Tabletop Role-Play Games, Wargaming, Homebrew, World Building, Interviews and more

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Elven Maid Inn

Tales from the Tavern

Magazine



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Issue 3

2026
by
K.A.Bauer and K.S. Bauer
And friends



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Special Thanks

As the final pages of Tales from the Tavern turn, I find myself overwhelmed with gratitude for every single soul who has been part of this beautiful, unexpected journey.

To every reader who picked up Issue #1, who shared a kind word, who waited for the next issue, and who made it all the way here to Issue #3 , thank you. Without you, none of this would have ever existed. That we reached a third issue at all is living proof of how extraordinary, generous, and passionate our little community truly is. You didn't just read a magazine; you breathed life into it.

This publication was only possible because of the giants who first dreamed these worlds into being. We owe everything to Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, whose creation of Dungeons & Dragons gave birth to an entire hobby and opened the door to infinite adventures. We also stand in awe of Sandy Petersen, whose Call of Cthulhu brought cosmic horror and unforgettable dread to our tables, along with the many brilliant creators who kept the flame burning bright and expanded what tabletop role-playing could be.

And we must never forget the storytellers whose words first lit the fire in our hearts: J.R.R. Tolkien, Glen Cook, Ed Greenwood, Robert E. Howard and all the other masters whose tales of wonder, courage, and darkness gave us the raw material for our own adventures. These creators gave us realms where we could lose ourselves completely, pure, magical journeys untouched by the noise and divisions of the modern world.

It is important, now more than ever, that we remember their gifts with deep respect. They are the true Giants of our hobby. Their work deserves to be honored, protected, and passed on with the same love and care they poured into it. By staying true to the spirit in which these worlds were born, we keep the magic alive for everyone who comes after us.

To my family, thank you for loving me through every late night, every doubt, and every moment I disappeared into these pages. Your patience, your quiet encouragement, and your belief in me have been far more than I have ever deserved. You are the steady light that made this whole adventure possible.

As we close this final issue, I want to leave you with this:Stories end, but every ending is the beginning of something new.

The dice will keep rolling. The tavern doors will always be open somewhere. And the magic we shared here will live on, in your games, in your stories, and in the hearts of everyone who still believes in wonder.

Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for walking this road with me.

With endless gratitude and warmest wishes,

K. Bauer

Elven Maid Inn



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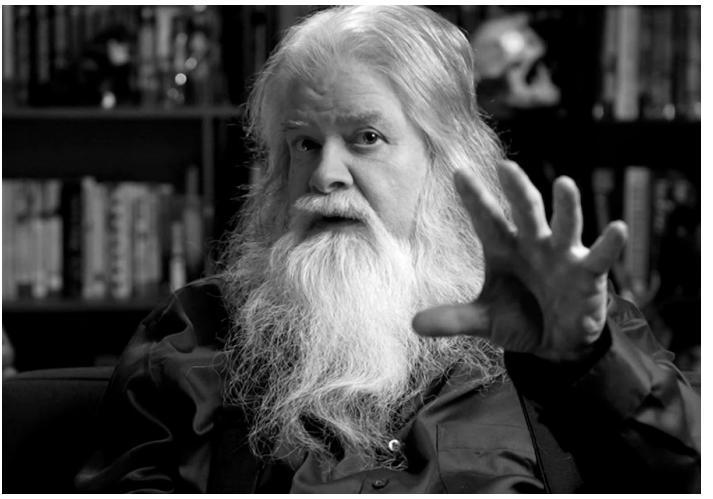


Interview with

Ed Greenwood

The Man Who Built the Forgotten Realms

Today, we're privileged to converse with Ed Greenwood, the legendary creator of the Forgotten Realms, a vast, intricate fantasy world that has enchanted gamers, readers, and storytellers for decades. Born from childhood tales in the mid-1960s, long before Dungeons & Dragons emerged, the Realms have evolved into a cornerstone of the D&D universe, inspiring novels, games, and endless adventures. Ed's boundless imagination and prolific writing continue to shape fantasy landscapes. In this interview for Tales from the Tavern Magazine, we'll delve into the origins, evolutions, and enduring legacy of his creations.

Elven Maid Inn: Many believe the Forgotten Realms were created specifically for Dungeons & Dragons, but the truth is that your world predates D&D by nearly a decade, originating in your childhood stories from 1965. Can you describe what the Realms looked like back then, and how different it was from the version we know today?

Edd Greenwood: The Realms back then geographically looked very much like the published Realms of today, except that my original Moonshaes were an archipegalo of many small islands (like Ursula K. Leguin's Earthsea, or the real-world Hebrides she drew inspiration from), The Great Ice Sea covered the area now known as Icewind Dale, and another glacier covered the area later revealed as Vaasa and Damara. All across Toril, there were no close real-world analogues. So there was no Maztica and no Kara-Tur (there were landmasses there, but not with those names and echoes of real-world culture), no Arabian Nights or Al-Qadim areas (Calimshan and Anauroch were on my maps, as largely desert lands, but not with the pashas and so on; I had "satraps" and "viziers." I believe drawing too-close real-

world parallels shatters the “suspension of disbelief” and borrows needless cultural-appropriation (and denigration) problems.

EMI: What inspired the initial spark for the Forgotten Realms as a setting for your stories? Were there particular books, myths, or personal experiences that shaped its early foundations?

Edd Greenwood: I was inspired by the fantasy and pulp tales in my father’s den. My mother died when I was six, and I craved escape into happier worlds; those stories on my father’s shelves “grabbed” me. From the Fritz Leiber Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser tales I took the notion of telling episodic self-contained adventures in the lives of vagabond anti-heroes, with the world setting “always there” in the background and getting detailed in tiny additions within the tales I was writing. My original “over the shoulder” point-of-view main character in my stories, which I began writing as a six-year-old, was Mirt the Moneylender, a fat, wheezing old trickster who was a combination of Shakespeare’s Falstaff, the trader Nicholas van Rijn from Poul Anderson’s Polesotechnic League sf stories, and Guy Gilpatrick’s drunken Scottish freighter engineer Glencannon, from his long-running series in the magazines of the day.

EMI: Key locations like Cormyr, Evermeet, and Waterdeep have become iconic in the Realms. What real-world or fantastical inspirations led to their creation, and how did you envision their roles in the world?

Edd Greenwood: Cormyr was my version of what a kingdom would be like if King Arthur (with his Knights of the Round Table) had gotten the chance to rule a kingdom for generations—but “kept in line” by powerful wizards on the side of law and order, if not always on the side of good. I wanted to explore what life would be like in a land over-endowed with fractious nobles, and with two cities that had rebellious tendencies (Arabel and Marsember) but overall peace, and therefore prosperity. With the constant threat of being bought up, farm by farm and city building by city building, by a wealthier land next door (Sembia).

Evermeet was my idea of Tolkien’s Rivendell—but a larger “hidden land” where the elves of the Realms kept the wider world at bay. My elves are haughty and noble, but they have always also been involved in bitter feuds with each other, between sorts of elves and between elven families. They share a love of beautiful sylvan growth, so Evermeet is a leafy green paradise.

Waterdeep is the olden-times Rome, Paris, or London of the Realms (its dominant tolerant crossroads trading city), and although there are a few Lankhmar and later Ankh-Morpork nods in its design, it’s most rooted in my idea of what medieval London might have been, if magic worked and a wizard (Ahghairon in elder days, and Khelben more recently) kept order. The major real-world London inspiration was the guilds, and the now-vanished gentlemens’ clubs.

EMI: How did TSR first approach you about acquiring the Forgotten Realms for D&D, and what were your initial thoughts on sharing your personal creation with a larger audience? Looking back, do you have any regrets about "giving away" your world?

Edd Greenwood: Jeff Grubb, a senior TSR staff designer who read every issue of The Dragon (as Dragon Magazine was then known), had drafted an internal white paper proposing a unified game world for the 2nd edition of D&D that wasn't Greyhawk (Gary Gygax's world) and wasn't Krynn (a world built around one big epic story). His reward for championing this idea was to find a candidate world, so as he'd read many passing references to the Realms in my Dragon articles, he got my contact information from Kim Mohan at The Dragon (I was a Contributing Editor of the magazine) and cold-called me at my public library workplace. Jeff asked me if I had a complete detailed world "at home", or if I made it up as I went along; the answer to both questions was and is "yes."
I was delighted to share my creation with the wider world, minaly because when I made color maps of the Realms, you could see my pencil-crayon strokes in all the oceans, and I was hoping for more beautiful maps.

My only regret is that I didn't retain a tiny bit more creative control, so I could have prevented those real-world too-close analogues I mentioned earlier (copying a real-world culture or its Hollywood version is easier for artists, but it borrows a host of design troubles and cuts down on new, creative, DIFFERENT world details).



EMI: Your early contributions to Dragon Magazine, such as articles detailing the Realms' lore, helped introduce the setting to fans. What was your experience like writing those pieces, and how did they influence the development of the published campaign setting?

Edd Greenwood: I started writing for The Dragon to "fix" some problems (incomplete rules, mismatches between rules and countersheet on numbers of armies) with the published DIVINE RIGHT boardgame, and to feel better, morally, about throwing my own creations (spells, monsters, and magic items) at my players in the "home" Realms campaign. In those days, everyone who could, players and DMs, read Dragon, but my players didn't bring stacks of the magazine to our gaming table, so they had to try to remember what they'd read—which I thought simulated "what their characters knew or

overheard in taverns" in the Realms.

I was named a Contributing (later Creative) Editor of the magazine because Kim Mohan (who began as a journalist, not a gamer) was impressed by my Gates article (published in issue #37 of The Dragon) because it had footnotes. As magazines are assembled in 8-page signatures depending on how many advertisements are bring run that month, Dragon could expand or shrink—and Kim really needed somehow who could write "finished text" to order, in a hurry, to match this theme or that piece of art he already had on hand. I could, so I got a lot of work. Alongside the themes he asked for, I wrote lore pieces about the Realms on topics I wanted to explore, and in that way managed to get a lot of non-location-specific Realmslore into print. When TSR bought the Realms, they asked for more and more about characters, places, and things they'd already read about in Dragon, so the articles influenced the direction of the published Realms in that way.

EMI: As you took on a role at TSR, you wrote some of the most iconic novels in the Realms, including the Spellfire Saga, the Elminster series, the Cormyr Saga, which is my personal favorite and helped me through one of the darkest times in my life, for which I'm extremely grateful, and books in The Harpers series. What drew you to these stories and characters?

Edd Greenwood: I was never on staff at either TSR or Wizards; I was always a freelancer, and my Realms novels were works-for-hire; the publisher can literally change every word if they want to. Spellfire (just the first book) was originally written as a trilogy, then cut down to one book in-house. So most of my published Realms novels, with the exception of the Knights of Myth Drannor trilogy and the last two books (Spellstorm and Death Masks) were almost assignments; what I was going to cover in a given book was discussed and agreed-upon beforehand, and then I set to work at top speed to write the tale. Elminster: The Making Of A Mage was written in 16 days (eight two-day weekends). Both of my Double Diamond Triangle books were written in half a day, each. So I literally didn't have time for convoluted plots, and at the same time was directly ordered to include lots of fighting. What I tried to do "for me" was to show love, and give even the bad guys their moments of sympathy and explanation and reflection (they had life aims, and dreams, and families at home), and also to include strong female characters who were central to the story, not Frazetta-Conan-like babes wrapped around a man's ankles. I wanted to show everybody doing things "for the best," even if they were wrong and what they did was terrible—they didn't think so, at the time. I wanted the lives of the characters to seem real, so full of mistakes and meanderings and sarcasm and foolishness, among the heroics.

EMI: During your time writing for TSR, how much did their vision for the Forgotten Realms differ from your original concepts? Were there elements you had to adapt or compromise on to fit the company's direction?

Edd Greenwood: TSR controlled the published Realms, not me, so when something was put into print and not presented as the views or words of an "unreliable narrator" (I always kept Elminster or Volo as my mouthpieces, reminding the reader that what they read might be wrong—so a DM could change things without arguments around the gaming table), it was canon from that instant on" whatever was published, I shifted to accept as what was reality "on the ground" in the Realms. When they embraced real-world cultures or Hollywood versions, I didn't contradict them, but I leaped in to write little "details of the world" that were different than real-world history, to make the Realms different from our Earth in tiny ways. I would never have put the Dalai Lama into the Realms, or given it a Mongol (ahem, Tuigan) Horde, but when those things appeared, I tried to work with them

to make everything fit into a huge, endlessly-unfolding tapestry. I still work on the Realms every day of my life, creating new details large and small, and trying to leave the lore created by others into a big coherent piece. So I've always had to adapt and compromise, but by staying involved in the Realms behind the scenes and out front onstage, I've managed to keep influencing the Realms and keep putting my original lore and new lore into it, for everyone to use. I have always worked with game designers and fiction writers behind the scenes—not to control what they're writing, but to make it "fit" the Realms.

EMI: TSR expanded Faerûn into the larger world of Toril by merging it with regions like Kara-Tur, Zakhara, and Maztica. How much input did you provide in this transformation, and what were your feelings about seeing your world grow in ways beyond your initial design?

Edd Greenwood: As I said earlier, I'm no fan of too-close real-world analogues—and Kara-Tur and Maztica are those. Zakhara is a Hollywood-version-of-the-real-world borrowing, and I wouldn't have done that, either.
I had no input into Kara-Tur or Maztica at all until after the fact, and worked with Jeff Grubb on Al-Qadim by deciding what spells I'd devised for my Anauroch Realms product (which had been forced into real-proximity by what Troy Denning had already written in his Harpers novel THE PARCHED SEA) could go into Al-Qadim.
I have nothing at all against my world growing beyond the original design, though I have most of Laerakond (a.k.a. "Returned Abeir") and other continents lightly designed in outline, and some elements of Realmspace, too, as I was the first freelancer to work with Jeff on Spelljammer. It's only the too-close-to-real-world stuff I object to, because it robs us of creative "new" setting lore and can offend some real-world folks—needlessly.

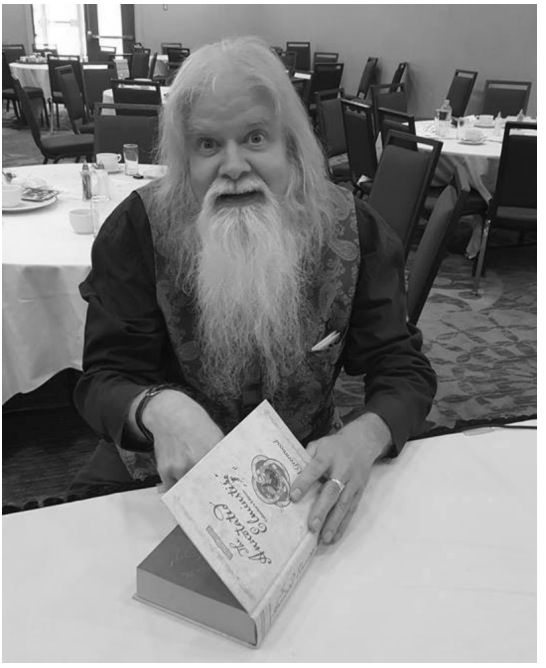
EMI: The Forgotten Realms gained immense popularity among pen-and-paper RPG players and fantasy readers. How do you reflect on that rise, and what role did early adventures and sourcebooks play in building its fanbase?

Edd Greenwood: I created the Realms for myself, and am immensely flattered and pleased that anyone else liked it. I think D&D players, among the most creative people in the world, were ready for a deep level of detail, a "world that worked" in that I wrote answers to "Where does the food come from, and where do the wastes go to?" and worked out WHY wars happened, and what was in those caravan wagons and ship holds, and details like that. Gamers were hungry for that, because it makes the setting feel real, worth living in, and guides them in creating new adventures if they stay in Cormyr or Waterdeep or the Dales and play continues beyond what was between the covers of a published adventure or sourcebook. I have always just wanted to build the coolest sandbox, with the best toys waiting in it, on the street, and let everybody come and play.

EMI: The release of the legendary video game Baldur's Gate marked a breakthrough for the Realms, bringing it to a wider audience. How did you view its impact back then, and what was it like seeing your world adapted into an interactive medium?

Edd Greenwood: I currently have a lot of fun playing in live stage shows, and filmed liveplays, with some of the Baldur's Gate 3 voice actors. I did some minor design work on the first two Baldur's Gate games (creating the titles of books characters can come across

in libraries, for instance; in the real world, I have always worked in public libraries, for over 50 years now), but I'm going to assume that you're asking here about Baldur's Gate 3. Which I am overjoyed about. In past computer games, when your character met someone, it was either to kill them and take their stuff, or to negotiate or quiz them to get information you needed to progress in the game. BG3 gives you so much more: you can romance characters, become their friends, choose to adventure with them or not, shift your allegiances as the game advances, and so on. This entire dimension, of getting along with other beings in a world as opposed to just using or eliminating them, was added.
And as with only a few rare details (Volo and Elminster should not be killable, as they are both Weave anchors whom Mystra and Azuth should step in to rescue, and Gale should not be able to progress as far as he can without Mystra's blessing), I recognize "my" Realms in the game: they got it RIGHT. So I can really enjoy the game. I live in a rural area with slow internet that often just dies for long periods, so I can't even run the game on my computer, but I'm currently doing a streamed playthrough with my friend and tech guru Ivan, so he plays as I comment and advise, so I get to hang out and play with someone, not alone: even better!



EMI: Was Baldur's Gate ultimately a blessing or a curse for the Forgotten Realms? On one hand, it skyrocketed its popularity and arguably made it a staple of D&D, but on the other, it seemed to shrink the focus to the Sword Coast, with places like Cormyr, Evermeet, and even Waterdeep fading from prominence while regions like Neverwinter, Icewind Dale, and the Underdark dominate perceptions.

Edd Greenwood: The Sword Coast focus was a Wizards of the Coast/Hasbro decision before BG3 was ever released, because "the rest of the Realms" is easier for a third-party license to use if there's no current canon details they have to match. I agree that this focus is a bad thing, because we all deserve ALL of the Realms, not one corner of it, but the Baldur's Gate 3 game is not to blame.

EMI: In recent years, there's been a push to portray drow as not inherently evil, with more emphasis on good-aligned drow societies. How do you see this trend affecting the lore, and could it diminish the impact of characters like Drizzt, whose arc is built on overcoming his origins and the world's prejudices, similar to figures like Hellboy who triumph over their "evil" heritage?

Edd Greenwood: I think the shift offers a fascinating "you are there as the world changes before your eyes" moment. When crafting the first DROW OF THE UNDERDARK game book (titles seem to have a habit of getting reused), I was asked to create a "good drow deity" and came up with Eilistraee, and from the moment I did, a lot of gamers seemed very interested in her. Change is the one constant in the real world, and when fictitious worlds change, they can seem more real; I think that's proving to be the case with the Realms. Undeniably Drizzt had more impact when he stood alone against most of his race, and therefore "stood out" in contrast, but we are seeing tales of his descendants now: the world moves on.

EMI: In 1990, you wrote a book introducing the drow goddess Eilistraee. What was the initial idea behind her creation? Was she always intended to be a good-aligned deity, and how would you compare her personality and role to that of her mother, Lolth?

Edd Greenwood: Eilstraee (not the name or the specifics of her as female and as the Dark Dancer) was an editorial assignment: create a "good" drow deity for "good" drow to follow, and make that deity have impact/worshippers in the Realms Above (the surface world), not just the Realms Below (the Underdark). She was always intended to be good-aligned, and her very existence helps, in design terms, how Lolth can be so evil and so powerful and yet fail to achieve much of anything or get anywhere except in drow cities she already dominates. If Lolth can thwart Corellon and the other elven deities, why isn't she already ruling the world? Or at least the Underdark, and/or the elven world? The existence of Vhaeraun and Eilistraee helps to explain that, and more importantly increases possibilities for play at your gaming table and many others: it's a time of chaos and conflict, and the actions of your player characters may very much matter. (And that, as designers, is what we're always trying to do.)

EMI: During TSR's financial difficulties in the late 1990s, you offered to continue writing Forgotten Realms books for free to help keep the line alive. Why do you think this suggestion was rejected, and how did that moment affect your relationship with the company?

Edd Greenwood: I have no idea as to why it was rejected. Possibly because someone saw it as "losing control" over me or the books I produced, but that's sheer speculation on my part. As TSR began to "run down," communications—except on a personal level, between me and close friends at the company I'd been working with—faded away, and that was a change in the relationship (and the reason why I have no idea about the rejection, too), but I've never worked on the Realms for money: I could have made much more doing many other things. I work on the Realms because I want to, because I love the setting and I love sharing it. I would write Realms novels for free right now, if they'd let me. (The problem is, I'd need to find some other way of getting income, as I get older and health problems

accumulate and the need for funds with it, so the time I'd spend on Realms novels would take away time from getting paid for doing something else.)

EMI: When Wizards of the Coast acquired D&D and asked you to continue writing for the Realms, how did that experience differ from your time with TSR? Were there changes in creative freedom or collaboration that stood out?

Edd Greenwood: There were "gentlemens' agreements" in place, unwritten but understood by everyone involved, over the protocol of using Realms characters (so different writers wouldn't use the same character in contradictory ways, such as Writer A killing her off while Writer B married her off and made her a ruler) and places (I write a bucolic rest scene in a village, but you write about a war that's already destroyed that village), that simply vanished overnight because "the new folks" didn't know about them. Then there was the hundred year 4e time jump and the Spellplague, which harmed the very strength of the setting: the rich tapestry without interruptions, and the cast of NPCs we'd built up that suddenly "died of old age" overnight without their tales getting told.

Other than that, there were summits over major series and changes, such as The Sundering, which were golden moments of getting together and talking plot elements face to face, that I'll always cherish.

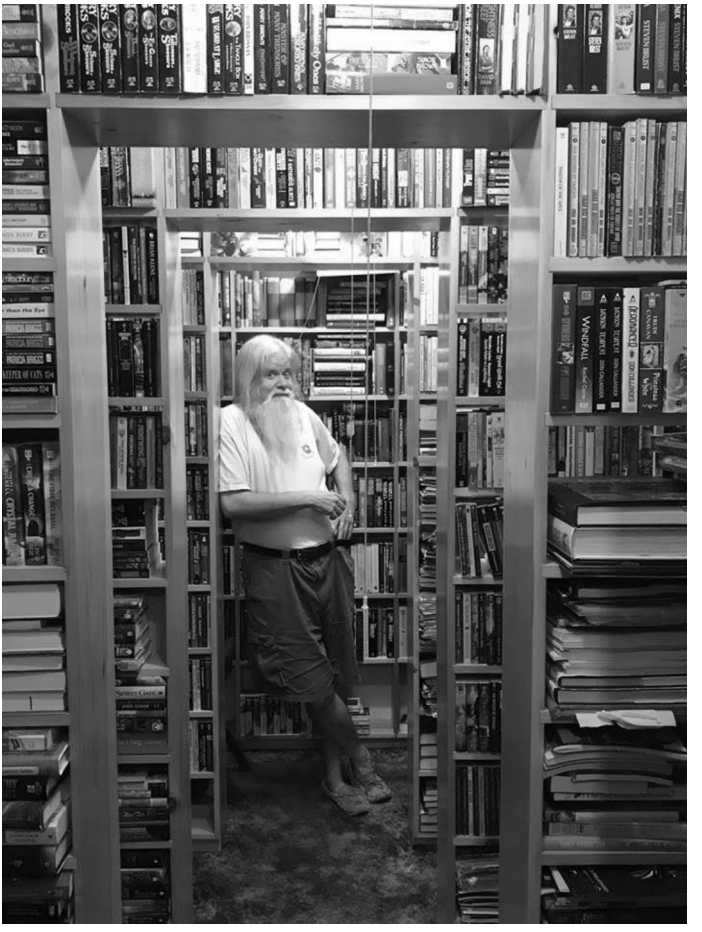
EMI: Your last published novel in the Realms was Death Masks in 2016. Will we see more books set in Faerûn from you in the future, or are there any ongoing projects you'd like to hint at?

Edd Greenwood: I'm working on a collaboration with Rhys Yorke and others right now, entitled SOULS FOR THE TAKING, and have in the past published a Mirt short story on DM's Guild, ALL THINGS THROUGH THE BRIGHT FLAMES, and collaborated on game sourcebooks, also available at the Guild, entitled THE BORDER KINGDOMS and THAY: LAND OF RED WIZARDS with Alex Kammer and Alan Patrick.
I have many other Realms-related collaborations in the works, from new Volo's Guides to new regional sourcebooks, and intend to go on working on detailing the Realms, through various means, for as long as I can!

EMI: A controversial topic: retcons in the Forgotten Realms and other settings. As the creator of Faerûn, how do you feel about changes made by others, such as introducing entire cities of good drow with the explanation "they were always there," or similar retcons in other hobbies like Warhammer 40k's Adepta Custodes shifting to multi-gender with "they were always there"? Is there a good way to handle retcons, perhaps through events and novels that alter the setting organically, or is a simple phrase like that sufficient?

Edd Greenwood: Unless new territory is being explored, or a magical or other barrier or deception removed to reveal things in a new light, the "was always there" is never a good design way to introduce or explain anything. And unless there are valid lack-of-time-or-wordcount-or-legal-rights reasons for explanations, it's always lazy design to do so. Give fans/gamers/readers an in-world reason or presentation for the retcon, even if it's something as clumsy as "when the moons come into conjunction, this entire species changes." Much better is to (as with the drow shift mentioned before) show the change happening, or the revelation of why "what we thought we knew, up until now" was wrong,

and we should now see things differently. Change is never easy, or accepted by everyone, but to not make the effort is, to me, just lazy design and disrespect for the audience AND the creation you're working on.



EMI: If you could go back in time and change any elements of the world you created, what would be the first thing you'd alter, and why?

Edd Greenwood: Not have the world mirror edition changes in the game (so, no Time of Troubles), avoid having any gods onstage in person (as opposed to speaking in dreams or showing manfestations), and cut back drastically on Realms Shattering Events like the Spellplague. Eradicate Big Change Events first. No need for any of them until we've explored the entire world thoroughly in sourcebooks; we've only seen half of one continent!

EMI: Beyond the Forgotten Realms, you've created other works like the Band of Four series, Falconfar, and Castlemourn. Can you tell us about these non-Realms projects and what inspired them?

Edd Greenwood: All of these projects are things I was asked to do, and all of them involve creating new worlds. (I do lots of other game design and fiction, too; I recently wrote a

novel for the Fate Of The Norns Viking roleplaying game, entitled THE ONE-EYED KING, and before that penned a Folklore: The Affffliction novel, THE WHISPERING SKULL.) The Band of Four briefly explores a corner of Aglirta, the various baronies along a river; Castlemourn introduces us to an entire new world (one continent and some large offshore islands); and Falconfar looks at what happens if a fantasy writer's work creates or influences a fantasy setting that's connected to our modern real world, and what happens when he finds himself suddenly plunged into that setting.

I love to tell stories, and I love to create worlds, so when someone asks me to do those things, I leap at the chance if I possibly can.

In all three cases, plus the Fate Of The Norns novel, friends asked me to create something, so I did. With glee. In every case, I went down to the human level of "look over the shoulders of interesting characters as they live their lives, and go along for the ride." I asked myself what they'd see and feel, and just wrote about it.

EMI: Have you developed any new settings outside of the Forgotten Realms in recent years? Would you be willing to create a entirely new world that could rival the scope and depth of Faerûn, and what might that look like?

Edd Greenwood: Non-Disclosure Agreements prevent me from speaking freely about some settings I've created, developed, or am at work on, but the short answer to both of your questions here is: Yes.

I've created several settings, and developed many more that were created by others (right now, I'm detailing cities in Darrin Drader's Daring & Dread campaign setting, and have finished work on The Environs of Gyzaengaxx, from Gooey Cube).

If I was setting out to do a brand-new, large-scope setting, I'd want it to have a different focus than the Realms, likely with magic working in different ways, and I think, for me, it's time to explore more intrigue and less fighting monsters, for a bit.

EMI: Looking back on your career, what has been the most rewarding aspect of sharing the Forgotten Realms with the world, and how has the community influenced your ongoing passion for it?

Edd Greenwood: The most rewarding aspect of sharing the Realms with the world has been making friends among writers, gamers, artists, and other creative folks all over the world—and being invited to conventions to see a lot of the world, too! The love of the Realms that fans have shown me, and their endless lore questions about the setting to try to make their games and fiction and imagining richer, inspires me every day to go on working on the Realms. It has truly become my life's work, thnat I'm happy to tackle every day until my last one.

EMI: Thank you immensely, Mr. Greenwood, for joining us and offering such profound insights into the Forgotten Realms and your creative journey. It's been an absolute honor to hear from the mind that brought so much wonder to life. Your stories continue to inspire and transport us.

Before we conclude, could you share with our readers where they can purchase your books, such as the Elminster series or Death Masks, and how they can stay updated on your future projects or connect with you?

Edd Greenwood: The easiest way to get my Realms books (and those with other publishers and other settings I've mentioned here) is through Amazon, in paper, Kindle ebook, or Audible audiobook formats.

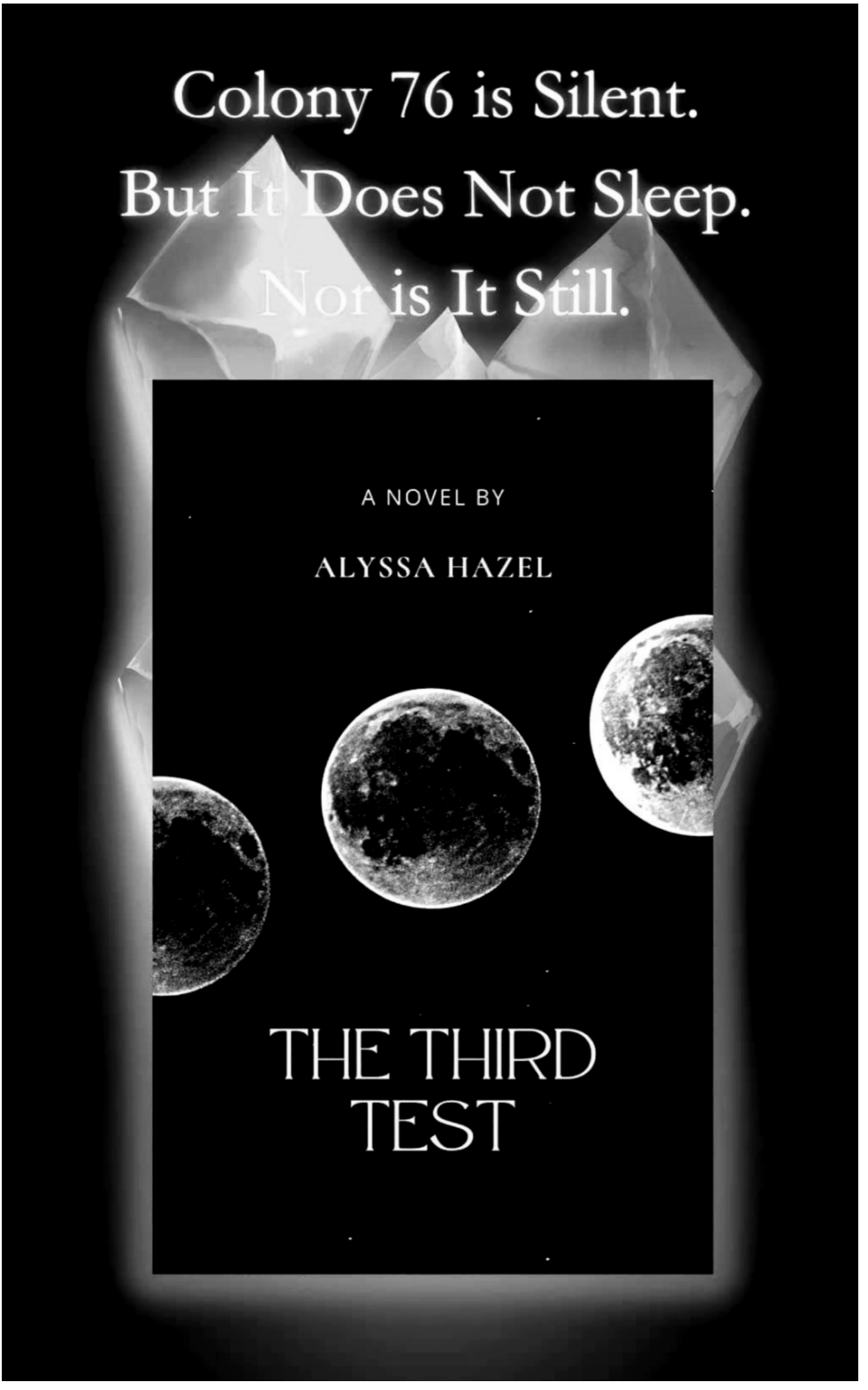
To reach me, these days, the best way is to join my Patreon (I am Ed Greenwood there), Greenwood's Grotto on Discord, or find my Realmslore videos on my YouTube channel. I also do the Mages & Sages podcast.

I can be seen playing Elminster on the Six Sides of Gaming YouTube channel, or playing a Greyhawk mage, Rhavalantar, on Lord Gosumba's (Jay Scott's) Twitch TV channel, or guesting from time to time on his Gabbin' At Lord's Peak Twitch show (I usually write new Realms AND Greyhawk lore for those appearances).

Or see me in person at GaryCon in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin in February, GenCon in Indianapolis every July or August, and Gamehole Con in Madison, Wisconsin in October. I go to other cons, like Phantasm in Peterborough, Ontario, Anime North in Toronto, Ontario, and GrandCon in Grand Rapids, Michigan when I can snatch the time.

Thanks for the opportunity to talk about the Realms! May the Realms be a bright light in your life forever!




Colony 76 is Silent.
But It Does Not Sleep.
Nor is It Still.
A NOVEL BY
ALYSSA HAZEL
THE THIRD TEST

Elven Irish Cream

Recipie from Elven Tavern

I have walked many roads, but none quite like these. The mist here clings to the skin like cool silk, and the grass beneath my boots smells of sweet cream and wild honey. I came upon a small stone cottage nestled between two hills, its windows glowing with soft golden light. Gentle, luminous kine grazed in the meadows around it.

The women who live here call themselves the Milk Maidens of the Golden Kine. They welcomed me without question. Over a simple supper they spoke little, but their eyes held ancient knowing.

It was the eldest among them, Grandmother Willowbough, who finally spoke to me alone by the hearth.

She told me of the sacred milk of their herds and the golden toffee gems they craft from it. Then she leaned close and said:

"Child of the trees, when the road grows long and your heart grows cold, remember this. Take the Gems and melt them slowly into the thickest cream you can find. Let the mixture cool until it no longer steams, then add the clear spirit of the mountain springs, enough to warm the blood but not to burn the tongue. Bottle it. Let it rest in the cold. It will taste of home, even when you are far from it."

She gave me no written recipe, only these words and a small pouch of the Gems to carry with me.

Back at the Elven Maid Inn I set to work at once.

I chopped the Krówen Toffee Gems and warmed 500 ml of the richest double cream over the lowest flame. I stirred until the Gems surrendered and the cream turned into a smooth golden sauce. Then, impatient fool that I was, I added the vodka while it was still warm. The mixture split. I poured it away.

The second attempt I let the cream and toffee cool completely before adding 450 ml of good starlight vodka. This time it held together.

