He's nowhere to be found, and I'm not keen to goin' looking."

"Cormere, come with me," his superior said. "Murin, you're in command until we get back."

"Where are we going?" Cormere asked.

"Back to Felldur," he said. "You need a break, and I need to hire someone to find Malik, since no one will go."

Back at the city, he stabled the horse and went to the middle of Felldur on the plateau furthest away from the slums and the rich alike. It was the center, as all things of balance should be, and the church was rather large with black pillars, and etched in dwarven runes with their angular designs. The windows were of stained glass painting a mural for Forsyshe, and outside the center courtyard was a marble sculpture of the Goddess of Justice. A shield

lay against her left while she wielded a hammer in one hand, and the scales in the other, balancing with the look of grace and compassion etched in the stone.

He marched up the marble stairs, still panting as he'd yet slept from the two-days' ride, sweat bed down on his face as he removed his helm, holding it between his arm and midsection as he pushed the double doors open. The pews were empty, and many acolytes with white robes and a golden lining as they all wore symbols of the scale hanging around their necks. Many greeted him warmly, but a large armored man came to him, much taller and broader than he.

"Welcome to the church of Forsyshe, I am Paladin Quaradin," he said with a warm smile, despite a long scar across his nose. "How may we bless you with truth and justice today?"

"I was out on patrol over by the. . ." Cormere began. "And the catacombs. There was something—something—"

"Easy," the paladin put his hand on his shoulders and he was immediately calmed, as if the strength of a God eased his weary spirit. "Just start from the beginning."

And so Cormere did. Calmly, he spoke about everything that happened. The dead rising from the catacombs, the grotesque appearance and change of Malik, and the evidence seemed to have erased itself since no one at camp truly believed it. "I know what it is I saw, I'm not crazy!"

"No one said ye were," Quaradin shook his head. "Seems harrowing indeed, and should what you say have been true and not some fragment you've come up with, it is very concerning to the Church of Forsyshe, for one of the tenants of our Faith is to not raise the dead. I'd ask ye come with me and I will see for myself if what you say is true, and aren't seeing or hearing things. Come pray with me."

Cormere knelt beside Quaradin at the head of the church by the altar. A presence filled the room as if Gods were real. But then, who was he to have these questions in a house of worship. His eyes felt rested with the acolytes touching him, and chanting a prayer in an older dialect of Shironian he didn't recognize. Finally relieved, he agreed Quaradin's request, and so led him to the catacombs.

Rain came down on the horses as they neighed in the night, their reins chinking against the metal parts of the saddles. Cormere's nerves were strong and unswayed and felt like he was staring down an entire company of goblin bandits on his own. The tombs were still inside, but that didn't sway his fear and anxiety, at least not until Quaradin's boots plopped in the mud and fastened his steed to a tree while taking his symbol of Forsyshe with him. On his breastplate were the scales, and the gauntlets, the spear.

"Come with me, Cormere, and we'll see yer devil slain," the man drew the sword and a bright light shimmered from it, lighting the path of the darkness. "For I wield the bane, and in the hearts of demons, dismayed."

Cormere nodded, feeling strengthened on his resolve and entered, leading the way into the darkened caverns of the catacombs. Looking downward, he traced his steps, but the sounds of monsters and the undead did not break the silence, apart from the metallic boots against the rock and stone. Through the path, Cormere's fear was kept in check with the paladin's Grace, and his steps came with great confidence, the likes of which he never had before, especially here in the opaqueness that was the human soul.

"Cormere," the Paladin said, bringing his shield out. "What was the first, pray tell, and tell me true, incident which you suspected the supernatural."

"I told you at the church," Cormere said, inching towards the tunnel leading downward to the base of these tombs and empty halls, save for the dead.

"Yes but perspective and words change. Always, especially I've found at the scene of the incident. So, pray tell me again. When did you suspect it?"

"There was much more to tell, you see," Cormere said, inching closer to the opening of the base. "I heard a noise, and Malik heard it not. I came in here, and silence too displayed vehemently against these halls and my nerves rattled. I came in this tunnel, ye see, and I heard nothing. Until water itself splashed and the howls of little children. Malik claimed to have heard them too, but I chased after the noise down these here tunnels, and that's when I saw the dead. The children were little as they tried to grab me, that was after I saw Malik and his behemoth of a form not like anything I've seen in this world."

"Describe his form for me," Quaradin said, pushing past him, and a shrill escaped Cormere's lips.

"Wait, do not walk so fast!" he found himself picking up the pace, and his boots echoed off the halls. "Or I shall be lost. Stuck in a cage or worse, with whate'er curse befell poor Malik."

"Then explain him to me, what happened after," the paladin said, slowing down as he reached the archway.

"He was a young man, inexperienced but I would say bold, given the little time I knew him," he answered. "His armor splintered, if metal could do that before his flesh expanded into a large mass with tendrils popping out of it. Eyes," his shoulders trembled as he recalled the form. "Eyes were all over as the flesh bubbled, screeching at me. I struck it, and struck it true."

"It?" Quaradin turned his head briefly before stepping into the light of the green flames of torches underneath.

"Malik,"

"Hmm," Quaradin growled. "Your comrade, if indeed he was, is not an it. Address him right and true as he. He was a man, was he not? Or . . . a woman?"

"A man," he said. "A right and true one. More true than even I am."

"More brave, by your own admission, come with me," Quaradin beckoned, and so he did, and entered the dome of the catacombs, and he recognized very little, save an unconscious man on the floor, fully helmed. The catacombs were untouched and the catacombs and tombs, the coffins as well remained undisturbed. This doesn't make any sense.

"Man, wake up," Quaradin turned the soldier up, and lifted his visor. Malik! He placed his hand on his forehead and the light lit the room, and Malik came too, screaming with sweat beading down on his face. "Easy, child, what happened?"

"I don't—I dunno," he said.

"Malik!" Cormere came, and embraced him, but terror still filled his bones. What of the fleshy tendrils? "You're alive, but what happened to you. The I saw. . ."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Malik grunted, standing to his feet.

"Please son," Quaradin separated the two. "I serve the order of Forsyshe, if ye expect foul play of any kind, now would be the time to speak. Did you see ghosts?"

"Nay," Malik answered.

"Necromancers, undead, anything like that? Any magic at all?"

"Nay,"

Cormere," Quaradin frowned. "Tell me true, what happened?"

"I told you everything," he said, realizing the Paladin believed his time was wasted.

"What it seems to me," Quaradin sheathed his sword. "Is a waste of Forsyshe's resources, and you took advantage of hers, and my goodwill. Such cannot be overlooked. You will be fined."

"But—"

"I'll have none of it," Quaradin waved his hands dismissively.

"I'm not lying!" Cormere shrieked.

"And you cannot provide evidence to prove that you are not," he shook his head as Malik recovered, leaning against the wall, panting heavily. "Ye will be fined, Cormere. That is the end of it."

"But my company came down here. Surely they would have seen something that can verify what I saw!" Cormere said. "Let's ask them, they'll tell you true."

"What ye don't realize yer suggesting is that there is some other magic at play here, perhaps illusions. For which, is not something I'm presently equipped to handle. Besides, even if they did verify, what use would it do?" Quaradin said. "Fine. One-hundred-fifty shironian coins, right now."

"What, you have to believe me,"

"I'm gracious enough," Quaradin stood tall, his hand grasped around the hilt of his sword. "Fine. Now."

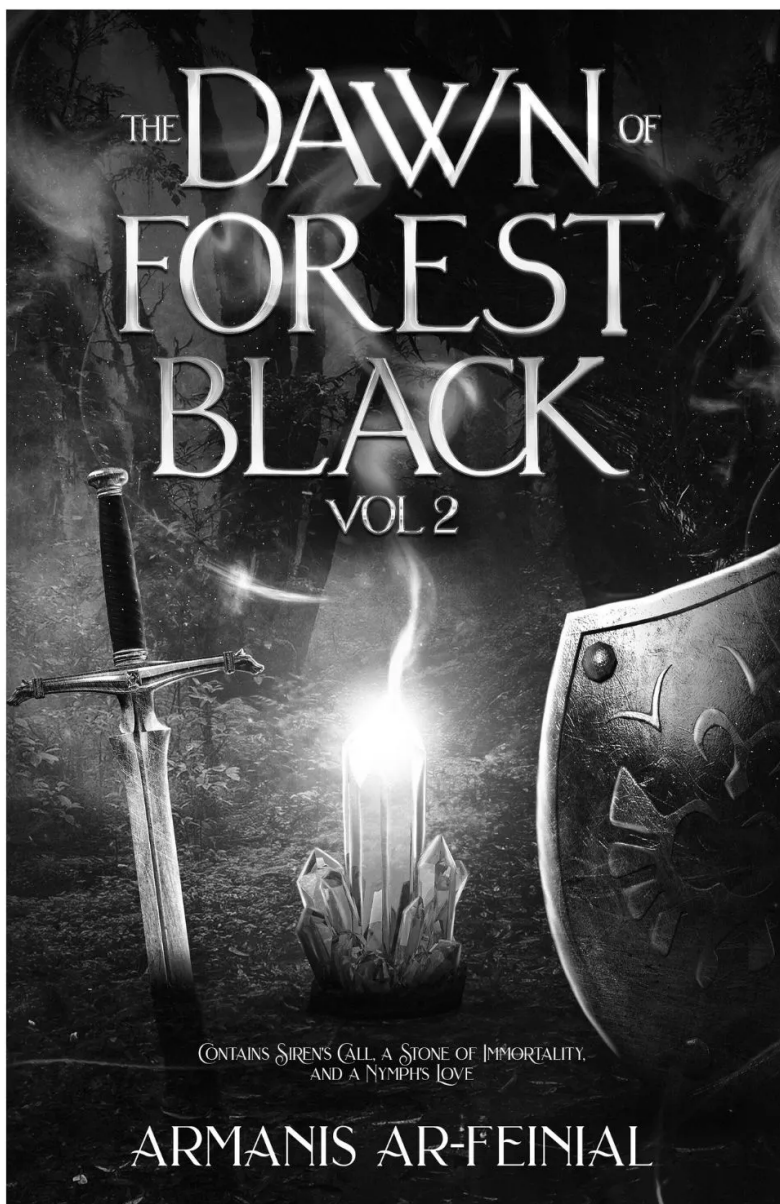
"I don't—"

"If you do not have the proper funds," Quaradin said. "I'm afraid we're done speaking. So, tell me, if you can afford the fine so be true. Pay the fine in coin, or you will pay in life and join the souls down here. This is your last warning."

"I don't keep coins on me on my patrols," Cormere said.

"Well, that's it then," Cormere gasped as the glowing sword impaled him. "In the name of Forsyshe, may your blood find truth and justice. May your deceit be a warning to the world to all those who dare lie to Forsyshe, and take advantage of her good will, especially that of the church."

The blade twisted, and Cormere knew no more.



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Random Encounter Tables

More than Melee

by Tony Garcia (@Dystopian_Dawn)

Overview:

Random Encounter Tables got you down? Are you tired of all your random encounters turning into a pointless combat for your gaming group? Have no fear, this article will help bring some life to those drab tables, and maybe you'll see them in a whole new light.

We've all been there, as players and as the GM/DM – the group is traveling from Point A to Point B and a random encounter pops up serving no purpose other than getting the group into a meaningless battle, often with a creature that doesn't fit your story. Some gamers may even think that this is the entire purpose of a random encounter table – I'm here to tell you that it's not. At least, it doesn't have to be.

As a game designer, I know that Random Encounter Tables are created (generally) based upon the terrain type and meant as tools for the GM to ingest a little extra life into an unscripted scene. They serve to feed the GM ideas regarding what types of beings potentially live in the particular geographic area that the group is traveling through. Originally (way back when) they were used as a means for player characters to gain XP while trudging the unknown distances between modules. This works great for inexperienced GMs and helps to hone their imagination for later events. But this is not their only intent, and they can be so much more.