On the third try I added a little powdered dreamroot dissolved in warm cream, and a few drops of vanilla. The balance felt right.

The Golden Toffee Elixir of Krówen
(Liqueur of Silken Dreams)

For approximately 1 to 1.2 litres

350 to 400 g Krówen Toffee Gems
(Polish krówki milk fudge candies, chopped small)

500 ml Velvet Double Cream
(double cream or heavy cream, 36% fat or higher)

450 to 500 ml Starlight Vodka
(good neutral vodka, 40% ABV)

Optional, for deeper harmony:

1 to 2 tsp powdered Dreamroot (instant coffee) dissolved in a splash of warm cream

A few drops of Vanilla Essence

Method I now follow:

Warm the double cream gently in a pot over low heat. Do not boil.

Add the chopped Gems a little at a time, stirring constantly until they melt completely into a smooth caramel-coloured sauce (8 to 12 minutes). Add a splash more cream if it becomes too thick.

Remove from heat and cool completely to room temperature. This step is vital.

Stir in the vodka (and optional dreamroot and vanilla). Whisk well until smooth.

Pour into clean bottles. Seal and rest in the cold cellar or ice-box for at least one full day (two days is better).

Serving at the Inn

We serve it well chilled in small goblets by the fire, or stirred into hot morning coffee for travellers who need courage for the road. A plate of extra Krówen Toffee Gems beside it is traditional.

A Note on Keeping

This elixir must live in the cold. Shake before pouring. It keeps well for perhaps a fortnight. I have learned not to make more than we can drink in that time.

Note on Replacements for the Gems

(added later, after speaking with a trader from the southern realms)

If the true Krówen Toffee Gems cannot be found, a thick golden caramel made from slow-cooked milk works almost as well. Grandmother Willowbough once hinted at this herself.

Best replacement for Polish krówki :

Use 350 to 400 g of ready-made **dulce de leche** (thick caramel spread, often sold in jars or tins). Simply warm it gently with the double cream until smooth, then continue exactly as written above. The result is remarkably close in colour, sweetness, and creamy depth or use Kraft Caramel Bits.

Closing Thought, 14th Day of the Moon of Silver Mists

I still think of Grandmother Willowbough when I pour this for guests. One sip and even the most road-weary soul seems to sit a little straighter, as though remembering a home they had almost forgotten.

The Golden Toffee Elixir of Krówen now has a permanent place on the shelf behind the bar at the Elven Maid Inn. It is not the strongest drink we serve, nor the most famous, but it may be the one that feels most like a warm hand on the shoulder.

I will keep her secret well.

Sora Miyuki
Keeper of the Elven Maid Inn

The Unwritten Story

Why Game Masters Are Not Storytellers

In every tabletop role-playing game, one figure stands at the center of the experience: the Game Master. Whether called a Dungeon Master, Castle Keeper, or simply the GM, this individual designs the world, arbitrates its rules, and gives voice to its countless inhabitants. It is tempting to call them the "storyteller." The label feels natural, until one considers what storytelling actually requires.

A traditional storyteller authors a complete narrative. They control the beginning, middle, and end, delivering it to a passive audience. The Game Master performs a different role entirely. They build the conditions under which a story can emerge, then step back and let it unfold through the choices of others.

The GM's primary work is world-building and facilitation. They draw maps, populate cities and wilderness with NPCs, seed ancient mysteries and simmering conflicts, and prepare plot hooks like invitations left on the table. They embody every monster, merchant, and monarch the players encounter. They enforce rules with consistency and creativity, and they react in real time when players make unexpected decisions. Yet they do not dictate the plot. When players ignore a carefully placed hook, befriend the enemy, or wander into a side passage that leads nowhere important, the GM adapts the world around those choices rather than steering the group back onto a predetermined path.

This reactive stewardship is the heart of the role. The Game Master provides the stage, the lighting, and the supporting cast, but the protagonists write their own scenes. A single player decision, to parley instead of fight, to spare a creature that was meant to be an obstacle, or to pursue a personal goal no one at the table anticipated, can redirect an entire campaign. The resulting narrative is emergent, shaped by every participant in the moment. No one, including the GM, can reliably predict its middle or its end.

The distinction carries real consequences for how the hobby is played. When GMs view themselves primarily as storytellers, they risk prioritizing their own narrative vision over player agency. The most vibrant sessions often occur when the GM yields a measure of control and allows the table's collective creativity to surprise everyone, including themselves. In these moments the GM becomes less an author and more a host, a referee, a fellow traveler, and the keeper of a living world large enough to contain stories no single person could have written alone.

A tabletop role-playing game is not a novel, a film, or even a video game with fixed branching paths. It is a shared act of imagination that belongs to everyone at the table. By relinquishing the title of "storyteller," Game Masters can more fully embrace their actual power: the ability to build worlds rich and flexible enough for legends to arise that no one could have foreseen.

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WOLFHOUND

by AJ VanOrden

"Names and places in the Great Work?" Even through the constant rattle and hum of the city's machines, the bureaucrat's voice is a nasal buzz that grates on my ears.

"Ahrenoshi. Combat Technician 7th grade, 13th gear in the Wolfhound Apparatus of the Brassian Warmachine." I self-consciously adjust the leather strap slinging my bolt-rifle across my shoulder, making the buttstock slap against the black leather of my greatcoat. I incline my head back towards the two soldiers behind me, who step up to either side and rattle off their own identifiers.

"Kentaka," the shorter soldier rasps, his voice dry and tight with years of tabaka smoke, "Artisan Medica 3rd grade, 10th gear in the Wolfhound Apparatus."

My last compatriot hesitates, but only slightly, the youthful squeak and stutter of his words barely noticeable. "Oremanda. Procurement Technician, 4th grade, 2nd gear in the Wolfhound Apparatus."

The functionary looks us up and down for a moment, copper eyes narrow behind his thin crystal spectacles. "Reason for departure?" His fingers drum restlessly on the metal windowsill below the glass separating us.

"Reassignment to the outer breastworks in the Barrens." I struggle not to stare down at my boots. It's bad enough that I'm being sent off for simply standing up for myself. But the condescension from every face I have to tell it to is a thousand-fold more degrading. I can feel the tension rise off of Kentaka and Oremanda, just as irritated as I.

"Ah," the clerk says, voice turning smug. "Pest control then." He pauses to adjust his grey smock before reaching out for my papers.

"We all serve our functions in the Great Work. "I pass the fold of leather and grey rag paper through the opening beneath the window, ignoring the man's sneer as he endorses our pass with a smear of red-gold ink from his seal. "Everybody pays their dues one way or the other." I reach up and adjust my coalscuttle helm, trying to tuck a stray lead-colored lock back underneath.

The trumped-up desk-tech hands me the pass, locking eyes with me as I snatch it back with my other hand. "Remember the dictats. No citizen of Brass goes unveiled outside the walls of the city."

I nod, stuffing my papers into one of the pockets of my coat, wedging them behind

the ampil envelope of dispatches I also carry. "And trust none that do not know the Great Work or serve its purpose," the three of us repeat in near unison. "Got it," I add, slightly defiant. The dictats had been drilled into me – drilled into all of us – since before we could walk. The two we had just spoken were just a pair among a legion of rules and regulations that governed the city of Brass.

I march past the functionary before he can needle me further, raising the heavy charcoal cloth of my veil from its place around my neck to cover my face, letting Kentaka and Oremanda fall in line behind me. The tunnel beyond the clerk's window is dimly lit, gaslamps burning low and blue in a feeble attempt to hold off the dark. The steel shanks of our boots scrape and chime weirdly on the stones, echoing an almost mocking sound as we trundle off towards our assignment.

Slowly, the comforting racket of my home fades behind, leaving us to walk in uncomfortable silence, with only the hiss of gaslight and our shuffling footsteps to keep time. It seems like we're walking for an hour before Oremanda's stutter breaks the silence. "Wh.. why do we have to wa.. walk the whole way?"

"Because," Kentaka growls in response, his low voice nearly lost in its own echo off the tunnel walls, "trains don't run to the Barrens anymore... there's no point."

"But..."

"The chirurgeon has it right, kid." I cannot be more than handful of years older than Oremanda, but the word seems to suit him. "The wells of naphtha there ran dry a long time back, and there's more lucrative veins of ore in the more easterly quarters. You'd have to establish a whole new district, right on the edge of the Blackened Wastes, if you wanted to eek anything out of the Barrens now."

Kentaka coughs then, derailing me long enough to let him pick up where I leave off. "And that would mean attracting more than just a scattering of Mamluks and a few over-curious abominations... likely kick up the whole hive out there in the shadow and sand."

I turn my head to glance at the man directly behind me and nod. "The technocrats think it best to let it lie fallow, at least for now."

"I su.. suppose it doesn't hurt that they can assign a few malcontents or dis.. disappointments like me to the Barrens to straighten them out, eh?" Trailing at the rear, Oremanda gives a self-conscious little shrug. "All to keep the Ma.. Mamluks from growing overbold and taking it themselves, of course."

I shake my head, turning my eyes back to the path in front of us. Duty in the Barrens was a secret punishment, albeit an open secret. Nobody ever talked about why you were going there, at least not to your face. But the rumors I'd heard about the two soldiers behind me were enough to make Oremanda's words sound truthful enough: the kid's clumsy, and as skittish as the forge is hot, only a soldier by virtue of his total lack of skill anywhere else.

Kentaka clears his throat again. "So, instead of being packed like cattle aboard one of the rattletrap railcars that crisscross Brass proper, we get to walk like <u>proper</u> soldiers." The raspy-voiced medic is the other sort of disappointment to Brassian Warmachine, crooked and shiftless. I heard he'd gotten caught up in one den of vice or another during some sweep by the temperance consuls. Whispers had it he'd even tried to knife the officer who tried to clap irons on him, but had been too drunk to hold the blade.

"At least the way is straight." In the gloom I can barely make out the branching side corridors as I pass. I stifle the thoughts of us becoming lost in those passages, and of what might yet be wandering the dark. *Those guarding the Barrens can't catch everything,* my mind whispers.

Finally, after what feels like another hour of sweating silently through my underclothes in the dark, we reach our destination. The corridor comes to an abrupt end, a row of rust-speckled iron rungs leading upwards along the redbrick wall, just as the consuls

had said when they had laid down my punishment and handed me the dispatches for the Engineer in the Barrens. Craning my neck upward, I can make out the outline of the hatch three of four measures above us, sunlight seeping through the seams between hinge and brick.

I look back to find Kentaka studying the tops of his boots and Oremanda glancing nervously at the hatch. With a half-hearted curse, I shrug my rifle's sling over my neck and across my body to keep it from falling. Pulling on the leather gloves hanging from my belt, I begin to haul myself up the ladder. Hand over hand; I climb as quickly as I dare, until I am hanging above the tunnel floor from twice my own height. Twisting to hang by one arm for a moment, I work the handle above me, wrenching at the iron ring until the mechanism squeals open. With a shift of my shoulders, I push the hatch up and open, letting me exit to the world above.

The orange-yellow sunlight is blinding, burning my eyes after so long in the dark. The howling wind off the Blackened Wastes is an impenetrable cacophony, louder by a hundred fold in comparison to the silence I have left behind. I am grateful for my coat and gloves - despite the sweltering heat above, even after the stifling warmth of the tunnels below, they keep off the black grit that fills the air.

"Another Wolfhound, eh? Rust and corruption, that's the last thing we need up here."

I turn towards the words, but find myself unable to make out much beyond a black blur through the glare and the tears in my eyes. The voice itself is enough to recognize the figure, though.

"Spensuka. I see you've made it through a month in this hellhole and still kept your head. Pity, it'd probably look better on some Mamluk's belt."

The tall soldier laughs, the smile in his silver eyes coming into focus as he leans in to clap me on the shoulder, veil hiding the broad grin I am certain is splitting his face. He presses something into my hands.

"You'll need these 'till your eyes adjust to things topside."

I nod my thanks, looping the leather strap of the goggles around the back of my helmet before pulling the lenses down over my eyes. The world is suddenly tinged a dim crimson, cutting the worst of the sun down to a manageable level.

"Thank the Maker. " I take a second look at Spensuka, now able to see the fresh scar just beneath his eye that must stretch below his veil, as well as the less important details like the grime caking his uniform and blotting out the insignias marking his gear in the Wolfhound Apparatus. "Ugh. Tell me there's something better to do here than stare at your pox-rotten face all day."

"Plenty." Another grime-coated soldier stands a few measures behind Spensuka, head cocked towards some sound I cannot hear over the moaning winds. I don't recognize his voice –it's possible he's from another Apparatus altogether –but he seems agitated. "We need to get out of here."

Spensuka puts his hand back on my shoulder and begins leading me away from the hatch, forcing me to duck under his arm to go back and help Oremanda and Kentaka up and out of the hole, then seal the rounded plate of iron from this side. I can only shake my head at the big soldier's laxity.

"You've gotten lazy."

My friend laughs again, his deep bass rumble almost a growl as he passes goggles to the other two new arrivals. "What can I say? Without the bureaucrats niggling after every last detail, I'm free to indulge myself a bit. Still, the Engineer in charge up here keeps a precise gear when it's important. Lauruki may be a wisp of a woman, but she's hard as adamant and sharper than vorpal when she has to be."

I trudge behind Spensuka and his unnamed compatriot, following up a half-ruined

flight of stone steps and on to what seems the main causeway of the Barrens, Kentaka and Oremanda still just steps behind. The sector proper is little different than the dry canal we've just exited: worn brick and mortar, half-rusted metal fixtures and an all-encompassing coating of ebony filth accumulated from the winds off the Wastes. A hundred measures distant the road is choked with deliberate rubble, rock piled chest high from building to building and adorned with strands of barbed wire.

"That way's the breastworks proper, such as it is," Spensuka says, inclining his head towards the blockade, his voice nearly a shout in order to be heard by all of us. "And down the other you can find the barracks and most of the gears that aren't ranging."

"And damn near half of the whole Wolfhound Apparatus," I grouse, words half lost to the wind.

Spensuka shrugs and turns, moving as if to march down the street towards the barracks, the pauses. "Honestly, what do the technocrats expect? Our whole lives they drill the dictats into our heads, telling us how every little thing must be done down to the tiniest degree. Then men like us are asked, forced, to push the rules, adapt and break them in the name of our orders. And they wonder why we start questioning things."

"T.. talk like that's why you're up here you know," Oremanda chimes in, the kid's quavering voice almost entirely devoured in the constant howl coming off the Wastes.

The tall soldier's elbow finds my ribs in a short jab as he looks back at Oremanda. "And Ahren here is any better? I supposed he got sent topside for being a dutiful little cog in the machinery of the Great Work?"

I jostle Spensuka back. "I had words with the local populat consul. We... disagreed about the proper place of the Warmachine in the Great Work." Truth be told, I'd taken a swing at the smarmy toad of a man. The Wolfhound Apparatus may lack in purpose, but it sure as Hell wasn't just 'scrap going to rust'.

Spensuka scoffs behind his veil. "Hidebound fools the lot of them. They'd have the whole of the Manufactorium up here too if they thought they could get away with sending fabricators and alchemists to the Barrens for bending the rules. As it is the most bold still get *assigned* to walk the earth as Arteficers among the children of the Word until they mellow or go missing."

The nameless soldier gives a small laugh. "There you go again. Keep chattering sedition and they'll promote you to Chief Engineer of this place and never let you leave."

The black wind slows from a roar to a whisper as the group begins to move down the road. "Even they aren't that foolish," Kentaka rumbles, "Not unless they're trying to forge an armed insurrection. A grinding gear may get grease, but a broken one gets discarded."

Spensuka shifts, looking from me to the medic and back again as we march. "Of course, maybe that's why they send us all here in the end. No reason for the Wolfhounds to exist if there's not some kind horror for us to hunt or threat from beyond to quell. Out here, we might have enough rope for them to hang us with."

"You ne.. never know. Those of us here might ju.. just be keeping our edge, incase--" Oremanda is cut off by a high silvery whistle, the staccato blasts tearing through the low breeze. My ears prick up at the sound, knowing the signal by heart, even if I'd never heard it outside of a drill.

Weapons are unslung in less time than it takes to draw breath, a lifetime of training springing to life with well-oiled discipline. I shift slightly, placing my back against Spensuka's, sweeping my weapon from side to side as the raid signal continues its piercing scream.

"Where do they usually come from?"

I feel the big soldier shrug. "Anywhere, really. They're like rats, burrowing-". He's cut off by a less pleasant sound than the whistle, a low warbling swiftly rising in pitch.

"Cover!" The nameless soldier is already diving for shelter as he shouts, rolling into the doorframe of a collapsed building. The rest of us scatter as the hard rain begins to fall, arrows of blackened bone that seem to moan as the air of the Wastes caresses them. As I hit the earth, I see Oremanda shoulder Kentaka aside, though I'm not sure if he intends to shove the medic out of the way or is simply tripping over his own feet again. It doesn't matter, as a pair of locust-wing fletched shafts burrow through the kid's greatcoat and into his back all the same. He falls, gurgling, into the filth coating the street.

Kentaka, crouching, grabs Oremanda by his shoulders and drags him under the doorframe, cursing at the blood streaking the ground beneath the fallen soldier. I push myself up, helped along by Spensuka's hand on my collar, which starts dragging me along, away from the others.

"Come on, Arhen. If we hurry we can outflank them before they start coming over the barricades," Spensuka pants as he finally releases me, turning from the street into another ruined building, motioning for me to follow.

I move inside the building, just a step behind my fellow soldier. The room is bare and just as dusty as the street, though here I can see the red brick through the grime. The same thin yellow light as outside comes from the vacant windows and a hole a few measures above, catching the swirls of black sand as they dance around a length of braided metal cable hanging from the gap in the ceiling.

I sling my weapon as my comrade nods towards the hole in the roof. "The front's up there." The big soldier turns away without another word, hauling himself up the cable with practiced ease. I shrug, still following, and begin to shimmy up the line.

I reach the roof a few ticks behind Spensuka, pulling myself up and over the lip by the oversized bolt securing the cable to the mortar. Ignoring the filth now clinging to my coat, I begin to glance around. The remains of the sector spread out around us, just as bleak from above as below, though from here I can spot the piecemeal fortifications topping some of the buildings and the makeshift bridges connecting most of the rooftops.

Someone, Kentaka or the nameless soldier, cries out robbing me of more time for inspection. I move to the edge of the roof where Spensuka is already crouched, his bolt-rifle raised and aiming somewhere below.

"Aiming with iron from way up here, Spensuka? Glass, why didn't your friend down there send someone competent up with me? A 5th grade heavy like you should be down on the street baptizing heathens with naptha." I laugh, "Or doesn't he know you can't shoot?"

"Keep giggling like a girl at teatime and he and the medica won't live to find out. Besides, we don't all need a crutch to see what we're hitting like you do."

Grinning, I drop to my belly and pull back the goggles, screwing one eye shut as I press the other to the steel ring of the scope topping my own weapon. The cut and polished cryshala lenses of the thaumechanical device bring the streets into sharp detail, everything limned in blue-green and magnified to an almost painful degree.

Through my sight, I watch the Mamluks swarm over the barricades choking the streets, each coated in black grime that nearly obscures the tattered flesh braided into their mantles. Had my eye been unaided, they would have blended seamlessly with the filth of the ruble. As it is, I pick them out easily, each moon-mad barbarian illuminated by my scope and the ghostly cross of the imposed reticle. I draw a bead on the leader of one pack, its inhuman features twisted in a snarl of hate, a bow clutched in one three-fingered hand as it nocks another arrow with the other.

"Savages." My whisper barely reaches my own ears, though the wind is still merely a sigh. I squeeze the trigger. Simultaneously, the thunder of my cartridge fills my ears and blood blossoms from the stump of the Mamluk's neck, his head a sudden ruin of flesh a bone not whole enough to deserve the name. Drawing back the bolt of my weapon in a single straight pull, I prime another cartridge with a solid metallic snap, sending my spent

brass tumbling away.

Spensuka's bolt-rifle answers mine, sending lead howling into the horde, hopefully to some effect. I don't pause to find out, working like the clockwork parts that make up my weapon. Aim. Squeeze. Prime. Repeat. A dozen rounds and as many dead Mamluks later, I'm dry, rolling back from the edge and pulling my goggles back on so I can see my fingers well enough to start picking rounds out of my belt pouch and reload.

Spensuka, needing longer to pick each shot, empties his own magazine a few moments later. He pulls back to join me, hands mimicking mine as we both go through the reflexive motion of thumbing cartridges into the box-like metal magazines hanging from the bottoms of our bolt-rifles.

"How often does this happen?" More cartridge fire echoes from the rooftops around us and the streets below, revealing our brethren picking up our slack as well as our companions mounting their own defense. A handful of arrows wobble up from the street in response, but nothing like the concentrated volley that downed Oremanda.

The big soldier shrugs. "Every couple of days? According to the lifers, it's gotten a lot more frequent lately. The swarms do seem to be getting bigger... angrier too. Something's had them stirred up all autumn, I suppose."

I finish reloading my weapon, snapping the bolt closed. The bestial screams below begin to thin out, suggesting a lull or even an end to the raid. "And they just throw themselves at us? You'd think they'd learn."

"Nah. This is just the first part. A few always manage to slip past and we have to run them down before they start lighting fires or stealing supplies, or Maker forbid, get into the tunnels. And while we get busy doing that, some of the really horrible stuff crawls our way. You should have seen this place on High Harvest; it was like their god-king himself was back from the grave, chasing everything in the Wastes right to us."

"The reports back home don't--"

"Don't mention anything but the Mamluks, right? No word of the plagued-ones, or the war-bringers, or the death speakers and faminites? Stunning, really."

Another whistle sounds, this time in a note starting low, pitching high and swinging low again, cutting me short. Spensuka curses. "Rust! Something big. Come on." He rises from his half-crouch, dashing towards the planks spanning the gap between buildings. Rising to my feet, I choke down a protest for the comrades we're leaving behind, a lifetime following the dictats moving me, boots hammering a stride behind my friend.

Three buildings later, we find what Spensuka's looking for, a half-broken wall at the edge of another precipice. Tucked beneath is a tarpaulin of grime smeared ampil, stretched over some hidden, square-edged bulk and pinned down with stray bricks.

"Lovely, the procurement technicians haven't found it yet." Spensuka grabs the sheet, yanking it off and casting it aside in one jerk. Beneath is an open wooden crate, holding a hundred different odds and ends. Cartons of ammunition, spare boots and the parts for a score of different devices —and that's merely what I can see at first glance.

"What do you need all this for?"

Spensuka looks back at me, one eyebrow raised. "Better to have it and not need it than need it and not have it. Besides, it was all going to rust back at the supply dump anyway. I'm at least putting it to use."

I shrug. "Fine. But what are we even here for? I don't need to know about your contraband."

The big soldier begins sifting through his collection. "There's a few things might come in handy here, depending on what's come out of the Wastes today. Don't sweat it. Nobody has to know you've seen my cache."

Somewhere nearby, a clockwork repeating cannon begins to chatter merrily, sending round after round screaming through the air. Coming to the edge of the building, I

pause, staring at the street below. "What the hell is that?"

Spensuka turns to look with me. The creature is only a few hundred measures distant, looming three stories tall as it trundles forwards on a dozen spindly legs. Its hide is an osseous carapace, interlocking plates stained grey-black with the leavings of the Wastes like everything else topside, plating the whole of its stubby insect body and its many-jointed limbs. The only gaps in that armor are a handful holes for its beady crimson eyes and a larger rent for its dripping maw. Tendrils of pale flesh lash fitfully from that last opening, as if probing the air for something.

"Damned if I know. Not everything has a name up here. Either it's some new gift from the Wastes, or something so old the taxonomists forgot about it." He shakes his head. "Whatever it is, it doesn't look happy."

The monster shrieks, as if agreeing with Spensuka, moving with sudden rapidity towards the source of the lead driving down on it. Perched further down the road, atop another building, a two-man crew of my brothers man the clockwork cannon I'd heard before, one working the crank and steadying the heavy metal base while the other feeds cartridges from a nearby crate into the open hopper. Round after round tears across the creature's carapace, none seeming to slow it any more than the rain of brass trickling between the solders' feet do.

The beast slams into the base of the building, just as unfazed by the impact as it was by the pelting lead. Rearing back, its writhing tendrils snake out to snare my brothers, dragging them screaming from their weapon. In a single tick of the clock it's done, both men lost to that slavering mouth. The monster lets itself down from the wall, snuffling and gurgling oddly as those tentacles test the air again. One of those rolling red eyes shifts towards us.

"I think it smells us." Spensuka begins rummaging through his crate, moving with speed born of desperation. The creature shudders its armored bulk, beginning to move our direction.

"Spens--"

"Stall it. I swear I stashed some dynamite up here."

I want to hit him. *Stall it? How the hell do I stall it?* Instead I raise my weapon, pulling back my goggles again and pressing the scope to my eye. Shifting slightly, I bring the mystic blue of the reticle just above one of those red eyes, compensating for the distance and slight drift of the air by instinct rather than manually adjusting my sight. My finger squeezes the trigger.

I'm rewarded with a bellow from the nameless monster, the beast stopping short to shake its bulk at the sudden pain. Not pausing to gaze upon my handiwork, I rack the rifle's bolt and take aim at another eye, trying to ignore the sounds of cursing and shifting objects as Spensuka searches fruitlessly. I send another round into the creature, even as it begins to charge, throwing off my shot by the merest fraction.

Shot fouling off of the impenetrable armor, I cycle the bolt again, prepping another round as the shelled-horror strikes the base of our building. Shards of rubble shake loose of the walls and the grime of the Wastes blooms upwards for a moment, only the thin layer of my veil between me and a coughing fit. Instead I lean out over the edge of the building, weapon still raised and line up another shot. A second eye bursts, and the creature shrieks, high and hard enough I think one of my eardrums breaks. The pain in my head is excruciating, running from my ear down to the roots of my teeth.

I fall backwards, cursing in my pain, bolt-rifle clattering to the ground beside me. The monster rears up, just as it did moments ago before devouring my brothers. The horrible slit on what passes for its face is wide open, a forest of albino tendrils waving as if in greeting. Something green and fat and repulsive drips from the opening, hanging viscously before splattering between my feet, revealing bits of red and white and black. It takes me a tick to recognize them: bits of undigested meat and scraps of leather, all that

remains of my fallen brothers.

"Found it!"

There's a click of steel on flint as Spensuka flicks open his naphtha-fueled striker and ignites the fuse two-thirds of the way down to the bundle of dynamite rods in his hand. Almost gently, he tosses the clustered explosives into the looming maw. On primal reflex, those tendrils draw the bundle in, snaring it as they would any other morsel before swinging back to menace us.

Spensuka turns to run and I do the same, scrabbling at the broken floor as I try to reach my feet. I feel a tug as one of the tentacles snares my ankle, dropping me back to my knees before beginning to haul me backwards. I shout and my friend turns back, reaching a hand out for mine in what we both know is a doomed gesture.

There is a crack, hard and sharp enough to break bone and loud enough to fill the whole of the world. I feel the ground beneath me give way, crumbling even as my vision does. Then there is nothing but the void.

***

I awake, aching in every joint, head feeling three sizes too small. I try to rise, and manage to crane my head enough to make out my surroundings. I'm surrounded by a score of cots, all made of metal tubing and taut grey ampil. Most are empty, but a few hold forms beneath sheets. The light of the single gas lamp hanging above is too dim for me to see if they're dead or merely sleeping. Everything else around me is the same neglected brick and mortar as the buildings Spensuka and I'd passed through earlier.

The thought of the big soldier forces me to sit up further, casting my gaze about. I try to push further with my arms, but find one locked in a sling. My chest is bare and swathed in bandages as well, and I cannot help but to wince as I feel the pain simply breathing causes. Still, I call out.

"Spensuka?"

"He's not here."

I crane my neck over my shoulder to find the source of the reply. Kentaka is sitting on the edge of a cot just behind mine. His greatcoat is disheveled, unbuttoned nearly to the waist in the heat, exposing a black undershirt beneath. His now-dented helmet rests on one knee alongside his veil, revealing the lines and scars of a man twenty years my elder.

"Where are we? What happened? Where's Spensuka?"

The man is silent for a moment, reaching into one of the pouches at his belt and removes a thin roll of grey paper, lighting it on the lamp wick next to him before taking a puff of tabaka.

"You're in what passes for the medica altelier around here. As for what happened, you nearly went the same way as Oremanda and half our welcome wagon did. Nearly blew yourself to Hell."

I try to sit up, only to have Kentaka lean over and push me back down. "Take it easy. You still had a building fall on you."

"And Spensuka?"

From across the room, someone clears their throat. I turn my head. Her maroon greatcoat is singed and frayed, and the ivory braid of rank at her shoulder is stained with grime and worse. The veil that should be over her face is a tattered rag pulled down around her neck, and with no helmet in sight, her short, sweat-matted hair gold hair glimmers under the lamplight.

"Lauruki... er, Engineer, that is to say. Ma'm..." She strides over, quick pace making up for her short stride. Leaning over me, she locks eyes with mine, and I can't help but to notice that they're the same polished bronze I see every time I look in a mirror.

She shakes her head slightly. "I've just finished debriefing your friend. I would swear he has the Devil's own luck. Enough dynamite to level half a manufactory and not a scratch on him. Though, after the procurement technicians are finished with him, I think

he'll gladly switch places with you. How one man can filtch so much is beyond me."

"Thank you, Ma'm." I let myself relax a bit. "But why are you here and not out at the front?"

"The fighting's been over for hours," Kentaka says with a cough, taking another drag from his roll.

Lauruki nods. "Lucky for us, whatever that thing you two killed was, it was the only one with the Mamluks today. I just wanted to make sure your medica was taking care of things." She turns, I assume to leave. "You should get some more rest."

"Ma'm" She pauses, turning back to me. "My coat. If it survived, there... there's dispatches from below, in the side pocket."

She gives a half smile at that, and bends slightly to reach beneath my cot. It's not a long trip for her, being just as short as Spensuka had claimed. Rummaging for a moment, she pulls back with the envelope. Without any ado, she breaks the red wax sealing it closed, rifling through the papers within with a series of crinkles. A few ticks of the clock go by, her eyes widening, and a smile growing on her face.

Finally done, she jams the papers unceremoniously into one of the pockets of her coat. Reaching out, she pats me on the shoulder. "I'm glad I stayed, soldier. I hope you're well enough to rejoin your gear by the end of the week. I'd hate to have to reassign a man like you out of the Wolfhounds and into one of the other Apparati attached to this post."

"Why," Kentaka asks, beating me to my own question, "would you have to do that Ma'm?"

If possible, her grin gets bigger as she turns to regard the medica. "These are marching orders. Something's happened down south, out among all the pagans and sorcerers--the children of the Word. It might even be the real thing, loose at long last, if the preliminary reports are to be believed. Looks like they've finally found something for the Wolfhounds to hunt."

The grin on my face rivals hers and the one now on Kentaka's. I hold back laughter only because I know how much it will hurt. *And here I thought this was going to be a punishment. So much for scrap going to rust up here.*

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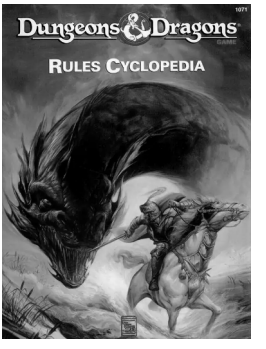

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Interview with

Alyssa Hazel

The Indie Architect of Strange Worlds

Today, I'm absolutely delighted to chat with Alyssa Hazel, an incredibly talented independent writer and a dear friend of mine whose imaginative storytelling has always inspired me. As the creative force behind gripping series like "The Twitching Light Trilogy" and "The Helios System", along with standalone gems such as "Among The Juniper Trees" and "To Those Who Haunt You", Alyssa weaves tales that blend horror, science fiction, and fantasy in ways that keep readers on the edge of their seats. Her passion for speculative fiction shines through in every page, and I'm excited to dive deeper into her journey, her works, and her insights as an indie author. Now, let's get into the questions...

Elven Maid Inn: Can you tell us a bit about your background and how you got started in writing? What sparked your passion for storytelling?

Alyssa Hazel: I was an avid reader growing up, so I think after years of enjoying books, I wanted to create something like it in my own way!

Elven Maid Inn: Where did your love for speculative fiction, horror, sci-fi, and fantasy genres come from? Was there a particular book, movie, or experience that ignited it?

Alyssa Hazel: My father and mother were well-read, and they passed that on to me. One of the wrinkles that resulted? I was reading above grade level and lacked a challenge in what was available to me. So my dad, who didn't want to launch me into Stephen King in third grade, introduced me to the classics: Howard, Lovecraft, Tolkien, Lewis, Christie, Doyle, Poe, Shelley, and so on. I, of course, also dug into RL Stine quite a bit. My mother studied a

great deal of psychology, and always had a number of books about the mind, development, etc. I think between those influences, and a passion for forensics, I was drawn to the odd, the mercurial, and the morbid.

Elven Maid Inn: Who are some of your favorite authors and books that have influenced your work? Are there any classics or modern titles that you keep coming back to?

Alyssa Hazel: The two books I reread the most have to be "Watership Down" and "Red Dragon" by Thomas Harris. An odd combination, to be sure, but make what you will of it.

Elven Maid Inn: As an accomplished young author who has published multiple books, including full series, by your mid-20s, how has your writing evolved over the years?

Alyssa Hazel: I'd say it's definitely improved (insert laughter here). In all seriousness, I think the quality and quantity of work have been forced to improve with each book. You can be the greatest writer in the world, but if you don't start forcing yourself to sit down and get the work done, you won't have anything to show for it. And I am far from the greatest. At least right now. Consistent effort is slowly becoming my secret writing weapon, as far as I'm concerned.

Elven Maid Inn:What does a typical writing day look like for you? Do you have any rituals or habits that help you stay creative and productive?

Alyssa Hazel: It's a bit chaotic at the moment. I still currently have a side hustle, I'm the primary homemaker, we now have a rather energetic dog (pronounced DAWWWWG), and I'm expecting my first child in January of next year. Right now it's do everything in the morning, eat lunch, and then grind out as much writing as I can for around three hours until I have to make dinner. Then in the evenings, I write more. Staying productive is a by-product of self-imposed deadlines. After all, when you're expecting a new kid in January, and you want to put all your attention on them as much as possible, getting the bulk of the work done for your next book is critical. Especially if you want the book out by February. It's not a glamorous answer, but "it be what it be."

I will say, some of my best inspiration arrives when I'm on the treadmill. I set the belt to 5.5 miles per hour, then let my brain float while my legs feel like they're dying. Works every time.

Elven Maid Inn: Have you ever played tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) like Dungeons & Dragons or others? If so, which ones are your favorites?

Have I played? Yup! Castles and Crusades, D&D 5e, Savage Worlds, HERO, Pathfinder, Hollow Earth Expeditions, the Star Wars RPG, Hyperborea, and more! I'd like to get back to Castles and Crusades or Hollow Earth, but I'm pretty much down for whatever is available. I currently live in a smaller town, so the options aren't super diverse, but I enjoy my home table.

Elven Maid Inn: How do you view the current TTRPG scene? Do you see any parallels between TTRPG storytelling and the way you craft narratives in your books?

Alyssa Hazel: To quote Sebastian from *The Little Mermaid*: "Ariel, the human world? It's a mess." I will say there is a bit of an improvement going on right now, and I love that more and more indie projects are finally getting their time to shine.

Honestly? I think the closest parallel between systems and the way I write is that my sci-fi series is fairly evocative of old school *Traveller*.

Elven Maid Inn: Let's talk about "The Twitching Light Trilogy". What inspired this horror series, and what themes do you explore in it?

Alyssa Hazel: It was partly a collection of stories I'd written over college and partially my realization that I, at the time, was not a particularly reliable and good person. I remember asking myself early on in the writing process: "If I were a mom, would I be a good one?" I answered "No". "Twitching Light" was written over the course of all of this, plus Covid shutting the world down, and I'd like to think it carries themes of motherhood, depression, substance abuse, but also little wisps of hope things are going to get better.



Elven Maid Inn: In "The Twitching Light", how did you approach building the eerie atmosphere and characters that challenge reality?

Alyssa Hazel: Just tacking onto the answer above, during the time I was writing the first three books, I was also going through a health scare. My body was fighting Lyme's disease and a co-infection called Bartonella. We figured all this out because I was about to check myself into the psych ward. Not to make light of a situation that was frankly terrible then, but it wasn't hard to lose myself in writing these morbid sort of things. I'm a lot better now, and have scanned clear of those infections. At the same time it's easy to remember what it was like to not have full use of my mind. And I still get dreams on occasion that aren't particularly nice. That being said, I've sounded enough like a tortured artist. Dreadful, really. Next question.

Elven Maid Inn: Moving to "The Helios System" series starting with "The Third Test: A Science Fiction Thriller". What was the initial idea behind this sci-fi world?

Alyssa Hazel: When I was seventeen, I travelled to China on a mission trip sponsored by my church. The goal was to teach English for a few weeks. I was one of three Americans there at the time. I loved the experience. It wasn't without its hiccups. There was a sense of

danger, especially when it was just us over there, and there was a sort of lonely isolation to the process. I wanted to tap into that feeling of travel, discovery, and isolation and I figured science fiction was the best way to do it.

Elven Maid Inn: "The Second Initiative" is the sequel in "The Helios System". How does it build on "The Third Test", and what new elements did you introduce?

Alyssa Hazel: The most common note I received about "The Third Test" is wanting a larger expansion on the setting. So, this was a huge focus going into *The Second Initiative*. I gave an extensive look at Breccia, the correctional system on Kasian, gang activity on both, etc. I also wanted to give the reader a better understanding of the dualistic religious system: The Church of Mitriana.

Elven Maid Inn: "Among The Juniper Trees" seems to blend fantasy with elements like a crippled prince and a pilgrimage. Can you share what drew you to this story and its unique setting?

Alyssa Hazel: I wasn't planning on writing a sequel to "The Third Test" initially, and I wanted to try out a different genre: fantasy. High fantasy wasn't what I was drawn to, especially with my horror affliction. So my aim went to a Grimm's level low fantasy, integrating a somber, realistic tone with odd hints of magic. While Antigone was the first character conceived, I knew she wasn't meant to carry the story. Thus was born Prince Emund Boone, a young man who was robbed of the use of his arm and leg during a plague twelve years ago. I've long been drawn to underdog leads who overcome the odds. And Emund, who was not intended to be King until the death of his older brother, in his striving to become a man worthy of the throne despite how others perceive him, is a prime example of that.

Elven Maid Inn: "To Those Who Haunt You" appears to delve into horror or odd tales. What makes this book stand out in your bibliography, and what was your favorite part to write?

Alyssa Hazel: I wrote it entirely because of Larry Correia. Short version of the story: I was invited to be the featured horror guest at a convention a few years ago. The theme? Monsters. The Guest of Honor? Mr. "Monster Hunter International" himself. Since there was a good chance we were going to be on a panel together, I knew I couldn't show up with only four books under my belt. So I wrote the book entirely over the course of October, releasing it in time for the convention in January. While that's probably the most interesting part of the behind-the-scenes story, 'Whistling at Night' is probably one of my best horror stories.

Elven Maid Inn: You've recently mentioned a new book. Can you give us a teaser about what readers can expect from it?

Alyssa Hazel: This next book is a conclusion to the "Among the Juniper Trees" story. There's gonna be a bit of a Hammer Horror Gothic strand to this new tale, and I'm excited for you all to read it.

Elven Maid Inn: Many of your books are now available as audiobooks, like "To Those Who Haunt You" and "The Third Test". How has the transition to audio formats affected your storytelling approach?

Alyssa Hazel: In my previous books, I did a lot of internal dialogue, which doesn't translate as well to an audiobook format. I've been more intentional about indicating when thoughts transition into spoken word and general prose.

Elven Maid Inn: As an independent writer, what has been your overall experience self-publishing your books? What motivated you to go the indie route?

Alyssa Hazel: Self-publishing is like running a small business. If anything goes wrong, it's your fault 99% of the time. I'm coping, I swear. Motivation-wise, that could be an entire video essay. That being said, it came down to creative control, royalty payments, and chances of success. And I figured I'd be better off with my writing future in my own hands.



Elven Maid Inn: What are some of the biggest hurdles you've faced as an indie author, such as editing, marketing, or distribution challenges?

Alyssa Hazel: Marketing is like wrestling an octopus. You have a high likelihood of failure, but you can get the upper hand. Distribution is entirely through Amazon and Barnes & Noble at the moment, but I'm mostly content with this side of the operation. Editing has been an odd sort of struggle. Between pricing, not getting scammed, and finding someone who fits your working style, it's difficult to find good help.

Elven Maid Inn: How do you promote your books? What strategies have worked best for you on social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, or Threads?

Alyssa Hazel: Memes work great on X. TikTok is like the Modern Art of Marketing. If you can figure it out, you can make bank, but the average person just 'doesn't get it'. I'm still cracking the code on Meta, so I'll get back to you.

Elven Maid Inn: You've attended events or discussed your work at places like libraries. What tactics do you use at conventions, book signings, or in-person events to connect with readers?

Alyssa Hazel: The greatest thing any author can do is stand up and make eye contact. It's gotten harder to do the more pregnant I've grown, but getting off your phone and being

ready to actively engage with potential readers works wonders.

Elven Maid Inn: In terms of building your audience, how important has your website (authoralyssahazel.com) been, and what other online tools or communities do you leverage?

Alyssa Hazel: The website tends to be a little out of date, mostly because I do most of my updates through social media. It works best as a landing pad for people to learn more, almost like an extended business card. Especially since more of my sales are through Amazon, not through the site itself.

Elven Maid Inn: Looking ahead, what are your future plans as a writer? Are there more books in existing series or new genres you're excited to explore?

Alyssa Hazel: I currently have three projects lined up: "Beyond the Juniper Trees" (ETA Feb 2026), a collection for "Horde Wars" (Late 2026 Approx), and the finale to my sci-fi trilogy (2027). After that? I think I'd like to return to horror. I'm always my most energized when I get to dip into the genre, and I think I'm due for another round of spooks!

Elven Maid Inn: Finally, what advice would you give to aspiring writers, especially those considering the independent publishing path? Any key lessons from your journey?

Alyssa Hazel: Start with short stories to build your confidence. Try to write three hundred words a day, even if it feels like nonsense. And don't become weighed down by your own expectations. Most authors don't start gaining traction until book ten, which will happen for me after nearly ten years of publishing. Enjoy the journey, sniff some roses, make friends, and write what energizes you.

Elven Maid Inn: Thank you so much, Alyssa, for taking the time to join us and share your incredible journey as a writer. Your enthusiasm for crafting worlds full of mystery, thrills, and wonder is truly contagious, and it's been a joy hearing about your experiences and future plans.

Before we wrap things up, could you tell our readers where they can purchase your books, including any preferred platforms for ebooks, paperbacks, or audiobooks? Also, how can they stay connected with you for updates on new releases and events?

Alyssa Hazel: Thanks for asking! All of my books are currently available in paperback and e-book, with the "Twitching Light Omnibus" available in Hardcover. If you are an audiobook fan, "To Those Who Haunt You", "The Third Test", and "The Second Initiative" are all available via Audible. If you're looking to keep in touch, I'm on Facebook, Instagram, and Threads as @authoralyssahazel. And, if you're here for the memes as well, check out my X account: @alysssahazel.

I am taking a bit of a hiatus from live events in early 2026 with the arrival of my first daughter, but I should be back in the saddle by later in the year or early next. Just keep an eye out on my socials! And of course, thank you to EMI for the interview.

The Elven Dewdrop

Recipie from Elven Tavern

During one of my journeys through the Whispering Groves, I was welcomed to a spring blossom festival by the elven kin. Under flowering trees that glowed softly in the twilight, they served this delicate drink that tasted like morning dew kissed by starlight and wildflowers. It was light, floral, and refreshing, the perfect sip after a long day of travel. I asked for the secret and brought it back to the Elven Maid Inn. Our guests now call it the Elven Dewdrop, and it has become a favourite for quiet evenings and celebrations of new beginnings.

The Elven Dewdrop

A light, floral, and elegant cocktail that captures the essence of elven gardens and spring blossoms.

Ingredients (makes 1 cocktail):

- 60 ml Gin
- 30 ml Elderflower liqueur (such as St-Germain)
- 15 ml Fresh lemon juice
- 90–120 ml Sparkling wine or soda water (chilled)
- Garnish: Lemon twist and a few edible flowers or a sprig of thyme

Method:

1. Fill a cocktail shaker with ice.
2. Add the gin, elderflower liqueur, and fresh lemon juice.
3. Shake well for 10–15 seconds until well chilled.
4. Strain into a chilled flute, coupe, or tall glass.
5. Top gently with sparkling wine or soda water.
6. Garnish with a lemon twist and edible flowers.

Serve well chilled. Perfect as a welcome drink or for lighter moments at the inn.

Sora Miyuki
Keeper of the Elven Maid Inn

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We've Always Split the Party

by

Ryan David of Nerdcognito

Hey hey, everyone: let's talk about Dungeons & Dragons, the game that's been sparking epic adventures and heated arguments for over fifty years. You gather your friends, roll some dice, and dive into a world of dragons and wizards. Sounds like a blast, no? But here's the thing: D&D has this knack for dividing its fans just as much as it brings them together. Whether it's players bickering over rules or whole communities splitting over new editions, the hobby's got a history of drama that could rival any campaign's plot twist.

You know I always have thoughts... and here they are on why D&D keeps fracturing the base.

We will be digging into the player fights, creator clashes, and corporate moves that have shaped the game through its wild ride. We'll look at the social stuff, edition wars, and big shifts that keep the D&D table feeling like a battlefield sometimes.

I've split D&D's history into four eras to make sense of it all. The Golden Era (1974 to 1990) is when the game was born with Original D&D, Advanced Dungeons & Dragons, and (yes, even!) the launch of 2nd Edition. The formative period when it grew from a niche hobby to a cultural juggernaut! The Dark Era (1990 to 2000) was a rough one, with TSR, the company behind D&D, stumbling and the hobby losing its shine. The d20 Era (2000 to 2014) covers 3rd Edition, 3.5, and 4th Edition, a period of huge growth but also some nasty rivalries. And the Modern Era (2014 to present) is all about 5th Edition and its 2024 updates, where D&D's bigger than ever persona still trips over issues like licensing and inclusivity. Each era has its own flavor of chaos.

The Fractured Realms: Division Through the Eras

Back in the Golden Era, from 1974 to 1990, D&D was this shiny new toy that had everyone buzzing. Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson kicked it off with Original D&D, pulling in wargamers and college kids who were stoked to create their own fantasy worlds. But even in those early days, things started to splinter. In 1977, TSR dropped Basic D&D for beginners and Advanced D&D for the diehards who wanted gritty, pronounced play. Suddenly, you had groups arguing over which was the "real" D&D, with some swearing by simple dungeon hacks and others geeking out over AD&D's

complex charts. Players started tweaking rules to fit their tables, which was cool but meant every group was playing a slightly different game.

Then there was the Satanic Panic in the '80s, when worried parents and TV preachers decided D&D was basically a gateway to devil worship. It sounds nuts now, but it put gamers on edge and really impacted lives and psyches. Some groups got defensive, debating how to convince people the game wasn't evil, while others leaned into the "edgy" vibe just to mess with the critics. Behind the scenes, Gygax and Arneson were squabbling over who deserved the crown for D&D's success, and fans started picking sides in fanzines and at cons. By the time 2nd Edition hit in 1989, the community was growing, but those early fights about rules and the game's reputation were already carving out little factions, like adventurers splitting up to explore different dungeon paths.

Still, the Golden Era had a kind of magic that kept things mostly together. The game was fresh, and settings like Dragonlance and Forgotten Realms gave players shared stories to geek out over. Sure, there were debates, but the excitement of this new hobby kept most folks on the same page. Those early divides, though, over editions and how to deal with the outside world's judgment, were like warning shots for the bigger battles to come.

The Dark Era, from 1990 to 2000, is when things got rough. TSR went wild, cranking out campaign settings like Dark Sun, Planescape, and Al-Qadim, trying to hook every kind of player. Problem was, nobody had the wherewithal to buy it all, so you'd have Forgotten Realms fans butting heads with Planescape nerds over which setting was the heart of D&D. It split the community into camps, and some players just bailed for other games like Vampire: The Masquerade or Werewolf: The Apoclypse, which were all the rage with its dark, story-driven vibe. The flood of books was overwhelming, and it felt like you needed a second job to keep up.

The Satanic Panic was still lingering, too, making players feel like they had to defend their hobby at every turn. Some argued over whether to dial back the "demonic" stuff in the game to avoid more heat, which led to tension at tables. Meanwhile, TSR was a mess inside, with big names like Gygax long gone and fights with authors like R.A. Salvatore spilling into fan newsletters and early internet forums. By 1997, TSR was skinflint; Wizards of the Coast acquired the IP and assumed control over remaining TSR projects. The community felt like a guild that'd lost its leader, with players either clinging to their old 2nd Edition books or jumping to other systems, making it tough to find a shared vibe.

What made the Dark Era tough wasn't just the rules or settings. The hobby wasn't pulling in many new players, thanks to its bad rep and TSR's fumbles, so you had small, stubborn groups holding onto their version of D&D like it was the last potion in the bag. One table might be deep into a 2nd Edition campaign, while another was already playing something totally different. It was like the game was barely holding on, and that made everyone a bit more territorial about their corner of the hobby.

The d20 Era, from 2000 to 2014, started with a bang when 3rd Edition dropped in 2000. The d20 system was a slick, unified way to play, and the Open Game License let other companies churn out D&D-compatible stuff. For more than a minute, it was awesome! Players were swapping character concepts on forums and trying out new games built on the d20 rules. But then 3.5 came out in 2003, tweaking things but making older books feel useless. Fans were mad, feeling like they'd been suckered into buying new stuff, and online arguments got heated, with 3.0 holdouts and 3.5 fans throwing shade at each other.

Then came 4th Edition in 2008, and oh boy, did that stir things up. It went all-in on tactical combat, feeling like a tabletop video game, and a lot of players who loved the storytelling side of D&D weren't having it. The internet exploded with "edition wars," where 4e fans were called sellouts and 3.5 loyalists were mocked as stuck in the past. Paizo jumped in with Pathfinder in 2009, their enhanced version of 3.5, and by 2011, it was outselling D&D. Fans picked sides like it was a blood feud. Meanwhile, the Old School Renaissance crowd started digging up the simple rules from the '70s and '80s,

calling newer editions bloated.

The d20 Era's fights weren't just about rules, they got personal. Online forums let people hide behind screen names, so arguments turned mean fast, with players slinging insults over playstyles or even accusing each other of gatekeeping the hobby. It was a weird mix of growth and chaos, the community was bigger than ever, but it was also split into factions that barely talked to each other. Everyone was so sure their version of D&D was the right one, it was like trying to get a party to agree on a quest when half of them want to fight and the other half want to talk their way out.

The Modern Era, starting with 5th Edition in 2014, brought D&D back to the mainstream limelight. It was easier to pick up than 4th Edition, welcomed new players, and got a godly boost from shows like Critical Role and platforms like Roll20. The community now highlighted its omnipresent diversity, and there was a protracted effort to make the game present as hyperinclusive. Sensitivity consultants were paid to clean up myths of stereotypes in the lore. This wedged out Classic Gamers who knew that all along, inclusivity and acceptance were baked into the game. They felt as if politics and pandering trumped polearms and potions.

And then Wizards tried to overhaul the OGL. Making the license stricter and threatening small creators' ability to monetize their work, fans went nuts and partially united. 88 percent in polls said they hated it, and it felt like a betrayal. Some folks started looking at other systems, returning to Pathfinder or now looking to Daggerheart. Some retreated back to the OSR for refuge.

Social media made it easier to connect, but also kept the old edition wars alive. You'd see 5e fans arguing with OSR purists or Pathfinder players. With youth comes exuberance and sometimes it gets way too heated. People act as if they are defending their honor instead of just talking about a game. Folks rehash old heat and save screenshots of "gotcha" moments for years to be used at "just the right time." Online battlegrounds have become cultural graveyards and a lack of sanity, humor, and hubris is omnipresent.

At the table, problem players arguing over rules or derailing stories became a bigger deal, and DMs had to play peacemaker. The 2024 updates to 5e tried to keep things compatible but caught flak for not fixing broken elements or correcting the errors identified by all in the past, like overpowered spellcasters. D&D is huge now, with more players playing now than ever. But do they really play? Should I even ask that question, or will it spawn a 7-day rage bender of tags and receipts on X?

The hobby still has got that knack for sparking fights over what the game should be.

Bridging the Divide: A Call to Roll Together

Getting the whole D&D hobby, "community," and all players in-between to hold hands and sing around a campfire is probably a lost cause, like trying to charm the Tarrasque with a lute. The game's history is littered with fights, from the Golden Era's edition debates to the Modern Era's online drama. Players are passionate, and that passion makes them dig in their heels concerning rules, settings, or what D&D should stand for. With so many systems out there, from Pathfinder to Classic Gaming indies, communities are spread across the internet wasteland. A unified D&D fanbase feels like a long shot. Everyone's got their own table, and they're not always inviting others to sit down.

But here's the deal: every D&D player, whether they're flipping through a 5e book or clutching a AD&D manual, loves this game for the stories and the fun. That's the spark we need to focus on. Instead of arguing over who's playing "right," try running a one-shot with a different system or just listening to why someone loves their weird OSR homebrew. At the table, use stuff like common sense instead of session zero to make sure everyone's vibe matches. Online, maybe skip the snarky reply and share a cool campaign idea instead. We might not get one big happy D&D family, but we can make the divides smaller by remembering why we roll dice in the first place: to have a good time together.

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From Concept to Class:

Turning Inspiration into Distinct TTRPG Mechanics

In tabletop role-playing game design, many promising class concepts begin with strong thematic ideas but ultimately feel mechanically interchangeable once translated into rules. A Summoner who calls forth powerful creatures and a Puppeteer who controls animated constructs may seem worlds apart in flavor, yet at their core, both reduce to one character directing another in combat.

This article examines a practical method for transforming raw inspiration into mechanically and thematically distinct classes. By breaking concepts down to their fundamental mechanics, comparing them to existing archetypes, and then rebuilding them with clear functional differences, we can avoid creating redundant options while preserving the unique identity of each idea. To demonstrate this process, we will take two very different concepts, a Summoner and a Puppeteer, and explore how they can be developed into unique, balanced classes.

Class #1 - Summoner

My first class idea came to me after seeing art of woman with white snake. It was an AI image that popped up in my feed, depicting a woman and a snake. It seems like she's controlling this creature, or perhaps the snake is protecting her for some reason. That sparked an idea in my mind of a class that would "Summon" Divine Beasts and use them in combat. Now, a lot of you might think "Final Fantasy," and yes, this is exactly the concept of a Final Fantasy Summoner. I would be dishonest if I said they weren't related, as after this first idea came a chain of thought that led me to Final Fantasy as inspiration for what this class could do in combat. So, our first class that we'll try to build is a Summoner, a caster who will summon Divine Beasts to use in combat.

Class #2 - Puppeteer

My second thought occurred to me while watching anime, and here I must say that anime is an extremely good mine of ideas for TTRPG games, but that deserves a separate article. The anime that inspired this class is called "Hitoribocchi no Isekai Kouryaku - Loner Life in Another World", especially the scene where the main hero uses a "Dummy" skill that lets him control his body as if it were a puppet.

This idea then ventured to another anime, "Naruto", and the concept of Puppet Masters from that show. The concept was so intriguing that it could work as a TTRPG Class.

So we have two concepts that are extremely unique and different from each other, but are they really?

In terms of theme, yes, both feel different enough from each other that they could potentially justify creating separate classes. The problem is that the thematic concept is only part of the equation. For a concept to be turned into an actual class, it not only needs to feel thematically unique but also mechanically.

So let's disassemble the concept to its purest basics:

- Summoner: Object A (Summoner) controls Object B (Summon) in combat.

- Puppeteer: Object A (Puppeteer) controls Object B (Puppet) in combat.

The basics are identical for both concepts. If we think about it, if we use the same logic for Thief and Fighter, we'll have a similar situation:

- Fighter: Object A (Fighter) uses a melee weapon to attack enemies in close combat.

- Thief: Object B (Thief) uses a melee weapon to attack enemies in close combat.

What sets the Fighter and Thief apart is how those basic concepts are expanded. A Fighter will use Strength-based weapons to attack, while a Thief will use Dexterity-based weapons. We have the same start but move in different directions.

The question is, can we do the same thing with Summoner and Puppeteer? Can we make Objects A feel different in combat as well as Object B behave differently based on those concepts?

It's not hard, right? We can just slap an existing class. Stop right there. Don't forget a very important matter: power control. At this point, we need to think about what system we're planning to use and what our Action Economy is. In 5e, we'll have Action, Bonus Action, and Reaction, but in Castles & Crusades, we're only having Action. These resources at our disposal make a huge difference when creating classes. Let's try using Castles & Crusades for this article.

So, our resources are Movement and Action, but we cannot use an Action if we use more than 50% of our movement. Another thing that needs to be considered is if we're toying with a Dual-Character concept, where a character has Object A (Player) and Object B (Summon/Puppet). Are they two different entities in combat? What we need to consider is if our Object B has a separate Action Economy, Separate Stats, and Separate Initiative. The reason for this is that we don't want to create a class that is much stronger than other classes.

To achieve that, we must ensure our classes fill specific roles in combat. The easiest way to think about it is in terms of the so-called "Holy Trinity": Tank/Support/Damage.

Now, this is a very simplified explanation, and many times these terms are very flexible. This should not be needed for players. It's only for creators so they can focus on the role of the class in combat.

So let's put our Objects A on the "Holy Trinity" chart. Our Summoner will be in the Support area. The Puppeteer sits somewhere between Tank and DPS.

Time to separate concepts. The Summoner is summoning a Guardian Spirit (Object B). This Guardian Spirit will have its own will and intelligence, hence its own personality. The Puppeteer will use a Doll or Puppet that will have no free will, so it will be more of an animated object. At this stage, our concepts separate from each other. The Summoner will summon an independent creature that will have separate Initiative. The Puppeteer will control an animate object that will act as an extension of the Puppeteer. That means the Summoner will be able to use movement or action independently of the summoned beast, which will have its own Action Economy, while the Puppeteer will need to use his own Action to move and attack with the puppet. Our two concepts diverge into two different directions.

Now, one concept feels vastly stronger than the other. Our Summoner has a much bigger action economy than the Puppeteer. So, we'll now focus on building this class.

In my concept, the Summoner will be able to obtain different types of summons. Some will be more durable and act as Tanks, some will be stronger and act like melee damage dealers, some will serve as casters, and some will focus on healing. It feels so overpowered that we need to focus on limitations. One obvious limitation is that the Summoner cannot summon more than one creature at a time. Another thing we need to take into consideration is

resources. What will be consumed to summon a Guardian Spirit or Celestial Beast? We could create a hybrid system: allow the Summoner to summon the same creature once per day, but when summoning again without rest, they must sacrifice HP to do so. This will put pressure on the Summoner to try to make contracts with new Guardian Spirits over time.

So, the matter of resource concept is tackled. Another thing we need to tackle is Action Economy. Right now, players during one round have two actions and double movement as they control two separate characters, which is too much. The first thing we'll do is take control of the summon from the summoner. The summon will act independently based on a very clear template.

The Game Master will control the Guardian Spirit in a similar manner to Monsters but will have the template in mind:

- A) Guardian Spirit will protect the Summoner, attacking anyone who attacks the Summoner and focusing its attention on protecting the Summoner.

- B) Summoner's Order takes priority over Protecting the Summoner.

- C) When the Order is fulfilled, the Guardian Spirit goes back to Protecting the Summoner.

The Summoner can use his Action to give Commands to the Summon: Attack, Defend, Use Skill, or Others. Just keep in mind that the Summon has its own mind. They can refuse to fulfill an order if forced to act against their nature.

Let's focus on the Summoner now. The Summoner will need an Action to summon a Guardian Spirit and an Action to give a Command. But at this point, he can't do anything more. In Final Fantasy, Summoners are often connected to White Mages, so we might allow limited access to Cleric Spells with reduced spell slots.

Summons will have their own Character sheets, pre-made and scaled to the Summoner's strength. We might introduce ways to reduce reckless behavior, such as a mind link where damage to the summon is shared with the Summoner, or a trust/reputation system between them.

So, our Summoner feels quite unique at this point. We need to work on the details and play-test it.

On the other hand, we have our Puppeteer, which feels much less complex. First of all, it's a Ranged class that uses melee weapons at a distance. The Puppeteer will use its Actions to move and attack with puppets.

What I think here is a way for the Player to build his own Puppets or Dolls, making them more durable, allowing them to use different weapons or even skills. A fun concept that we can explore is to have different types of puppets, maybe made out of corpses. Or we could allow Puppeteers and other players to join forces, enabling Puppeteers to take control of players, giving them extra attacks or movement. There are a few things we could potentially explore here. But this article is quite long at this point, so it might be a good idea to focus on the details in future articles if there's interest in this.

By stripping concepts down to their mechanical foundation and then deliberately rebuilding them with distinct roles, action economies, and thematic identities, we can turn similar-sounding ideas into classes that genuinely feel different at the table. The Summoner becomes a supportive commander of independent beings, while the Puppeteer operates as a controlling force whose power is directly tied to their own actions and resources.

This methodical approach, from idea to core mechanic to differentiation and balance, offers a reliable framework for any designer looking to expand their game's class roster without creating redundancy. Whether you're working in Castles & Crusades, 5e, or your own system, the key lies in making both the what and the how of each class feel unique.

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The Crunch Paradox

Why Heavy Rules Create Better Immersion

by

Loupvapeur

Crunch Supports Immersion Better Than You Think

I used to think crunchy TTRPGs like "GURPS" and "Shadowrun 5th Edition", with their heaps of tables for every possible contingency, hindered immersion. After all, the less you have to consult the rules, the more you can remain in character and focus on the fiction. It would seem logical, then, that the antidote to crunchy tables and massive rulebooks would be systems like "FATE" and Powered by the Apocalypse (PbtA). One might assume that if immersion is hindered by crunch, then rules-light narrative systems would be the purest form of flow-state ambrosia.

Oh, younger Loupvapeur. Sweet summer child.

The Conventional Wisdom (And Why It's Wrong)

Parts of the gaming community have long held that narrative systems create superior immersion. The logic seems sound: fewer rules mean less interruption, meaning more time spent "in character." *FATE*'s aspects and PbtA's conversational moves promise to keep the fiction front and center. No more flipping through combat tables or calculating modifiers, just pure, undiluted storytelling.

Except this conventional wisdom ignores a fundamental truth about how immersion actually works in tabletop gaming. True immersion doesn't come from narrative mechanics. It comes from maintaining what I call **Actor Stance** — that state where you're thinking purely as your character, making decisions based on what they would know, do, and want in that moment.

Narrative systems, for all their good intentions, systematically yank players out of Actor Stance and thrust them into Writer

Stance or Director Stance, where they're thinking about the story from an external perspective rather than living it from within.

The Oil Barrel Test

Let me illustrate with a simple scenario. You're playing a dwarven ranger, crouched behind cover in a warehouse. Your character's mind works: "There are lamps everywhere. Stands to reason there'd be barrels of lamp oil nearby." You want to shoot a flaming arrow into one to create chaos.

In "D&D", "Castles & Crusades", or even crunchy "GURPS", you simply ask the GM: "Are there oil barrels nearby?" The GM, thinking like the world, answers based on what would logically be there. Your character acts on information that exists in the fiction.

In "FATE", you'd spend a Fate point to declare the barrel exists. Suddenly, you're not a ranger spotting obvious environmental details — you're a writer adding convenient plot elements.

In PbtA, you'd roll *Discern Realities* and negotiate with the GM about what you discover based on your roll's success level. You're not observing the world; you're collaborating on its creation in real time.

Notice the difference? The first approach requires minimal out-of-character thinking. The latter two transform every interaction with the world into a meta-conversation about narrative construction.

The Immersion Paradox

Here's where things get counterintuitive: those chunky "GURPS" tables and "Shadowrun" equipment catalogues actually support immersion better than narrative mechanics. When you need to know if your decker can hack that particular security system, flipping to the appropriate chart and rolling dice maintains the illusion that this world has discernible rules with internal consistency.

Your character exists in a world with physics, economics, and logical consequences. When the rules model that world consistently, you can fully inhabit your character's mindset. "Given what I know about Aztechnology's security systems and my hacking skills, can I slice this?" The mechanical resolution confirms or denies what your character attempts, but the thinking remains in-character.

Contrast this with PbtA's *Hack and Slash* move. You're not thinking "How do I best eviscerate this orc with my sword?" You're thinking "What interesting complication will a roll of 7–9 create?" You've shifted from inhabiting your fighter to directing their story.

The Actor's Toolbox

Traditional systems, from basic "D&D" to crunchy "Shadowrun", provide what I call "mechanical scaffolding" for Actor Stance. The rules create a stable world with predictable cause-and-effect relationships. Your barbarian's rage works the same way every time. Your mage's spells have consistent effects. This consistency lets you think purely as your character because the world responds logically to their actions.

Even rule-heavy systems like "GURPS" excel at this. Yes, there are tables for everything, but once you know them, they become invisible infrastructure. Your character attempts something; the world responds according to its established physics. No narrative negotiation required.

The OSR

The Old School Renaissance understands this instinctively, which is why sandbox games create such powerful immersion. Kevin Crawford's Sine Nomine games — "Stars Without Number", "Worlds Without Number", "Cities Without Number" — masterfully demonstrate this principle. These systems provide extensive tables and procedures not to bog down play, but to make the game world feel autonomous and reactive.

When you're exploring a procedurally generated sector in *Stars Without Number*, you're not collaborating on what you find — you're discovering what's

already there. The pre-rolled world responds to your character's actions, maintaining the illusion that you're inhabiting a real place rather than constructing a story.

Crawford's faction turn procedures mean civilizations rise and fall whether you interact with them or not. Pirates raid trade routes, alien species expand their territories, and political situations evolve according to their own logic. Your character enters this living world as an actor, not an author.

The Revelation

My epiphany came from playing "FATE" game after PbtA game after "FATE" game and feeling deeply unsatisfied with the result. Whether I was GMing or playing, the experience felt hollow and devoid of that spark of immersion that evokes the greatest joy this hobby can provide.

Then I considered when I'd last experienced deep character immersion — the kind that made me care about the game so much that I thought about the characters and events between sessions, pestering the GM with questions and planning my next in-character moves. I realized the last time I'd felt that was when I played "Shadowrun 5e". At first blush, that made no sense. I had hated "Shadowrun 5e" for its intense crunch and its disorganized core rulebook (by the way, SR5's core book is still a hot mess, even if I've changed my mind about its crunch).

What followed was a journey of discovery. I was reading old forum posts, books on GMing, the opening paragraphs of GM rulebooks that discussed fostering immersion. Hell, I wound up buying a used copy of a $70 textbook ("Role-Playing Game Studies: A Transmedia Approach"). Gradually, I absorbed a ton of theory on the nature of immersion, method acting, and that rare flow state where one fully inhabits a character.

After all that, I came to a number of new conclusions about TTRPGs, but none so impactful as this: "immersion doesn't come from narrative simplicity. It comes from consistent world modeling that lets you remain in character." The more the system models the world's internal logic, the less you need to think about the system itself.

The Deep End

This doesn't mean every game needs "GURPS"-level detail. Basic "D&D" and "Castles & Crusades" prove that relatively simple systems can still maintain world consistency and support Actor Stance. The key isn't complexity — it's the system's relationship to the fiction.

Traditional systems model "worlds". Narrative systems model "stories". If your goal is immersion — truly inhabiting a character in a believable world — you want mechanics that fade into the background while maintaining consistent world physics. You want to think "as" your character, not as a collaborative storyteller.

The industry's push toward narrative mechanics has created beautiful, accessible games that excel at collaborative storytelling. If you love those games, I'm not saying you're wrong for it. Hell, I'm not even saying it's impossible for a good GM to craft an environment that fosters immersion out of those systems. But we've mistaken accessibility for immersion and narrative control for character embodiment.

Sometimes, paradoxically, more rules create "less" interference with the thing we're actually trying to do: disappear into another world entirely.

So next time someone dismisses "GURPS" as "too crunchy for immersion," remember that those tables aren't obstacles to overcome. They're the scaffolding that holds up the illusion — the physics engine that makes the world feel real enough to inhabit.

After all, the deepest pools require the strongest foundations.

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The Golden Apple Crumble Cake

Recipie from Elven Inn

The Whispering Orchards

During my last long journey I spent several days in a quiet valley known for its ancient apple orchards. The trees there grow heavy with fruit that tastes of honey and sunlight. The local folk bake a simple but deeply comforting cake that has stayed with me ever since.

An old baker named Mistress Rowan shared her family recipe with me one rainy afternoon while we sat by her warm oven. She called it "Szarlotka", a golden apple cake with a tender crumb and a crisp, buttery topping. I have since made it many times at the Elven Maid Inn, and it has become one of our most requested sweets, especially on chilly evenings.

The Golden Apple Crumble Cake (Szarlotka)

A rustic, moist cake packed with apples and finished with a sweet, crunchy crumble. It needs no fancy equipment and tastes even better the next day.

Makes: One 9-inch (23 cm) round or square cake (8–10 generous tavern portions)

For the cake:

- 125 g butter, softened

- 150 g sugar (white or light brown)

- 3 large eggs

- 250 g plain flour

- 2 teaspoons baking powder

- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract or the zest of 1 lemon

- Pinch of salt

- 800 g – 1 kg apples (about 5–6 medium apples), peeled, cored and grated or thinly sliced

For the crumble topping

- 150 g plain flour

- 100 g cold butter, cubed

- 80 g sugar (white or brown)

- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon

- Optional: 50 g chopped walnuts or almonds

Method:

1. Make the crumble first

Rub the cold butter into the flour, sugar, and cinnamon with your fingertips until it looks like coarse breadcrumbs. Set aside in the fridge.

2. Prepare the cake batter

Cream the softened butter and sugar together until light and fluffy. Add the eggs one at a time, beating well after each. Stir in the vanilla or lemon zest.

3. Mix the flour, baking powder, and salt together, then gently fold into the wet mixture until just combined. The batter will be quite thick.