RPGs have evolved over the years and so have the players. The days of grinding for those extra points eventually gave rise to the

desire for deeper immersion. While some players are content to hack and slash with no motivation beyond collecting XP and GP, many want (and expect) more out of their gaming sessions. In this article, I'll show you how to transform that simple percentile roll on a random table into so much more than "1d6 Goblins".

Most Random Event Tables are constructed with very simple mechanics. This is by design more for brevity and page count reduction than anything else. While a typical table lists things like terrain type, creature, and number encountered, as a GM the encounter should become much more than Desert, Kobold, 2d6. This requires a little extra imagination on the GM's plate, but let's be honest, the GM is usually the person in the group with wild adventure ideas constantly swimming in their brains. So, I challenge you to let the tables jump-start your brain!

Basic Interrogatives:

When you roll on a Random Event Table, take a minute or two and fill in some blanks.

- Why are these creatures here?
- What do they want?
- How did they get here?
- Who do they serve?
- Where were they going?
- When did the encounter take place,

and will someone notice that they're missing?

- And the most important question – Huh?

I know that sounds like a lot, but it really isn't, and not all of it needs to be answered. Those are just ideas to get your gears moving. With me so far? Good! Let's dive into some examples.

For simplicity (and potential copyright issues!) I'll use some of my own tables from the **Dystopian Dawn Game Master's Guide**.

Example 1:

Your group is traveling through a desert region. They've just completed a quest or some portion of an adventure and need to cross the desert to get to the next part of their adventure. Rather than just saying "ok, in three days you make it to your destination",

What if the group ignores that potential thread? Not to worry. Put it on the back burner in case they ever get curious, and just continue on their journey.

Example 2:

The following day the GM rolls to determine an encounter and checks the table. This time the result is **Giant**. Checking the creature writeup, the GM determines the type as **Cyclops**, and ironically enough the number encountered is also only one. So now what do we do with one lone **Cyclops**? Rather than a basic battle for no apparent reason, let's add to that previous encounter with the **Giant Ant** and change it completely on a whim!

Roll	Encounter	Roll	Encounter	Roll	Encounter	Roll	Encounter
01-03	Vampire	20	Basilisk	48-50	Insect Men	75-77	Sand Worm
04-06	Jack-o-Lantern	21-23	Ogre	51	Cerbesnake	78-80	Insects
07-08	Opti-Blaster	24-26	Turtles/Tortoises	52-56	Mutant	81-85	Snakebot
09-11	Bats	27-30	Spiders	57-60	Beast Men	86-88	Lizards
12-14	Radi-Ant	31	Spectre	61-66	Canines	89-92	Goblin
15-16	Metal Men	32-33	Rodents	67-70	Felines	93-97	Ratkin
17	Mummy	34-40	Snakes	71-72	Giant	98-99	Skeleton
18-19	Manticore	41-47	Human	73-74	Mutant Plant	00	Vampire Tree

we're going to check for random encounters along the way during the three day trek.

The GM checks the table and finds that during the night the group encounters **Insects**. Checking the creature listing, the GM determines that the encounter is with **Giant Ants** and luck is with the party, there is only one **Giant Ant**. That doesn't seem like much of a threat. The group is resting, and we'll pretend that they remembered to set up a rotating watch during the night.

Perception rolls are made, the **Giant Ant** is discovered, the party rouses from slumber and butchers the hapless bug without a second thought. We could leave this encounter there and no one would even remember it happening. Let's not do that. Instead, the GM asks a few of those interrogatives and decides that the **Giant Ant** came from somewhere nearby, was out foraging for food, and was on its way home. A simple enough explanation.

This could lead to the group tracking the insect's movements back to its lair. Perhaps there is a small colony of **Giant Ants** currently building a home beneath the already blighted crops of a nearby village. This opens up a whole exploration scenario that really wouldn't take much time for the GM to throw together. A scribbled map, a few villager NPC names, 3d6 more Giant Ants, and perhaps buried treasure.

The **Cyclops** is out looking for his pet, you guessed it, a **Giant Ant**.

- Did he happen across it's remains?
- Does he know that his pet is dead?
- Will he attack the party or ask if they've seen his beloved companion?

Perhaps this is a chance for the party to befriend the giant and make amends for their previous night of thoughtless slaughter. Or maybe they'll just attack the **Cyclops** and loot his corpse. The latter could result in a sort of "full-circle event" if the Cyclops happened to have a map leading to the ant caves that he was tending before his untimely demise. Or maybe the party has a change of heart and offers to help him wrangle a new **Giant Ant** as a pet.

The point being, not everything **HAS** to be cut and dry. A little imagination will go a long way. The examples above actually come from a recent game I ran. As the GM it made no sense for one **Giant Ant** and then one **Cyclops** to encounter the party. A few quick scribbles on my notepad and suddenly a scene is born. And yes, the party had a blast.

They did kill the **Giant Ant**, but they felt awful when the **Cyclops** approached them with his sad tale. They ended up helping him and apologizing. This was a few months ago and the Ant Herding Cyclops scene is a fond topic that still pops up. This is how fun

memories are created. Without the extra effort, the group would never think twice about the **Giant Ant** and **Cyclops** they butchered in the middle of nowhere.

Let's make a few more off the cuff examples using the Swamp table from the **Dystopian Dawn Game Master's Guide**.

village to rid the swamp of deadly spores that drift out and destroy their meager crops. The group is horribly lost. They have a map but lost their way a few days ago. They'd gladly hand the quest off to a more seasoned adventuring party and ask for directions to get home. The party discovers several large Mutated Plants purposely belching their

Roll	Encounter	Roll	Encounter	Roll	Encounter	Roll	Encounter
01-03	Spectre	20-21	Death Beetle	57-60	Goblin	77-82	Frogs
04-05	Giant	22-30	Alligators	61-62	Skeleton	83-88	Spiders
06-08	Jack-o-Lantern	31-38	Insects	63-64	Ogre	89-94	Snakes
09-13	Muck Horror	39-51	Swamp Men	65-70	Lizards	95-97	Radi-Ant
14-19	Beast Men	52-56	Human	71-76	Mutant Plant	98-00	Troll

2d6 Goblins – a fishing and hunting party from a distant village ruled by a Shaman who demands fresh frogs for his potions. They fear retribution for failure.

1d4 Alligators – in a feeding frenzy, in the distance the party spots a baby calf frozen in horror as one of the gators is heading its way. The alligators have the remains of a Druid in their clutches. The Druid was on a mission to rescue lost livestock and return them to a nearby village where the locals live in shacks on stilts.

1d6 Humans – they're a group of inexperienced warriors hired by a local

spore into the wind as a lure to bring them fresh meat.

You get the idea. Random Encounters can (and should) be so much more than a forgettable combat. Give them a little life and flex your GM imagination. You'll enjoy the challenge, and your players will have a good time.

In closing, remember game what you like and like what you game. May all your rolls be crits.

- Tony

Tony Garcia is creator of amazing Sci-Fi and Fantasy Role Play System Dystopian Dawn, check it out today!





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R.W. Krpoun

Dark Obligations

by Disciple of the Logrus (@K_Burkhardt)

Dark Obligations is a sword and sorcery novel full of deadly intrigue, graphic violence, and fragile courage. The story follows the adventures, trials, and tribulations of The Phantom Badgers mercenary company. It takes place in the world of Allmar on the Northern continent of Alhenland, which is very similar to Warhammer's Old World. The land is populated by Humans, Dwarves, Elves (although elves are called Threll), Orcs, Goblins, and Skaven (called Felher).

The world is divided into the civilized land of the Eisenalder Empire and the Northern Wastes, which are occupied by orcs, goblins, and forces of Chaos. These forces include Direbreed (beastmen) and Direthrell (Drow). The setting is one of high fantasy, where the common man is aware of the existence of magic, wizards, and the undead, and is suitably afraid of them all.

Dark Obligations is the first in the series and introduces several characters, including Durek Toolsmaster, the commander of the Phantom Badgers. He is a Dwarven Warrior who left his homeland to fight against Chaos. Starr Brightgift is a young Threll maiden and expert archer. She recently left her home forest to explore the wider world, occasionally regretting the decision. Kroh Blackhand is a Dwarven Waybrother, an order of Berserkers sworn to destroy Chaos wherever they find it. Kroh is fiercely protective of Starr, who rescued him from an undead attack.

The book contains two stories. The first is a dungeon crawl through the abandoned Dwarven city of Gradrek Heleth, where the group must recover a collection of arcane tomes for Bluefire the wizard, in payment for a rescue that occurred before the book begins. They face the forces of darkness inhabiting the city, including giant spiders, goblins, and Felher. The events could have

been taken straight from a TTRPG campaign, and I actually borrowed a few ideas for my current campaign from it.

The second story is a murder mystery that Starr and Kroh stumble into when they



are sent by Durek on what should have been a simple trading mission. I can't go into details as I want to avoid spoilers, but I will say it made me laugh out loud more than once at Kroh's attempts to be subtle.

The events of the stories are relatively unimportant to the world at large, but as the series progresses, the Phantom Badgers and their actions begin to increasingly impact the world of Allmar.

In closing, I'd just like to say that I thoroughly enjoyed not just these, but all of the author's works. If you're a fan of sword and sorcery, where the emphasis is on action and heroism with a little humor to occasionally lighten the tone, I highly recommend that you give them a try.

Exhaustion is still broken

Here's how to fix it

by R.J.A. Gilbert (@TaleMasterTOV)

Note: this original blog was written a few years ago for a web site that has since been taken down. What I am presenting here are the parts that are still relevant in light of the newest developments in Dungeons and Dragons game rules.

The fighter fails his saving throw against the death ray and drops to the ground, slain. The party gasps. Without the help of their powerful ally, this will be a formidable battle. And, indeed, it is. After several rounds of damage and dodging, the monster lies dead beside the fallen fighter. The cleric checks her spell slots and curses. The fight drained her of the power she needs to cast even the lowest of revival spells; she has no hope of bringing this fallen comrade back to life.

The power-built paladin casts one final Searing Smite as his blade finds its mark. A flash of flame, an extra roll for damage, and the battle is won. The rest of the party prepares to move on to the next chamber, but the paladin stops them.

"I am all out of spells," he protests. "We must camp for the night. Again."

The party groans in dismay; this is the third time they have had to camp in the past 24 hours. And each time it was due to a certain spell-happy party member using all of their resources in a single battle.

The barbarian rolls again to test his strength against the door. It does not budge. "That's the fourth time you have rolled to open this door," the DM reminds him.

"I can do it," the barbarian insists, then rolls a fifth time. It's a 20. "Okay," the player says, clapping his hands in anticipation, "I'm

charging into the next room!"

"But you have a level of exhaustion from straining against the door for so long," the DM cautions, his words largely ignored.

Shrugging, the player and his barbarian both reply, "Who plays by those rules anymore?"

Who indeed?

When *Dungeons and Dragons*, 5th Edition, came out in 2014, the rules for exhaustion were confusing in both interpretation and origin. What did they mean, and what did the authors have in mind when they developed this enigmatic system? Many house-rules favored abandoning the game mechanic altogether, much to the chagrin of a great many DMs who wished they could have some means to reel in their more exuberant players: the power-build who quickly expends their resources to employ mighty combo-moves in every round of combat; the spell-slinging sorceress who never finishes a fight with any remaining power; the greedy rogue who re-rolls five times before his lock picking skills finally open the chest. All of these scenarios justify the use of exhaustion, yet many DMs are reluctant to employ such complicated and confusing rules.

But what if there were a way to fix Exhaustion so that it was both enjoyable and

fair?