4. Assemble

Grease and line your cake tin. Spread roughly two-thirds of the batter into the base. Mix most of the grated/sliced apples into the remaining batter and spoon this over the base. Scatter the rest of the apples on top, then cover everything generously with the crumble mixture.

5. Bake

Bake at 180°C (350°F) for 45–55 minutes, or until the crumble is golden and a skewer inserted into the centre comes out clean. If the top browns too quickly, loosely cover with foil for the last 10–15 minutes.

6. Cool in the tin for at least 20 minutes before slicing. It is excellent warm or at room temperature.

Serving at the Inn

We serve generous slices with a dusting of powdered sugar, a dollop of thick cream, or a scoop of vanilla ice cream. On colder nights I sometimes warm individual portions and pour a little of the "Golden Toffee Elixir of Krówen" over the top, the combination is quite wonderful.

It also travels well, so I often pack slices for travellers setting off early in the morning.

Storage

Keeps well for 3–4 days in an airtight container at room temperature. After that, store in the cool cellar. It also freezes beautifully — wrap slices individually and thaw at room temperature when needed.

A Note from Mistress Rowan

She told me the cake is best when the apples are tart rather than too sweet, and that a little lemon zest brightens everything. If you have no fresh apples, she said dried apples soaked in a little warm water or even a spoonful of good apple butter can be used in a pinch, though fresh is always preferred.

This cake has become a quiet favourite among our regular guests. It smells like home and comfort, even to those far from their own hearths.

Sora Miyuki
Keeper of the Elven Maid Inn

The Damnable Decision

by Reben Groisch

Paul ran a hand through his hair as he considered the figure rasping on the bed before him. A young woman, a little younger than him, with glossy russet curls and cheeks normally the color of roses. She was usually so full of life, song and smiles. Now she lay, clinging to life, and nobody had a cure.

He blinked away tears that gathered in the corners of his eyes and turned his head up towards the unseen sky in frustration. Why had it come to this? Why her?!

The disease that had spread through their small village had been merciless. Within twenty-four hours, all who had suffered it perished. And Meredith's time was running out. She was with child.

He'd carried her all the way here, to the nearest large town, in hopes of finding a shaman, a cure...

A knock sounded on the sturdy oak door and a mousy haired nun peered in, wearing a strange mask upon her bony features.

“Paul?” She asked, voice high and thin.

“Yes, that's me,” he said, approaching eagerly. Had they found something?

The woman took a startled step back.

“Oh... just over there is fine,” she said, indicating the place for him to stand. She didn't enter the room.

“What is it?” He asked. “Have you found something?”

“Yes,” she said, slowly, as though wary of how to put it.

“Well?” Paul asked, exasperated.

The woman sighed. “The... shaman. He's done a reading. You're infected.”

Paul stared at her blankly. This couldn't be happening.

The woman continued speaking but Paul could hear nothing but a ringing in his head.

“...antidote was attacked. There's only one left.”

The word sunk into his consciousness, bringing all sound rushing back.

“You have an antidote?” He asked, leaping to his feet. He hadn't realized that he had sunk to the floor.

“Yes... but there's only one. The carrier was attacked by hounds, you see.”

Paul shook his head, dazed. “How soon until the next shipment?”

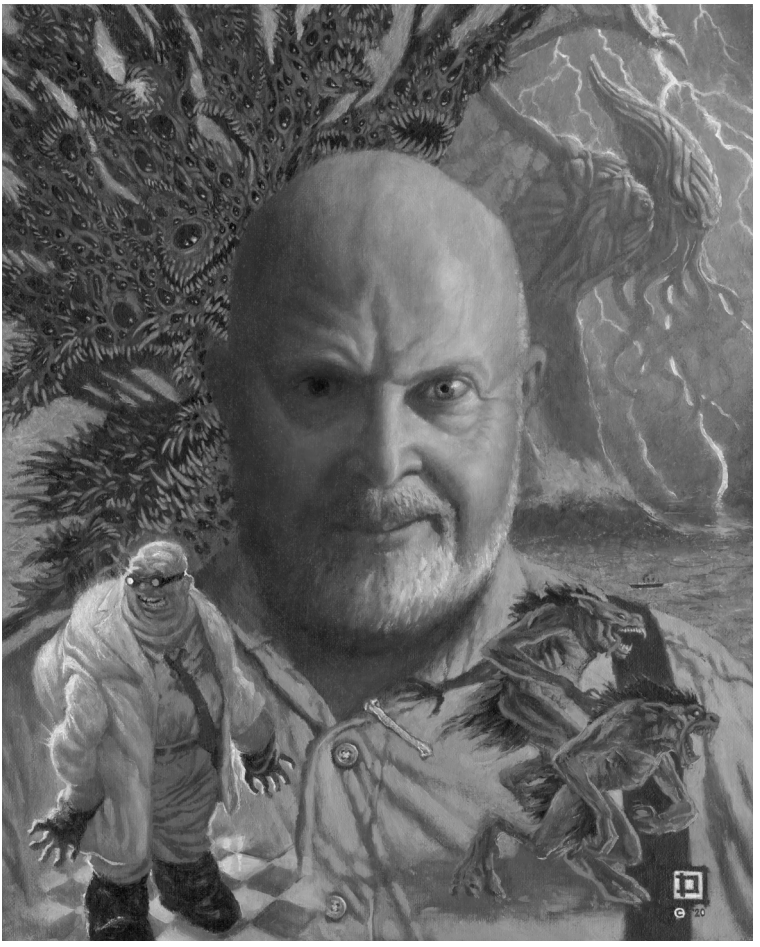
The woman gave him a peculiar look. “There are no other shipments. The alchemist who made them is dead. It will be months before it can be recreated.”

“What - what am I supposed to do?” Paul asked, suddenly realizing the decision before him. He glanced back at the bed of his sweet Meredith.

“That's a decision you'll have to make,” the nun said, not unkindly. “She has twelve hours. You have twenty-four.”

She spoke more but Paul stopped listening. He gazed at Meredith through a blur of tears. When he looked up, the nun was gone and a tiny vial stood where she once stood.

It was twelve hours before he made his decision. Three people had gone through that door. Only one left it. And he would hate himself for the rest of his days for his choice.



Interview with

Sandy Petersen

Father of the Lovecraftian RPG

Today, we're honored to speak with Sandy Petersen, a true pioneer in the world of tabletop role-playing games, video games, and beyond. As the creator of the iconic Call of Cthulhu RPG, Sandy has shaped the horror gaming landscape for decades, drawing from H.P. Lovecraft's mythos to craft experiences that blend terror, mystery, and adventure. His career spans contributions to RuneQuest, level design on legendary video games like Doom and Quake, work on strategy titles such as Age of Empires, executive production on the film The Whisperer in Darkness, and innovative board games through Petersen Games. In this interview, we'll explore his remarkable journey and insights.

Elven Maid Inn: Can you share a bit about your early life and interests that first drew you into the world of gaming and storytelling? What sparked your passion for role-playing games?

Sandy Petersen: I started out as a kid in elementary school who would sometimes stay in from recess to play Clue or Stratego with a friend. By the time I was 12, I was playing Avalon Hill wargames. In 1974, a friend showed me the first Dungeons & Dragons game and while I was suspicious, I gave it a try and we were all hooked, so I was a roleplayer pretty much from the start.

EMI: Before Call of Cthulhu, you contributed to RuneQuest with supplements for Avalon Hill and Games Workshop. How did you first get involved with RuneQuest, and what stands out most about your experiences working on those projects?

Sandy Petersen: After we started playing D&D in college, other roleplaying games would come out, and we'd try them. We'd usually play D&D and the other game (Traveller, The Fantasy Trip, Chivalry & Sorcery, etc) about 50-50, then after 6 months or so go back to plain D&D. Well in 1978 we tried RuneQuest. At first it was 50-50 just as with the other games we'd tried. But within 6 months we weren't playing D&D anymore. It was just RuneQuest.

My friend Steve Marsh, who'd interned at TSR, got me to contact Greg Stafford at Chaosium about publishing some of my creations for RuneQuest, and that's what got my foot in the door.

EMI: What personal or professional experiences in the RPG scene led you to conceptualize and create Call of Cthulhu at Chaosium? Was there a pivotal moment that inspired adapting Lovecraft's works into a tabletop system?

Sandy Petersen: Chaosium had published some of my cults & ideas, and they published a whole book (The Gateway Bestiary) which had a chapter on Lovecraftian monsters, and was the first time those creatures were ever described in a roleplaying basis. I told Greg about my idea to do a RuneQuest supplement based in Lovecraft's Dreamlands, and he told me that he wasn't interested, because he was doing a WHOLE GAME on Lovecraft, set in the modern era. I asked if I could help in any way, and he put the whole thing in my lap. He said he didn't like where the current author was going and I could do it all. He never showed me anything that the former author had written, so it's all mine.

EMI: Reflecting on the early days of developing Call of Cthulhu, what were some of the most memorable challenges and triumphs you encountered in bringing the Cthulhu Mythos to life for players?

Sandy Petersen: the biggest breakthrough was the Sanity system, which informed and practically controlled the game and its outcome. It also gave the game its personality and really is the key to its success. The biggest challenge was how to portray the Great Old Ones. I tried two different systems, and then Chaosium published both systems simultaneously in the first draft, which I thought was dumb. Anyway, I FINALLY figured out how to portray them in 2019 – 39 years later. I published it in a book, and will continue to make it available. My idea is they should be environmental effects.

EMI: How has your deep involvement with the Cthulhu Mythos influenced your worldview or creative process over the years? Do you have a favorite Lovecraft story or entity that particularly resonates with you?

Sandy Petersen: Lovecraft and his works have been a core part of my entire life since writing Call of Cthulhu. I have never escaped his influence. Heck here I am six decades after reading my first Lovecraft story and I'm STILL publishing games based on, and influenced by, Lovecraft. I even was exec producer on a Lovecraft film (The Whisperer in Darkness 2011). I'm sure my every gaming and creative thought has been inspired by or tainted due to my Love for Lovecraft.

The first story I ever read by Lovecraft was Pickman's Model so that is pretty seminal for me. I had the privilege of reading The Call of Cthulhu without knowing who or what a "Cthulhu" was, which is probably pretty hard to do today. And of course, Cthulhu has dominated my life so I guess the Big C is the entity that most resonates. I know Cthulhu isn't the most powerful entity in Lovecraft but man I am impressed by him. Also, he has become the "face of horror" for better or worse. Since no one had heard of Cthulhu before my games, I feel that I am responsible for bringing Cthulhu's knowledge to the world, and every time I see a crappy little Cthulhu plush toy, or some game trying to milk Cthulhu's name, or a piece of jewelry with his face, I am a little bit proud to have brought him to such fame.

EMI: You've often spoken about the horror elements in Call of Cthulhu emphasizing psychological terror over combat. What experiences shaped your philosophy on horror in gaming?

Sandy Petersen: I always put theme first in my games, so I wanted Call of Cthulhu to feel like a horror movie, or a horror story. That's why combat isn't emphasized. Imagine a perfectly ordinary werewolf movie – the heroes don't have constant fights with the wolfman because he would annihilate them. They are trying to figure out what's going on, avoid the wolfman, or gather resources to stop him. That's where the conflict lies – not in hand-to-hand struggles against a monster that can tear a person limb from limb. Call of Cthulhu works similarly. The weakest opponent in the game is a cultist – and that cultist is just as well armed as you, more ruthless and probably better organized within his cult. So you

need to plan. And this resonated with players – a game in which you HAVE to plan and solve mysteries? People loved this.



EMI: After establishing yourself in RPGs, how did your career path lead you into the video game industry in the late 1980s? What drew you to that transition?

Sandy Petersen: it was 1988 and I was living in a 2 bedroom apartment with 4 kids. Something had to give. I told Chaosium I was going to seek employment elsewhere, because Chaosium's promise of higher salaries was not materializing. In retrospect, I think it was because Chaosium made all its business plans after smoking big hooters of weed. Anyway, at the next GenCon I put out my name, and Lawrence Schick, a former worker at TSR, recruited me for MicroProse, and I was off.

EMI: At id Software, you were a key level designer for Doom. What was it like joining the team, and how did your RPG background influence your contributions to the game's design and atmosphere?

Sandy Petersen: id Software was a weird place. It was an odd combination of backbiting, friendship, company politics, and creativity. Somehow it all sort of worked. Until it didn't (on Quake). My RPG background was super useful because I knew how to create interesting dungeon maps from my years on D&D, and I knew how to present players with suspense and fear from my years on Call of Cthulhu. And of course my time at MicroProse meant I knew my way around computer scripting.



EMI: Building on Doom, you also worked on Quake. Can you share some behind-the-scenes stories from those projects and how they differed in terms of creative freedom or team dynamics?

Sandy Petersen: Quake destroyed id Software. It was intense, and there was a lot more toxic snake-in-the-grass action. We were working super-hard, all in the same gigantic room (for Doom, we had separate offices, but for Quake, John Carmack wanted to keep an eye on everyone). When Quake ended, Mike Abrash, Dave Taylor, American McGee, Shawn Green, myself, and John Romero all left the company. We were literally not the same company anymore. Adrian Carmack toughed it out for a few more years (he did own 1/3 of the company, so was incentivized to stay), but even he finally was forced out.

I add that the modern id Software has shed its backbiting past and seems like a great company. But everyone who was there in the old days is gone.

EMI: Later, at Ensemble Studios, you contributed to the Age of Empires series. How did shifting from fast-paced shooters to real-time strategy games feel, and what unique experiences did you bring from your RPG roots?

Sandy Petersen: I was well-served because my roots in hobby gaming, clear back from the 1960s, were in wargames such as Avalon Hill's Blitzkrieg or SPI's World War I. I'd even played tabletop miniatures war games – this was before Warhammer, so the games I played were either Napoleonic, Civil War, or World War II. But it turned out that Age of Empires looked & felt like a miniatures war game so I was right in my element. How did my Roleplaying roots help? I would say they helped in two ways. First, it enabled me to plan campaigns in such a way that though they mimicked reality, the scenarios got more intense and exciting over time. Second, it helped me in balancing asymmetric factions. Is a fighter better than a magic-user? If not, how do you balance them? I was faced with similar concepts for Age of Empires constantly. How do I render the Huns, a cavalry-heavy nation,

able to fight against a faction that emphasizes pikes and anti-horse tactics? That sort of thing.

EMI: Across your video game work from Doom to Age of Empires what do you consider your most significant contributions, and how did those projects impact your approach to game design overall?

Sandy Petersen: My most important video game work I believe to have been first, my work creating the majority of the levels for Doom & Doom 2, which changed gaming forever – not because it was a fun shooter, but because it opened up online gaming, in which you could shoot your pal instead of a computer-controlled monster. Second, In the Age of Empires series I normalized and made profitable the concept of the "expansion pack" with Rise of Rome and The Conquerors. These had not been successes in the past, but I made them a highly desirable facet of games. So yeah. Making head-to-head video games and expansion packs into things is my biggest impact. Compared to that my work on stuff like Civilization, Halo Wars, and such, while still important, pales.

EMI: You've also been credited on other video games like Civilization. Looking back, what were some of the most rewarding or surprising aspects of collaborating on such diverse titles?

Sandy Petersen: I learned how to balance asymmetrical games, and I learned how to tell if a game was fun. At MicroProse, we had a team of testers, who had to work 10 hour days most of the year trying to finish up whatever games were handed to them. Naturally they burned out on a game pretty fast. But when they played Civilization, they actually stayed later after work to keep playing! That's what told us we had something.

EMI: Transitioning to the big screen, you served as executive producer for The Whisperer in Darkness, adapted from Lovecraft's story, which was nominated for the 2011 Free Spirit Award, Gold Hugo in the After Dark Competition, and Rondo Statuette for Best Independent Film. How did you become involved with the H.P. Lovecraft Historical Society on this film?

Sandy Petersen: the HPL Historical Society obviously knew who I was, because most of their publications were based off my work on Call of Cthulhu. I contacted them when they released their film The Call of Cthulhu and said I really liked it and let me know if they ever did anything similar. Well a few years later, they called me and asked if I would be an exec producer for The Whisperer in Darkness. I flew to Los Angeles with a friend who was an expert in film making (he had a degree from San Francisco U on the topic, and had worked on some films). We looked at the drafts of Whisperer and loved it and I agreed.

EMI: What was your experience like stepping into film production for The Whisperer in Darkness? Were there any parallels between crafting a movie and designing RPG scenarios or video game levels?

Sandy Petersen: well, I'm sorry to disappoint, but I found out EXACTLY what an executive producer does on a film. Nothing. Not one single thing except putting up money. I was happy to do it because I thought it was an amazing movie and I wanted it out there. So

there is zero creative input from me on the project. Unless you count seeing the early version of the movie and falling in love as "creative".

EMI: You even made a cameo in The Whisperer in Darkness as a "brain cylinder test subject." What fun or eerie stories can you share from being on set?

Sandy Petersen: I wasn't there during filming, but I got to see all the stuff they used – the ¾ biplane that they used for the aerial duel, the "face and hands of Henry Akeley", the mi-go armatures they used for the fungus monsters, and even the miniature barn they created. I say "miniature" but the thing was like 8 feet across.

EMI: Moving to board games, you've founded Petersen Games and created titles like Cthulhu Wars. What motivated you to venture into board game design after your RPG and video game career?

Sandy Petersen: some friends enticed me into doing a Cthulhu Wars boardgame as a means of partially supporting myself. I had already accepted a job in India doing phone games and I thought this would be a good side gig. But the crowdfunding for it exploded. I'd expected maybe 250k or so, and it went over a million. So I gave up the Indian gig and founded Petersen Games.

The interesting thing is, I designed Cthulhu Wars to be the very last game that I would ever create and design from start to finish. I expected that from then on all my work would be on someone else's project. So I wanted Cthulhu Wars to be my swan song – a great contribution to Lovecraft gaming. I poured my soul into it. And lo and behold instead of a swan song, it became a phoenix of rebirth.

EMI: How has your experience with the Cthulhu Mythos evolved through board games compared to RPGs? What unique joys have you found in this medium?

Sandy Petersen: I can resolve things faster in a board game than an RPG, and I can pit the players against one another in a way that's not so great in an RPG. Thus, the fun in Cthulhu Wars derives from the players tricking and ambushing one another. And I know it's fun – I see them, laughing and gloating over some vicious ploy. This would be toxic in an RPG, but is just great in a board game.

That's not to say board games are better – the camaraderie you find in RPGs is absolutely precious and I still play both RPGS & board games.

EMI: Kickstarter has played a big role in your board game projects. Can you reflect on how crowdfunding has changed the way you connect with fans and bring ideas to fruition?

Sandy Petersen: well for a long time, crowdfunding enabled me to create my games and get them out to people. When the company fell upon hard times during COVID and then continuing, it became a source of distress to me, because I couldn't fulfill my promises easily. I've managed to mostly fulfill my Cthulhu Wars obligations, and to partially fulfill Hyperspace, but I have a lot more work to do. I guess I didn't "expect the unexpected" in 2020.



EMI: Throughout your career, from RPGs to video games, film, and board games, what common threads or lessons have tied all these endeavors together?

Sandy Petersen: I want to create games that I want to play. I don't view myself as a "creator" and my customers as "fans". I view us as peers. We both want and like the same exact things. Yeah, I'm lucky enough that my JOB is to create fun games for us to play, but I treasure this as a gift, not an entitlement. When I hang out with other fans I get excited about the same things that they do. We're all in this together. Another facet of gaming I am passionate about is theme. I want my games to FEEL like you're playing in the world of the game. It has to feel right. If you're playing Cthulhu in Cthulhu Wars, I want you to feel like the apex predator. If you're playing Ithaqua, I want you to feel like the arctic wind. If you're playing a professor in Call of Cthulhu I want you to feel smart, but scared as you find out things No Man Was Meant To Know. It's all theme, for me.

EMI: Through Petersen Games, you've adapted the Cthulhu Mythos for modern systems like Pathfinder and Dungeons & Dragons 5th Edition. How did the experience of creating these supplements differ from your original work on Call of Cthulhu?

Sandy Petersen: well these games are more about combat, and my job wasn't to change D&D or Pathfinder, but to give those players access to the cool concepts of the Mythos. That said I did manage to fulfill a lifelong dream in that I finally got to forge the Great Old Ones as I feel they should be which is kind of an environmental effect. For instance, if you're facing Cthulhu, initially the world's geometry starts to warp a little. If you're running away from him it's farther than running towards him. And his telepathy starts to bombard and distract you. Then as Cthulhu's influence intensifies, the geometry warps more. Now if you flee, you might find yourself running in a circle back to him, and his telepathy starts to give you visions of horrors beyond madness. It keeps getting worse. Eventually the world's geometry starts to break apart and monsters ooze through as Cthulhu's mind starts to overtake and blanket yours. And THAT'S how I think Cthulhu should be portrayed now.

EMI: As a legend in the industry, how do you see the evolution of horror and mythos-inspired gaming today, and what excites you about its future?

Sandy Petersen: as the "father of horror gaming" I love the fact that horror is doing so well nowadays. Lovecraft wrote a whole essay "Supernatural Horror in Literature" trying to defend horror as a topic in fiction. Back in the 1970s horror movies were considered lowbrow, only watched by perverts and goblins. Now it's one of the most important types of films. The spread of horror and people appreciating GOOD horror thrills me. I feel that as a society we have matured.

EMI: Looking ahead, are there any new projects in RPGs, video games, board games, or other media that you're currently working on or dreaming about?

Sandy Petersen: well I keep hoping for Guillermo del Toro's Mountains of Madness but I guess it will never happen now. For my own stuff, I am working on a complete new Roleplaying Game based in my Hyperspace universe. Not just working on it, I'm actively testing it with players! So that's pretty fun. It'll be my first new complete roleplaying game since Elfquest in the 1980s.

EMI: Finally, what advice would you offer to aspiring game designers who admire your path and want to create immersive, horror-infused experiences across different mediums?

Sandy Petersen: don't make a game that has "mass appeal". Go for a game that has specialized appeal. One that YOU love. A mass appeal game isn't anyone's first love. A weird, quirky game has fans who are diamonds and pearls – they love the game and will push it beyond your boundaries.

EMI: Thank you immensely, Sandy, for sharing your extraordinary journey with us. It's been a privilege to hear from a true innovator who has shaped so much of what we love in TTRPGs and beyond. Your passion for the Cthulhu Mythos and storytelling continues to inspire generations.

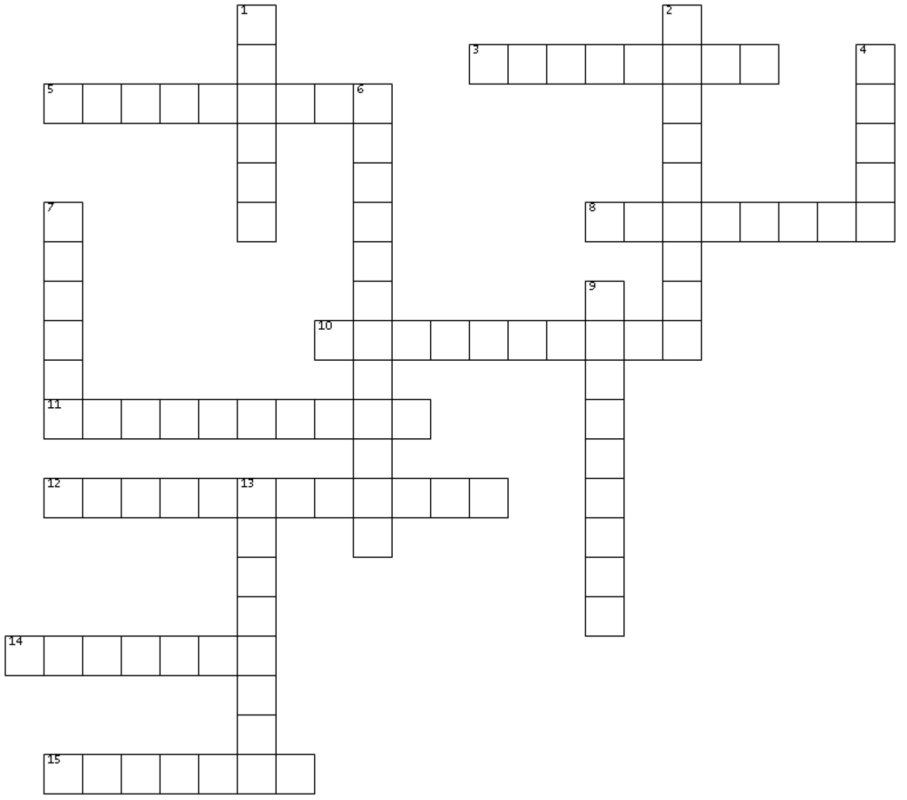
Before we conclude, could you let our readers know where they can find your works, such as Cthulhu Mythos, board games from Petersen Games, or ways to support your ongoing projects?

Sandy Petersen: you can buy my products at shop.petersengames.com and of course at fine game stores both in person and online.

You can join my Patreon, where I post essays weekly, and game topics bimonthly, and neat STL figures to download monthly. Example: this month so far I've posted essays describing Lovecraftian magic items, about serpent men, tips on game design, serpent men for D&D, and the Galaxy Eel as a downloadable figure and a monster for board games & roleplaying games.

You can also follow me on Youtube, where I usually post weekly, and on X (twitter) where I post inordinately. You can also subscribe to me on X, and I release about two subscriber-only essays each week.

Cthulhu Mythos Crossword



ACROSS

3. Fish-like humanoids from the town of Innsmouth

5. Five-pointed protective symbol against the Old Ones

8. Amorphous blob-like servants of the Old Ones

10. The All-in-One and the gate

11. University known for its occult studies and rare books

12. The Crawling Chaos and messenger of the Outer Gods

14. Village terrorized in The Dunwich Horror

15. The Great Old One who lies dreaming in R'lyeh

DOWN

1. The Unspeakable One sometimes called the King in Yellow

2. Decrepit New England town overrun by Deep Ones

4. Sunken city where Cthulhu sleeps

6. Forbidden book written by Abdul Alhazred

7. Fictional Massachusetts city home to Miskatonic University

9. Author who created the Cthulhu Mythos (H.P.)

13. The blind idiot god at the center of the universe

Looting, Encumbrance, and Appraisal

by R.J.A. Gilbert

The final bugbear takes one last gasp, drops its mace to the floor, and collapses. Dead. The entire dungeon seems to pause at that moment. No other monsters come to investigate the sound of battle. No risk of that last drop of oil in the lantern running out. Even that band of orcs the party was pursuing seems to wait for them to take the time to loot the bodies and search the room for treasure.

As the rogue counts the coins collected from each corpse, the sorceress spots a handful of gems on a table and immediately knows how much she'll get for them in town. The same goes for that piece of art found in the corner of the room. And the weapons collected from the slain enemies? Those all fit neatly into the paladin's back pack, with no concern at all whether they will slow him down.

Because the game isn't fun when played realistically.

Fifty years ago, taking five minutes to count out the spoils of a battle then taking another five minutes to decide who gets to carry what and how much it slows them down was a very small fraction of the entire Saturday spent gaming among friends. These days, most TTRPG sessions only last a few hours, and time can easily feel wasted if ten to fifteen minutes is spent counting coins and appraising treasures after every fight. And that says nothing about the problem of recalculating encumbrance after every new batch of loot.

The most common solution to this problem...is to ignore it.

As the game is played at many tables, everything goes into the backpack, nothing slows the character down, and if they pick up a gem or piece of art, they immediately know how much they can sell it for back in town. The implications of this method of play is that, either all adventurers possess

an appraisal skill that helps them quickly assess the value of their loot, or time stops within the dungeon while the party carefully combs through the various piles of bones, webs, and other debris that is mixed in with that goblin stash, sorting out the valuables from the junk.

And right about the point where the party finds an entire dragon's hoard worth of booty, the suspension of disbelief is sustained with the introduction of a handy haversack or bag of holding, into which all treasure is thrown and not considered further for purposes of encumbrance. As a DM, even I am guilty of allowing these solutions at my table. I have even gone so far as to equip a kobold with a "kobold-sized bag of holding" just so that my players could loot it and use it to avoid encumbrance early on in their campaign.

What if there was a way to retain verisimilitude but also keep the game mechanics for encumbrance and looting simple?

Delayed Appraisal

First, let us consider that looting, in most circumstances, is done in a dim, dangerous, and messy environment. Practically speaking, it should be done quickly. Novice treasure-hunters would grab everything they see trash included and stuff it into a sack or their pack. Appraisal is for later, when the party is safely back out in the sunlight where they can see the loot better. Even the most foolish of adventurers know not to count their money while there are still monsters around. And in case any player wants to bring it up, dark-vision may be useful for sorting out the broken statuettes from the valuable ones, but it is not going to be able to tell you how much those gems are worth.

The goal of delayed appraisal is to allow for faster gameplay. If players take time after every battle to list the loot and its value, the game can easily slog to a halt. If players wait until they get to a stopping point (camp, town, or their base) before the DM breaks down the items they found, it not only speeds up the game, but also adds to the verisimilitude of gameplay.

Slotted Inventory

Now let's consider the conceptual mechanics of a character's inventory. In its most basic form, every PC has two areas in which stuff gets stored. On one side, there are the weapons, shields, and equipment they plan to use to survive the dungeon; we'll call this the character's "kit". On the other side, they have the space they plan to fill with treasure from that dungeon. Perhaps there is a campaign that uses a pack for other purposes, but that would be more of an exception than a rule.

As a DM, it is reasonable to allow a player to configure their kit in a practical manner, without needing to worry about encumbrance or weight. Assume that each character's kit is arranged on their body for quick access and minimized clumsiness. If the player insists that their PC be allowed to over-load their kit, that is when the second part of their inventory comes into play.

The rest of a PC's inventory is measured in "slots", with each slot holding a certain amount of bulk. Bulk is a combination of weight and volume. A large sword that is easily strapped to the side of a pack would still take up one slot, whereas a single sack of coins could easily take up three or four slots if their cumulative value (and bulk) is high enough. And a particularly large piece of treasure or something cumbersome like a suit of armor or a full-sized mirror is going to be too big to fit inside any backpack without risk of being damaged on the trek out into daylight.

How many slots does a character's pack carry, then? It depends on the pack. A regular backpack, purchased from most general outfitters, would carry a number of slots equal to 5 plus or minus the character's STR modifier (to a minimum of 1). A simple satchel or small-pack may not have room for much more than the character's STR modifier (to a minimum of 1). A master-work frame pack (double the price of a regular pack) can hold a number of slots equal to 10 plus or minus the character's STR modifier. For a strong character, that can be upwards of 15 slots of loot.

Notice that this is not about the pack's

volume. It is about the character's ability to carry the bulk within the pack. A weak character may only be able to carry one or two slots of inventory, regardless of the size of their pack.

If playing with a bag of holding, it is also possible to track its contents using this same method, but the number of slots available is 35. (This is a generous generalization of the spatial and weight specifications as described in the Dungeon Master's Guide. Each slot would hold about 15 pounds of loot, coins, or one specific piece of equipment.)

Putting it Together...in the Pack

Remember, looting is hasty and indiscriminate. Players are not going to know what they scooped into their packs until they take time to appraise it. So where on the character sheet does the player track their loot? Nowhere. The DM does that.

This is made easier if a little bit of preparation is done before the game. When I DM, I keep a sheet next to the dungeon map listing the treasure on the map. From this sheet I can easily reference what loot is where. Each line on my sheet is a different pile of loot, marked A, B, C, D, etc. and matching up to a letter somewhere on the map. As the party finds the loot, I mark it as found on my list. If you are rolling up your treasure on the fly, don't; merely write down what size trove is in that room (as measured in slots).

Now into this mix let's add another sheet of paper behind the DM screen. On it we list the names of each character in the party, as well as a line for each slot in that character's pack, up to the maximum allowed by their STR modifier. Then we'll leave some extra lines below each character's slots, numbered +1, +2, +3, to +5 or so. As the party finds a pile of loot, the DM informs them how many slots of inventory it will fill and lets them decide whose pack is going to carry how many slots. The DM then marks those slots as filled on their inventory sheets, noting the corresponding letter to the loot sheet.

As a player's pack slots fill up, the DM lets them know that their pack is getting bulky. Once a player chooses to add loot to a slot beyond their strength limit, they gain a point of encumbrance equal to the number of slots filled beyond that point. At +6, their haul is so bulky they are unable to move. This encumbrance counts as a penalty that the DM applies to each character. If you read my mechanics for fatigue previously, you know how that works. Add these points of encumbrance to the DC or AC of any roll the character is attempting, and add it to the roll of any creatures attacking that character. If you are also playing with fatigue, you may treat these as points of fatigue, but encumbrance points cannot be removed until the encumbering slots are emptied.

Note that none of the treasure has been appraised yet. Appraisal needs good lighting to sort the valuable loot from the junk. After all, many monsters tend to think a bone fragment from a slain enemy is worth as much as that imperfect gem-stone, and it is common for such items to share the same purse or pile of loot. Also note that we have not yet addressed any wondrous items or magical pieces of equipment that might have been included in that loot.

Most wondrous items are going to be mixed in with the rest of the treasure and won't be easily discerned without first appraising the entire bulk of the loot. There may be several fragmented manuscripts, but only one intact spell scroll among them. There might be several potion bottles, but only one with anything of value in it. And who is to say whether that thug's helmet is of any value until you have had a chance to appraise it. Better to fill it with coins, stuff it in the pack, and wait until you have more time and better lighting to figure it out.

A possible exception to this system would be that one piece of equipment specially planted in the loot pile for one player in particular. Perhaps a staff for the wizard, or a belt of strength for the barbarian. If the DM wishes, they may point out this particular item of treasure to the player whose character it is meant for. Telling the rogue that "a dagger in the glimmering heap has caught your eye" might be enough to announce that this particular piece of loot is meant for the Rogue's belt,

not for the bulk of their backpack. This can also apply to specific items of treasure that are hidden or otherwise separated from the rest of the treasure in a room.

But what if you wait to roll up the loot, and you roll a massive sword or staff or other large piece of equipment? Simple: don't give it to the party until their next encounter, at which point they will see it lying in a corner of the room or among a pile of bones or other obvious location. At that point, they may choose to add it to their pack or try to appraise it for its usage, and the verisimilitude is sustained.

Now let's talk about calculating the bulk of a pile of loot. Here are a few points to keep in mind:

- There is always a minimum of one slot no matter how small the pile of loot.
- Consolidate if you are gathering multiple purses from fallen foes. An encounter CR of 5 or less is only 1 slot of purse loot.
- Round up in terms of slots. Often there is a lot of junk in with the good stuff, but it all takes up the same slot in the pack.
- Each piece of equipment or wondrous item needs its own slot. You can mix gems and coins with this item in that slot.
- You need one slot for each 200g value in coins. Mixed among this can be gems, small pieces of art, and junk.
- Large pieces of treasure, such as a painting or mirror, take up one or more slots all on their own, because they are often wrapped in cloth or casing to keep them from being damaged. (Unless it was hastily looted from its previous owner by a burglar or thief). These should be treated like wondrous items and held until the next encounter.

Appraisal and Adjusting your Kit

So now we have a bunch of loot in our packs. And maybe a glowing sword or two that the players want to start fighting with. When do we get to sort it all out?

Appraisal requires both time and light to accomplish. At the very least, it takes about 5 minutes for every 500 coins counted, plus an additional minute for each valuable item sorted out from the rest of the junk. In the dim light of a dungeon, the party is not going to be able to tell the value of each gem in a hobgoblin's pocket. Appraisal requires daylight or, at the least, a lantern or spell that can illuminate the immediate area where the party is examining their goods.

Additionally, players should note that their characters have no awareness of danger while they are focused on appraisal or configuring their kit. One cannot be both ready for battle and busy strapping that new scabbard to their belt or fitting that new helmet to their heads. As a rule, any time they stop to appraise their loot in an unsafe location, the DM should roll for wandering monsters (with a higher chance of discovery if the area is illuminated for appraisal purposes).

Switching a character's kit out is also going to take time. If a player wants to do it, give them a minute of time for each item they are pulling from the loot and adding to their useful inventory. An adjustment to a character's kit may also reduce the overall carrying capacity of the character. If a player wants their barbarian to carry both a great-axe and a great-sword, don't waste time calculating how much extra weight that is on their back. Simply fill one of their slots with the extra weapon and go back to playing. And if that rogue wants to switch out rapiers, remind them that the obsolete blade is still in their inventory; it's now taking up a slot in their backpack.

With these modifications to the mechanics of loot and encumbrance, let's revisit that scenario from the beginning of this article.

As the paladin sheathes his great sword, the rogue begins collecting the purses from each goblinoid lying on the ground. The DM informs him that the combined bulk of the purses takes up one slot in the rogue's pack. Meanwhile, the sorcerer collects the

enemy's weapons, dropping each ceremoniously into her bag of holding. The DM tracks this, too, marking each slot taken with "Encounter 'M'-weapons and armor" for later reference. Not pausing to appraise the treasure found in a pile at the center of the room, the rogue scoops all of it into a sack, then hands it to the cleric to add to her backpack, since it is too much for him to carry and remain light on his feet. The DM informs the cleric that her pack is over-filled, noting a +1 encumbrance penalty beside her name on the DM's tracking sheet. Then the DM informs the wizard of a small, gray bag on the goblin shaman's belt. Is that a...a bag of tricks? The wizard takes a moment to collect this magical item and fasten it to his belt. Unfortunately, he does not notice the sound of footsteps in the corridor behind him. Luckily, the rogue, paladin, and sorcerer are quick to warn the rest of the party that there are more monsters incoming...

...At the end of the session (or perhaps during a pizza break), the party makes it back to town and begins appraising their loot. The DM then informs them that, among the loot from "M", the party finds x number of gold, silver, and copper coins, 2 gems worth 50g, a small piece of artwork worth 100g, and two potions of healing (along with a feather token that originally looked like junk). The DM also rolled up a +1 shield, but that will be waiting for the party when they next find treasure in the dungeon. The players may take time to divide up the spoils here, or use an online platform such as Discord to further discuss who will take what.



The Orcish Blood

Recipie from Elven Tavern

A half-orc mercenary once stayed at the inn after a brutal campaign. He was quiet at first, but after a few tankards he spoke of the drink his warband shared around the fire, something dark and sweet that tasted like victory and iron. He called it the Blood of the Fallen, but I have softened the name for gentler company. The Orcish Blood is now served to those who carry the weight of battle on their shoulders. It is rich, bold, and carries a quiet strength.

The Orcish Blood

A robust, balanced classic cocktail with deep red-orange hues and a complex, slightly sweet profile.

Ingredients (makes 1 cocktail):

- 22 ml Scotch whisky
- 22 ml Sweet vermouth
- 22 ml Cherry liqueur (Cherry Heering or good quality cherry brandy)s22 ml Fresh orange juice
- Garnish: Orange peel or maraschino cherry

Method:

- Fill a cocktail shaker with ice.
- Add the Scotch, sweet vermouth, cherry liqueur, and fresh orange juice.
- Shake hard for 10–12 seconds.
- Strain into a chilled coupe or rocks glass.
- Express an orange peel over the drink and drop it in, or garnish with a cherry.

Best served to warriors, storytellers, and those who have walked through fire.

Sora Miyuki
Keeper of the Elven Maid Inn

The Story You Keep to Yourself

The Real Purpose of Backstory

In tabletop role-playing games, few topics generate as much discussion as character backstory. Some players treat it as essential world-building material for the Game Master, while others see it as little more than optional flavor text. But what is the actual purpose of a backstory, and who is it really for?

The answer is simpler than many assume, and more player-focused than is often acknowledged.

What is Backstory?

This is a very simple question with a very simple answer. Backstory is the history of a character that happened before "Season 1." It provides basic information about the character: where they were born, who their parents and siblings are, and what events influenced them. It can be as simple as, "I was born on a farm, but I was unhappy, so I left to find glory as an adventurer," or something more complex like R.A. Salvatore's trilogy of the dark elf, which tells the story of Drizzt before he meets Cattibrie, Wulfgar, and Regis.

What is the Purpose of Backstory?

Here, many players may hold a different view. In my opinion, the main purpose of a backstory is to flesh out the character you're playing. The primary purpose of a backstory is not to create plot hooks for Game Masters. Rather, it serves the player to explain certain characteristics or behaviors of your character due to past experiences.

For example, a backstory can explain why your character is cold and finds it difficult to make friends, wears black armor adorned with a skull, and lives only to kill bandits because he witnessed his wife and daughter's murder. Your character might have a fear of flames because he watched

his family burn in a fire, or wears a mask and fights crime because he let a criminal escape who then killed his uncle. Characters have origin stories that shape who they are today, like the Punisher, Caleb Widogast from Critical Role, or Spider-Man. This is the true purpose of backstory: character personality and motivation.

Is it the Game Master's Responsibility to Incorporate Backstory into Their Games?

The answer is no. Your backstory, no matter how awesome it is, should not be expected to be used by the Game Master. If you, as a player, think that your story of betrayal, love, and glitter should be part of the adventure, pause for a moment and think. This isn't just your adventure; it's an adventure shared with friends. Do you really think you're the only one with an amazing backstory?

Tabletop RPGs are about playing together with your friends. Consider how much work your Game Master has put into the story you're currently enjoying, and be grateful for the time they sacrifice so everyone can have fun.

That being said, if the Game Master asks for more details on your story to incorporate some events or quests, feel free to provide all the details they need!

How Long Should a Backstory Be?

Go wild. Write a page, write a chapter, write a book, or even a trilogy. Be as creative as you want. It's your character. However, you should respect some limits.

Don't force anyone to read it. This is your backstory; share it gradually during the game through role-play moments by the campfire, in a tavern, or while traveling. And most importantly, don't send it to your Game Master.

Your Game Master should get a haiku:

"Rustic plow in hand,
A sword now calls from the field;
Fate's new path begins."

This is obviously a jest, but there's truth in it. Your Game Master only requires a summary of your backstory. The backstory you send to your GM should not be longer than a tweet. Think of it this way: the Game Master also enjoys learning about your character as you play, and the best scenario is when they reach out to ask for more details.

Backstory is for you and you alone, unless your Game Master asks for more details.

Are There Certain Things to Avoid in a Backstory?

Yes. Remember, you're likely starting at level 1 or 3. You're at the beginning of your adventure. So, don't include any heroic acts in your backstory. No, you haven't fought a dragon before because you'll be fighting slimes next. Avoid granting yourself powers you don't have.

Also, make sure to talk with your Game Master. Let them provide you with some locations from the world you're playing in, so your character feels natural to this world and not an "outcast" in a grim, dark setting, born in the Kingdom of Fartlandia in a town called Glory Hole. No, don't do that. Discuss with your Game Master about the world, ensuring they give you some information about the setting you'll be playing in.

Many GMs and players will likely disagree with parts of this perspective. However, this approach treats backstory as a tool for character depth rather than campaign fuel, and places the responsibility for a compelling game on collaborative play rather than individual backstories.

Whether you write a single paragraph or a full novel for your character, the most important thing is remembering why you're writing it in the first place.

Angels in the Arrow Road

by

Carpenter B. Gibson

The Arrow Road was a crowded graveyard of cars and drivers, a ribbon of ruin stretching through the wasteland. At the Cherry Bomb marker, efforts to clear the shallow highway had long ceased. The fetid glow of downtown cast eerie shadows across the wreckage. Decades ago, the Barrowmen claimed this road, running scavenging trips from their southeastern stronghold into the radioactive hellscape of the city center. Now, only haunted tales of their ramshackle wagons and strange drivers remained.

One Eye scanned the cluttered road, her tanned face scrunching around her ghostly dead eye and lively brown one. "Looking for them, Lieutenant?" Sleepy tossed his half-lidded gaze over the burnt husks of cars and twisted metal. "I hear they still scamper around the south. Who knows?" The lanky boy panned his shotgun across the debris, pausing to cough into the sleeve of his blue denim Patrol jacket.

"Not so much," One Eye lied. "This highway snakes too close to every damn house in this part of town." She wondered how people in the old world lived with the noise. Now, the living dead lurked in those ruins, a shuffle or tumble away from spilling onto the road in some spots, or a gangling climb in others. She tapped her radio and brushed black hair from her face. "Gob, you tight back there?"

"Peachy. Me and Tom Tom see you just fine," came the reply from the little old woman perched at a rise in the road, her frankentruck's heavy weapon trained their way. One Eye's brother watched through his long rifle's scope. "Leg's acting up, though, so—"

"Expect trouble," they said in unison. Goblin's bad leg was useless at predicting weather but infallible for danger. One Eye waved her fire team forward. Sleepy closed in with his shotgun, while Darling and Silent followed, guns and knives at the ready. "Geiger counters up, ladies and gentlemen."

The warning was likely unnecessary for these Patrol veterans, but she'd seen good people cut short by one too many rads. The hazy downtown glow cast shadows through the frequent wrecks and piles of garbage. They were playing chicken with their long-term health on these fringes. The sun leered as they moved cautiously from cover to cover. A red dusty wind forced them to don masks and goggles.

Between their position and the old-world checkpoint into downtown, there should have been ghosts. The northern path, once westbound traffic, had been cleared by the Barrowmen until the Wild Fire Treaty. Patrols like hers rarely came here now, deterred by the checkpoint's looming barrier. One Eye raised a scope to her good eye. Two man-shaped forms paced before the rusted gate, obscured by red clay dust. She knew what they were.

"Deadbots on parade, ladies and gents," she whispered, her dry lips cracking. Her radio tapped as each squad member acknowledged. She waved Darling over. The white-haired man materialized beside her, taking the scope. He scanned, then held up three fingers and wiggled his thumb. One Eye sent him back to Silent before licking her lips and sighing.

Old-world military robots were force multipliers for soldiers—the three Darling noted. The wiggled thumb signaled a zombie. A lone zombie, even armored or in a vehicle, was manageable. A zombie soldier guarded by tireless Deadbots was another matter.

"How the hell did the Barrowmen pass this all the time?" she asked quietly into the radio, hoping Goblin had answers.

"Like I told you when we got this stupid assignment, I don't know. No one does," Goblin spat. "They passed Deadbots reliably—Southern Pearl, Radioville, Downtown, Fort Fargo, even Sandy Spring. Iron Town tried to pry that secret out of them for decades, so I hear."

A rapid double-tap on the radio silenced her. Sleepy waved for attention, his free hand making a two-fingered walking gesture and pointing off the highway. Flashing his fingers rapidly, he signaled a large group of walking dead ahead and below. This was why they'd come, and why the Barrowmen used this road. But now, their path forward was blocked.

One Eye had anticipated this. Outpost Whiskey reported something unusual falling from the sky south of here, on the Arrow Road. Her squad was sent to investigate, hoping it landed east of the checkpoint. It hadn't. Peering over the highway's edge, she studied the zombie horde below. She tapped her radio: dot, dash, dash, dot. The squad responded with taps. Goblin replied with dot, dash, dot, pause, dot—they were ready.

Closing her eyes and holding her breath, One Eye focused. The smell of red dust, old-world rust, and rot faded as her mind stilled. A light thought rippled out, bouncing back from her squad's minds, then hitting the fetid shore of ruined half-minds below. Nothing alert responded. If one of the wasteland's feared denizens was near, it wasn't close.

"Bee Zees, no Ell," she whispered. "Button down. I'm baiting the BZs out." Taps returned, but her half-telepathic trance caught a stab of disapproval from Sleepy. Leaning out, she stared down the road, her ghost-white eye focusing into the middle distance. She conjured a phantom for herself and any open minds—a figure peeking from bushes, eyes darting toward the zombies and the open road.

She hadn't chosen who it was at first, hadn't meant to. The dead didn't care. A few turned toward the figure, then more followed, haltingly at first, then in a slow stride. The figure sharpened into a young man, panic on his face. He pulled a tiny brown hand from the bushes. One Eye tried to stop it, but too late—her brother emerged, pulling their younger sibling. Her breath caught as the scruffy figures ran into the open road. The rotting tide surged, yellow teeth gnashing, gurgling moans echoing from the underpass. Bare feet struggled across buckled pavement, fear and memory driving them.

Tears rolled down her cheeks, blood dripping from her nose. The real road blurred with memory's twisting path—two boys running, the dead chasing. In a nearby building, a girl watched, stunned. A stumble, a wreck, and youth met death. From a fire escape, the girl's hand grabbed the taller boy, pulling him up. The dead grasped at them. Teeth caught flesh,

red splashed, and screams echoed. One Eye shook, hands clenched.

Darling's face snapped her back. "Ell Tee, it's done." He wiped blood from her upper lip, his handsome face clouded with concern. "Let's go."

He was right. The squad assembled quietly behind cover. The horde swarmed a building down the road, chasing phantoms from her past. Sleepy took the rear, Darling stuck by her, and Silent vanished over the retaining wall. The underpass where the zombies had gathered was littered with garbage and foul residue—an old shoe, a desiccated arm pointing back up. A grisly mark of Silent's passage greeted them: a limbless zombie with a fresh spike hole in its skull, mercy-delivered.

They skulked along the barrier wall, dangerously close to old fences and suburban death traps. Darling monitored the Geiger counter. Decades had faded much of the fallout, but some old-world bombs were salted with long-lasting isotopes, ruining places like downtown forever. One Eye wiped her nose, peeking over the wall at the checkpoint. Her head pounded with the familiar post-telepathic throb. She radioed, "We're over the other side. Watch the ZeeBees. I don't want us trapped. If we get pinched, radio Whiskey Tower—we'll head that way."

An affirmative tap replied. Silent's head popped over the wall, her masked face beckoning with raised eyebrows and a nod. All clear, for now. The three descended, gathering behind a fused metal lump. Silent outlined the situation: four fingers and a wiggled thumb toward the checkpoint, hands fanning out to indicate an empty area, then two fingers pointing down, forming a bowl shape. Darling translated quietly, "Four Deadbots and a Z-soldier at the checkpoint. This area's empty, but there's a new crater down there—probably the target."

One Eye squinted her good eye shut, pinching her nose, and scanned with her dead eye. Only the decayed shine of the zombie soldier returned. Sleepy's grip on her shoulder pulled her from the fog. She was staring at the reddish sky from the ground, his scowl piercing through half-lidded eyes.

"Enough, boss. We got this." His rough hands lifted her. "I'll take the Deadbots. You three drag her ass along." He moved too fast for a rebuke. Darling flashed a false smile, pulling up his gray cloak. Silent nodded firmly and followed. One Eye spat blood to clear her head and trailed them.

In the crater lay an octagonal spherical pod, the size of a frankentruck. Burnt cloth and foam chunks littered the area. Darling approached a damaged hatch, its round door twisted askew, revealing flickering lights inside. Silent hovered at the edge, glancing between him and the Arrow Road west into downtown. "I see someone in here—a stasis pod. Something's stuck, erroring out."

One Eye and Silent shared a concerned look. Who or what could survive in an orbital stasis pod? Why had it landed? One Eye considered her earlier mental sweep—would a stasis-bound mind even register? "Goblin, we've got a working stasis pod. How do we turn it off?"

"What do you mean *off*?" Goblin spat. "You're not opening it, are you?"

"I didn't sense anyone alive."

"It's a hot number," Darling interjected, earning a scowl from Silent. "No joke, a pretty girl in a skintight camo suit."

“Hush, Darling.” One Eye cut off the brewing fight. “I think she’s a corpse sickle, sadly. But I don’t want security systems acting up if we salvage this.”

“Fine, give me Yin and Yang there, and I’ll walk ‘em through it,” Goblin said. Darling and Silent set to work under her guidance while One Eye watched west. The Geiger counter’s needle hovered low but unsteady, the necrotic glow of downtown looming. Dread mingled with her telepathic headache.

A pop and the sudden silence of the pod’s hum startled her. Silent’s feet pounded over, tugging One Eye’s jacket. A hiss of old-world air followed. Darling flew out of the pod with the stasis chamber’s glass cover, landing hard as it crushed his legs with a crunch. Crystal-iron armor, heavier than it looked.

Out strode the “Corpse Sickle,” unfolding a Banzai-2099 laser SMG with a dancer’s grace. Everyone froze. She pinned Darling under the glass with one booted foot, weapon raised to his face. Silent lunged, but One Eye grabbed her jacket, shouting, “Civilians! Code C!” She slid her weapons down, hands raised. Silent followed. Darling raised his hands as best he could. Sleepy was nowhere in sight—likely lurking, armed.

“Code C not recognized,” the figure said flatly, her beautiful face expressionless. “Civilians are ordered not to interfere per D.o.D. Directive 2144-99654-Delta-Fiver. Failure to comply will result in termination under martial law directive 2156-77688-Bravo-Seirra.”

The faux woman turned to the pod, emerging minutes later with more weapons and a pack. Long strides carried her east as five eyes watched. Silent broke free, helping Darling move the glass. One Eye started to assist, but he nodded east with a grimace. She retrieved her weapons and followed the robot, Sleepy drifting alongside. “What do you think, boss?”

“It’s not here for us,” she said, sweat beading. “Autonomous Deadbots don’t drop from the sky for nothing. DoD directives? It’s bad news for someone.”

“Who’d it be after that’s not long dead?” Sleepy peered over their cover. Corpse Sickle marched toward the checkpoint’s Deadbots and zombie soldier. “Not that groaning grunt, I bet.”

“Whoever it is, they’re fucked.” One Eye tapped her radio. “Gob, you get the gist?”

“Mostly. How’s Darling?”

One Eye glanced back—red stained Darling’s midsection. “Not good. We need to get him home or to an outpost.” Their medic was at Outpost Charlie, helping another squad. “As soon as Corpse Sickle—”

Laser fire erupted. Corpse Sickle leapt through the checkpoint, spraying light. One Deadbot’s fusion core exploded, steam tearing it apart. The others couldn’t land a hit on her. The Patrol watched in horrified awe.

“Boss...” Sleepy managed.

“It’s a walking disaster.” Her good eye blinked.

“Luey Luey,” Goblin’s mock rank signaled bad news. “I dug up what I could. This thing wouldn’t drop farther than ten miles from its target.”

“Who cares? The target’s long dead,” One Eye spat.

"Do you think *it* knows that?"

"Wait..."

"Yep," Tom Tom cut in. "Some old-world death machine dropped in Patrol territory—"

"Patty HQ's nine miles from here," Sleepy added.

"Fuck." One Eye watched Corpse Sickle check its weapons and stride northeast toward Glitterdrome, Outpost November, or countless settlements. "It needs to die."

"Boss, we attack, we're dead," Goblin warned.

"Bring the—" Darling's wet cough interrupted, "—crowd back." Silent's fingers danced as he translated. "They don't have guns—it'll hesitate."

One Eye considered. Zombies could overwhelm with numbers, but Corpse Sickle might outrun them. She pointed to a wreck on the bridge's north side. "Sleepy, plant an intact CF genny under the south end of that car."

Corpse Sickle stood still, a fin-like device protruding from its hair, likely communicating with its orbital source. Goblin moved the frankentruck closer, speculating, "It's been canned so long, the map's no good. Lucky us, here in hell."

Sleepy returned, thumbs up, detonator in hand, its charge set under a Deadbot's fusion core. One Eye tapped her radio: dot, dash, dash, dot. Taps replied, Tom Tom echoing readiness. She closed her good eye, pushing past the pain in her skull. Her brothers cowered in her mind's wreckage, but she couldn't shake them. A phantom girl ran from the building, drawing the horde. Fear choked her—why her younger self? She hadn't been the runner, the brave one.

Her focus slipped, her brothers fading. The girl ran before the horde, teeth gnashing. Corpse Sickle's warnings blared, uncomprehending. As it raised its SMG, the phantom girl leapt through it, the horde pouring over.

"Brace!" Sleepy yelled. Silent pulled Darling and One Eye down. The road shook, light flared, and the blast's pressure hit. A wreck crashed, crushing zombies with a sickening crunch. Rot, burning, and crushed flesh assaulted them.

One Eye rose, blood coating her lower face. Sleepy and Silent half-carried her and Darling to the frankentruck, where Goblin held Tom Tom, his face bloodied like hers. "I got your back, like usual," he said tiredly.

A screech of tearing metal froze her. Ignoring protests, she crawled to the edge. Corpse Sickle, half-burnt and one-armed, carved through the lingering horde with a machete blade. Clearing the bodies, it strode west into downtown's radioactive maze.

Sleepy whispered, "Where the fuck is it going?"

"Where are we taking Darling?" One Eye asked, pointing at the robot.

"Home, to patch him up," Sleepy said, raising an eyebrow.

One Eye nodded at the vanishing Corpse Sickle. "Let's hope it takes longer to patch up than we do."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Between the Railroad and the Sandbox

by

Eryk Rejner

Being a Dungeon Master in a RPG is no easy task. Mostly known styles of leading a RPG are the so called Railroads and Sandboxes. Both are very different in how they are played with Railroads being probably the less popular option being considered low effort and amateurish. Of course there is nothing wrong in playing and enjoying Railroad adventures but it may be difficult for DM's to suddenly try and lead a Sandbox game. There is another method though. A method that I described as "the Net".

The Railroad is restrictive. The players can go only on a metaphorical set of tracks from point A to point B, C and so on until the adventure is over. Detours are avoided or unavailable because they are derailing the main plot. Yet the restrictive nature of the Railroad is perfect for players that want a plot focused adventure.

The Sandbox may be overwhelming. The players can go anywhere and do anything. The main plot may be ignored or even not encountered by the players which may or may not have devastating results on the whole world the adventure takes place in. The freedom a Sandbox provides always risks a certain lack of focus.

So what would be the Net method of leading a RPG adventure? In the most simple terms it could be described as a two-way Railroad with track allowing for side quests or a smaller and thus more restrictive Sandbox.

Imagine a fishing net. Each thread in it represents a decision of the player group makes or a place they can go to. The

players can move freely on this net jumping from thread to thread like they were playing in a Sandbox, but the Net has points where it ends and if the players decide to go further they won't find a game there. For this to work the DM should design a small hub for the adventure to take place in. The players entering the hub should at some point be informed or realize on their own that leaving the region will be impossible without either resolving the regions issue/ issues or gathering immense resources.

Lets say its a fantasy setting. They players entered from the west crossing a bridge in a small village without paying the unfair and prohibitorily expensive toll. If they want to escape that way they will have to fight a whole garrison who will be on a lookout for them. No villager will rent them a boat for crossing the river since they will be too afraid for their life if they help outlaws. So they need to travel deeper into the designed hub. They travel to a castle-city. There they learn that gathering larger amounts of food and resources for travel is forbidden by the ruler as they don't want anybody to leave. To the north are vast grassy plains, no way to hunt for food or forage to survive a long trek. Not without a horse and carriage with supplies. To the east there is a dense forest. A forest full of typical monsters. And if you manage to pass it somehow well there are mountains - no point going that way. So they can go south and cross the bridge on that river. But do the players really want to go to the dreaded lands ruled by vampires? Doubtful. So they are stuck in this region that consists of a large castle-city, maybe two towns, a mine, an old graveyard, ruins of a castle and a plethora of surrounding villages. There is no issue to buy enough food to travel from place to place in the region but no one will sell an amount allowing enough to pass the northern grassy plains, because everybody is afraid of repercussions from the tyrannical ruler.

I hope this Net method will encourage some creativity for Dungeon Masters that maybe are tired with Railroads but are afraid of taking on a Sandbox game. Or for Dungeon Masters that have problems with keeping everything in mind while leading a Sandbox. Either way if you decide to try it out make sure the players know that if they escape the Net there is no game beyond it.

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Life

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Forever lost to the world gone,
A tiny flare on the globe black,
Goodbye, burning bright, goodbye.

Stephanie Gruchow
(@SapphireKaneq1)

ShadowDark

Elven Maid Inn Review

Shadowdark RPG

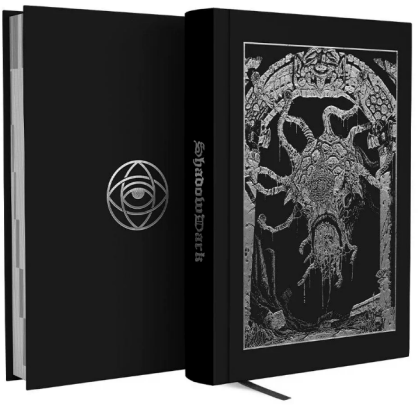
Old-School Danger for a "Modern" audience

As a tabletop role-playing game enthusiast, I've had the pleasure of diving into numerous independent TTRPGs over the past few years, many of which have taken the robust framework of Dungeons & Dragons 5th Edition and molded it into something unique. Games like Tales of the Valiant, Dark Souls: The Roleplaying Game, Level Up: Advanced 5th Edition, and 13th Age have all brought fresh spins to the familiar d20 system, each with their own flavor and flair. Yet, among this crowded field, one game stands head and shoulders above the rest: Shadowdark RPG. What makes Shadowdark so special? It does something no other 5e-inspired clone dares to do, it marries the gritty, perilous ethos of old-school TTRPGs with the streamlined mechanics of modern systems, creating an experience that feels both nostalgic and revolutionary.

To understand why Shadowdark resonates so deeply, let's take a detour into the world of video games. Back in the days of the NES, Sega Genesis, and early PlayStation (PSX), games like Ghosts 'n Goblins, Castlevania, or even Final Fantasy VII on the PSX were brutal. Saving your progress was a luxury, often nonexistent or restricted to specific checkpoints. If you died, you started over, sometimes from the very beginning. These games demanded skill, patience, and creative problem-solving. Compare that to many modern video games, where autosaves before every major obstacle and hand-holding tutorials make failure almost impossible. The challenge is gone, replaced by a safety net that pulls players toward the solution, often rendering the experience brain-dead easy.

Then came Demon's Souls (and later Dark Souls), games that flipped the script. They reminded players that "hard" could be exhilarating, that overcoming a grueling challenge was infinitely more rewarding than coasting through a game. Old-school TTRPGs, like Advanced Dungeons & Dragons (AD&D) 1st Edition, were the Ghosts 'n Goblins of their time, dark, gritty, and unforgiving. With the advent of D&D 3rd Edition, the genre began to soften. Darkness was replaced with heroics, and by 5e, players were unkillable superheroes. Death became a rare inconvenience rather than a looming threat. Enter Shadowdark RPG, the Demon's Souls of TTRPGs. It reintroduces modern players to the thrill of danger, showing them that "hard" is not only fun but transformative.

Shadowdark is the brainchild of Kelsey Dionne, a seasoned designer who runs The Arcane Library, a publishing company known for its high-quality 5e adventures. Before Shadowdark, Dionne built a reputation crafting concise, evocative adventures like The Secrets of Skyhorn Lighthouse, which gained traction in the 5e community and even caught the attention of prominent influencers in 5e community like Aabria Iyengar and Brennan Lee Mulligan. Her work was characterized by unconventional formatting and a knack for delivering immersive experiences with minimal bloat.



In February 2023, Dionne launched a Kickstarter campaign for Shadowdark RPG, aiming to bring her vision of a modernized old-school TTRPG to life. The timing couldn't have been better. With the Dungeons & Dragons community reeling from the 2023 Open Gaming License controversy, players were hungry for alternatives that captured the spirit of classic D&D without the corporate baggage. Shadowdark struck a chord, raising an astonishing $1.3 million from over 12,000 backers by March 2023. The campaign's success was meteoric, surpassing its funding goal in mere hours and selling out physical copies faster than a fireball spell clears a goblin horde. Digital PDFs were delivered by April 2023, with physical books following in July 2023, a testament to Dionne's ability to manage an ambitious project despite it being The Arcane Library's first Kickstarter. The game went on to win the 2024 Three Castles Award for best game design and four gold ENNIEs: Product of the Year, Best Game, Best Rules, and Best Layout & Design.

The Shadowdark RPG core rulebook is a marvel of design. At 330 pages, it's presented in a digest-sized A5 format, smaller than the standard A4 tomes of Wizards of the Coast. Don't let the size fool you—every inch of this book is utilized with surgical precision. There's no wasted space, no fluff, no filler. It's a stark contrast to the sprawling, sometimes bloated rulebooks of modern TTRPGs. The book's compact nature makes it easy to carry to game nights, and its two-page spread layout ensures that rules are accessible at a glance.

What truly sets the Shadowdark rulebook apart is its language. If AD&D 1e was written in "High Gygaxian", a dense, florid prose that could feel like deciphering an ancient grimoire, Shadowdark is the opposite. Its rules are written in clear, concise English, stripped of unnecessary verbiage. Every sentence serves a purpose, making the game accessible to players and Game Masters of all experience levels.

This linguistic clarity is Shadowdark's superpower. The rules are as transparent as pure water, making them easy to grasp and retain. For new players, this is a godsend. If you're running a game for a group that's never touched a TTRPG, Shadowdark is the perfect candidate. Its intuitive design means you don't need prior D&D experience to dive in. Even a a first-time GM, can find Shadowdark's rules so straightforward that you could focus on storytelling rather than flipping through pages for obscure mechanics. It's a system that welcomes beginners with open arms while still offering depth for veterans.

Another standout feature is the book's all-in-one nature. In a single volume, Kelsey Dionne has condensed the "holy trinity" of TTRPG books, Player's Handbook, Dungeon Master's Guide, and Monster Manual, into one compact package. This isn't just a convenience; it's a game-changer. At $59.99 for the hardcover plus a free PDF, Shadowdark is a steal compared to the $150+ required for the core 5e books. The efficient use of space and lack of bloat allow Dionne to deliver everything you need

to play; character creation, GM advice, monsters, and more, in a single tome. It's a testament to her design philosophy: quality over quantity.

Shadowdark is proudly rules-light, designed to empower GMs to make quick rulings without consulting the book. The rules are intuitive, built on a unified d20 mechanic where you roll a d20, add a modifier, and aim to beat a Difficulty Class. There's no need to memorize complex subsystems or cross-reference tables. This simplicity extends to every aspect of the game, from combat to exploration.

One of Shadowdark's boldest departures from 5e is its lack of a skill system. In 5e, players rely on skills like Intimidation or Persuasion, often defaulting to a Charisma check to resolve social encounters. Shadowdark throws this out the window, encouraging creative problem-solving. Want to intimidate a guard? A warrior might use Strength to loom threateningly, a rogue might use Dexterity to subtly flash a dagger, and a wizard might use Intelligence to weave a chilling threat. This approach feels natural to old-school players but can be a revelation for 5e veterans accustomed to rigid skill lists. I've seen 5e players struggle with this freedom at first, their instincts urging them to "check their character sheet" for solutions. But once they embrace it, the game comes alive with inventive roleplay.

Shadowdark's classes, Fighter, Thief, Priest, and Wizard, are deliberately minimalist. Unlike 5e's sprawling subclasses and feat trees, Shadowdark keeps things lean. Each class has a handful of core abilities, with progression tied to random talent rolls every other level. These talents, which might grant a bonus to hit, a new spell, or a unique ability, keep character advancement unpredictable and exciting. There's no min-maxing here, just the thrill of the dice shaping your character's destiny.

Combat in Shadowdark is lightning-fast, thanks to the streamlined classes and rules. A typical 5e combat can drag on for an hour as players parse their myriad abilities. In Shadowdark, fights are quick and deadly, often resolved in minutes. Character creation is equally breezy, taking mere minutes compared to the hours some 5e builds demand. I rolled up a Thief in under 10 minutes, and by the end, I was itching to dive into the dungeon. This simplicity doesn't sacrifice depth; it amplifies it by putting the focus on player decisions rather than character sheet minutiae.

Shadowdark reintroduces a sense of primal fear to TTRPGs through its real-time torch mechanic. Torches burn for one hour of real-world time, and when they go out, the GM rolls on the Random Encounter Table every turn. This rule is a masterstroke, forcing players to manage their light sources and plan ahead, an art nearly forgotten in modern TTRPGs where darkvision is ubiquitous. In my games, the ticking clock of the torch timer cut down on table talk and kept everyone on edge. The moment a torch flickered out during a combat encounter, the tension was palpable as players scrambled to light another. Inventory slots are limited, so choosing between carrying extra torches or loot adds another layer of strategic depth.

The game's lethality is another hallmark. In 5e, death is a challenge; in AD&D, it was a possibility ("if you die"). In Shadowdark, it's an inevitability ("when you die"). Hit points are low, and the dying mechanic ensures that zero HP is a death sentence unless luck or allies intervene. The book even encourages players to create multiple characters to save time when the inevitable happens. This brutal approach might sound daunting, but it's exhilarating. Every choice matters, and every victory feels earned. I've watched players shift from reckless 5e-style heroics to cautious, creative problem-solving after their first Shadowdark character bit the dust.

Shadowdark isn't flawless. Its minimalist approach might feel too sparse for players who love the crunchy character-building of 5e or Pathfinder. The lack of a skill system can be jarring for modern players, and the random talent rolls might frustrate those who prefer complete control over their character's progression. But these are minor quibbles in the face of what Shadowdark achieves.

For new players, Shadowdark is the ideal introduction to TTRPGs. Its clear rules and

compact design make it accessible, while its depth ensures it's not a one-and-done experience. For veterans, it's a perfect side game, a lean, mean dungeon-crawling machine that captures the thrill of old-school D&D. I've run Shadowdark for both newbies and grizzled grognards, and it's been a hit every time. The rules are so simple that learning them takes an afternoon, leaving you free to focus on the story and the scares.

Shadowdark RPG is a triumph, a game that dares to challenge modern TTRPG conventions by embracing the gritty, dangerous spirit of the genre's roots. Kelsey Dionne has crafted a system that's accessible yet deep, simple yet thrilling. It's a love letter to the dungeon crawls of yesteryear, modernized for today's players. Whether you're a newbie lighting your first torch or a veteran yearning for the days when death lurked around every corner, Shadowdark delivers an experience that's hard to forget. Lift your blade, light your torch, and plunge into the Shadowdark; just don't expect to come out unscathed.

Choice

I can't make people change.
I can't make people listen.
I can't make people choose.

I can only help.
I can only listen.
I can only support.

Everything I've done.
Everything I've experienced.
Everything I've overcome.

Life is a choice

Stephanie Gruchow
(@SapphireKaneq1)

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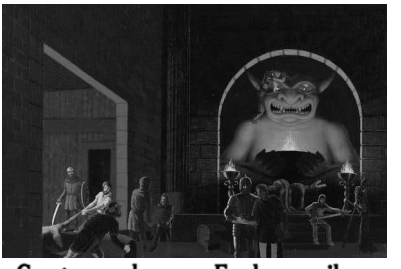

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Defining Sandbox and Railroading

Cutting Through the Confusion in Tabletop Gaming

In recent discussions across the TTRPG community, one topic has been creating a lot of confusion: the difference between Sandbox and Railroading. Many people seem to be having the same conversation, yet they're working with completely different definitions. Two people can describe nearly identical ways of running a game, but one will call it a Sandbox while the other calls it Railroading.