First, despite the core manuals failing to explain this, the reason there are 6 levels of exhaustion is because they were meant to be tracked on a d6, similar to how such die are used to track buffs and resources in Magic the Gathering. Even with a six-sided die in front of every player, however, the effects of those six levels of exhaustion are hard to track. The 2024 rules did little to remedy that statement. This is where my own proposed game mechanics of “Fatigue” and “Desperation” come in.

Fatigue is the first and lesser effect of overexertion. DMs may use this to rein in a player who wants to continue with a futile task (such as forcing a door despite failing their first Strength check). Fatigue can easily be tracked by a d6 in front of each player (or secretly tracked behind the DM’s screen if players are tempted to be dishonest). Simply put, for each point of fatigue, up to 6, the DM adds one point to the DC and AC of all of that character’s rolls (as well as added to the saving throws of creatures targeted by that character’s spells). Fatigue would be easily gained and easily removed—gained by such acts as making multiple attempts to pry open a tough chest or “taking ten” to search a room while also remaining wary for ambushes, removed by eating certain foods or drinks (and completely removed, perhaps, by a short rest).

To revisit our example of the barbarian forcing the door, the first failed roll would result in no fatigue, but after that, for each additional “attempt”, fatigue increases by 1. This means that the DC of the door increases from 20 on the first two tries to 21 on the third, 22 on the fourth, and 23 on the 5th. Had the barbarian forced the door on the second attempt, they would have still gained a point of fatigue for having used an additional roll to do so. Consequently, when the party encounters that minotaur in the next room, the barbarian must roll against an AC of 15 (or 18 in the first example), whereas the rest of the party need only roll against the beast’s normal AC of 14.

Fatigue is limited to a single d6, so if a character gains more fatigue than 6, that is when exhaustion rules set in. Additional actions that cause fatigue now increase exhaustion, which would be tracked with a separate d6. If the character manages to accumulate 7 points of exhaustion, they die. Different houses may agree on different effects at this point, but, at the least, the character’s movement speed should be cut in half (rounded down to the nearest 5 feet) while exhausted. Exhaustion also prevents

the character from removing fatigue by eating or resting; they first must remove the exhaustion before they can recover from fatigue. And exhaustion is harder to get rid of, each point requiring a long rest to be removed. So a character who gains a point of exhaustion is going to be stuck with it until the next long rest.

This sounds like a punishment for players who play creatively, but here is where it gets tantalizing for the rest of the table. Like “Inspiration”, “Desperation” is a game mechanic a player can use to give their character a temporary advantage. In the case of inspiration, this option is limited by the amount of inspiration each player is allowed to have. In the case of desperation, this ability would be limited by the consequences of fatigue and exhaustion.

Desperation is the opportunity for players to tap an ability that has run out of resources. Whenever a player overextends their character’s limits, the DM can call for a desperation roll. The first time this roll is made, use a d8. The face value of this roll is added to that character’s Fatigue. If more than 6 fatigue points are gained, the character adds the remainder of the roll as points of exhaustion. This means the character may now require several days’ worth of rest before they can get rid of the effects of their desperation. However, it can also create heroic moments at your table.

Consider the cleric in the example above. As the body of her ally grows cold, she hastens to prepare one last, desperate spell to bring him back. In this case, the DM could use the spell’s level instead of rolling for desperation, causing the cleric to gain fatigue equal to the level of spell they are trying to cast. At most tables, this is going to open up the opportunity for those lower-level spell casters to use their magic more between rests. It would be quite tempting for a wizard well-equipped with refreshing rations to allow a few fatigue points to accumulate in exchange for a few extra spells in combat. However, the caster’s casting ability, as well as spell DC, is affected by fatigue, so prolific use of this mechanic is going to result in the loss of efficiency for many a spell.

Now consider the example above where the paladin has used his last spell slot, but continues to use Searing Smite with each additional round of battle. He may be consistently rolling 20+ on his attack roll, but if he has 6 points of fatigue, every target’s AC is going to be increased by 6, increasing the chance that those 20+ attack rolls may miss. Meanwhile, the other members of the party

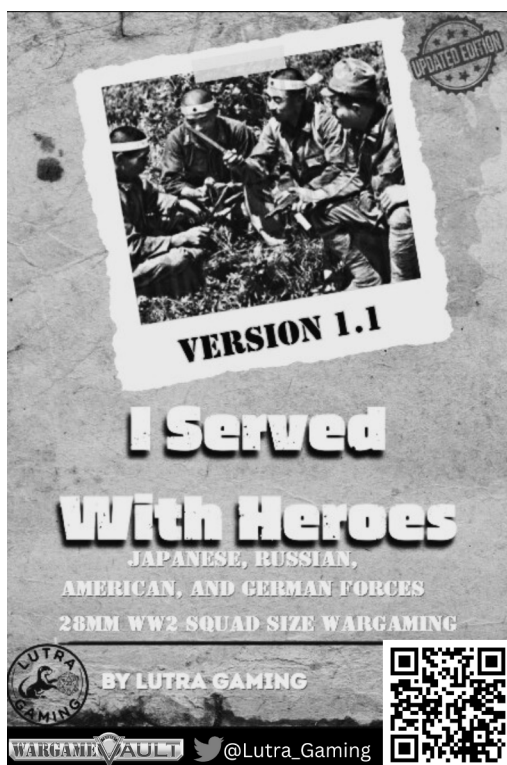
who played more responsibly with their resources and energy now have a chance to get in a few hits before the fight is over.

Finally, consider the potential for food being a useful in-game mechanic, with daily rations not only staving off exhaustion but also helping to restore fatigue. If you have players who like the idea of collecting different kinds of food beyond “rations”, this is going to appeal to them. Various food items would have stronger effects, giving even the most battle-focused players an incentive to spend a little time “shopping” for the kinds of snacks that will best suit their character’s playing style.

A comprehensive list of grocery items won’t fit into this blog, and I’m sure that, if you have players who like this aspect of the game (I do at my table), you will want to customize your list of available foods to suit their own fantasy. From sweet rolls to chocolate bars to large, juicy melons, consider the weight and amount of fatigue each food item might replenish before pricing them (think in terms of copper coins). Also consider that only one food item can be eaten at a time, and they usually require one to ten minutes to consume (often while the rest of the party is busy elsewhere).

In closing, here is a simplified explanation of the Fatigue/Exhaustion mechanic:

- Fatigue is gained from unsportsmanlike exertion or desperation. Casting a spell or using an ability after it has expended all of its uses also causes fatigue.
- Each point of fatigue increases AC, DC, or the saving throws of targets affected by the fatigued character’s spells or abilities. The DM silently adds this penalty to each roll as applicable.
- Fatigue may be reduced by eating energizing food or by taking a short rest.
- After 6 points of fatigue have been gained, the character gains 1 point of exhaustion for each additional point of fatigue.
- Exhaustion halves movement speed and requires one long rest to remove. For each additional point of exhaustion, an additional long rest must be performed.



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Rules for Writing

Halloween Horror

by Daniel (@DanielDnDYT)

The witching hour draws near as the Eve of All Hallows falls upon the gaming world and that means just two things: Catholics having to educate both other Christians who fail to understand it's Christian origins as well as hostile non-Christians who mistakenly believe it was created to overshadow the Celtic holiday of Samhain, despite the adaptation of rituals and trappings similar to that holiday being only a recent occurrence of the last few centuries and the topic of this particular editorial, horror themed sessions around the TTRPG table. Perhaps the most impactful and genre defining adventure module of all time, 1983's *Ravenloft*, began its existence as author Tracy Hickman's annual Halloween game in 1978. This was preceded by modules such as *House on Hangman's Hill* in 1981 and the massive 240 room haunted house *Tegel Mannor* from 1977, proving that themes of dread and horror on the holiday favored by ghouls and ghosts stretch back nearly to the inception of table top roleplaying games. However, the question remains: why, with such a perfect example of how to do it correctly as *Ravenloft*, can't GMs and more particularly DMs seem to pull it off?

To pull off a truly memorable, heart-pounding, and fear inspiring Halloween adventure, one must first understand the nature of dread. Dread, great fear or apprehension, is one of the most basic of human emotions which stems from two primary sources: lack of knowledge and helplessness. According to *Atlas of Emotions* Dread is the fourth level of fear and the first before it rapidly spirals into the fight, flight, or freeze responses. It is also exactly the realm where a good scary game session should reside. Go too far and you

cross the line into desperation and panic which is harmful to even the most emotionally healthy players, don't go far enough and players are left with anxiety which has all the nagging unpleasantness of dread with none of the memorable excitement, like being stuck on a roller coaster at the highest point only to an hour later beslowly backed down the hill and told the ride can't be fixed. So how does one go about building tension for the perfect frightful session? Lucky for all the GMs of the TTRPG universe our forefathers have left several rules to guide GMs on the path of happily frightened players.

Rule 1: Avoid Transgression

The first thing a horror themed DM must do is to avoid the lazy trap of getting "cheap heat" through intentionally transgressive content. This can damage the session in two ways. First, being transgressive is immersion breaking and immersion is critical to building tension. The reason it breaks immersion is that being transgressive derives its emotional response from the GM himself as opposed to from the feelings of the character in the story. When a GM chooses to intentionally cross boundaries in order to illicit a response from the player, the player is no longer anxious for their character, they're simply offended by the GM. That leaves the second issue, it gets a response on the wrong emotional spectrum. Instead of building a sense of fear, the response comes from either a state of anger or a state of disgust. A quick look at the charts for those emotional states will show a list of feelings that do nothing but destroy gaming groups in all but the lowest

levels. This isn't what a GM wants in their Halloween game. The session should be remembered for sweaty palms and the excitement of not knowing what is coming next, but knowing for sure it won't be good, not for the fact that a player got so mad they had to leave the room for 10 minutes because the GM decided give a detailed description of a of a possessed nun using a holy relic for self-pleasure to get a rise out of the Catholic at the table and to turn the stomach of the girl who is self-conscious about sex. Shock has value, but how the GM chooses to shock the players is what determines its value. This also applies to exploitation. If you know a player was beaten with a heavy leather belt by his alcoholic father as a child, having a drunken villain capture the character and beat him with a whip in order to trigger a response isn't good horror, it's just being a dick.

Rule 2: Keep it Brief

There are several reasons why Ravenloft was designed to be played in a single session. It's the same reasons the majority of Call of Cthulhu, Kult: Divinity Lost, and Delta Green modules are designed to be easily finished in a single session. Dread requires immersion and tension has to build. Any player who maintains the feeling of anxiety about a game from one session to the next likely needs to seek professional help. Fear is a natural, fundamental emotion that is designed to warn a person of impending danger, once the immersion is broken by the end of the session, the impending danger is left behind in the game world and when the group picks the game back up the GM is starting over at square one to establish the atmosphere and tone. This is a case of when in doubt, write less. The game can always be slowed down to allow things to linger, but rushing to finish the session in one sitting will kill the tension just as certainly as not finishing it at all will. On a more mechanical note, one major issue that a multi-session structure is that players enter the game with a reasonable expectation of surviving each session. If the horror game is designed to run for 10 to 12 sessions, the players know that the threats to their characters in session two aren't likely to be particularly deadly. By contrast, if the players know their characters are only going to exist for one night regardless of their success or failure, then every encounter carries the knowledge that death is a real possibility.

Rule 3: Pacing is Everything

Dread is a function of anxiety and anxiety is a product of time and stress. When its boiled down to its roots, fear comes from not knowing. Mystery and uncertainty allow the mind to craft its own illusions each more terrible than the last. To achieve this in a game session, a GM must balance a fast enough progression to maintain interest and attention while slowing the flow of meaningful information down enough to allow the players to build their own horrible scenarios in their mind as new bread crumbs are added to the trail. Ravenloft accomplishes this by granting the players a tremendous amount of freedom to explore the gothic horror set pieces and providing numerous avenues to reach the adventure's conclusion, but has the mechanic of the ever moving and random appearances of the deadly Stradh who the party is unlikely to have a method of defeating to provide constant pressure to hurry and find that sun sword or other method of defeating the count. Never was the expression "you can't push a man with a rope" more true than in a horror themed game. Players must have the freedom to move about while constant pressure guides them to the inevitable conclusion. In fact, that is an excellent visual to help pace a Halloween adventure. Imagine the party tied to a rope. As they move about, the GM removes the slack. He never pulls the party to force them closer, but anytime they stray nearer their world gets a little smaller and there simply is no going back.

Rule 4: The GM Will Never Write Anything More Frightening Than What's In The Player's Head

In Wizards First Rule, the wizard Zed lays out that in many cases a lie is more powerful than any magic because people will believe a lie they wish is true or a lie they are desperately afraid is true even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. The same holds true for lies of omission. If the GM leaves a blank, the players will fill it and if the atmosphere and tone are correctly set, they will fill it in with something far worse than reality. Once a GM had the party of a 3rd edition Dungeons&Dragons game come across a skeletal figure draped in robes bearing arcane sigils that threateningly gestured toward them with a short staff of dark wood. The party fled, casting all their best warding and defensive spells, knowing full well that a lich was far beyond their

abilities. It was just a skeleton with a quarterstaff stationed in the room by the real lich, but the players didn't know that and their own imagination (as well as a little unavoidable metagaming) did the rest. Of course had they called the GM's bluff and learned the truth immediately, they would have faced an entirely different kind of terror later in the game when they met the real lich and assumed the same trick was being played twice. In a less obvious use of this concept, remember the trope that plays out in every good suspense thriller: never show the audience the monster until the end. Showing the PCs a claw mark on the wall here and the spiked tip of a tail disappearing around the corner there will always build more tension than describing the stalking monster in its full terrible glory.

Rule 5: Split The Party and Cut the Scene

A big part of anxiety is a feeling of isolation. When a player feels cut off from the security of their friends, every threat feels more real and every danger more deadly. Use teleport traps or doors that slam shut to separate the party and force them to go in different directions. Set time limits that mean two things in different areas must be accomplished simultaneously. Create situations where one character must be in a different location when another character throws a switch. This vulnerability will heighten tension all on its own, but it also gives the GM another powerful tool. When the party is split, that means two scenes are playing out at the same time. What better time to switch to the rest of the party than right after the character who triggered the teleport trap enters a room, fails a listen check, then feels a rush of icy cold, wet air hit the back of their neck in the uncomfortably warm and humid dungeon? When better to return to the party member rushing back to town to get an artifact from the local cleric, necessary to defeat the shadow demon the party just identified as the real threat, than after calling for initiative against an unnamed and undescribed opponent? When the scene cuts away to the rest of the party and the player whose character is in the basement starts pacing the room or nervously shuffling his dice everyone will know the GM hit their mark.

Rule 6: Vulnerability is Everything

The last rule in this in no way exhaustive list is in order for there to be fear, there must be a perception of vulnerability. This is why

splitting the party works so well, because the player feels vulnerable without the supporting roles of the other characters. Accomplishing this is easier in some games than others, after all when a D&D character is walking around with HP in the triple digits and three death saves it provided a sense of security that a Cyberpunk Red player will never feel with his 30 HP and knowledge a single rifle round does 5d6 damage, but it is still possible in even the most forgiving super heroic games. Use metagame knowledge against the players by showing them creatures the players know are beyond the abilities of their character. Limit resources by making sure that rest and recovery periods can't happen and environmental conditions make ranged weapons or special abilities less effective or even impossible. Give the players a threat that they know will eventually overwhelm them such as a horde of low level undead who will eventually overwhelm their high level characters through sheer numbers eventually. A rule of thumb is that the more powerful a character is, the more dread the player feels when they recognize they can and eventually will fail if the situation doesn't change.

Last but not least is kill the characters. Don't save them. Don't rule of cool them out of a predicament. Don't bend a rule to get them out of a tight spot. If a player's character dies in hour one of a six hour session, so be it. Let them back in with a new character if that makes sense and you don't want them to feel left out the rest of the game, but make sure that it is a demonstrable fact that their characters can and will suffer an unknown and untimely fate, otherwise it is all for naught. Happy Halloween folks, and may all your characters perish in gruesome ways they talk about for years to come.



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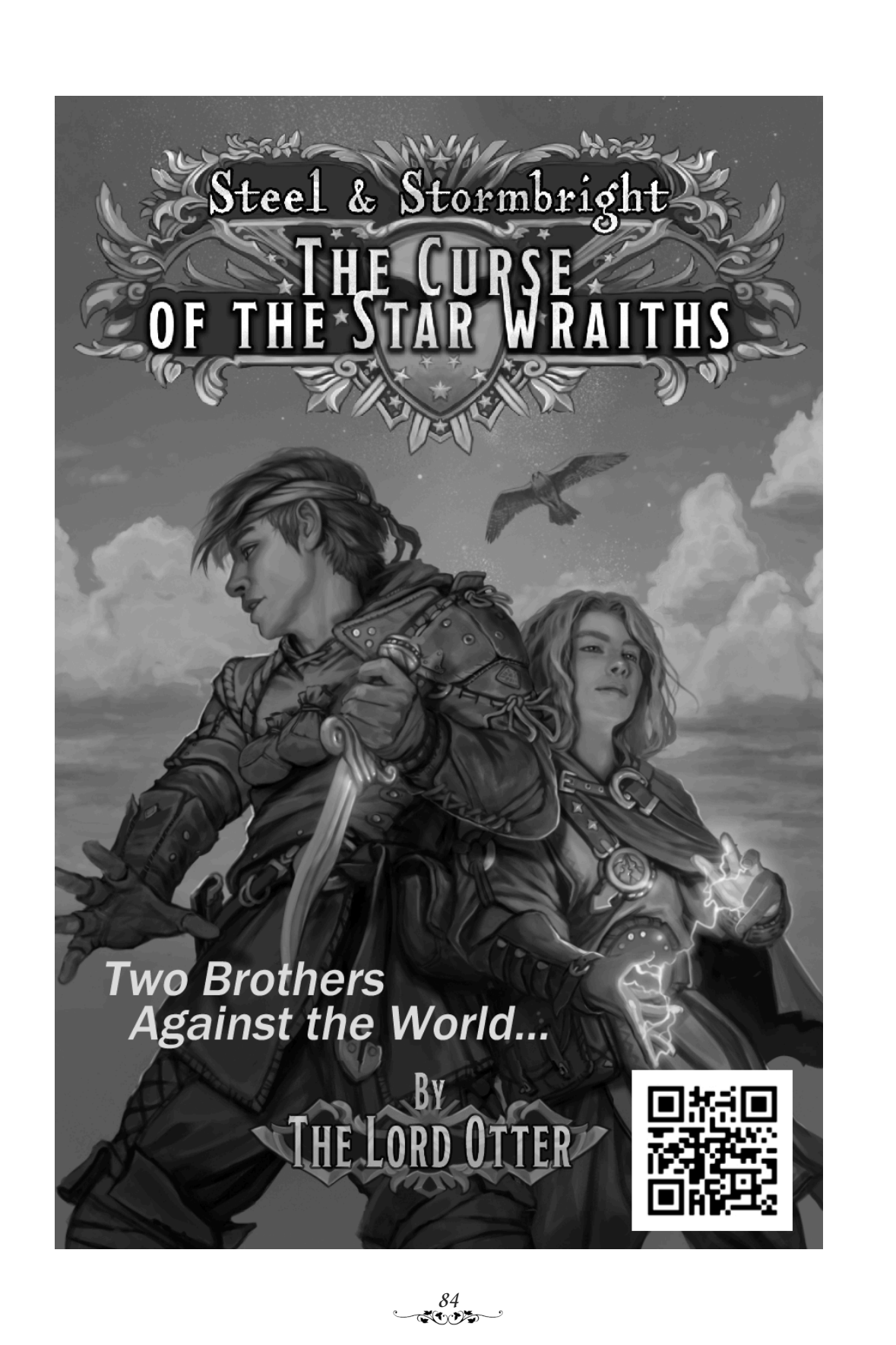
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*Two Brothers
Against the World...*

By
THE LORD OTTER





The Quill and Magic Guild

presents:

Kyle A. Potter
(@KyleAPotter1)

“Sable and Crimson”

Sam could see the morning sun peeking over the gallows swinging in the courtyard from his cell.

I didn't kill him, but how can I prove that? They're hanging me this morning!

Sam's mind went back to that evening, that horrible evening, almost three nights ago. He had heard the shot and rushed out of the Black Horse Tavern with pistol in hand, only to find his rival lying dead in the street. The magistrate hadn't listened and even the governor was hard pressed to deny his guilt. It hadn't taken long for the court to find him guilty either.

Shouldn't have threatened the bastard at the Flasten Ball, that was stupid...

But Sam had been drunk at the time and he knew he had seen Allister fondle Patricia, the governor's daughter, under her dress.

Sam had to admit, that the girl hadn't made a protest over the incident, but he had assumed that it was because she didn't want to cause scandal for Allister, whose family owned the West Carpathian banks.

Sam's thoughts were interrupted by a tapping on the door to his cell. Marta, the old maid who fed the prisoners and did their laundry, entered carrying a tray covered in a sheet.

"Last meal, mijo," the old woman muttered solemnly.

"Gracias senora," Sam responded in Marta's native Sedillian. Sam's Sedillian was not top quality, but neither was Marta's Carpathian, even though she had lived in St. Kalas since before Sam was born. "Frijoles and cabeza, as usual?"

Marta shook her head. "I put some stewing beef in there and some fat. So, when you hang, you might very well break your neck, I hate watching prisoners suffer," she said.

Sam smiled and patted the old woman on the shoulder.

“I appreciate it.”

Marta smiled half-heartedly, not making eye contact as she left. Sam could have hit her over the head and escaped, as she had her back turned as she opened the door. But, he could never reconcile himself with such a monstrous act on such a kind woman.

He sighed as he heard the cell door clang shut, cursing himself as he could see just past the barred window that the guard at the door to the cell block had fallen asleep on duty again.

Curse my soft heart! Had I cuffed the old lady on the back of the head, I'd be free now!

Still, the stew smelled good and Sam found himself picking up the spoon and trying it even though he didn't feel hungry. He was surprised to find that his spoon struck something metal at the bottom of the bowl. The Stew was not piping hot, so he reached in with his fingers and pulled out a small brass key.

Glad I didn't knock the old lady out after all...

He fit the key in the lock on his cell door and turned it slowly and softly until the lock clicked back in the open position. He then slowly pushed the door open, praying to Saint Kalas himself that the hinges wouldn't squeak. As he slunk down the hall, he stopped to check the guard in the chair to make sure the man was really asleep. The guard's tricorne hat was slumped low over his closed eyes and his rhythmic snores would have been hard to fake, so Sam took the risk and slipped past him into another hallway. He slipped around a corner and headed to the kitchens where he guessed Marta would have created an escape route.

He found the old woman in the kitchen, and she put finger to her lips and motioned to a nearby window. The window was open large enough for Sam to climb through and overlooked a drop straight down to the sea. It was where the cooks dumped their garbage and the water below was likely infested with sharks... if it was even deep enough to break Sam's fall. Sam took a deep breath and made the plunge.

He hit the tropical water in a steep dive, praying that he wouldn't break his neck on hidden rocks or a shoal. He swooped the end of his dive, after hitting the water, angling for the surface. He broke through the waves and saw the morning light glint off of something thrown from the window above. He swam over to the object and found it was a corked bottle with a parchment in it.