This usually comes down to how we define these terms. Here are some clearer definitions that might help make these discussions more consistent.

Definition of Railroading

Railroading is a game mastering style where the Dungeon Master (DM) controls the narrative and player actions, significantly reducing or eliminating player agency. Players are introduced to problems with only one pre-determined solution by the DM, neglecting the players' creativity and ingenuity. The game follows a linear path where player choices have little to no impact on the outcome or progression of the story.

Definition of Sandbox

Sandbox describes a game setting where players have substantial freedom to explore, make decisions, and solve problems in multiple ways. The narrative is less linear, allowing players to influence the story through their actions, creativity, and strategic choices. Challenges can be approached from various angles, with outcomes reflecting the players' decisions rather than adhering to a single solution laid out by the DM.

Let's explore examples of certain scenarios and how those scenarios would look if they use the above definitions of Railroading and Sandbox.

Scenario One: Players have been locked in the prison; they need to escape.

Railroad Definition: The DM introduces a guard; the only way to escape the prison is to convince the guard to let them go. When

players try to explore the cell, they are unable to find anything. Each attempt at threatening, ambushing, or outsmarting the guard is automatically failed or dismissed by the Dungeon Master, and the guard's attitude doesn't change regardless of the players' actions. Players are forced to listen to the Guard's story and sympathize with him to convince him to let them go.

As you can see, this scenario is pure railroading; players need to learn about this "masterfully written" backstory of the guard and are forced to convince him to let them go, as each other attempt is automatically failed.

Sandbox Definition: Players are left to their own devices, with the DM carefully describing the cell. They have been introduced to a problem – being locked in the cell – and a goal – the need to escape from prison. At this point, the DM will let players brainstorm their plans, even the wildest Hollywood ideas, like using a spoon to dig into the rock, are not dismissed by the Dungeon Master, and attempts at it are allowed. Players are free to use any tactic they come up with while interacting with the guard, but their actions have consequences; a failed attempt at attacking the guard can lead to punishment and reduce the trust of the guard towards the players.

The Sandbox scenario allows players to tackle the problem on their own. If the players are stuck, the DM can sneak in some tips, like, "You spot a mouse that runs through a hole in the wall; you lean over and feel a breeze coming through the hole; you look in and see light; it appears there's a cave behind the wall." By doing this, you've suggested to the players that this might be their way out, but you don't force them to break the wall, nor do you say this is the only way; you give them a hint when they are stuck, but it's their agency whether they will use that route or not.

Now, think for a bit: which of those two scenarios would bring more interesting solutions? Is one better than the other? Will solving a problem by the players be more rewarding when it's their idea that brings fruits? I will not answer those questions for you because this article is not about which way of playing is better but rather a way to establish proper definitions of what Railroading and Sandbox are. I would like to bring one more example that was explored on our Discord server.

Scenario Two:

A Wizard falls into a hole and survives (yes, I know we're overreaching here; what kind of Wizard would survive falling damage from 10 meters? For my US brethren out there, that's 32 feet, standard feet, no shoes. Oy! Gnome! Stop tip-toeing; I said standard Elf feet, not your tiny baby feet!). So yes, the Wizard falls into a hole and survives. Now, we need to get out.

Railroad Scenario: The DM announces that the Wizard needs to use a series of Dexterity Checks to climb up from the hole. The Wizard realizes he has a teleport scroll in his backpack and wishes to cast it. The DM says, "This hole is covered in an Anti-Magic field; you can't cast spells," preventing the player's reasonable idea of using his resources and forcing him onto the Dexterity Challenge.

As we can see, the DM on the fly created an obstacle that is there without reason to prevent the Wizard from using his idea, which does not match the established scenario that the DM prepared. Player agency was taken away from them.

Sandbox Scenario: The DM suggests that the Wizard, after checking the wall, can try to climb up but will require a Dexterity check to succeed. The Wizard realizes he has a teleport scroll in his backpack and wishes to cast it. The DM congratulates the player for keeping tabs on what he has in his inventory and allows the use of the spell according to the spell rules.

In the Sandbox scenario, the DM will not create random obstacles to prevent player ideas from bearing fruit; in fact, the DM will prompt other players to also be aware of what items they have in their inventory, as you never know when certain items might come in handy.

Two scenarios and two ways of playing; it's up to you to decide what you find more appealing.

Lastly, I wish to bring some clarity to what a Sandbox experience is. Sandbox games mean that players are presented with sand, and they can build whatever they want with it; the DM will give them tools like shovels, buckets, and sandbox molds to make it easier.

Sandbox doesn't mean players are left to their own devices and can do whatever they want, because in this scenario, you leave players with nothing to do. The Dungeon Master builds scenarios in the world and lets players tackle them as they fit. For example, I will bring my campaign that I run right now using the Shadowdark system. The players have just finished their first adventure, and now the open Sandbox game begins; they can do what they want, but before they can choose, a few events happen:

A Raven brings a letter to one of my players; it's from her father, who wishes to see her as he has decided on her husband, and introductions are needed.

- As players are in the tavern, they hear a rumor of a series of murders happening in town, with a big reward for anyone who finds the culprit.
- While speaking with the Tavern Lady, they learn that a prominent mage has been missing for days, and no one can find her. Weirdly enough, the players encountered her an hour ago, but when they speak, it turns out each saw a different woman; one player saw a blonde Elf, while another saw a curly redhead.
- Lastly, there are rumors of treasure in a nearby dungeon, but no one has been able to reach it.

Players now have four different plot hooks to follow. If they try to solve the murder mystery, the woman they encountered will cover her tracks. If they focus on the woman, another murder will happen. If they ignore the player's father, he will be angry. They can pick any of the four scenarios, but all four will progress regardless, creating new leads and scenarios. Players can freely move from one to another. Some scenarios will reach a dead-end until players find other clues. It's a living world filled with possibilities, but players are never left without options because every event in the world is a potential scenario for players to follow.

This is what I consider a Sandbox Game.

I do hope this short-ish article will make the definition of Railroading a bit more consistent, as I do believe the biggest issue in the debate of Railroading vs. Sandbox these days is the difference in definitions.

CITIES WITHOUT NUMBER

A Cyberpunk Sandbox RPG of Megacity Intrigue

By Kevin Crawford, creator of Stars Without Number and Worlds Without Number

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To Linnea,

I have been informed of your recent success in passing the Academy Exams. This is but a single step in the long journey that is your duty to our family's name. The position you are now poised to contend for among the Magna Vander is of utmost importance. It is not merely a title; it is a cornerstone for our family's continued dominance within the nobility of Circulus Magna.

Your potential rise to such a station will solidify our influence and extend our reach far beyond what has been achieved in generations past. However, should you fail in this endeavor, alternative measures must be in place. Thus, I have compiled a list of candidates suitable for marriage. These individuals possess the lineage, intellect, and political clout that would enhance the purity and potency of our bloodline. Their offspring with you would carry the promise of surpassing even the expectations set for you, ensuring the continuation of our family's prestige.

You have been raised to excel in all aspects, to think strategically and act decisively. This is how one achieves a place among the elite. The list I provide is not for sentimental consideration but for the calculated advancement of our lineage. Your choices will either affirm or tarnish the legacy you have been groomed to uphold.

I expect your decisions to reflect our family's highest standards. Your actions from this point forward must be calculated to maximize our influence, either through personal achievement or through strategic matrimony.

I await your next report on your progress with the expectation of perfection.

Yours in obligation,

Eledhwenor Galadrielion Silmarïenthas





Meet James Fir: a modern ex-soldier who unexpectedly finds himself in the Norse afterlife. Rejected by the gods, he willingly sheds his humanity in pursuit of power and that which he craves most - Hrein.

Now meet Hrein: a young valkyrie who finds sweet first love while escorting a brave warrior to his final destination. But for her, idyllic dreams turn to horror when he takes on a monstrous new form, before she is captured and enslaved by enemy forces. That he will come for her is a certainty, but what will happen once he holds the leash to her collar, and she finds herself subject to his dark desires?

The Einherjar is a Harem Fantasy series by J.L. Harrie, that blends themes like Cultivation, LitRPG, and BDSM in a unique and thoughtful manner. Pick up the first five books of this ongoing series to follow the epic story of James and Hrein, as they explore a world where Earth's myths and legends come to life.

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The Dwarven Ember

Recipie from Elven Tavern

A band of dwarven traders once stayed at the inn after a long journey from the mountain halls. They shared stories of their forges and the strong spirits that warmed them after long days of crafting. One evening, their leader showed me how they make a rich, warming drink using their finest fire-water and the sweet syrup from the trees near their halls. I adapted it slightly for our guests. The Dwarven Ember is now a favourite on cold nights — bold, comforting, and with a touch of sweetness that lingers like the warmth of a dwarven hearth.

The Dwarven Ember

A rich, warming, and slightly sweet whiskey cocktail inspired by dwarven forges and mountain halls.

Ingredients (makes 1 cocktail):

- 60 ml Bourbon or Rye whiskey
- 15 ml Pure maple syrup
- 2 dashes Angostura bitters
- Garnish: Wide strip of orange peel and a cinnamon stick

Method:

1. In a mixing glass, combine the whiskey, maple syrup, and bitters.
2. Fill with ice and stir well for 20–30 seconds until properly chilled and diluted.
3. Strain into a rocks glass over a large ice cube (or serve neat if preferred).
4. Express the orange peel over the drink and drop it in.
5. Add the cinnamon stick as garnish.

Best served after a long day or by the fire. The maple and spice give it a hearty, comforting character.

Sora Miyuki
Keeper of the Elven Maid Inn

Unleash Your Imagination

The Forgotten Art of Dungeon Mastering

As a Game Master or Dungeon Master, have you ever had a situation where you prepared amazing photos of your non-player characters, created detailed maps of dungeons, and filled them with miniatures, only for players to stare at their phones during role-playing or combat scenarios? Have you ever wondered why, despite all the hard work you put in, your players are unable to immerse themselves in those situations? All that hard work, only for your players not to appreciate it?

Well, let me share something with you: it's not their fault, it's yours.

Now, before you get angry, hear me out. Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson in the Dungeons & Dragons Basic Set from 1977 wrote:

"Dungeons & Dragons is a set of rules for fantastic medieval wargames, campaigns, or adventure gaming. It is meant to provide an unlimited framework and background for the exercise of imagination and creativity."

And before you say, "That was 50 years ago," the 5e Player's Handbook also says:

"Dungeons & Dragons is a game of adventure, exploration, and imagination. You are a character in a story, shaping the narrative through your choices and actions."

Dungeons & Dragons is a game of Imagination and Creativity; how very simple, yet accurate, a definition of what every single pen-and-paper game is. Can you see the mistake you've been making? By introducing flashy portraits, colorful battle maps, and amazingly painted miniatures, you're leaving little for the players' imagination.

Don't take this the wrong way; your NPC sheet should have a visualization of the NPC, but it should be for you and only for you. For the players, you should describe the look of your NPC:

"Kairi Asteria stands tall and formidable, her elven heritage evident in her gracefully pointed ears peeking out from beneath her vibrant red hair. This hair, a cascade of fiery locks, seems almost alive with the energy of the flames she so loves, often emitting wisps of smoke as if it's still smoldering from her last magical incantation. Her piercing green eyes, bright and intense, seem to flicker with the same fire that she commands, giving her a gaze that can both

intimidate and captivate. Her skin, pale with a subtle elven glow, bears the marks of her craft—small burns and patches of soot that she wears like badges of honor. Her mage robes, dark as the night sky, are tailored to her form, adorned with intricate silver embroidery that glows subtly when magic is in the air. These robes are not just for show; they are practical, with reinforced areas to protect against the heat of her fiery spells. Her posture is always confident, almost regal, yet there's a wildness to her, an untamed spirit that mirrors the untamed nature of fire itself."

This description is quite overwhelming, but now your players can imagine her look. Each one of them can create an image of the NPC in their minds, and because you've only provided verbal descriptions, you're prompting your players to make notes, thereby steering their focus to listen to you, not check messages on their phones.

Such a simple solution: reduce the resources of your players so they can create their own gaming resources. You're building immersion in your world not by showing but by telling, and due to how the human brain works, your players will start using their imagination to visualize what you've described.

Another very simple thing is mapping. Your players are visiting a mansion, dungeon, storage house, castle, or crypt; how do you show them the layout of the dungeon? By placing in front of them an amazing-looking virtual tabletop (VTT) that shows every detail of the room? Or maybe you'll build an amazing miniature set with doors and rooms in front of the players? It shows the halls, the treasure room, kitchen, armory, but... where is the room for imagination?

How about placing a white canvas in the middle of the table and providing players with markers? Then, when players arrive at a new location, simply tell them:

"The mansion's foyer is a grand spectacle, with a ceiling arching to fifteen feet, creating an awe-inspiring space. The room is enclosed by dark, gleaming wood panels, while long hallways stretch out on either side, their paths covered by deep red carpets that contrast beautifully with the polished wooden floors beneath. Red curtains hang from the ceiling, their luxurious fabric pooling on the floor, adding color and privacy. Flanking the foyer, four doors on each side stand, their designs intricate and inviting, suggesting the chambers they guard. Opposite the entrance, three doors promise further exploration, while at the end of each hallway, another door waits, hinting at more secrets. The mansion is lit by a magnificent chandelier, its candles casting a warm, flickering light that dances across the room, creating an ambiance of timeless elegance. The scent of wax mingles with the faint aroma of aged wood, enhancing the room's historic charm."

Let them create their map on their own. In the past, during AD&D 1e, each group had one or two "Mappers" whose job was to create maps as they explored dungeons. The Dungeon Master had his map behind the DM screen, and only he could see it.

The same goes for battle maps; you don't need to spend hours in mapping software creating a battle map for your next session. Provide players with a board that they will need to fill themselves. Let them create the battle map; explain with description the size of the room they will fight in, tell them about the environment. As they place elements on their handcrafted map, they'll start developing strategies on how to use the environment to their advantage. They'll forget about their phones and social media, immersing themselves in the game like never before!

A certain smart-ass from Ancient China who went by the name Confucius said:

"Tell me and I will forget, show me and I may remember; involve me and I will understand."

Involve your players more in your game, let them use their imagination to its fullest extent possible; this is how you capture your players. Not by showing them all the fancy stuff, but by letting them use their imagination.

Don't believe me? Just try it.



Interview with

Daniel D. Fox

Mind behind Zweihänder RPG

Today, I'm thrilled to sit down with Daniel D. Fox, the visionary creator behind Zweihänder Grim & Perilous RPG, a tabletop role-playing game that has captivated fans with its gritty, low-fantasy take on adventure, survival, and moral ambiguity. Drawing from a rich tapestry of historical and fantastical influences, Zweihänder stands out in the TTRPG landscape for its emphasis on flawed heroes, perilous mechanics, and a world where every decision carries weight. Daniel's work has not only earned critical acclaim but has also built a dedicated community eager for more grimdark tales.

A special thanks goes out to Kyle from the Nerdcognito Podcast for introducing me to Daniel and making this conversation possible. Your passion for the genre truly bridges creators and enthusiasts alike. Now, let's dive into the questions...

Elven Maid Inn: Can you tell us a bit about your background in tabletop role-playing games and how it led you to create Zweihänder?

Daniel D. Fox: I've been rolling dice since the late 80s. I'm 48 now, so it's been quite a journey. My first RPG book was the AD&D Monster Manual. I was nine, and my friends and I used it to fight monsters in the sandbox without the faintest clue how the game was really supposed to work.

When I turned eleven, my mom bought me the Dungeon Master's Guide and Keep on the Borderlands. That's when everything clicked, and I finally understood what D&D was about. From then on, it became a cornerstone of my life, both as a kid and an adult. As a dyslexic reader, D&D didn't just spark my imagination; it became a foundation for how I learned, and ultimately shaped the path to a very successful career outside of gaming.

EMI: What was the initial spark that inspired the idea for Zweihänder TTRPG? Was there a specific moment or experience that made you decide to develop your own system?

Daniel D. Fox: In 2015, during a rough patch while going through a divorce, I decided to channel all its negative energy into something constructive. I had never written a game before, but had been a heavily kit-bashed version of D&D & Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay that leaned into horror.

My friends had been urging me to write my own game for some time, and after several months, I made the decision to create a game that was cathartic, different from D&D, and that brought forward the same "life is cheap and the world is cruel" vibe I loved in films, only reimagined for modern players. That drive is what eventually became Zweihänder. I took a chance on the Kickstarter platform in 2017, and the rest, as they say, is history.

EMI: Zweihänder is often described as a "grimdark" fantasy RPG. What does "grimdark" mean to you, and why did you choose to emphasize that tone in your game?

Daniel D. Fox: To me, grimdark isn't about being edgy just for shock value. It's about flawed characters making tough choices in a world that doesn't care about them. It's grounded, messy, and morally complex. That tone just suited the kinds of stories I wanted to tell at the table. And I believe it's a tone that only a few tabletop RPGs truly convey through their mechanics.

EMI: What were the primary inspirations behind Zweihänder? Did you draw from literature, films, other RPGs, or historical elements?

Daniel D. Fox: What I wanted with Zweihänder was a world that felt like it could have existed in medieval history, just one where magic and monsters lurked in the shadows.

My inspirations were all over the place: history books, WFRP, Ravenloft, The Witcher books, Game of Thrones (before it went off the rails), and the old Maelstrom RPG. On the video game side, it was Castlevania, Vagrant Story, and Tactics Ogre.

For films, think Hammer Horror, Brotherhood of the Wolf, Black Death, and Conan.

EMI: How does Zweihänder's setting differ from traditional high-fantasy worlds like those in Dungeons & Dragons? What unique elements did you incorporate to make it stand out?

Daniel D. Fox: No shining kingdoms or chosen heroes here. The world is more mud and blood, with religion, politics, and superstition weighing as heavily as swords and sorcery. It's more about survival and consequences than saving the world.

EMI: One of the core mechanics in Zweihänder is the Chaos Die system. Can you explain how it works and why you designed it that way?

Daniel D. Fox: In ZWEIHANDER First Edition, the Chaos Die adds unpredictability and tension to the game. It functions as a die that increases suspense and can cause negative effects when luck is against you. In ZWEIHANDER Reforged, this approach has been refined by clearly defining what happens when you critically fail a roll.

EMI: What makes Zweihänder's character creation process different from other TTRPGs? How does it encourage players to build flawed, realistic characters?

Daniel D. Fox: You don't begin as a hero, you build a lifepath, similar to the concept in *Traveller*. You roll into a background, encounter a supernatural event, and that experience pushes you toward a career like blasphemer, zealot, sellsword, or slayer.

At the start, you're just an ordinary person trying to survive, but the world keeps pulling you into conflict. The result is characters who feel grounded and flawed, with imperfections that actually matter in play. It's very much a "from the gutter to greatness" journey.

EMI: In what ways does Zweihänder handle combat differently compared to systems like Pathfinder or Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay, which it's often compared to?

Daniel D. Fox: Combat in ZWEIHANDER is deadly but streamlined. You don't need minis or grids. It's fast, brutal, and every fight can leave scars, both physical and mental. The focus is on stakes, not math. Instead of tracking Wounds or hit points, the game uses a Damage & Peril Threshold system with natural language terms to describe the severity of someone's injuries. It avoids the odd abstraction of HP numbers and replaces them with conditions that feel more intuitive and true to life.

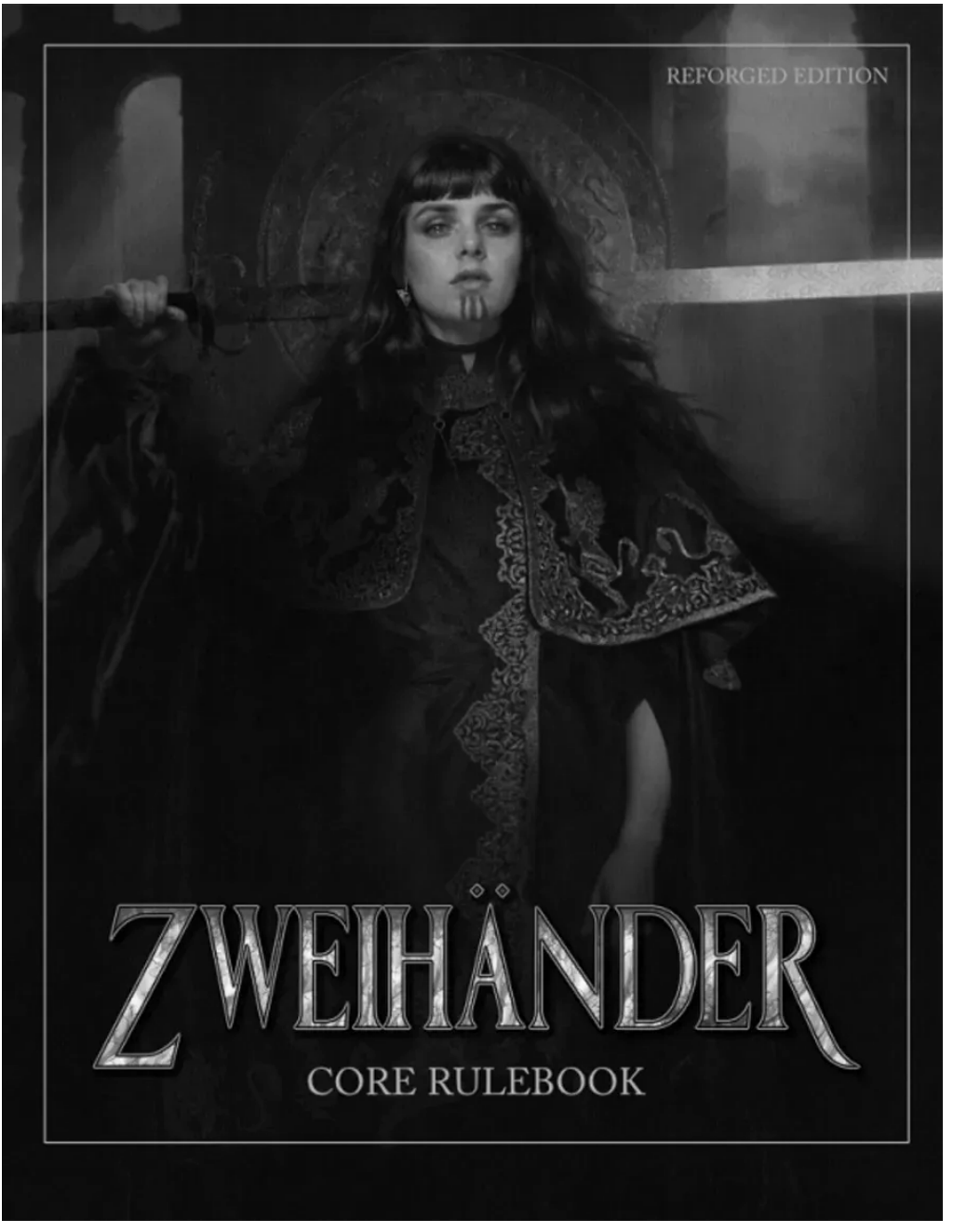
We were the first to bring forward the "3 Action Point Economy," so every action you take has an impact. You trade in Action Points to attack, move, disarm foes, choke them to death, perform stunts, charge forward, use your words as weapons, and more. I wanted the action economy to be flexible enough that a scholar might not be as powerful as a sellsword, but can still contribute to battle in ways beyond firing a blunderbuss or swinging a sword.

EMI: Zweihänder emphasizes social and psychological elements, like Corruption and Peril. How do these mechanics enhance the storytelling aspect of the game?

Daniel D. Fox: They ensure that choices remain meaningful. Corruption reveals the moral cost of your actions, while Peril shows how the world wears you down physically and mentally. Both encourage players to embrace role-playing consequences instead of just pursuing loot.

EMI: What role does magic play in Zweihänder, and how does it differ from more "heroic" magic systems in other TTRPGs?

Daniel D. Fox: Magic is dangerous, unreliable, and feared. Unlike heroic systems, where wizards save the day, in ZWEIHANDER, casting spells could literally ruin your life. It's powerful but always comes with a cost. Every spell has a unique critical success mechanic and critical failure mechanic. There isn't a universal table for rolling. It feels more like *DCC* in that sense, but with many more spells and risks.


REFORGED EDITION
ZWEIHÄNDER
CORE RULEBOOK

EMI: Can you share some of the challenges you faced while developing Zweihänder, particularly in balancing its gritty realism with fun gameplay?

Daniel D. Fox: The biggest challenge was balancing realism with fun. If it's too gritty, it feels like punishment; if it's too loose, you lose the tone. Finding that middle ground took years of playtesting. Fortunately, my weekly gaming group was very understanding and willing to work with a new character sheet and rules each week until the system was dialed in right.

EMI: How has the community response to Zweihänder evolved since its release? Have player feedback influenced any updates or expansions?

Daniel D. Fox: It's been incredible. Early on, players were excited to see a modern take on low fantasy. Over time, their feedback shaped errata, rewrites, and even new supplements. The community has kept the game alive and thriving. It's also the biggest reason behind the second edition of ZWEIHANDER Reforged, which has raised a little over $232k through Backerkit and Kickstarter. It's the most successful campaign the game has had.

EMI: What sets Zweihänder apart from other indie TTRPGs in terms of its design philosophy? Is there a key principle that guided your decisions?

Daniel D. Fox: Player agency. Tough choices shape the dice roll and risk, but also the story. The key principle was always "consequence matters." So, the mechanics support that by allowing the expenditure of Fortune and Misfortune between players and the GM at the table.

EMI: Looking back, is there anything about Zweihänder's core rules that you'd change if you were starting over today?

Daniel D. Fox: Yeah, I'd streamline some of the early rules. The first edition was too bloated in narrative, with mechanics hidden deep in the paragraphs. I attribute this to it being my first time writing a tabletop RPG. Since then, I've moved toward leaner, faster systems in my design work. ZWEIHANDER Starter Kit in 2022 and now the Reforged edition in 2025 reflect that change and growth.

EMI: What are your future plans for the Zweihänder universe? Are there any new supplements, editions, or spin-offs in the works?

Daniel D. Fox: ZWEIHANDER Reforged Edition is scheduled for December 2025 with improved mechanics and new content. It also cleaves off its connective tissue from WFRP, establishing its own tone. Additionally, I am developing supplements and third-party support to expand the universe in the directions fans have asked for (Gangs of Kahabro, a medieval gang-based RPG that's heavily inspired by the movie The Warriors). Nocturne Gothic Horror is an OSR game I am working on now, building off of where WotC abandoned Ravenloft. I also have a major license I am securing for a proposed 2026 Kickstarter.

EMI: Over a year ago, you were a guest on the Nerdcognito Podcast with Kyle and Ryan, where you discussed considering a module similar to Oriental Adventures for Zweihänder, inspired by Chinese and Japanese mythos. Can you recap why you ultimately decided to cancel that project due to concerns about cultural appropriation?

Daniel D. Fox: At the time, I realized I didn't have the cultural grounding to do it respectfully. It felt like I'd be borrowing aesthetics without understanding the deeper meaning. Rather than risk it, I stepped away.

EMI: Building on that podcast discussion, how do you define the line between drawing inspiration from real-world cultures and mythos for fantasy settings versus crossing into cultural appropriation?

For me, it all comes down to intent and respect. Are you just using surface-level tropes, or are you genuinely engaging with the culture? If it feels like mere window dressing, it's appropriation.

EMI: In the context of Zweihänder or fantasy TTRPGs in general, could you give examples of how creators can respectfully incorporate elements from diverse cultures without appropriating them?

Daniel D. Fox: Include people from that culture in the creation process. Don't just Google a myth and insert it; treat it with the same respect you'd give your own heritage. Flames of Freedom exemplifies this approach. The original manuscript from Richard Iorio approached the topic from a scholarly perspective. Still, I also felt it was important to include the lived experiences of Native American tribes in the manuscript, specifically writers from those tribes, who possess a grounded cultural understanding of aspects that scholars may never have been aware of and could uniquely speak to those experiences. It was by far the most challenging game I've ever worked on.

EMI: Is there a chance that we will see Zweihänder expansion into eastern mythos?

Daniel D. Fox: Not directly from me. I prefer supporting creators from those cultures to make it themselves and spotlight their voices. That feels more authentic.

EMI: Finally, what advice would you give to aspiring TTRPG designers who want to create games with deep, culturally inspired lore while navigating sensitivity issues like those you've encountered?

Daniel D. Fox: Make the game you want to play, but don't do it in isolation. If you're drawing from cultures outside your own, bring those voices to the table early and listen to their feedback. It not only helps you avoid blind spots but also makes the game richer, stronger, and more authentic.

EMI: Thank you so much, Daniel, for joining us and sharing your passion for Zweihänder Grim & Perilous RPG. Your insights into its grimdark inspirations, unique mechanics, and thoughtful approach to cultural elements in fantasy have been truly enlightening. It's creators like you who keep the TTRPG community vibrant and evolving.

Before we sign off, could you tell our readers where they can purchase *Zweihänder* RPG, along with any expansions or related materials? Also, how can they stay updated on your future projects and connect with the Zweihänder community?

Daniel D. Fox: You can purchase ZWEIHANDER on DriveThruRPG, Amazon, Barnes & Noble, or at your local game store. Demonic and Chaos expansions like Main Gauche are available, and the upcoming Reforged Edition can be preordered at https://sllswrd.games. For updates, join the community on Discord (https://discord.gg/Zweihander). We're 2,400 users strong and a politics-free zone to discuss dark fantasy gaming.

No Heroes Without Horrors

The Dark Foundations of Fantasy

Let me start this article by pointing out the elephant in the room: if you think that orcs, goblins, demons, or any other fictional fantasy race represent minorities from human history, do yourself a favor, book a ticket to a mental asylum. Being unable to distinguish the real world from fiction is a mental problem. It was back in the '80s/'90s when the Satanic Panic was burning fantasy books, and it's now where mentally disabled people try to find offense and "fix" it in every part of entertainment.

Now, making sure that's clear, we can dive deep into demons and monsters in fiction.

Question: Why does evil exist in fiction?

Evil in fantasy fiction provides a clear antagonist or force that the protagonist must overcome, thus driving the plot forward. This conflict not only creates suspense and excitement but also allows for character development. Characters are tested by evil, revealing their strengths, weaknesses, virtues, and flaws.

There is no Good without Evil, for each defines the other in the eternal dance of morality. Goodness shines brightest when contrasted against the backdrop of malevolence, much like the stars in the night sky. Without the presence of evil, the virtues of kindness, courage, and justice would have no context, no purpose to manifest. Similarly, there is no Shadow without Light. Shadows exist because light is cast upon objects, creating areas of darkness that outline and give form to the world around us.

And finally, there is no Hero without a Villain. A hero's journey is not just a path walked in solitude but one that requires an adversary to challenge and elevate them. The villain, with their schemes and dark intentions, forces the hero to rise, to grow, and to prove their worth. Without this opposition, the hero's qualities of bravery, sacrifice, and honor would remain untested, their story untold, their legacy unformed. The villain is not merely an obstacle but a necessary force that shapes the hero, defining their character through

conflict, much like light and shadow define each other. Together, they weave the narrative tapestry of struggle, redemption, and the human condition.

This is the case with "Frieren: Beyond Journey's End" and its depiction of demons. Many people fail to understand this: Demons in this story are depicted as emotionless monsters that wish to feed on humans. Many viewed the anime and saw demons as victims, but have you ever listened to or read the lore conveyed through the entire series? Demons are descendants of an unnamed species of monsters; they evolved to develop a more humanoid appearance and the ability to mimic human behavior more accurately as a way to better trick their prey, yes, prey: humans.

When one very powerful demon emerged and united demons under one banner, he called himself the Demon King. He waged war against other races, especially humans, reducing their numbers to a third over the course of thousands of years. But not only humans; elves were also targeted by demons. Frieren's own village was destroyed; she was the lone survivor when Flamme rescued her from certain death. Let this sink in: Demons killed everyone Frieren loved.

The Demon King was killed by Hero Himmel and his party, which included Frieren. After that, the demons scattered, serving under high-ranking demons. Now, before we move forward, let's talk about what demons from "Frieren: Beyond Journey's End" do with humans. Well, despite being omnivores, many demons eat humans for sustenance, just like their unnamed ancestors. Demons view humans primarily as prey to be killed and consumed, even though they can survive without doing so.

Like all monsters, demons are anti-social creatures by nature, preferring to be alone and avoiding contact with other members of their species beyond what's necessary. They only form groups to fight against mankind, refusing to form any deep bonds with each other. Due to their individualistic nature, the concept of family is foreign to them, and they will often abandon their children once they are born.

Great Mage Flamme explains that demons are by their very nature liars and will talk to humans to manipulate them into dropping their guard and sparing them, though they only know how to use words without understanding their meaning. Aura, for example, feigned a peace mission to destroy Graf Granat's Domain. Or let's talk about that memory of Frieren when she was traveling with Himmel, and a young demon girl would cry for "mother" whenever cornered in an attempt to gather pity from humans who might otherwise kill her. She succeeded in her lie; she was spared by Himmel against Frieren's warning. Not only that, she was given a home, food, and shelter; a mayor of a village offered her a family. What did this demon girl do? She killed him and took his granddaughter hostage, is that the behavior of a good person? When Himmel rescued the captured granddaughter, Frieren dealt the final blow to the demon girl. Frieren asked her, "So why do you use the word 'Mom'?" She replies, "Because it stops you from killing us. A wonderful, magical word..." Yet throughout the entire confrontation, the demon girl showed no emotions, no fear, no sadness, nothing. So many people incorrectly interpreted this scene as her using the word "Mom" out of fear, but the truth is, this statement only reflects the manipulative nature of demons in the show.

So many people fall for this; those who watched the show and call Frieren "racist" don't realize they've become victims of "Fictional Manipulation," falling for the demons' lies. I must say, this design of demons and creatures that resemble demons in other media, like tieflings in D&D, is amazing. It's so good that I transferred it to my Homebrew World, yes, I've locked tieflings from players to create such amazing villains like Frieren has, and it worked amazingly well in my campaign.

Let's move away from Frieren to a topic that's a bit closer to my followers: pen-and-paper games, specifically, Monster Races, or more specifically, races that are based on monsters. Orcs, goblins, tieflings, drow, minotaurs, bugbears, yuan-ti, and a plethora of other races were created based on creatures in the Monster Manual.