With the bottle in his fist, Sam swam for the cliffs, hoping that the only sharks in the area were the small ones. When Sam began to near the rocks at the base of the cliff, he spied a small launch that had been tucked away from the view of the prison on the cliff. He tossed the bottle into the boat before clambering in himself. As he lay, resting from his exertions, he pulled the cork with his teeth and extracted the parchment.

The parchment read: *Your escape was not pro gratis, please meet my associate at the Slippery Siren at eight o'clock in the evening for your release fee. She will meet you in the red room. Do not think to escape by ship, the city watch will be on every dock.*

Sam admired the handwriting, clearly the writer was of clerical background. The man had to be wealthy to afford such an intricate escape. No doubt he wanted

Sam for his skill as a burglar, a skill Sam had tried to hide ever since entry into polite society.

Sam knew of the Slippery Siren, a brothel on market street in the city of St. Kalas. He took note of the fact that the note clearly indicated that the person he was meeting was a woman. But she wasn't one of the brothel's working women, as the red room was a private room leased out for liaisons between two non-working individuals, usually nobles with different spouses. He was not concerned with docking his boat in public and walking to market street, the brothel had a private dock at the fresh water canal that ran under the town to the sea. The only tricky part would be having to row past the docks and into canal, but Sam had all day to come up with a good disguise.

He considered rowing around to the far side of the island of St Kalas and signing on with smugglers or pirates. But Sam would never be welcome in St Kalas again if he failed to clear his name; an opportunity he would only have if he met with this strange woman and heard her offer. Sam sighed and rowed as close to the cliffs as he dared as he navigated around the island.

Sam was amused at the look on the prostitute's face as he docked the launch. He imagined she'd been expecting a wealthy gentleman swathed in a fine cloak, instead of a ragged and smelly fisherman in oilskins. The woman wore a revealing corset and stockings; her wavy, auburn hair more alluring than her dress.

"Are you sure you're at the right dock?" she asked him.

"I'm expected in the Red Room," Sam said, matter-of-factly.

"Uh, would you please wait a moment while I get the mistress?" she replied uncomfortably.

Sam nodded and settled back into his boat.

The madame came along shortly, the auburn-haired prostitute at her heel. The madame was a plump, middle-aged woman with blonde hair and a dignified air about her. She recognized Sam with a nod and motioned for him to follow, leaving the working girl to mind Sam's boat.

"I was sorry to hear of your arrest... I am guessing by the manner of your arrival that things have not yet been cleared up?" the madame said.

Sam nodded. "Yes, sadly. I am hoping that part of the deal with my benefactor involves helping me clear my name."

"All the same, I do not wish to risk my establishment being raided by the watch, your visit should be brief but for the fact that your '*benefactor*' booked the room for the night."

"With all due respect madam, you've housed infamous pirates and brigands in these walls. I imagine that you were well paid for your discretion or I'd already be in irons."

The madame's countenance came to resemble that of a tomato, but she did not deign to respond. She led Sam down the hall past several doors, each painted a

different color and from behind which came the muffled sounds of pleasure. At the end of the hall was single red door.

"She's waiting for you. As I said, you have the room for the night. Please be discreet and leave the way you came," the madame said.

Sam gave her a slight nod and opened the door, the pleasant aroma of rosewood caught his attention as he entered.

The red room was named for more than the door. The four-poster bed and table that furnished the room were draped in red sheets and there was a red Asistani carpet on the teak wood floor. But the thing that captured Sam's attention was the beautiful creature seated at the table.

She was a young woman, appearing to be in her early twenties. She wore a black dress and bodice that matched her long, sable hair.

Sam was enraptured by her dark eyes, eyes that seemed to promise danger and passion all at once. The only thing that marred her beauty was her lack of a smile. Her eyes twinkled, but her ruby red lips didn't even twitch. Sam could tell by her cinnamon-colored skin that she was of Sedillian origin, though he couldn't say if she was from the old world or if she was born there in the islands.

"Good evening," she said in a strong accent that was almost like a purr. "Samuel Briggs, I presume? You may call me Rosalinde, I am here with a proposition on behalf of my employer. You got our message?"

Sam nodded, his tongue suddenly too thick to move. An uncomfortable silence followed.

"I'm not really in the position to refuse though, am I?" Sam was finally able to say.

Rosalinde shook her head and mirth filled her eyes, though she still would not smile. "I'm afraid not."

Rosalinde offered the seat across from her and Sam accepted, almost entranced by her beauty. She pulled a bottle from under the table and produced two tankards.

"Drink?" she asked.

"Yes please."

She poured rum into the two tankards, squeezed a lime, and added a pinch of dark sugar to each. Sam sipped the drink warily; he still didn't know how well he could trust her.

"It's not drugged, that would be a waste of time. I have better ways of ensuring your cooperation," she said, lifting her skirt so he could see her bronze thigh. It took him the better part of a minute to notice the small flintlock pistol tied to a band there.

"My employer has spent considerable money on your escape, and he intends to recoup his investment twenty times over," she continued.

Sam leaned back in his chair.

“So... What does your employer want stolen? I assume he is aware of my reputation despite my attempts to hide it upon moving into the upper echelons of society.”

“Let’s just say my employer is aware that you did not come by much of your fortune through legitimate means. How he came by said information, I am not at liberty to say. As for your goal, it is nothing less than the Jewel of Lyree.”

Sam tried his best to keep his poker face.

“St. Lyree? The wife of St Kalas? The one kept in the donjon of this city’s fortress?”

Rosalinde nodded in confirmation.

Sam let the silence impregnate the room before asking: “What’s in it for me? Either way I’m looking at a hanging! Is he going to guarantee me a ship off this rock, with good pay to boot?”

Rosalinde also kept her face placid as she responded: “No.”

“So, once again, what’s in it for me? I’m dead either way.”

“My employer says that you will get the information necessary to clear your name.”

“Is that a guarantee?”

“I am, myself, aware of said information and will give it to you when your task is complete, no further need to wait for a special message. You do the job, I tell you what you need to know,” she said as she stood up from the table.

Sam watched as Rosalinde walked over to an ornate wood and silk screen, slipped behind it, and began to undress.

“I’m going to need more than that, I will need physical evidence...” Sam said, eyeing her hourglass silhouette behind the screen.

“Which I will also provide... when the time is right.”

“I have no reason to trust you.”

“You’re also dead either way, so what do you have to lose, exactly?”

“Nothing,” Sam sighed.

“Precisely.”

“Then I’m going to use this bed, I’ve got until morning... I don’t suppose you give other services to entice my cooperation?”

Rosalinde cleared her throat. “There’ll be no time for that, unfortunately, my employer has given a strict timetable. We are to scope out your mark tonight.”

“What?! But, we were given this room for the night!”

“That was for if I needed to use other ‘methods’ to persuade you... now that I know you’re onboard, we must get going!” Rosalinde said, stepping from behind the screen.

Sam's breath caught in his chest at the sight of her new outfit.

She wore high-top boots and black pantaloons with a red chemise under a black bodice. On her raven head sat a broad brimmed hat.

"Your disguise is perfect, mine will have to do... shall we?" she said, hiding her grin behind her hand.

Sam looked at his ragged oilskins and grinned at the disparity between the two.

"The guards would arrest me just for being seen with you. A lowly fisherman with a high-born noble, even one mistaken for a man..."

Rosalinde laughed, still hiding her face. "If nothing else, for crimes against fashion! But do not worry, my dear, behind the screen you will find clothes more befitting of one of your '*station*'."

Sam went behind the screen. Next to Rosalinde's dress, he saw black pantaloons, a black tunic, and a black cloak.

"What about my face? I am well known to the watch now. Could you not give me the evidence to clear my name so that I might walk about barefaced? I surely would feel gratitude towards our mutual employer such that I would still fulfill my end of the bargain..."

"It would take us too long to rouse the captain of the guard and supply your evidence to the court. Besides, you will be watched afterward, which is a worse problem, considering our aims." Rosalinde said, throwing a piece of cloth over the screen.

"You want me to cover my face? Won't that be suspicious?" Sam asked.

"Not really, many folks cover their faces around here at night, some folks believe that soaking a cloth in lime oil keeps the mosquitos away from their face. Besides, it's dark enough to prevent most people from noticing that your face is covered."

The boat glided quietly through the waters of the underground channel. Rosalinde rowed the oars despite Sam's protestations that such work was beneath a lady of her stature. He was amazed at how she did not tire despite the great distance they needed to row to get to the keep.

"I know the way better than you, and we cannot afford to get lost, we have precious little time until dawn and being caught in broad daylight would be very bad for us."

Sam sat in sullen silence feeling emasculated until Rosalinde spoke to him.

"I know of your exploits in Noveux Vaillens, especially in the island city of Prix de L'aventur. But I was hoping to hear the tales from your own mouth, especially about the theft of the Sea Maiden's pendant."

Sam couldn't help but grin at the mention of his most famous heist.

"Well, what would you like to know?" he asked.

"Are the stories true?" Rosalinde responded.

“Aye, there were more than twenty guards and it was almost as well fortified a keep as the one here in St Kalas,” said Sam, suddenly feeling the desire to impress the strange woman across from him. “Well, everything you heard was true. The keep was laid out like a maze, only those who were trained there knew the layout completely. Thus, I was forced to secretly join the guard and learn the patrol routes and the traps two months before I made my move,” he said proudly.

“Do you know who hired you to steal it?” Rosalinde asked, her leonine face getting closer to his.

“I knew that it was a man... I knew that he was the intended recipient and not a middleman.”

“How?”

“The first clue was that he hid his face, a middleman like yourself doesn’t really need to. The second was the signet ring he forgot to take off; ‘Twas a red hawk. It just so happened that the month after the heist, the Governor of St Stevens’s son, Talbot, was engaged to the maiden Catherine, daughter of the Marquis of Andersborough in mainland Carpathia. Catherine was seen wearing a pendant that looks suspiciously like the Seamaiden’s pendant, and the coat of arms of the Governor of St. Stevens has a red hawk on it.”

“So, you think Lady Catherine now has it?”

Sam nodded.

“Fascinating! How did you get into the keep?” Rosalinde asked, her eyes glowing with excitement.

“Well, I had to scale the cliff overlooking the seaside and the tower wall on that side so I could avoid the curtain wall where most of the patrols were...” Sam trailed off, having caught sight of a lamp lit dock in the gloom, but Rosalinde had already spotted it over her shoulder.

“We’re here,” she whispered.

In a swift motion, she leapt from the boat and tied it off at the dock, flicking her hair over her shoulder.

Sam stood and began to depart from the boat and was surprised when Rosalinde reached out a hand to help him. “My apologies, Samuel, I quite enjoyed our little boat ride together, but now it is time for you to get to work,” she said.

Rosalinde quickly adjusted Sam’s appearance, making sure the cloak and mask properly hid his countenance. She then grabbed one of the lantern poles that lit the dock and handed it to him.

“Here, this will complete your disguise. We are to appear as a master and servant returning from a party.”

What if they get too close and realize she’s a woman?

“Shouldn’t you at least hide your hair under your cloak?” Sam asked her.

“Ah, yes, I almost forgot! By the way, do you have an idea of where to go to observe the guards’ movements?” Rosalinde asked while quickly adjusting her cloak.

Sam nodded. “Yes, but I was hoping to properly case the place, if we came in during the day and-”

Rosalinde cut him off. “We don’t have two months for you to join the guards and follow everyone around on their shifts. Also, you are a wanted man; and they’ll spot you in the daytime. We have tonight to scope the place out and tomorrow night to steal the jewel. That’s the time frame our employer gave us.”

Sam sighed. “Well, I’ve done a heist or two in the spur of the moment...”

“Good then! Shall we?” Rosalinde said, gesturing him onward with open hand.