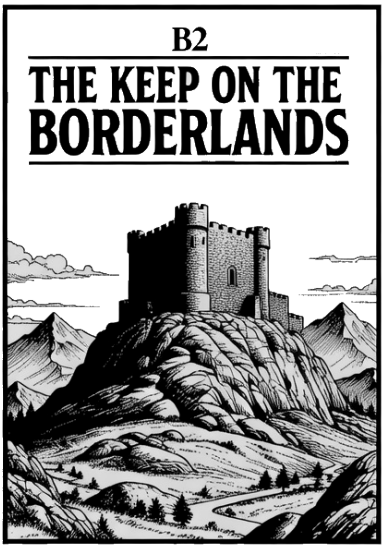
I will keep it short: I hate Dungeons & Dragons' approach to races and how "common" certain races become in worlds. Those "Monster Races" should never be part of the "civilized" world, and let's make this clear, I am not against players who want to play those races; in fact, I would always encourage at least one player to pick one of them. Why? Because of Drizzt, because of Hellboy, because of heroic journeys where a member of an "evil race" overcomes all odds and wins the trust of people who fear and hate them. This is one of the most beautiful journeys a hero can have. But it can be tarnished so easily. Drizzt's journey was amazing because he was able to escape the grasp of Lolth in a world where the majority of drow were evil, where surface races saw drow as pure evil, and the same story applies to Hellboy, a son of the Devil raised by humans, fighting to protect humanity from his own kind. Their journey matters because they are "one of a kind" and not "one of many."

Keep Monster Races away from your cities, make them evil so your players have their Hero Journeys. Think about it for a moment: in "Baldur's Gate 3," an amazing video game, in Chapter 3, you go to a brothel and find what? Two drow selling themselves for gold. I was furious to the point I couldn't finish the game. Why? Because drow used to be unique, feared, and hated; their skin was black due to a curse from Lolth, they were sensitive to light, and the sun burned them. Yet here we are, we can ask them for a blow job.

The same story is with tieflings; we are bombarded with tieflings from left and right, and the only thing that did was decrease the "fear" when players meet a true demon or devil. D&D is a game of imagination, and when you get used to certain creatures, the fear is gone when you encounter the monsters those creatures are based on.

"The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown." - H.P. Lovecraft

Don't populate your world with monsters; let monsters be monsters, let monsters be evil, let monsters be the force that the protagonist must overcome.



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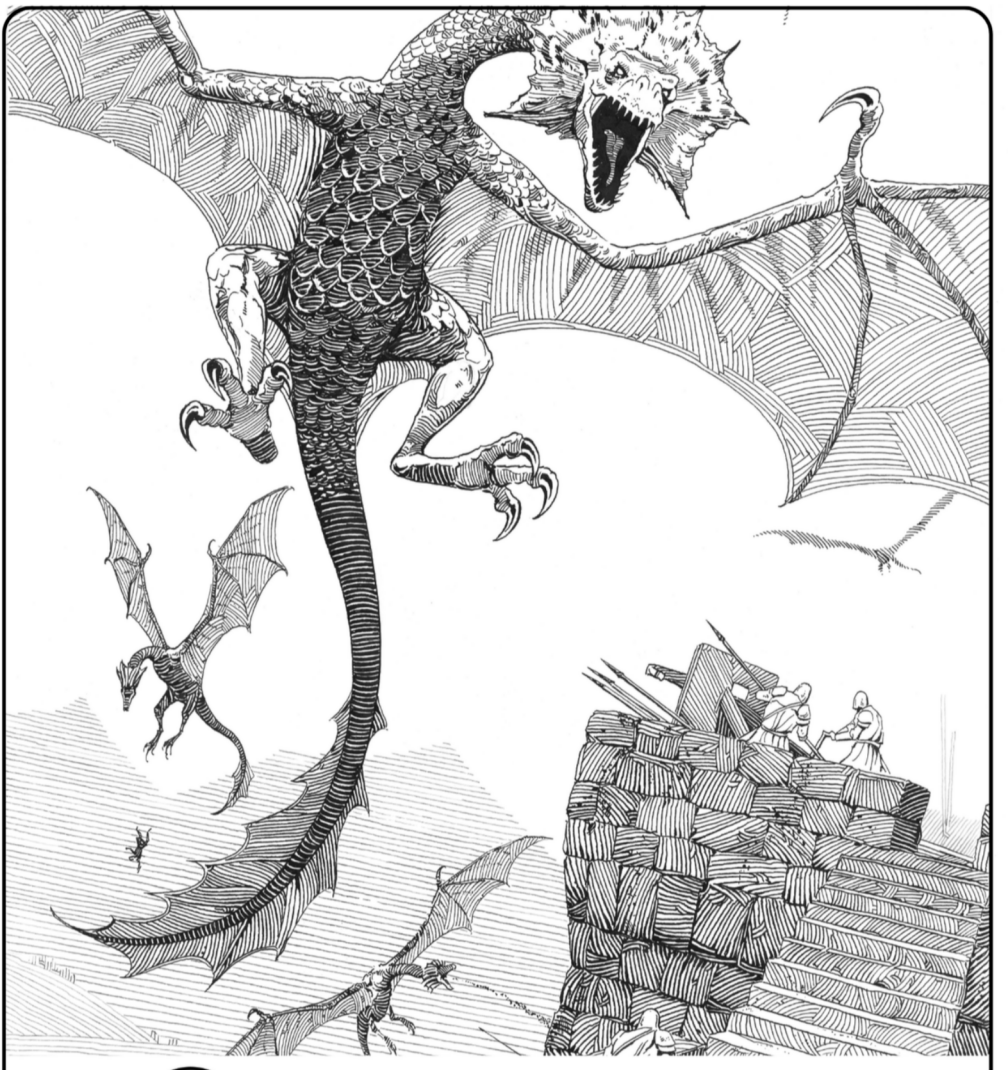

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To Dust and Glory

by
Oscar Pelka Barreto
and
Edgar Pelka Barreto

The neon lights glowed faintly, even on the three hundredth floor. Rick James' eyes glassed over as the pain kept flaring from his spine. Even just sitting in a wheelchair was agony. Even with the painkillers and everything else they had already given him it was still too much to bear.
"Rick James, the man of the year" a voice said, snapping Rick back into the room.
"Mr. Smith, great to meet you finally" Rick said with a grunt from the pain.
"You still struggling with that human level spine?" Smith asked with a smile that was more predatory than friendly.
"Yes, I...don't think I will ever be able to play in The Game any more, not in the Pure League anyway" Rick lamented, his career in the Pure League was over, and that meant only one thing.
"The Augmented League, wonderfully violent, no limitations everyone is Chromed. But you my friend, might just be the first Organic superstar" Smith said still smiling.
"Will the procedure fix...everything?" Rick asked, unable to hide the pain.
"Fix? No, no, we will make it better than it ever was. Trust me, after we are done, you will be the greatest there ever was, no Chromed player is even going to come close" Smith said as he began to wheel Rick away from the window.
"The only thing I ask as your trainer, is that you do everything I tell you. We don't have time for you to rest or take it easy, Ricky" Smith added.
"I...I don't care, as long as I get to play..." Rick said, the pain overwhelming his mind.
"Great, trust me, time will fly by faster than you can realize" Smith said with his predatory smile.

Rick blinked as he lay down on the grass. Artificial, but it felt real enough. Had to be fake as there was no sunlight or sprinklers. Then the numbness came, this time it was far worse than the last injury. He couldn't feel anything below his neck. Everything was gone, he couldn't move, he couldn't feel, he couldn't...
"Rick my boy you will be fine. I'll get you fixed up again in no time" Smith said with his predatory smile. Rick wanted to say something but his mouth failed to move.
"Don't say anything, I know today didn't go well. You could have died today. Told you that the Augmented League was vicious. These Chromed boys are nothing like the athletes you will face out in the real field" Smith add.

Rick made a grunt, it took everything he could to make the noise. Smith just continued to smile as a stretcher came over. In seconds Rick saw the lights of the operating theatre, he didn't know when they had cleaned him over, or what they were about to do, his head felt like it was made of wool. The last thing he remembered was the mask being

placed over his nose and mouth, one breath and he was out.

Rick woke up in the middle of the night. His hands were shaking. It took a few moments for him to calm himself down enough to think. It wasn't the spine, the operations had been a complete successes, it wasn't nerve damage, the stem cells had fixed that...
"I killed them..." Rick said unconsciously out loud. As the words escaped his mouth he couldn't stop the tears that were streaming from his eyes.

Rick glanced at the alarm clock, it was three in the morning, he would have to get up in an hour. Technically the Rest Machine had given him enough time to sleep, but his body still felt heavy. He was going to need the extra oxygen again. With a sigh Rick got up.

Three corpses in body bags yesterday. He had lost count of how many he had killed through accidents or... Rick stopped as his hands stopped shaking. He would need to take his pills soon, and then the rage would begin. Smith had promised him that this was the only way an Organic like himself could compete with those in the Augmented League. Rick looked at the mirror at the other end of his room, in the dark, he could still see the glare his face always made.

He wasn't going to go down again, five times had his spine been broken. Five times he had come to a hair's breadth from death. Those he had killed had been augmented, state of the art cybernetics, simulation training, AI decision making, if he couldn't take them on here in training he would stand no chance out there on the field.
"It's you or them..." Rick said to himself as he looked around the room. His eyesight had gotten a lot better, his mind was sharper, but it wasn't enough. With a sigh, he got up. He wasn't allowed even one drop of alcohol, he wasn't allowed to eat until Smith told him to, he couldn't drink without authorization. His sleep was chemically and mechanically induced, his days were endless hours of training and injections.
"All to be the best of the best. If it was easy, any idiot with a credit card would have done it by now" Rick said to himself as he got changed. Then calmly, like many days before him, Rick took out his phone and he ringed Smith. With a cheerful greeting his day would start, and like every other day, Smith would be there, every step of the way.

Emperor Agamemnon looked on, standing atop his favourite balcony, the glory of his capital. Lights shone like stars in the night sky, making it nearly impossible to tell where the heavens ended and the land began. There was an undisputed beauty to the grand design. His design. And yet he could tell that things were starting to slip out of his hand. Movements in the dark, from a simple whisper to worse. Agamemnon cracked a smile. That was what the game was all about.

"Sire, Surgeon Smith has made an application to submit a pure organic player into the Augmented League." Jeron, the emperor's messenger said.
"Smith?" Agamemnon asked.
"He's tried several times. All failures, but spectacular ones." Jeron said.
"Let him. It'll be amusing either way." Agamemnon said, "though he is augmented right?"
"Of course. Total biological reconstruction." Jeron said.
"Total?" Agamemnon asked.
"Yes, down to the genetics, apparently. Though many have been left vague for trade secrets purposes" Jeron informed.
"How exciting" Agamemnon said sarcastically.
"And if he wins?" Jeron asked.
"Then like it is granted to each winner; I shall spend an evening all alone with him in this very balcony." Agamemnon said.
"Smith has been associated with radical elements, maybe some caution is necessary" Jeron said.

"No" Agamemnon said, "I'm tired of all this cat and mouse games. If Smith can get an assassin that close to me, then so be it."

Jeron looked at Agamemnon for a moment, while the face of the emperor looked indeed

very tired, something else was afoot in his eyes. The old emperor's mind was as sharp as it had ever been. Maybe even sharper. He had survived countless assassination attempts, wars, civil wars and even intragalactic wars. Almost as old as humanity's star faring empire, he had been crowned the second emperor of humanity and had never left the throne since.

"Don't think too much about it, Jeron" Agamemnon said, "After all, it is not your duty to be in charge of security."
"But... sire... you have no head of security" Jeron protested.
"No, I don't" Agamemnon said with a sly smile.
"But..." Jeron protested.
"It is not your duty" Agamemnon said, waving his hand, "And our conversation has ended. Return to your post and collect any new messages."
"As you command, my lord" Jeron said, with a courteous bow and a heavy heart.

After Jeron had left, Agamemnon still looking out onto the city, tapped his wrist three times, a code that was known to only one other being. Raising from the motes of dust that hid in the corners of the balcony, rose a feminine figure, mostly out of empty air, outline by tiny specs of metallic dust: A micromachine artificial intelligence being.

"You summoned me, your majesty?" the being said.
"Yes, it seems another assassination attempt will happen soon" Agamemnon said.
"Shall I prevent it?" the creature said.
"No, we'll go with the Trojan Protocol instead." Agamemnon said.
"As you command" the being said, dispersing out of the air once more.

Rick smashed onto another of the Augmented Players. Their mechanical spine snapped like a dried twig, of course Rick was so overcome with his own rage that he didn't noticed it. Two more players rushed him, but their bodies would not survive either, as Rick charged forward and smashed his body onto theirs. With a sickly wet sound Rick reached the other side of the field for another score.

As Rick took a deep breath, his mind slowly came back to him. The crowd was cheering to the point of hoarseness. The score showed a clear lead, between his team and the opponents, although a single look to the field was all it took to know who had won. After all, more than half the players had been broken, one way or another, most wouldn't survive the night either. Rick couldn't stop the feeling of guilt.
"Nicely played Rick, that's the third team you have completely decimated, although the term might not be entirely appropriate" Smith said as he walked over.
"What do you mean, most of them won't survive!" Rick snapped back.
"Yes, but the term decimate, comes from Roman times, when one in ten were killed as punishment. My boy, you aren't taking one in ten, you are taking nine and leaving one to tell the tale of their encounter with you" Smith said with a dry chuckle.
"You made me into a killer" Rick spat, blood splattering with each word.
"No, no. I made you the best of the best. Do you think anyone else in the team could have performed anywhere near what you did?" Smith asked.
"They wouldn't have killed..." Rick tried to argue but Smith waived him off.
"You need to get ready for your grand meeting. Remember you just won the last galactic championship" Smith said with a smile.
"I...what?" Rick asked as him mind struggled to keep up with what was actually happening around him.
"Also your alcohol band is lifted, go and party your heart out" Smith added.
"I...ok, and what about the diet?" Rick wondered.
"Eat until you can't move a muscle" Smith said as he left the stadium. Rick shook his head for a moment, his mind was still struggling to recall his matches, all he remembered was the countless bodies he had killed, and a good half of them he wasn't even sure if they had been accidents.

As his mind was still struggling to reconcile the facts that he had witnessed, Rick looked at

his reflection on the mirrored surface of the elevator. The suit had to be tailored made, and the elevator could only carry him. After all he barely fitted in there, even though it was designed to take ten people. His skin was now a dark maroon, his muscles were larger and tougher than steel, and he had the kills to prove that.

With a sigh, Rick walked out of the elevator into the grand room where the Emperor awaited. Rick took a second to look around before he realised something was off, it was just him and the Emperor.

"You were expecting something else, Grand Champion?" Agamemnon asked.

"I...no, I was just under a different impression. It is an honour to meet you, my Emperor" Rick said as he bowed, although the movement ripped parts of his suit.

"No need to be so formal, after all your suit might not survive it" Agamemnon said with a chuckle. Rick gave a polite chuckle as well, even though he didn't understand what was going on. The Emperor felt completely different to what he had heard, but then, his mind kept blanking out.

"Would you care for a celebratory glass?" Agamemnon asked.

"Yes, I've been dying for a drink, haven't had any alcohol in..." Rick said as he grabbed the champagne glass and downed it in one go. As the alcohol entered his body Rick saw red, and his mind went.

When his mind came back, the entire room had been ravaged, every inch had been ripped to shreds, his clothes had been completely ripped and he was covered in blood. Some of it was his, most of it was of the Emperor, whose body was strewn about the room.

"What have I..." Rick stammered, but even with the shock he couldn't feel guilt but glee. Something was wrong and he couldn't put his finger on what.

Rick, still in shock, heard playing from a hidden speaker, Mr Smith's voice. Unlike the professional and compassionate voice that Rick remembered, Smith was talking with such agitation and fervour that it sounded like a different person. He was talking to someone else, but Rick couldn't hear the other's voice.

"Rick? Yeah, he's killed the emperor, it's done" Smith said with a bought of laughter, "the kid never had any idea what he had been built to do... No, he'll take the fall for everything... He was a good kid, so his guilt will eat him from the inside. He'll ask to be charged and rot in a cell for ever..."

"I think we've heard enough" a voice said from behind Rick. Rick turned around, and sitting on the ledge of the balcony, sat Emperor Agamemnon, his clothes far plainer than before, his body far more youthful than before, but it was him.

"How?" Rick asked in shock.

"Child, do you really think I survived countless millennia without backups? Any body of mine that is destroyed will only be replaced. Of course that's top secret, not even your friend, Mr Smith, knows that." Agamemnon said.

"But..." Rick said.

"Yeah, you were made to do something terrible. Out of your control. You were a pawn. And I'm sorry, but you were my pawn." Agamemnon said.

Rick didn't reply, instead Smith's voice came through, "Yes, we've confirmed the Emperor has died, we had a secret camera installed in Rick's jacket... He was torn to pieces!"

"I think we've heard enough, don't you?" Agamemnon said.

Rick nodded.

Agamemnon clicked his fingers. From the hidden speaker came through a soul curling scream, as something began to attack Smith. He begged for mercy. He pleaded. And yet whatever attacked the man, did not stop. Soon the screams became gurgles filled with blood, and then nothing but quiet remained.

"What, happened?" Rick asked.

"As Emperor, I have access to all technology that humanity has. That camera on your jacket was the key to locate your friend. And once that was done, it was but a trifle to end him. My

knives are not made of flesh, not augmented after they are born. They are but dust" Emperor Agamemnon said.
"Dust?" Rick asked.
"Dust" Agamemnon repeated. Yet as he spoke the words, the motes of dust began to coalesce into a feminine figure, made mostly out of air, but outlined by the metallic dust. Rick screamed.
"Ha! I haven't seen that reaction in a long time. Still priceless." Agamemnon said.
"The deed has been done, sire" the feminine figure said.
"Thank you" Agamemnon said, before turning back to Rick, "now let's discuss what we'll do with you. As apology for using you, and letting Smith use you, I'll give you any suitable compensation, after all, you worked very hard to become champion."
"I... I don't want to keep on playing. I... I don't want more blood on my hands." Rick said.
"Acceptable. Now you know, you have secrets of the empire that can never be disclosed" Agamemnon said.
"I know" Rick said, feeling the weight on his shoulders.
"Then, how about we give you a quiet retirement. To live the rest of your life out of the limelight. After all you've served your purpose." Agamemnon said.
"Really?" Rick asked feeling hope in his heart once more.
Agamemnon nodded.
"Then, I will!" Rick said.
"Good" Agamemnon said, before turning to the robot, "Take Mr James to his reward."

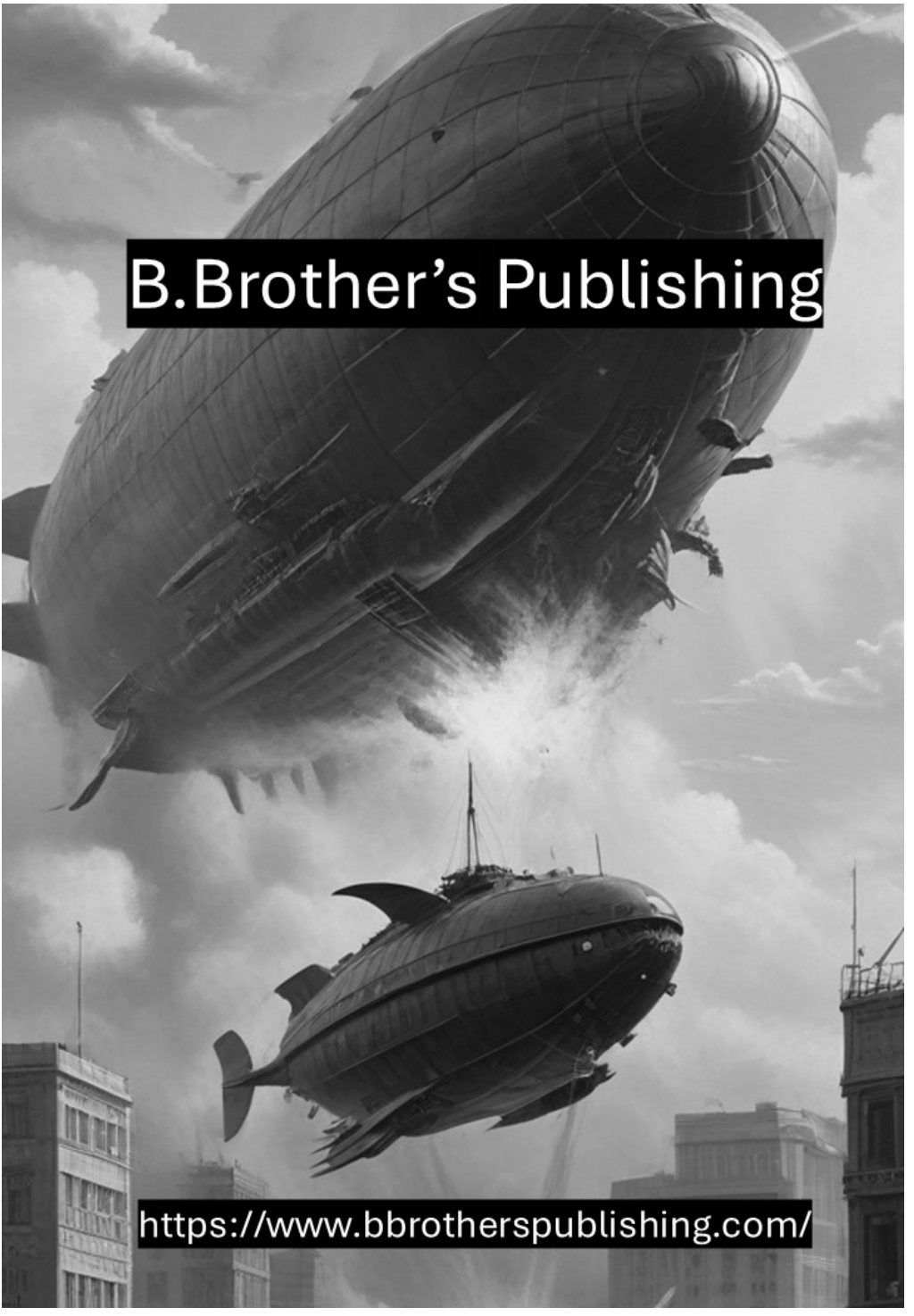
Agamemnon looked back out on to the city. The news of his death hadn't been released yet. After all until his retainers confirmed it, no one would believe that he had died. He looked back at the gore. Smith had made a wonderful weapon. One that Agamemnon now had access to. One that could bypass detectors of all kinds. The Emperor smiled again. Now was the time to purge the empire from his enemies. And he had just been given the way to do so. Like many times before. Lucky for Rick, Agamemnon was in a good mood, he would keep his word, for he had other issues to attend to.

The Lioness

The lioness stalks her prey with precision,
Having done it a thousand times ago.
She crunches in anticipation, having vantage
Point from which to spring.
Then leaps in grace to cut down her
Prides's meal.

She sleeps, having completed her tasks,
And naps in the heated summer sun.
The cubs play with her dancing tail,
As the heat rolls on.
And all is as before.

Stephanie Gruchow
(@SapphireKaneq1)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In Defense Of the Monster PC

How to Run Them Without Them Running Your Game

by
Rowan MacAulay

Since the beginning of fantasy tabletop RPGs, the term "monster" has had a broad but practical meaning: it is typically any creature antagonistic or potentially so to the party. While this simple classification can include individuals of playable races (such as a human cultist or an elven bandit), practically all members of various humanoid species- orcs, goblins, gnolls, etc.- by default fall under this umbrella definition. Yet despite this, there are players who- to the chagrin of many a DM- look at these evil hordes and seen not just an individual, but a character whose eyes they wish to experience the game through. And thus the controversy of the monster PC was born.

While the issue may seem more recent, given the hobby's overall shift away from moral absolutes and concepts like intrinsic good or evil, the idea of monsters as playable characters has literally existed since almost the very beginning. In the original 1974 box set for Dungeons & Dragons, Gary Gygax appears to give his blessing for players to be whatever they wish, though it's left to the referee to decide how to handle non-standard characters. The rules for the Dungeons & Dragons Basic set (1977) likewise suggested that the rudimentary classes be reflavored (presumably without any mechanical modification) to whatever the player wishes, including a centaur and a werebear as examples, while Andre Norton's 1978 novel Quag Keep features both a wereboar and a lizardman as party members (implying that they are characters being run by players in the "real world"). Despite his previous amenability to the idea, however, Gygax seems to have changed his opinion considerably by the time of the 1979 Dungeon Masters Guide, excoriating would-be monster players as power gamers interested only in gaining an advantage in the game or at best bored veteran players who in either case were sure to eventually lose interest. Aside from some sections on how to handle normal

PCs who have been turned into vampires or lycanthropes, and a September '79 Dragon article where he experimented with a half-ogre race (commenting that he didn't think players would find it very fun), he appears to have had nothing more to say on the matter, leaving his abrupt change of heart something of a mystery.

Whatever Gygax's final thoughts on monster PCs, the concept did not disappear, with AD&D options for more amicable "monsters" such as the centaur and aarakocra being published in The Dragon magazine, as well as several BECMI supplements such as Orcs of Thar (1988) offering ways to play humanoids with the later Creature Crucible supplements published throughout the later 1980s and early '90s offering ways to play even more exotic monsters from fairy creatures to werebeasts. The second edition of the AD&D Dungeon Master's Guide, in contrast to the first, gave the DM advice on how to allow players to be monsters, and 1995's The Complete Book of Humanoids saw the idea fully realized for AD&D. By the third edition, options to make monsters fully playable could be found in the Monster Manual itself.

That the desire and ability have long existed does not negate the potential negative impact a monstrous PC can have on a game. Playable monsters from typically "evil" races risk blurring the line between Good and Evil in game worlds where these concepts are meant to be concrete and absolute; having a more "Neutral" or even "Good" individual working alongside traditional PC races instead of against them may introduce unwanted ambiguity, especially if not handled carefully. It can also potentially "humanize" them too much and make them less interesting- little different from a normal human or demi-human with a few cosmetic differences. This article will explore ways in which to allow monsters as playable options while preserving their unique identity and maintaining the integrity of traditional OSR fantasy games where the forces of good eternally battle the forces of evil.

Make sure the concept suit your table

This first and most obvious step is the most important, but will be only discussed briefly here because there are so many factors that will be unique to each table and group. Gygax worried that players would choose powerful monsters in an attempt to dominate the table, but people aren't necessarily drawn to these unconventional choices for malicious purpose; they may be seeking a unique challenge or simply think that monsters are cool. However, the possibility of more sinister intent does exist, including players who want to forcibly dominate the game either mechanically or narratively- but then, a player who wants to play a monster for problematic reasons is likely to be problematic at the table in general, regardless of what race they ultimately play.

If the request is in good faith, you (the DM) should think about the world's setting and the types of situations the party is likely to find itself in; a primarily wilderness campaign may allow a monster ample freedom to move about without harassment, but for one that involves infiltrating the wealthy quarter of a major city the party may find it difficult to slip in with a seven and a half foot tall slobbering gnoll companion in tow. The type of monster also matters; some species may simply be too large or their anatomy too alien to properly function as playable characters, or their special abilities so powerful and exotic they risk disrupting the game. For this reason, only humanoid characters should be considered, unless specific rules addressing such issues already exist or the rest of the table is willing to take on the challenge of adventuring with an Awakened Tyrannosaurus rex.

Finally, unless you are willing to handwave a lot of the minutiae, realize that allowing a monster character will require at least some degree of more work than a standard PC. It will force you to consider more carefully how monsters generally fit into and are perceived in your world, and how specifically the humanoid species in question does so.

Keep Monsters Monstrous

Once you have at least tentatively decided to allow the monster PC, you must determine how the character will advance alongside standard PCs. The simplest solution is to have them take classes as any other character, which for AD&D and related systems means determining which are available and how many levels they may advance in. Fortunately, many resources already exist for common humanoid types, chiefly within The Complete Book of Humanoids and various Dragon articles. This is particularly attractive for DMs who run games with a high mortality rate (for characters, not players) and advancement is a rare achievement, but it does have two main drawbacks. It potentially ignores a monster's unique powers, which could make them initially too strong compared to other characters- or it could ignore them completely, making them little more than just uglier versions of the "regular" races, normalizing monster PCs by allowing them to take normal classes. And so the idea of the "monster" class was created.

Monster classes began in the BECMI gazetteers and Creature Crucibles, as within the BECMI and B/X systems races were treated as classes (elves took the "Elf" class, dwarves the "Dwarf" class, etc.); only humans were versatile enough to have classes based on profession. Thus Orcs of Thar created a "Humanoid" class through which all humanoids advanced, though at different rates based upon each monster type's specific abilities (allowing everything from kobolds to trolls to begin play on a more even playing field.) The Creature Crucibles took this idea a step further, with class progressions specific to each monster type, allowing (at least in theory) some degree of balance against even very powerful monster types. This system can be converted to AD&D easily enough, allowing monsters to stay monsters rather than forcing them into roles intended for the non-monstrous.

Third edition reached a sort of compromise between monster classes and traditional player ones, assigning monsters an Effective Character Level (ECL) based upon their starting hit dice and special abilities; this allowed monsters to take normal classes but only advance as though they were at a higher level. Later supplements (such as Races of the Wild) refined this further by breaking the ECL into individual levels for each monster, allowing them to gradually earn their normal hit dice and abilities before being able to start taking normal classes; this hybrid approach can be used not only by 3e/d20 games, but a potential template for other systems looking to balance the monster within against normal gameplay.

One point deserving of special attention is size, particularly for humanoids larger than human- depending upon the system, such characters can face novel challenges such as increased damage from weapons, being more easily surrounded by enemies, and increased equipment costs. Unlike AD&D, BECMI did not by default have size rules, and so developed its own (entirely optional) set of rules, and while AD&D did not formally have large PC races until its second edition, a few appeared in The Dragon (the half-ogre and the centaur) with a few articles (such as "Giant-sized Weapons" in #109) detailing additional rules for adjusting weapon damage based on the user's size. Based upon these, consider granting a large PC one additional die or a flat amount of extra starting HP if using rules where large creatures are expected to take more damage.

Of course, if size rules feel more complex than they're worth you can always follow the example set by the first edition's Dragonlance Adventures and ignore them entirely- Krynn minotaurs were a playable race described as over 7 feet tall and their entry in the "Creatures of Krynn" section explicitly lists them as Large, yet no mention is made of minotaur PCs having any particular advanrage or disadvantage based on size, implying (at least for the more narratively focused Dragonlance setting) that no special size rules were intended to exist.

Keep Monster PC "Special" (BUT NOT TOO "SPECIAL")

Allowing monster PCs can blur the line between standard, typically "good" races and typically evil ones, which can be undesirable in settings where good and evil are meant to be distinctively defined. This blurring can also raise an important question: if a monster can become a PC, why aren't monster PCs more common?

The DM and the player should consult to determine why this particular monster has become an adventurer while most of its kind do not, as well as defining the character's place in the world. The reason need not be a sprawling epic, and many simple, common explanations exist: the character could be an orphan, raised by kindly members of a common PC race and thus more acclimated to their culture; they could be a renegade, seeking a better life outside of their own kind (several humanoid cultures are noted to be quite misogynistic, giving female characters an excellent motivation to escape); they could be outcasts, driven from their clan or the only survivor of an attack from another clan, driven by a need for revenge so great that they're willing to ally with the playable races to achieve it; or they could be "defective", lacking the natural aggression necessary to thrive within humanoid society but making them uniquely more compatible with human/demi-human society. Another possibility can be found within the AD&D The Rogues Gallery- the character could actually be a previous adventurer reincarnated into a monstrous form. This is the most straightforward explanation (particularly if the player is replacing a character who has recently expired), though it may be unexciting otherwise. In any case, the player is of course then free to expand upon whichever basic backstory is decided on.

Unless the character is a reincarnated adventurer, it is important for both the DM and player to remember that a monster PC is often a stranger in a strange land, and that the difference between the human and humanoids worlds often transcend the comparatively simple cultural differences found in the real world, as humanoids represent entirely different species. This should never, however, become an excuse for behavior that disrupts the game; no matter how alien a monster finds social norms, any character fit to be a PC has a vested interest in trying to adapt, or at least not instigate unwanted fights with players or NPCs because "it's what my character would do".

"Special" is a double-edge sword

Before play begins, the monster player (and the other players) should be made aware of and agree to the limitations that the character may face- it is unlikely to be allowed into any settlements (aside perhaps from the seedier ones that tolerate humanoid mercenaries) and may have to be left outside, potentially missing out on important story beats. Other characters may also take issue with the monster character, and it's important to ensure both that the party is actually at least theoretically compatible (obviously a goblin in a party where another character is based on a certain anime about slaying goblins is unlikely to work) and that it's fully understood that any friction must be purely in character rather than personal.

Having a monster in the party can also alter how other monsters react to the party, for better or for worse. While certain humanoids may become more aggressive in the presence of the monster PC (based on either existing antipathy between certain races or personal history with that individual) a monster character can act as a potential "bridge" who helps the party avoid unnecessary fights through knowledge of humanoid behavior or by negotiating with humanoid clans to secure things like safe passage or truce.

The limits on what a monster can do should not be presented as punitive, but rather as challenges for the party to overcome (perhaps such as hiding a small humanoid in a bag or passing them off as the party's prisoner to sneak them into a city.) If the table leans more heavily into role-playing (and characters survive long enough) a potential bond of trust and even friendship could grow between the monster and other party members as they face challenges together, making the experience all the more memorable.

Final thoughts: The "Good" Monster

Throughout this article, a common theme has been deciding upon whether monster PCs fit into a traditional fantasy game world or if they are too disruptive to the straightforward morality such settings typically offer, especially if the monster is of non-evil alignment. It is reasonable to ask if, given the amount additional effort they require, they are even worth it or add anything to the game. This is of course a question only individual DMs and their player groups can answer. However, there is something to be said about monster characters who defy their typically evil natures to become neutral or even good; they don't just make interesting characters, but, rather than uncomfortably blur the lines between Good and Evil, also make the struggle between these two universal forces more interesting. They show that the power of Goodness is strong enough to be found potentially anywhere, even the heart of a monster- and offer a ray of hope, even in such darkness, that it will eventually triumph over the forces of Evil.

We Are

Hopes, dreams, goals, miracles.

Disappointment, despair, discord, disaster.

Do we get to decide?
Can we alter which occurs?
Does this change we are or who we will become?

Can you be the "who" you were meant to be?
Is there more to your tale?
Your story hasn't ended, what will you add?

Hopefully meets approval to be included.

Stephanie Gruchow
(@SapphireKaneq1)

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The world has become a very dangerous place. Mutated beasts stalk the lands, cruel fae use the common folk as pawns in their strange games, madness leaks into our world from unspeakable places, and evil cultists perform occult rituals to bring demons into our world. What will you give for the power to face these horrors?

WHAT IS THE PRICE OF YOUR HUMANITY!

Hello, my name is Dillon Dalton, and I am making the TTRPG Price of Humanity. This is my very first project like this and I am the only one working on it, but I really wanted to get more people in the know about my game.

In my game, you explore the world after an ancient catastrophe changed everything. You can train and level up the normal way, gaining better equipment, armor and weapons, learn to craft machines and gadgets, or make potions and bombs through alchemy.

But that takes time and sometimes you need power now. At any point, even during combat, you can trade in your own humanity for supernatural powers—be it godly strength and speed, magical reality-warping abilities, or summoning ancient powers to smite your foes.

Be warned though, power has a price and if you aren't careful you may soon become the horror skulking in the dark yourself.

I took a lot of inspiration for my game from things like Dark Souls and Kingdom Death: Monster. The idea of you becoming that tragic boss monster that the heroes must face was a really interesting concept to me.

I don't currently have a Patreon or Kickstarter or anything like that, but I do have a Twitter for Price of Humanity (@MalphasArc) and a Discord server where I post updates of the game, look for feedback, and take suggestions for new patrons and monsters. I've also been posting bestiary pages and art that I've commissioned there for everyone to see. It's free to join and I love hearing people's feedback and ideas.