The two of them navigated their way through a labyrinth of alleyways until they reached parade street in front of the moat surrounding the fortress. The moat itself, fed into the canals that ran under the city. Two pairs of guards patrolled the outside perimeter of the docks, frequently passing the stairway down to the dock under the bridge.

“We’ll have to find a location where the patrols are less frequent,” Sam said, pointing toward the entrance of a noble’s private garden.

They dashed into the garden and found, to Sam’s dismay, that the garden had a hedge maze that wound around the garden and neither of them could see where it went. Sam heard voices around the bend behind them.

“Hide!” he hissed, dousing his lamp and fleeing into the maze.

Sam turned two corners and hid in a corner. In the darkness, he could feel Rosalinde’s supple body pressing against him and could smell her rosewood perfume. He felt her lean her head back against his neck and he instinctively wrapped his arms around her in a protective fashion. He heard no sound of pursuit after some time, so he gave Rosalinde a reassuring squeeze and set out ahead of her to check that the coast was clear. Rosalinde moved ahead of him and grabbed his hand, leading him through the darkness.

They turned a corner and Sam spotted a stone wall in the moonlight.

“I’d wager that the moat is on the other side of that wall,” Rosalinde whispered.

“How did you see where we were going?” Sam asked.

Rosalinde didn’t answer the question. She instead went over to the wall and began to climb. “Come on! I thought you were the expert at this!” she hissed.

Sam shook his head and followed. When they reached the top, Rosalinde straddled both sides of the wall and pulled out her pistol. Sam joined her, looking down to see the moat and then across to see the fortress’s curtain wall on the other side.

Rosalinde produced an extractor and began to pull the wad in her pistol. She had an oilskin dry bag cupped between her thighs, into which she deposited the wad and ball as well as the small paper satchel she used to collect the gunpowder.

“No sense wasting it,” she said, tying up the dry bag.

“Surely your pistol will still be wet on the other side...”

“I’m sure I’ll have time to clean it while you scope the place out.”

“I thought you were here to assist me?”

“Aye, and I will, I’ll keep the guards from catching you, but this is the only weapon we have...”

Sam stared at Rosalinde. “We can’t just go shooting people. We’ll be hanged for murder,” he said.

“You’re already wanted for murder. Besides! Dead men tell no tales!” Rosalinde quipped.

“I’ll be free of the murder charges when I get the evidence from you, I don’t need you mounting the scaffold with me if I fail.”

At that comment, Sam heard Rosalinde mutter that she’d swing anyway under her breath. But before he could ask her about it, she dove into the moat. Sam stared at the bubbles on the surface of the moat, expecting Rosalinde to float to the surface with a broken neck. She did pop to the surface, but appearing to be unharmed, so Sam dove after her. He angled the dive so that he’d slide safely under the waves and was surprised to find that the water was deeper, and colder, than he had expected. He surfaced and followed Rosalinde to the opposing wall where the two began their climb.

As they pulled themselves out of the water and up the wall, Sam heard the sound of the bell in the fort’s bailey tower tolling midnight. He grinned. “I’ll wager there’s a change in the watch,” he whispered to Rosalinde at his side.

“Good, then we can accomplish our goal in one night and have a whole second night to... celebrate,” Rosalinde said with a grin that titillated Sam. But, before Sam could respond, Rosalinde bounded up the wall ahead of him. He followed as closely as he could and when he reached the ledge, he carefully peeked over while Rosalinde stayed below it.

“Coast is clear, they are changing the guard,” Sam confirmed after seeing the battlements and bailey empty.

Sam cleared the ledge and took the lead this time. He scanned the battlements, searching for a way into the central keep. Upon seeing a sallyport that was at the other end of the battlement he and Rosalinde were currently on, Sam led her over to it, hoping no one saw them. The door was locked, and it only took Sam a few moments to pick it. He and Rosalinde found themselves in a dimly lit, circular room lined with beds.

Rosalinde set to drying and reloading her pistol while Sam searched the room for inhabitants. It was clearly a barracks, but there was no one there. Sam imagined that most of the men going off shift were down below in a mess hall of some, but where was the armory?

Sam knew it wouldn’t be long until the men came up from the mess hall to go to sleep, so he sought an alcove to hide Rosalinde, while he searched upstairs. A spiral staircase went around the outer wall of the room and underneath the

staircase was a space packed with linens and straw pillows. Sam stashed the dusky woman in the pile of linens and dashed off before she could protest.

Sam crept up the stairs and poked his head above the landing. As he suspected, the room was the armory and was full of guards checking and cleaning their muskets and swords.

Drat, I wish I could grab a pistol or sword from here.

Sam was an impressive shot, but an even better swordsman. Either weapon would do in his hand. But he reminded himself that he couldn't risk killing anyone on this heist.

No one seemed to notice Sam, so he ducked back down and went to check on Rosalinde. The raven-haired woman smiled as she saw him peek into her hiding spot.

"Miss me darling?" she said in a sultry voice.

"Sorry, but I'm going to have to leave you here," Sam told her.

He then explained what he saw on the upper floor.

"Why don't you hide with me for a while until the guards go to their posts? I could make you very comfortable while you wait," Rosalinde said with a wink.

"No, this is our opportunity, there's a chance that the don jon is unguarded at this very moment, I can't pass up that opportunity."

Rosalinde drew close to him. "And how will you get past the guards?" she asked.

"I'll climb to the upper floor," Sam said, pointing to a window.

"Are you sure there's a window on that level you can get through?"

"Should be, with how hot it gets during the day, you need airflow to keep the tropical miasmas from killing your guards as they stand watch."

"I shall come with you."

Sam held up his hand. "No, I cannot risk you like that, those walls are slick and it's a hard landing below," he protested.

Rosalinde put a finger to his lips. "I wasn't asking. Besides, it's in my contract that I am to help you succeed in your endeavor," she said.

Sam shrugged and led her over to one of the large windows and took her hand as she eased herself onto the windowsill. Rosalinde let go of his hand and started to climb the wall. Sam glanced back to make sure no one was coming before climbing onto the ledge himself. Sure enough, it was a long way down and Sam felt a rush as he looked down into the courtyard below. He grunted and reached for a handhold to his right, he found one and followed up with a foothold. Outside of the dimly lit room, it was so dark that Sam had to navigate by feel to continue his climb. He was only aware of Rosalinde's presence by the scent of her rosewood perfume. He hoped she would be okay as he had no way of helping her.

Sam's left hand slipped off of a slick stone and the motion caused him to slip, losing his footing.

Rosalinde gave a muffled cry: "Sam!" as she tried to reach down and help him.

"No! You'll fall too, just keep going!" he growled.

Sam's grip on his one remaining handhold began to slip. He looked up at Rosalinde, who watched him helplessly.

After what seemed like ages, Sam used a burst of strength to swing himself up and grab another hand hold with his left hand. Using the hand holds, he pulled himself up to the last set of footholds he was on.

Rosalinde let out a long slow breath. "I thought... I thought I was going to lose you..." she mumbled.

"I thought I was a goner too," Sam responded, trying to ignore the butterflies in his stomach.

The two caught their breath, then Sam continued the rest of the way up to the window where he remembered the armory was. He peeked in and saw several of the guards passing around a flask.

Good, they're still busy then; we have time!

Sam and Rosalinde climbed further up to the window where he thought the donjon was. He peeked inside the room and was pleased to find it empty. The room itself was one round hallway with a series of reinforced wooden doors with barred windows on the inside wall. The room was dimly lit like the others, though Sam was dismayed to find that the window was too small for him to fit through.

"We'll have to go higher," he whispered to Rosalinde.

They climbed up to the top room, which had larger windows and was better lit. There were a pair of sizable bells in the room for putting out the general alarm to the garrison and a table with a spyglass on it in the middle of the room.

Sam turned to Rosalinde, who had just climbed up behind him. Before he could say anything, she took him in a tight embrace, laying her head upon his chest. "Please, don't scare me like that again," she whispered.

Sam felt her warm tears on his skin and wrapped his arms around her. "I'll do my best, but we still have to get out of here," he said softly.

Sam realized then that he had been softly caressing her back and let go of her.

"Please, continue," Rosalinde said.

Sam put his arms about her and caressed her for a little longer before he separated from her. "We must go, we have to retrieve that jewel before the guards get to their posts," he said, emphasizing the last few words.

They found a hatch on one side of the room and opened it. They found that the hatch opened upon a ladder that went down to the next room. They crept quietly down the ladder and found themselves in the room with the donjon.

“Isn’t it odd to have the don jon so high up where it could be hit by cannon-fire?” Sam found himself wondering aloud.

“Much of architecture and stonework here is reminiscent of an older time period. My guess is that this fortress was rebuilt upon the ruins of an older citadel. The age of the predominant stonework suggests that the ruins may even date back to the time of St Kalas, lending credence to legends that the jewel we are seeking really did, in fact, belong to Lyree,” Rosalinde said.

How could she possibly know all that?! It takes scholars years of study to learn that!

“Do you think the legends about Lyree are true then?” Sam asked as he knelt at one of the doors and began to pick the lock.

“What? That she was an elf?” Rosalinde responded. “It is quite likely, considering there are elven ruins in Carpathia that date back to the same time period. By the way, how do you know which door our prize is behind?”

“This room looks more like a treasury, with a desk, stacks of coins, and a scale. The other rooms look like bedrooms,” Sam answered.

“Bedrooms for wealthy political prisoners?”

“Aye, you can’t put nobles in a dirty rat hole while you wait for their ransom to come in. It tends to sour relations and make ransoms harder to negotiate.”

“Ah, indeed!”

Sam felt the lock turn under his torque and knew he had found the sweet spot. “Got it!” he whispered.

He opened the door slowly, and the hinges mercifully did not creak. Rosalinde followed Sam into the room, and he caught her marveling at the riches out of the corner of his eye.

Sam walked over to the desk where he found a small iron bound chest. “Keep an eye out for the guard,” he whispered as he began to pick the final lock.

Rosalinde nodded and filched a few gold coins before heading out of the cell to go on lookout.

Sam shook his head then focused on the task at hand. He prodded the lock with his picks and quickly found the sweet spot. He was about to turn the lock when a loud ‘*crack!*’ pierced the air and the hallway behind him filled with smoke.

Terrified, and with his concentration broken, he picked up the chest and hurried out of the cell to find Rosalinde standing over the corpse of a guard, whom she had shot in the heart.

“Damn it all!” he shouted. “That shot will have alerted every guard in the fortress!”

He grabbed Rosalinde’s arm and dragged her over to the ladder just as he heard angry voices downstairs. She swiftly climbed the ladder and he handed the chest up to her. When both were safely on the upper level, Sam followed. He scrambled up the ladder and slammed down the hatch, hoping none of the guards saw his face.

“What happened?!” he shouted at Rosalinde.

“He saw me and was about to alert the others, so I shot him!” she cried.

Sam was about to retort when thumping sounds on the hatch warned him that they didn’t have much time.

“Follow me!” he shouted, running over to one of the windows.

Sam knew the keep was surrounded by a bailey and curtain wall on all sides, there would be no jumping for the moat. He scanned the bailey and spotted what he was looking for, a large hay cart that was full to the brim.

He pushed the iron bound chest into Rosalinde’s arms and wrapped his face with the strip of cloth she had given him, the scent of the lime oil helping to sharpen his mind. He then found the coil of spare rope used to repair the bell’s pull rope and tied it off to one of the tables legs after bracing the table up against the wall next to the window he intended to make his egress from.

Sam then put one arm around Rosalinde and clutched the rope with the other. He then rappelled down the wall of the keep until he was about halfway from the ground. He had just enough rope left over to wrap his feet around as he swung from one end of the wall to the other. He angled his swing to where he and Rosalinde hung just over the hay cart, where he dropped her. He glanced back to make sure she landed safely before swinging back and forth to make the jump to the hay cart himself. Rosalinde scrambled out of his path and the hay broke his fall.

Sam didn’t have time for a roll in the hay, he recovered quickly and crawled out of the cart with Rosalinde hot on his heels. The hay cart was near the stables, but Sam knew that the guards would eventually search the stables and find them.

“Now what?!” Rosalinde cried, panic evident on her face.

But before Sam could answer, the alarm bells in the tower rang out. Sam ran for an alcove next to the stables where a different type of cart sat.

Rosalinde caught up to him, still carrying the chest in which Sam hoped their quarry lie. “I am not going to hide in the manure cart, they’re just as likely to search it as the hay cart anyway,” she spat.

“Worse than that,” Sam said, pulling the pins from a latch on a grate in the alcove. “This should lead to the moat.

“Is that... a manure chute?” Rosalinde asked fearfully.

“Yep! Now get down there before one of us gets shot!”

Rosalinde handed him the chest with a whimper and shimmied down the hole. One Sam was sure she was down quite away, he followed her, dragging the chest behind him and going feet first. The smell was terrible and the passageway began to constrict so that Sam feared getting stuck. He could feel cockroaches crawling all over his body, he was surprised that he hadn’t heard Rosalinde shriek. The passageway suddenly pressed on his chest, and he found himself stuck. Panic gripped him and he almost cried out for help. He shut his mouth just in time as a cockroach skittered over his face and he gagged. He let go of the chest and pushed against the sides of the passage. He felt the fabric of his tunic tear and the rough

stone of the chute scratch his skin. He continued to slide down the chute with the chest pressing down on his head, the pain of the stone scratching him reaching a crescendo, when the passage suddenly gave way under his legs, and he felt the sickening sensation of falling.

He scrambled to nab the chest and let gravity drag him the rest of the way out of the passage. The water of the moat caught him, and the iron-bound chest dragged him to the bottom. He struggled to lift the chest with the weight of the water pressing down on him. Just before he was about to give up and leave the item that he had worked so hard to retrieve, he remembered his lock picks were still in the lock when Rosalinde had shot the guard. He thanked St Arnais, the finder of lost things, when he saw that the picks were miraculously still in the lock. He swiftly found the sweet spot by memory and turned the lock.

Bubbles of air burst from the velvet lined casket and inside Sam saw a gleaming prismatic gemstone cut in a cushion shape. He pocketed the stone and swam for the surface, his lungs burning for air.

When Sam surfaced, he saw bullseye lanterns being shown on the waters of the moat, he also spotted more lanterns at the dock under the bridge and decided that direction was too dangerous. He began to flounder, unable to decide where to go, when a gentle hand tugged at his shoulder from the shadows underneath the moat wall. He saw eyes glowing in the dark, but soon recognized Rosalinde.

"Where's the chest?" she whispered while tugging Sam into the shadows.

"At the bottom..." he said, then added: "I have the stone in my pocket."

Rosalinde let out a long, slow breath. "Let's go! If we follow the moat around toward the back of the fort, we'll find the stream that feeds it," she said.

Rosalinde led Sam in the direction she had indicated, and once they reached the back of the fortress and they found a culvert in the wall that allowed the upper portion of the stream to feed into the moat.

"We're trapped," commented Rosalinde.

Sam scanned the area and noticed that no lanterns were shining in the area. He swam toward the wall where the culvert was, saying: "we'll just have to climb and hope no one sees us."

Rosalinde followed with a curse and the two climbed the wall. The wall was pitted with age, but it was also moss-ridden and treacherous. It was not long, however, until the two of them were on the other side and fleeing alongside the river that fed the town of St Kalas.

"Where do we go now? Our benefactor won't be meeting us for a couple more days," Sam asked.

"There are a number of plantations along the river here, my estate is one of them. It is quite fortuitous that we happened to escape the fortress the way we did. My plan for getting home was a lot more convoluted... We would have needed to take the boat down the canal to the port and hired a carriage to take us back. No, this is much better, and far less chance of people recognizing you," Rosalinde said with a

wink. "You are to be my guest until our business is concluded, and you will get the information about Allister's killer while you are there," she continued.

"How did you know Allister's name?"

"I've been moving around in the upper circles of St Kalas for some time now. I know just about everyone important in this town... even you."

"Bollocks! I would have seen you, you're not exactly a plain woman."

Hell, I'd have pursued her over Patricia, then none of this would've have happened.

Rosalinde smiled and blushed. "You were not invited to any of the events I frequented... I only mixed with the absolute upper crust of St Kalas," she said, carefully measuring each of her words.

"How come I've never seen you out and about in the day, such as in the market?" Sam asked.

"Managing my estate and political ties consumes most of my time, I have my indentured servants run such mundane tasks as shopping for me," Rosalinde explained.

The two of them rounded a corner and came out of the trees into a clearing. "Ah, here we are!" Rosalinde said, sweeping her hand across an open vista.

Sam saw a beautiful two-story villa with a terracotta roof, white clay walls, and iron railings. The villa was well lit, standing out against the dark evening. He suddenly felt very tired and his feet began to drag. Rosalinde appeared to notice his fatigue and wrapped her arm around his shoulder to steady him. "We're almost there," she cooed in his ear.

Rosalinde's words gave Sam a surge, he straightened and stepped lightly to keep up with Rosalinde rather than to depend on her. The two of them reached the front door where an attractive woman with chestnut hair and grey eyes held the door for them.

"Ah, thank you, Trisha," Rosalinde said to the woman. "Our guest is exhausted from his travels, would you lead him to his chambers?"

The woman nodded quietly, a slight smile adding to her charm.

Rosalinde turned to Sam. "Trisha will see to your needs. Sleep well, I will meet you tomorrow evening to discuss your fee. I will also leave orders with my other servants to give you unrestricted access to the grounds."

"But wait! I won't see you until evening tomorrow?" Sam asked, too tired to care if he sounded needy.

Rosalinde covered her smile with a hand

"I am sorry, but I have errands to run tomorrow," she said, coyly.

With that, Rosalinde took her leave of him. Sam turned to Trisha, who gestured down the hall. Sam entered and Trisha followed silently. The hall was wide enough for two people to walk side by side comfortably. The walls were painted a dull red and the hallway was well lit with candles in sconces. At the end of the hallway Sam

saw a teak wood staircase with an iron railing running along the inside. Trisha took the lead and began to ascend the stairs. On the red walls surrounding the stairs, there were a pair of wooden shields. One shield had a pair of crossed smallswords behind it and the other had a brace of pistols tucked behind it in an artful fashion. Sam noted the location of the weapons, in case Rosalinde had unwelcome company.

"So, when did you start working for Rosalinde?" Sam asked, following Trisha.

"My mistress bought me off the ship two years ago," she answered, not turning back to look at him.

"You're a slave?"

"Such a loaded word. No, I owed a considerable debt back in Celandis. Rosalinde purchased my debt and gave me a place to live. Once I work off my debt to Rosalinde, I will be a free woman, though it will be many years down the road. I'm an indentured servant, which is quite superior to debtor's prison."

"Slavery by any other name is just as bad. But you have a point about debtor's prison."

Trisha led Sam onto the landing which led to another hallway, she stopped at the first door and opened it.

Sam entered an extravagant bedroom with a large four poster bed with a sable spread and a teak desk with a cushioned chair.

"Will you be needing anything else?" Trisha asked.

"A drink... Do you have brandy?"

"Yes, I can bring it up to you shortly," Trish responded before turning on her heel and leaving.

I met friendlier guards in prison.

Sam sighed and pulled back the fur spread. Such an opulent blanket was useless in the humid climate of the islands, but the fine linen sheets were light enough that he soon found himself settling in and falling asleep.

Sam awoke to see Rosalinde standing over him in a very revealing silk gown, or he was pretty sure he was awake as he saw the glass of brandy on the end table next to his head. Rosalinde's raven hair fell well past her waist and her cinnamon skin shimmered in the candlelight. She leaned over and began to crawl across the bed toward Sam. Her dark eyes had the look of a lioness and before Sam could say a word, she kissed him passionately on the lips. Their tongues met and played gently. Sam felt his heart hammering in his chest.

She's so beautiful...

Rosalinde broke the kiss and drew back, her eyes meeting Sam's.

"Sleep," she whispered to him, and Sam suddenly felt exhaustion overtake him.

Sam's eyes grew heavy and his head fell back on the pillow. The last thing he saw and felt was Rosalinde kissing his neck before he drifted off into darkness.

Sam awoke to find himself alone in the sunlit bedroom, Rosalinde was nowhere to be found.

Drat, I was hoping to find her sleeping here with me. I guess it was a dream after all...

He noticed the glass of brandy sat empty on the end table and wondered at it.

I don't remember drinking that.

Sam felt a slight burning on the side of his neck and began to touch it.

Trisha entered the room and began tidying up. She gave Sam a delightful curtsy as she removed the empty brandy glass from the table.

"Good morning, sir. Sleep well?" she asked.

"Aye... A little too well. What time is it?" Sam asked.

"Nine o'clock in the morning, sir."

"Nine o'clock!" Sam shouted, trying to push himself out of the bed.

Sam suddenly felt woozy and collapsed, his head spinning. He felt even more tired than when he'd first entered the house.

"Ooo, ooo, be careful now. You must have drank too much last night," Trisha said. She walked over to him and gently helped him stand.

"Absolutely not! I never even got to enjoy the brandy you brought me last night! Something is wrong, here. I'll have to find your mistress. Where is there a mirror around here? I want to look presentable when I find her."

"Oh, she is out managing her affairs. She will not be back until this evening. As for a mirror, my mistress hasn't got one, they are dreadfully expensive."

"How does she always look so ravishing then? She must spend hours on her appearance!"

Trisha blushed. "I see to her appearance, sir. It gladdens my heart to see that you appreciate my work. I could do the same for you, sir... That is, if you'll allow me..."

"I would appreciate that... She has no mirrors, eh?" Sam thought aloud, he was now very suspicious and wanted a look around the place while Rosalinde was on her errands.

"Aye, sir. And I would be more than happy to make you up right after your breakfast if you please!" Trisha said, sounding much more chipper than the previous evening.

“Alright, lead the way.”

Trisha led Sam into the hall, but he suddenly turned right, away from the stairs and toward the end of the hall. There were two more bedrooms to his right, but his interest was in the door at the end where he assumed the master suite was.

Trisha stopped him as he reached the door. “I’m sorry, sir, but it is impolite to enter a woman’s room without permission,” she said, her sharp eyebrows forming a ‘v’.

“But she said that I would be given unrestricted access to the grounds,” Sam protested.

“The grounds, yes! Not every room in the house! Please, sir! If you wish access to my mistress’s boudoir you shall have to make the request upon her return!”

Sam relented, his suspicions all but confirmed. He would need a way to distract Trisha to sneak into Rosalinde’s room. There he expected all his questions would be answered. He watched with dismay as Trisha thwarted his plans by locking the door and placing the key under the folds of her skirt.

After a sumptuous breakfast of bacon and tropical fruits, Sam offered to help Trisha clean the beautiful silver dishes upon which the repast had been served. As he did so, he bumped into the maid, pretending it to be an accident. As he did, he ran his hand up her skirt and surreptitiously retrieved the key.

Trisha turned to him, blushing. “Pardon me sir, but I do not think it polite to play with a lady’s feelings. You cannot find me all that distracting after having met my mistress,” she said in a shaky voice.

Sam caught on to what she was thinking and decided to play along. “Oh, wouldn’t I? You are quite a fetching lady...” he whispered seductively.

“But my mistress...” she protested.

“She’s busy tending to her business is she not? Why don’t we go up to my room and ‘relax’ before you make me up for this evening?”

Trisha stared at him, her mouth hanging open. Sam took the opportunity to kiss her passionately. Sam felt both their hearts hammer and Trisha broke the kiss. She grabbed the bottle of brandy from a nearby table and ran up to the room Sam had been staying in.

Sam followed, surprised at how well his plan had worked and a little worried about how far he would take it. He made it up to the room and saw Trisha undoing her bodice. She smiled at him seductively and he returned the smile, before shutting the door and locking it.

Trisha hammered on the door. “You bastard! Open this door right now!” she cried.

Sam felt a twinge of guilt, knowing that were circumstances different, he would have been more than happy to give in to Trisha’s desires. He forced himself to ignore her impassioned pleas and focus on the more important task at hand. He ran back to the stairway and grabbed one of the smallswords from behind the shield and took the strip of cloth he had used for a mask the previous night and

used it as a sash around his waist, which he stowed the sword in as a makeshift baldric. He then walked down the hall to Rosalinde's door and paused before turning the handle. It was too late; he had already gone this far. He needed answers and then he needed to come up with a plan to deal with those answers.

Sam turned the handle and entered the room. It was pitch dark inside, all of the curtains had been closed. Sam saw movement in the darkness and prepared for a confrontation. A lamp was lit, and Sam saw Rosalinde sitting at the table in her room, her dark eyes focused on him. He noticed that she was wearing the same revealing outfit that he had seen her in last night in his dream.

No, not a dream! It really happened! He realized.

He caught himself looking Rosalinde up and down; and when he forced himself to meet her eyes again, he saw a smile graced her crimson lips, revealing pointed incisors.

I was right! She is a vampire!

Sam had only heard stories of the fabled blood-drinkers, but now the evidence was clear and sitting right in front of him. Sam touched his neck instinctively and Rosalinde gave a light chuckle. The sound sent shivers down Sam's spine but was also alluring, like seeing a king cobra open its hood.

"So, figured it out, have you?" She asked in her rolling accent.

"Yes." Sam answered slowly. "You bit me last night... you drank my blood."

Rosalinde nodded. "Yes, I did." Her smile faded and she looked down at the floor. "I wanted so much more from you than blood, but I was afraid once you found out the truth, you would want to kill me."

"You're being a vampire doesn't really affect my feelings for you, but it does pose a problem. Do you have to feed as often as normal humans need to eat?" Sam asked.

Rosalinde nodded and Sam's heart sank.

"I have been able to feed on pig's blood for a short period of time. But eventually I must feed on human blood, otherwise the bloodlust overwhelms me, and I usually end up killing my prey," Rosalinde explained.

"How much do you need?"

"Three pints a day, but only one pint of human blood a week. And trust me, it took decades of discipline before I was able live off of so little human blood."

Sam blinked. "Decades? How old are you?" he asked.

"I am twenty three and two hundred years old, human. I was turned when there were still elves living in Pashenol," Rosalinde said.

Sam's jaw hit the floor. "Wow! You look amazing for 200!" he chuckled.

Rosalinde's smile returned, even wider, but now it was more charming than fearsome.

"I think, if you are interested, we could be more than partners in crime. But first we must see to my exoneration so that I may walk the streets of St Kalas by your side as a free man. To do that I will need the information you promised on Allister's murderer," Sam continued, breaking into a wide grin to match Rosalinde's.

To Sam's surprise, Rosalinde's smile faded again, replaced with a look of deep sorrow.

"What's wrong? Was it something I said," Sam asked, trying to hide the panic in his voice. "I am okay with giving you a little of my blood from time to time to sustain you."

"Your proposition does please me, human, but there is another issue. One which will prevent us from ever being together..." Rosalinde said solemnly.

"What's that? You're not married, are you?" Sam asked, half joking.

Rosalinde shook her head. "No..." she sighed.

Rosalinde took a deep breath and said: "The killer you are looking for... the murderer of Allister... it is I."

Sam felt as if the floor fell out from beneath him. "But that means..."

Rosalinde nodded. "That for you to be free, you will have to turn me in; and I have no intention of going quietly," she said, standing up.

Rosalinde's face took on a more feral cast as she bared her fangs. Her long, spindly fingers became claws.

Sam stood too, his hand on the hilt of the smallsword sheathed at his side. "But... it doesn't have to end this way! We could escape together! There must be a ship we can take from St Kalas to one of the other islands... or maybe the mainland!" he said, stepping back until his hand brushed one of the curtains. He could feel the warmth of the morning sun on the thick black cloth.

Rosalinde, who had begun advancing on Sam, stopped suddenly, having realized the danger of her situation. She sighed, dropping her arms to her side. "No, I'm afraid it will not work that way. Our mutual employer is very well connected, he is a power broker here and on the mainland. Unless we give him what he wants, he will hunt us to the end of the world," she said.

"Why?! Why did you have to kill Allister? Things could have been different between us; you've seen that!" Sam argued, his voice suddenly breaking.

"Our employer hired me to do it. He said that the only way to pull you out of retirement was to put you in a situation where you couldn't refuse the job. He knew you had threatened Allister at the Flasten ball and said it was our only opportunity. When our employer shows up tonight to collect the gem, he will be expecting only one of us to be here... alive," Rosalinde explained.

Sam was confused. "I thought we were meeting him tomorrow night."

"Early this morning, after I... visited you... I sent Trisha with a message for our employer. I told him that we had been successful and were ahead of schedule, and that I would meet him tonight," Rosalinde said.

Tears of blood began to form in Rosalinde's eyes and roll down her cheeks. "I thought that if I killed and drained you sooner, that it would stop the feeling I have for you. I was foolish, I never thought that a vampire could fall in love with her prey," she said, her voice cracking.

Sam shook his head. He loved Rosalinde, but he had no intention of being hanged for a crime he didn't commit. More importantly, he didn't want to have to fight Rosalinde or have to watch her mount the scaffold, even though she was guilty of Allister's murder. He thought about Rosalinde's words. Their benefactor was expecting only one of them to be alive when he returned.

Sam sighed and looked deep into Rosalinde's eyes. He knew what he had to do.

When Trisha let Sam's mysterious benefactor into Rosalinde's room, the middle-aged man betrayed a small look of surprise upon his face as he sat down across from Sam. A large man with a thick neck and beard followed, Sam assumed it was the man's bodyguard. The benefactor had salt-and-pepper hair and a clean-shaven face with a hawkish nose. He tried to smile, but to Sam it appeared more like a sneer.

"Well, this is quite the surprise! I did not expect to see you here..." the benefactor said.

"Alive?" Sam asked.

Trisha bowed to them, not making eye contact with any but Sam, before closing the door behind her and heading downstairs.

Sam turned back to his employer; the older man nodded. "Yes. If you are here, that means that Rosalinde..." the benefactor trailed off.

Sam grinned as slammed a large sack on the table. Blood dripped from it all over the black tablecloth. "Does this answer your question?" he asked with a touch of arrogance. "I figured that if I exposed her to the sunlight, there would be nothing left for me to bring to the captain of the guard. She has an incriminating diary entry; but without a head, there's no villain to blame," he continued.

"There's nothing that would lead back to me in that diary, I assume?" the older man asked in a cool tone.

"None. You have my word."

"Because a thief's word is worth so much..." the benefactor said sarcastically. "What about my prize?"

Sam withdrew the gemstone from the pouch and slid it over the table. His benefactor picked it up and scrutinized it.

"Beautiful... and most definitely genuine. You have done well, maybe I will further enlist your services in the future," the older man said. "It is just as well that you killed Rosalinde. My friend here would have had to do it had she bested you. A pity

really... she was well and truly the most beautiful woman on this godforsaken rock."

The benefactor reached for the bloody bag and Sam let him take it. "She was too much of a risk. She knew too much about me and my operations and her needs put her in too much danger of being captured. I needed to tie up that loose end. But don't worry, If what you said about her diary is true, then there will be no need of further bloodshed..." the older man paused as he stared at the contents of the bag, trying to make sense of what he saw.

So distracted was Sam's benefactor that he didn't see Sam raise the pistol, his bodyguard on the other hand, did see the weapon and lurched forward. Sam cursed and shot the big man right between the eyes at point blank and his skull popped like a pumpkin dropped off the tower of St Kalas. The benefactor leapt to his feet, but Sam had drawn the smallsword and closed the distance. He ran the middle-aged man through and held him there as his lifeforce poured out over the floorboards.

"Rosalinde sends her love... She knew you were going to kill her. So, we came up with this little plan to tie up *our* loose ends," Sam said as he pulled his blade from the gut of the man.

"You fool... You're not... the first... you'll meet... the same... sticky... end!" the man guttered as he coughed up blood.

The bloody sack tumbled from the man's hands and spilled its contents: a pumpkin coated in pig's blood.

Sam backed away, putting a safe distance between himself and the dying man, in case the man had a dagger. After he heard the man's death rattle, Sam leaned over the corpse and retrieved Lyree's stone. He then took a leather folder from Rosalinde's end table and met Trisha in the hall.

"Here are the deed and your papers of indenture, you are now a free woman... with quite a bit of wealth I might add," Sam said, handing the folder to Trisha.

"I cannot say that I am happy to see you leave. But I could not bear to live in the same house as you and my mistress, knowing that you are the one warming her bed. I was foolish, like you, I let my desires get the best of me. I pray she will not hurt you as you did me." she said with an edge to her voice.

"I am so sorry, 'twas a cruel trick I played. There were better ways I could have entered Rosalinde's room... Sometimes the most expedient path is not the right one. I wish we could have parted on much happier terms," Sam said before turning toward the stairs. "By the way... What did the employer mean about me not being the first?" he asked, turning back to face Trisha.

"My mistress has had many lovers before you; she has been around a long time as she no doubt has told you. Whilst I do sincerely hope for your happiness, I am afraid the precedent is set against you," Trisha explained.

"But she said she had fallen in love with me."

"That is in your favor; she never told any of her previous paramours that she loved them. However, my experience in such matters is limited as I have only known her

a fraction of her time as a vampire. I only tell you these things so that you may be on guard.”

“I thank you for your information. I must bid you farewell, our paths will probably never cross again. If I may, you are quite a beautiful woman, and I think it will not be long before someone worthy of your heart finds you.”

And with that, Sam took his leave. The night was deep and his opportunity to escape was fast closing. Trisha had arranged for a carriage to take him to the docks where a ship heading to Prix de l’Aventure waited. With her help, Rosalinde had managed to book passage with a group of merchants, whom she had paid handsomely to not ask too many questions.

The footman opened the carriage door and Sam entered and sat down across from the woman he thought he loved.

As the carriage began moving, Sam asked Rosalinde: “Do you really love me?”

“It’s a little late for you to ask, isn’t it? You murdered a man in cold blood and gave up your one chance to clear your name. You’re honestly stuck with me at this point,” Rosalinde answered, a small smile revealing her fangs.

“Don’t make me ask again,” Sam said in a warning tone.

“I was telling the truth earlier when I said I was falling in love with you. I can make no guarantees for our future but know that I wish to see no harm come to you. I do not see you as merely a servant or a food source. What we become in the future, only time will tell.”

Rosalinde crossed the carriage and wrapped her arms around Sam and they kissed passionately.

Join the Staff!

Thank you for being part of the inaugural issue of our brand-new magazine! As we launch this exciting venture, we are seeking passionate and talented individuals to contribute as guest writers, artists, and TTRPG content creators. This is a fantastic opportunity to showcase your work, share your unique voice, and promote your social media and products to a dedicated audience.

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Movie Corner: Share reviews, analyses, and features on the latest and greatest in film.

Book Corner: Focus on independent authors and provide reviews, author interviews, and book-related articles.

Comics Corner: Highlight independent comic artists and writers with reviews, artist spotlights, and discussions on comic culture.

Anime Corner: Review new series, delve into anime culture, and discuss trends in the anime world.

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