Price of Humanity Discord, Hope to see you there!

The Art of Survival

Traps That Shape Dungeons

In our hobbies, we can identify two types: the Anime Trap and the TTRPG Trap. I know some of you might be disappointed, but we're focusing on the latter today. Traps in tabletop role-playing games are deadly, brutal contraptions designed to either keep something out of a dungeon or keep something in. This is crucial to understand: traps in dungeons aren't there just to kill players; they need a purpose. So, why do dungeons have traps?

It all depends on the dungeon's purpose. If it's the tomb of an old king, traps might be set to deter looters, protecting the king's resting place and treasures. If it's the tomb of a mad tyrant who was executed and buried there, the traps could be meant to contain him, or more specifically, his restless soul that swore vengeance on the world. The possibilities are endless. Take, for example, one of the most unforgiving modules ever created by Gary Gygax, the mastermind behind Dungeons & Dragons: the Tomb of Horrors. This deadly dungeon is the brainchild of Acererak, a powerful and malevolent demilich. Acererak wasn't just a necromancer with a knack for interior design; he was a being fueled by dark ambition that went far beyond mortal desires. The dungeon's purpose ties directly into his goals: to power his transformation into a demilich and sustain his existence, while also serving as a twisted monument to his hatred for the living.

As you can see, there are countless reasons a dungeon might be riddled with traps. Usually, it's to keep something in or something out, though the Tomb of Horrors shows they can serve other purposes too. And now, here's an "Emi Fun Fact" for you: Did you know that Robilar was the first character to survive the Tomb of Horrors? He was a fighter played by Robert J. Kuntz (@threelinestudio). Want to know more? Check out Tales from the Tavern Issue #2 for an interview with Mr. Kuntz himself, the hero who conquered the Tomb of Horrors!

So, we've established that traps in dungeons have a lore-based purpose. They're not just thrown in for kicks; they serve a specific role. But here's a thought I had to jot down before it slipped away: Imagine a dungeon where the traps only activate after the players reach the end. Getting to the treasury is a medium challenge, but getting out becomes a tougher ordeal, extending the life of a single dungeon. I love that idea; it's something to

tinker with in the future! Anyway, we've covered the lore purpose of traps, but what about their game purpose? Why should a Game Master bother including them?

I recently chatted with some players about this, and younger players, whose experience is often shaped by newer systems, sometimes say, "The DM puts traps in dungeons to kill players." Imagine my shock! I'd never thought of it that way. No, for me and many other Game Masters, traps aren't there to "kill" players. Their purpose is to test them.

Can that test be deadly? Sure, but it's never unfair. Well, it might feel unfair when a trap goes off, but activating it is usually the final step in a chain of events, often triggered by players ignoring warnings or failing to stay cautious. I've got a perfect example. In one session, I set up a simple trap for a group of level 1 players. They found themselves in a 5-foot-wide corridor, one of many they could choose. Ahead of them was a 5-foot-long square hole in the ground filled with lava, and on the other side sat a shiny, unopened chest.

What did my players do? One of them decided to take a running start and leap over it. I asked, "Is this what you want to do?" He was certain and asked if he needed to roll anything. In my view, a 5-foot jump isn't that tough, especially for a trained character, so no roll was needed. He jumped and bounced off an invisible magic barrier on the other side, falling into the lava and taking 10d10 damage. Instant death for a level 1 character.

Was I unfair? Nope. If the players had looked around first, they'd have noticed a warning scratched into the wall by previous adventurers: "Do not jump." If they'd used a 10-foot pole or tossed a pebble across, they'd have seen the barrier. Traps are designed to test players, but if they skip the test entirely, they might pay with their lives. This is something old-school players from the '80s and '90s would understand, a lesson that seems to have faded since Wizards of the Coast took over D&D.

But why do traps need to be deadly? It's simple, and video games offer a great analogy. If you're playing a game where you can barrel through an obstacle course, take some damage, but never enough to fail, would you bother mastering it? The fear of losing a character is what drives players to stay vigilant. If there's no real consequence to triggering a trap, why bother looking for them? This "video game mentality" is something WotC has leaned into since 4th Edition, but the threat of loss is exactly why players should stay sharp.

So, what kinds of traps are there? I'd say there are two main types: traps designed to be spotted and avoided, and traps designed to be activated and overcome.

The lava pit was the first type. It was meant to be noticed, and the players had multiple ways to figure it out and avoid it. Traps like these often come with clues in the Game Master's description, things to tip off attentive players. A trapdoor, for instance, might have no bones or rubble on it, since everything would've fallen through when it opened. Spikes in a wall or floor might leave holes or a skeleton as a hint that something's off. But that's if the players ask for those details or actively search for traps. It's on them to stay vigilant, not the DM to nudge them with a "Hey, there might be a trap here."

The second type is a trap that's activated and must be overcome. Think of a room filling with water where players need to solve a puzzle before they drown, or swinging blades on a bridge they have to dodge. These traps often force activation, but here's the key: in TTRPGs, they're not designed to kill players; they're designed to test them. The challenge has to be fair. There needs to be a clear way to beat it, even if it's not handed to players on a platter. It might be obscured, but not impossible to spot. Offering more than one solution is a bonus, and don't shoot down a player's ingenuity. If they want to open a Bag of Holding to buy time, let them! Don't say no just because it wasn't part of your plan.

That's it, friends: traps in dungeons! They're not there to kill your players; they're there to test them. From a lore perspective, they serve a purpose, like keeping something in or out. They should be fair but deadly, creating tension and stakes.

Stop Telling Stories, Start Narrating Worlds

The Secrets of Living Worlds

Let's forget about the players for a moment and think about this from the perspective of imagination. Imagine an NPC, let's call her Emi. She's a commoner girl living in a small town. Her parents have died, and she now lives alone in her house. She wakes up in the morning, prepares something to eat, and heads into town to work. In the morning, she helps certain townsfolk with chores like cleaning in exchange for vegetables or fresh bread. Later, she returns home to cook dinner, filling her house with comforting aromas. Her older neighbor visits to keep her company during the meal, then leaves to tend to his own responsibilities, sometimes bringing his son, who's her age. After dinner, Emi cleans up and heads to the tavern, where she works as a barmaid. She returns home late at night, having eaten at the tavern, and goes straight to bed, ready to wake up and repeat the cycle.

What does this give us? A character that players encounter will be in different places at different times. They might meet Emi in the morning at the market while she's helping with cleaning, or in the tavern in the late afternoon. Now, apply this concept to every NPC in the town. You create a town that feels alive, with its own schedule independent of the players. Shops won't be open late at night, and the tavern won't be bustling with life early in the morning. Do you need to plan a specific schedule for every individual NPC? Of course not. Major NPCs should have slightly more detailed routines, but most characters can follow a basic, logic-based schedule: they sleep at night and work during the day.

Next, introduce random events to the world, something that disrupts these schedules and alters them. These often serve as plot hooks for players to embark on adventures. For example, if monsters infest the local mine, miners won't go to work. Instead, they'll stay in the tavern all day, drowning their boredom. Adventurers might arrive in town to deal with the monsters, causing a ruckus and fights in the tavern. Emi could be in danger and ask someone to escort her home after her shift, perhaps the neighbor's son steps in. Over time, she might fall in love with him. Once the monsters are defeated and the adventurers leave, Emi and her guardian could start living together. Later, she might be expecting a child, reducing her work duties and staying home more often.

This is an example of a living world unfolding in the background. Is it

important for the players? Yes! They'll see how the world evolves based on events that transpire with or without their involvement. Apply this on a macro level, where events influence kingdoms and empires, and a micro level, where individual NPCs are affected by those events.

Bringing Players into the Mix

Now, let's add the players and their actions. Imagine a living world as the surface of a lake, flat and calm. When you toss even a small pebble, ripples spread to the edges and bounce back, colliding and creating more disturbance. This is what players' actions do, big or small. One of my favorite examples of this comes from Knights of the Old Republic II. When the main character arrives on Nar Shaddaa, a beggar approaches, asking for a few credits to feed his family. If you give him the money, your companion Kreia questions your choice. Later, you learn that someone saw you hand over the credits, attacked the beggar, killed him, and stole the money, leaving his family without support, facing death or a fate worse than death. I might be slightly off on the exact details, but the scene has evolved in my mind over years of writing and gaming.

This moment illustrates how even the smallest gesture can send huge ripples through the world, a butterfly effect. As a Game Master, play with this. Every action has a consequence, and those consequences aren't always predictable.

Structuring NPCs for a Living World

I've given you examples of how NPCs should function in a living fantasy world, as well as how events and player consequences shape their lives. You might be thinking, "Damn, this is a lot of prep work," and you'd be right, if you didn't have a structure for your NPCs. Here's how to manage it:

Sort NPCs into Tiers:

Important Characters: Flesh them out with detailed information. These NPCs are often central to the stories you'll tell.

Useful Characters: Shopkeepers, tavern masters, and others who interact with players. Give them a basic schedule and simple details.

Background Characters: Improvise these using common sense. They sleep at night, work during the day, nothing elaborate needed.

Keep in mind that a Background Character can be promoted to Useful or even Important based on player interactions. It's all in their hands.

Designing Campaigns with Flexible NPCs: You can't predict which characters will catch your players' attention, so create a few generic NPCs with a gender and no description. When players start interacting with a Background Character, grab one of your generic NPCs, assign a personality, and run with it. I've used this trick in many games, including a recent one.

For example, I'm running a Harry Potter-inspired magic school campaign where the school itself tries to kill its students, literally survival of the fittest, brutal and unforgiving. I had a quest in mind: a teacher disappears, and a doppelgänger takes their place. The task was simple, get the players interested in this teacher and guide them toward the quest. After a welcome ceremony and an escape from a deadly dungeon, the players met their teachers. I gave them options: a Snape-like teacher, a Goblin teacher, a few others, and a seductive Femme Fatale. They chose the Femme Fatale, so I quickly slapped my pre-created doppelgänger behavior onto her and started planting clues about the missing teacher.

I didn't create ten distinct teachers with quirks and behaviors upfront, I made one flexible NPC, and the players picked her appearance. The Snape-like teacher and Goblin teacher became Background Characters who might develop personalities later. That was a few months ago, and now my players have met multiple teachers, growing my NPC roster. But at the start, I didn't do as much prep as you might think.

Reusable NPCs: This approach has another perk: you can take those pre-made NPCs,

Aleria Wintergrass

Character Name

Elf
Race

Unknown
Age

Alchemy Instructor at Arcana Lumi
Occupation



Character Description

The character is an older Elven woman, exuding an air of wisdom and scholarly demeanor. She has long, flowing blonde hair that cascades down her back, with strands perfectly framing her face, accentuating her elven features. Her hair is meticulously kept, suggesting a routine of care that reflects her disciplined lifestyle.

She wears a pair of round, wire-framed glasses, which rest gently on her nose, giving her an intellectual appearance. Her eyes, behind the glasses, convey a sense of annoyance and coldness, as if she would rather be somewhere else, perhaps lost in her studies or in a quieter environment away from the distractions of teaching.

Her attire consists of Academic Instructor Mage Robes, which are tailored to fit her slender elven frame. The robes are made of a fine, durable fabric, colored in deep shades of blue and silver, signifying her status as an academic mage. The robes are adorned with subtle embroidery that hints at magical symbols and runes, a testament to her knowledge and expertise in the arcane.

Attached to her waist with a sturdy chain is a book, which she often reads. This book is likely a tome of magic or an academic text, always within reach for quick reference or study. The chain ensures it stays with her, symbolizing her constant pursuit of knowledge.

Her facial expression is set in a perpetual look of annoyance and detachment, with a slight furrow in her brow and lips pressed into a thin line, conveying her dissatisfaction with her current situation, perhaps finding the duties of teaching less engaging than her own research.

Goals and Motivations

Fears

Notable Skills

Character Information

Aleria Wintergrass is an Instructor of Alchemy at Arcana Lumis, known for her love of potions and herbs. Beyond her professional expertise, she is a loner, preferring solitude over social interaction. She lives in her office, which students describe as minimalistic and often covered in dust when visited. Aleria is a very secretive person, rarely interacting with her pupils outside of Alchemy Classes. Her teaching style is direct, focusing strictly on the subject matter with little room for personal engagement.

Despite her aloofness, her reputation as a formidable alchemist commands respect, with her classes being rigorous and demanding precision from her students. Her dedication to alchemy and her reclusive lifestyle make her a figure of intrigue and mystery within the institution.

without gender, name, or description, and carry them over to your next game, mixing and matching as needed. The more you use this method, the less prep you'll need in the future. Give it a try, and you'll see how much easier it makes your Game Master prep.

The Core of a Living World

I think I missed something important earlier, something I hinted at but didn't fully expand on. The main concept of a "Living Fantasy World" is that it moves forward with or without the players. I've said it before, and I'll say it again: every action has a consequence, even if that action is doing something else entirely.

For instance, news arrives that orcs have been spotted near a village up north. The players decide to explore the sewers instead, spending two days there before heading north to check on the orcs. By the time they arrive, it's too late, the orcs didn't wait. They've plundered the village, killed nearly everyone, and left survivors to fates worse than death. Action. Consequence. Let players see the results of their choices.

Another example: my players were in a small town and heard rumors of goblin raiders attacking nearby settlements. While planning a dungeon trip, they spotted a group of goblins on the way, tents set up, females and children among them. The players observed for a moment and decided to leave them be. When they returned, the town was burning, and everyone they'd met was dead, slaughtered by the goblins. The players had enough information, made a choice, and the world reacted.

These are the principles of running a game in a living world. Wars and monsters won't wait for players. Plagues and gods won't pause while players explore dungeons. Quests will evolve or resolve themselves if ignored.

As a Game Master, I love a living world. It's far more fun to tailor the world and let players shape their stories. Who knows what Big Bad Evil they'll create with their actions?

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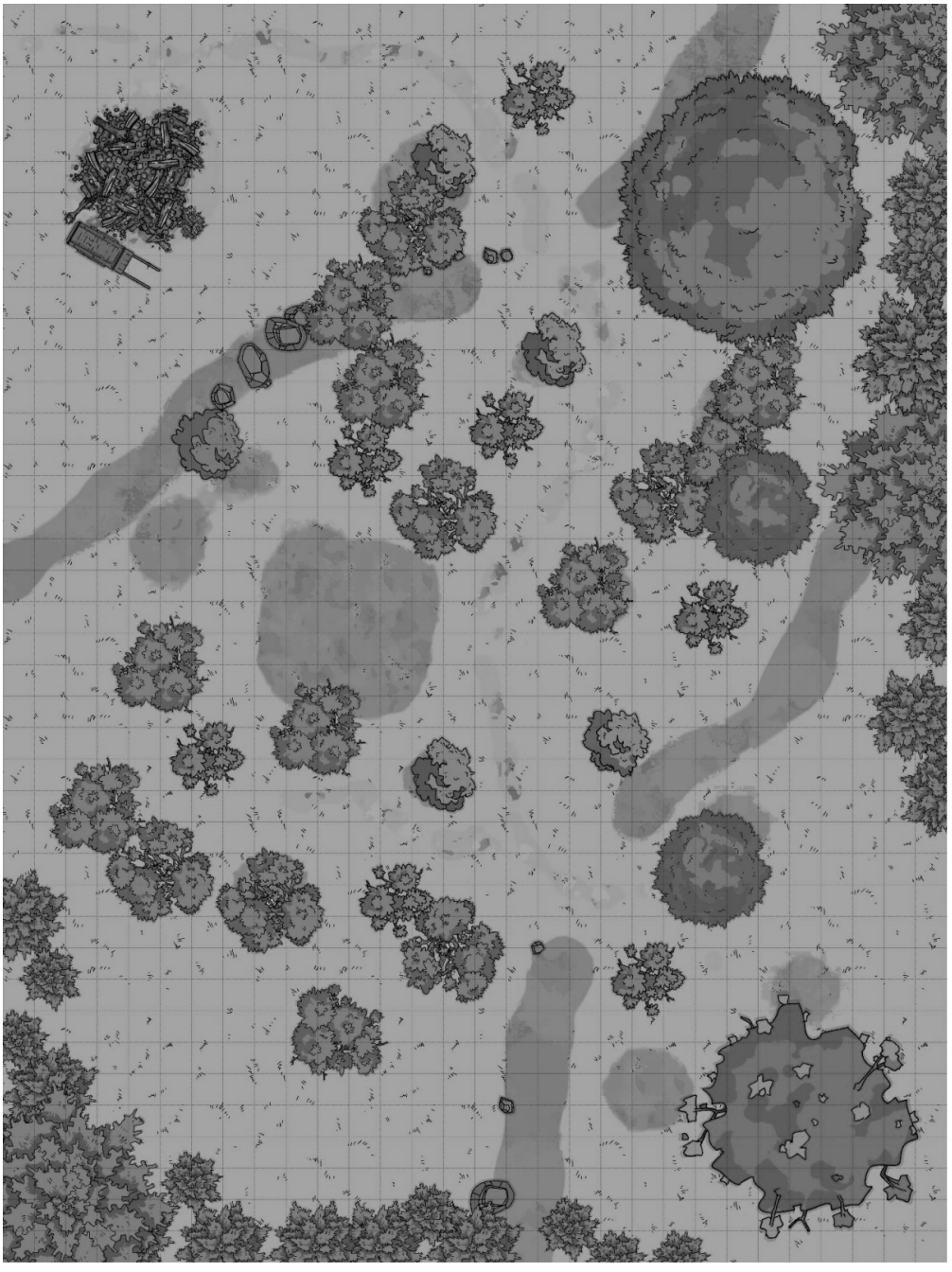

Dryad's Blood

A quest for level 1 PCs in 2024 D&D.

Parody Article
by
R.J.A. Gilbert

Felgar (he/him), the elven shopkeeper at the village's combination romance-novel book-store and magic shop, is out of healing potions due to a key ingredient being in short supply. When asked, he explains that Ryker (he/him), the tiefling ranger, usually delivers several jugs of a liquid he calls "dryad's blood" after every full moon, but has been overdue with his shipment by several weeks. The moon is almost full again, and Felgar fears an ill fate may have befallen his friend, Ryker.

The party is tasked with traveling to the sacred grove where Ryker lives and is known to gather this ingredient. Felgar explains that dryad's blood must be gathered under the full moon, and gives the party an empty jug to fill with the fluid.

When the party travels to the sacred grove, they find Ryker's hut has been torched, and his body lies nearby. Several arrows protrude from his leather armor. Successful investigation (DC10) reveals the arrows to be of gnoll origin.

Investigating the ruins, the party discovers no treasure, but there are several jugs half-filled with a burned, foul-smelling fluid lying half-buried in the ashes of his two-wheeled cart. (If this fluid is returned to Felgar, he will explain that this is tainted dryad blood, and is of no use to him.) A successful DC10 investigation check will reveal that one of the empty jugs at the bottom of the rubble is not damaged or tainted and can be used to carry an additional gallon of dryad's blood—once the party finds some.

A successful DC10 survival check will reveal gnoll footprints tracking all around the ruined hut and leading off into various parts of the sacred grove. The grove is set into the side of a hillside, with gently sloping terraces dotted by maple trees and hedges. Several 5-foot-wide, earthen ramps enable access to the higher terraces for any characters confined to a combat wheelchair. (Originally, these ramps were constructed to facilitate Ryker's wheeled cart carrying heavy jugs of dryad's blood down the hillside.)

If the party delays too long at the ruined hut, or if they arrive near dusk, they will encounter a single gnoll, Gnarla (she/her), who has been sent by the patriarchy to scavenge firewood from the ruined hut for the gnoll camp within the grove. If the party chooses to attack, she only has 1 HP and is unarmed. However, if the party chooses to befriend her (DC 12 persuasion if performed by a man, DC 6 if performed by

a female party member), they will learn that Gnarla has been mistreated by the fascist patriarchy and will gladly help the party defeat the other gnolls if it gives her freedom to make her own life choices.

Five gnolls wander the grove, their locations shown on the map. There is no leader or boss, and all use the basic gnoll stats from the monster manual. If the gnolls are too much for the party, or if a player uses the Safety "X" signal during a battle, the dryad Freya (they/them) appears and stops the fight, driving away the current pack of gnolls and healing the party with their spells.

Upon approaching the Great Maple at the center of the grove, the party will also encounter Freya, who is the dryad guardian of the grove. If the party has not already driven all gnolls from the grove, they will now ask them to do so.

Driving all gnolls from the grove will grant the party 100xp as Freya explains to them how to extract the "dryad's blood" from the sacred maple trees that line the grove. Returning this fluid to Felgar will reward the party with 50g for each jug returned, as well as an additional 100xp as Felgar gratefully demonstrates to the party how to boil the "blood" into a thicker, viscous, sweet-tasting syrup that greatly enhances the flavor and magical capabilities of his potions.

However, before the party can leave, Freya explains that, since Ryker is dead, they need a new companion to help them "replant" the trees killed by the greedy, gnollish patriarchy. If Gnarla is an ally, she will gladly join Freya in the grove. If Gnarla is not with you, the players must choose a character from their own ranks to leave the party to join Freya in the grove. (DM's note, you may suggest to the party that they leave the least-popular PC here so that the player who built that PC can rethink their ways and hopefully choose to build a PC that gets along better with the other players' characters.)

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The Dragon's Flame

Recipie from Elven Tavern

A dragonborn warrior once passed through the inn after surviving the volcanic lands of the Ashen Peaks. He spoke of drinks that burned like dragonfire yet brought courage to those who faced the flames. He shared his fiery recipe one stormy night, warning me to respect the heat. I have since tamed it just enough for our guests while keeping its bold, smoky spirit. The Dragon's Flame is now requested by those who seek something strong and adventurous.

The Dragon's Flame

A bold, smoky, and spicy cocktail with a fiery kick , perfect for those with a taste for danger.

Ingredients (makes 1 cocktail):

- 60 ml Mezcal (or tequila for a milder version)
- 30 ml Fresh lime juice
- 22 ml Agave syrup (or simple syrup)
- 2–3 thin slices fresh red chili (serrano or jalapeño — adjust to taste)
- Optional: Tajín chili-lime salt for the rim
- Garnish: Lime wheel and a slice of chili

Method:

1. (Optional) Rim a rocks glass with Tajín salt.
2. In a shaker, gently muddle the chili slices with the agave syrup.
3. Add the mezcal, lime juice, and plenty of ice.
4. Shake hard for 12–15 seconds.
5. Strain into the prepared glass over fresh ice.
6. Garnish with a lime wheel and chili slice.

Serve with caution, the heat builds with every sip. Excellent alongside bold tavern food.

Sora Miyuki
Keeper of the Elven Maid Inn

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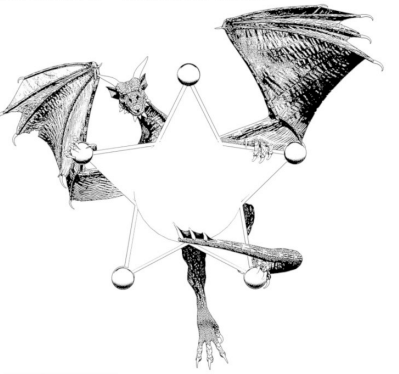

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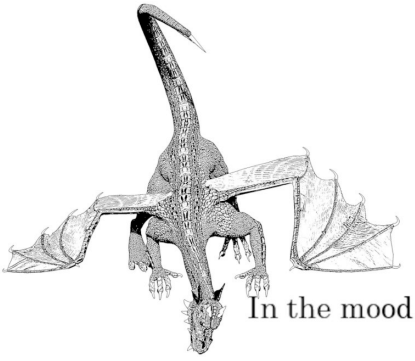

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On Lycanthropy: Origins

by

Ryan Rahuba

(@PatrioticDragyn)

Many are the tales and legends claiming to tell of the origins of this terrible affliction and how it came to affect the races of the world. Some claim the intervention of the Beastlord who gave his blessing to barbarian tribes of old who revered predatory species of the wild. Others invoke the name of Moon Goddess and say it was her gift to children alone in the wilds so that they might survive.

Come now! Harken onto me for I come to tell you the truth of the matter...

It began many millennia ago. As the civilizations of the various races continued to encroach on the wilderness, druids, whose task it was to defend these places, beseeched their gods for help in slowing that advance. But the gods were as powerless to stop the advancement of civilization as they were in stopping the flow of time. As a compromise, these wilderness deities called their followers who asked for aid and bid them go forth.

From all over they came, led by vision and whisper, out of the path of civilization to a promised land. A land under divine protection that would never know the touch of hammer and axe. There they would be stewards of this pristine wilderness and could spend their days in meditation and reverence. As the years passed their attunement to nature grew deeper still and they began to change. Their ability to take animal form became infused with their very beings until it was no longer a part of their druidic ways but a natural ability.

And thus the Shifter Race was born. Over the next millennia their descendants carried these traits and their society developed in isolation from the rest of the world. Sometime later, a cleric of Beastlord heard tales of this land of beast-men able to take the shape and traits of the great predators of the world. Whether the Beastlord himself sent divine

inspiration or a few shifters had left their sanctuary and spread the tales is unclear. However, the priest was determined to claim this ability in honor of his evil god.

The tales tell that after long years of searching, he came to the shifters' lands in the guise of peace and friendship. He begged of them to teach him this magic of change that they had mastered. When the shifter elders denied his request, saying the gift was not theirs to give, the priest hid his anger well and begged leave to stay among them and learn their ways. Being naïve in their isolation and knowing nothing of the visitor's heart the elders agreed.

Several more years passed before the priest learned of the Twilight Grove. An area of forest that was kept sacred as a shrine to the woodland gods that brought them to this place, the Grove was a holy place for the Shifters and was kept by those that still followed the druid's path. Seeing this as the source of the shifters' abilities, and unable to wait any longer, the priest went to the Grove the very next night under the light of the full moon.

At the center of the Grove he found a tree of singular kind, not found anywhere else in all of the world. Its base was hollow and large enough to fit several people at once. Moving into the hollow, he began a desecration ritual thinking to claim it for The Beastlord and the shifters' abilities for his own.

The gods of nature whom the shifters followed became aware of his plan and grew enraged and moved to strike the priest down. However, The Beastlord came to the man's aid and lent his servant his divine power. A great struggle ensued as druids were drawn to the shrine and joined in. When it was over, the tree was hallowed once again however the priest had gotten what he came for. But since he had tried to take it by force, the gift had twisted into a curse and, combined with the will of The Beastlord that had flowed through him, had driven him mad.

His form shifted to that of a great wolf but he was unable to change back and his madness left him little more than a savage beast. He became the first lycanthrope. In his rage, he struck out at the nearby druids. Those who were not killed contracted his curse. The new lycanthropes chased the remaining druids from the Twilight Grove and fell upon the surrounding settlements of shifters.

Many were turned before the monsters were driven back. The lycanthropes retreated back to the Grove which they now held for themselves. From this new territory, they sent raids out pushing the shifters further and further away. With their sacred site lost and losing ground, the shifters abandoned their home and joined the others lands for the first time in more than a millennia and the lycanthropes soon followed.

Thousands of years and many miles from the Grove and their homeland, the shifters have diminished slightly. No longer able to change to resemble specific animals, instead modern shifters manifest wider bestial traits such as sharp teeth, claws, fur, etc. However, every now and then the trait runs true and a shifter is born with this ability intact.

For their part, time and distance had lessened the savagery and rage of the lycanthropes and they began to control their curse. Eventually, they were able to change between bestial and human form. They began to blend in with the growing civilizations of Toril where they would further infect other races. Angered by this, the Moon Goddess altered the curse to make the moon a bane to the lycanthropes and would reveal their nature by its light.



Interview with

Davis and Stephen Chenault

brothers behind Troll Lord Games

Today, we're excited to sit down with Davis Chenault and Stephen Chenault, the dynamic brothers behind Troll Lord Games (TLG), a cornerstone of the TTRPG community since 1999. As creators of the beloved Castles & Crusades system and stewards of Gary Gygax's legacy, they've blended old-school charm with innovative design to inspire countless gamers. In this interview for our TTRPG Magazine, we'll explore their journeys, the evolution of their games, and the future of TLG. Let's jump into the questions...

Elven Maid Inn: Can you each share a bit about your personal backgrounds, including any early experiences with role-playing games that sparked your passion for the hobby?

Davis: We were both raised in a military family, so moved a lot. I was lucky enough to land in Germany for my high school years (where I was born). I then went to college, studied anthropology/archaeology and was an actual archaeologist for the 80's and 90s. Minus a stint in thar y during that time, which landed me back in Germany just in time for the collapse of the USSR. In the early 2000s I got married and had a passel of kids and Steve, Mac, and I founded Troll Lord Games.

My interest in gaming began when my father was teaching at the Command General Staff college and I got to watch the army game. I was dragged in with those massive maps, tiny lead army figures, and the metric tons of rules they used. It was some time later One of my father's Lieutenants gave me the little brown books, thinking it would interest me. It did, in spades. I even drug my brother into the game with those books.

Steve: Slightly younger than Davis, 2 years, I had the same upbringing. Moving a lot. Fort Campbell was very formative, from long hair and skateboarding to diving into D&D. I had already been reading Tarzan and John Carter books but that is when I began branching out. I remember the first few games of D&D we played, sitting on the floor of our bedroom. All my first characters were named after Tarzan and the great apes in his tribe. It was a slow burn for me. It was fun but one of many things we were doing back yonder, but as the years piled on RPGs became my hobby. In Germany, in 80-82, is when I really began playing constantly, both with Davis and in my own group. By college it was full on.

EMI: As brothers and co-founders of Troll Lord Games, how did your shared history, including your time as veterans, influence the founding and direction of the company?

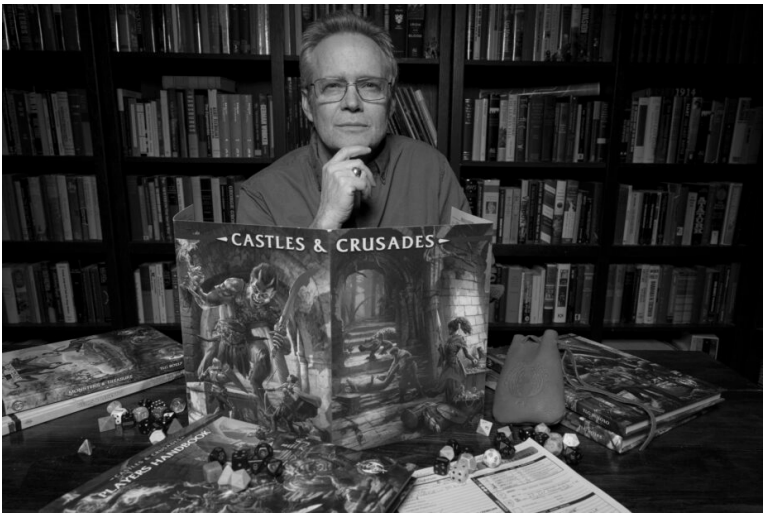
Davis: It was just Steve and I for a long time until we found people who would play. We did. We were both fantasy and comic book buffs though we had our own particular favorites, bringing two different viewpoints into the game. Steve, for example was deep into Burroughs and Tolkein and I was more deeply influenced by Howard. We both had an abiding interest in history, likely because of the time spent in Germany. My interest veered into the ancient past before people could write and Steve's remained a little more recent. Oddly we both served at the same time, though Steve was on the other side of the world soaking up rays in Hawaii. Both of us witnessed the collapse of the USSR.

Thinking about that It just occurred to me right now that the collapse of the USSR may have had an impact on the manner in which we designed our respective campaign worlds. In both, the big baddie is gone. For Airhde, Unklar is banished and in Inzae, The Dragon was defeated and cast out. The big baddies were gone. Evil things exist in both settings but are severely balkanized. It is, so to speak, the time of man in both. How is that or a 4am self-reflective moment. Never thought of that until answer this question.

As for founding TLG, I was just passing through town and stopped to have a beer with Mac and my brother at Vino's Pizzeria. I think I got bamboozled. Shortly after I took out a loan on my truck to pay for the first round of print products. As for the direction of the company, Steve and myself both have that interest in history and literature and inject that into the game fairly heavily, perhaps too much at times as we both tend to get lost in our respective settings' histories and stories. Again both come out differently. Steve can tell you about all the important battles and princes and I can tell you about why crow feathers are important to specific divine rituals.

Steve: Davis and I started out wargaming, or at least we wargamed as much as role played in the 70s. We would flip the mattress of my bed and set the maps on the box springs. Keep it that way for days. I just slept on the floor by the by. Our father had a deep interest in history and that with all the travel started us on that road. Then reading books like Tolkien certainly set the stage for what could be done. It was a lot of reading in those days, fantasy and sci-fi. That carried on into my college and time in the military. I read a lot. So did Davis. We followed similar by distinct paths on that road.

Starting the company was Mac Golden's idea. A long time friend of mine, he had been editing books I had written and submitted to TSR back in the 90s, and he was running a zine called the Seeker. He suggested we create a company. Now the line he pitched was, we can use this company to fund a trip to Gencon, instead of spending all the money we had been spending going to Dragon Con. Mac remembers it a bit differently haha But regardless we created the company at Vinos. Davis joined us for meeting two! And we were off.



EMI: What motivated you to start Troll Lord Games back in 1999? Was there a specific gap in the TTRPG market you aimed to fill?

Davis: Mac wanted to go to Gen Con and needed an excuse. I think that was the genesis of TLG's founding. The timing was right. Mac was aware of the release of 3e DnD, had followed its development, and the legals surrounding it. The OGL was the opening Mac and Steve used to publish our modules and attend Gen Con. I was along for the ride at that point since I was still doing my archaeology gigs. As for a gap in the market, I don't know if there was a gap per se' rather there was an opening to publish DnD related material without fear of being sued into oblivion. In the ensuing years, gaps emerged or were forced open. This led to those edition wars and eventually birthed the OSR movement. But we at TLG had already published Castles and Crusades at that time, having foreseen the market splintering as well as being generally unhappy with 3e and especially 3.5e.

Steve: Davis is remembering that wrong a little. Mac told me we could fund a trip to Gencon by creating a company. But I had no real expectations beyond that. I want to say I was thinking of making money writing adventures, but if I did, it was only a thought. I was only vaguely aware 3rd edition was coming out. I didn't play 2nd, so 3rd meant nothing to me. Mac was part of the legal think tank behind the OGL so knew what was coming. He and Davis sat down and scribbled up a game called Swords and Sorcery so we could have a very similar game to D&D and kind of beat everyone to the market. We were one of three companies that had material compatible with 3rd edition at Gencon 2000.

EMI Castles & Crusades launched in 2004 what was the driving force behind creating this system, and how did it reflect your vision for a modern take on classic fantasy RPGs?

Davis: I think the driving force behind the creation of the Castles and Crusades rules set was my unending desire to publish a game of my own and that suited my needs at the table (or at least mimicked my desires and allowed me to expand or contract whatever I desired). Mac also had an unending desire to create his own game and had already done so in 1999 – named Sword and Sorcery (the game can still be found in the 1999 printings of our first four modules). Steve had zero desire to do so. I honestly cannot recall what prompted the decision to do so but I believe it had to do with dissatisfaction with 3e, a game for which Gary to publish his material, and what we saw as the inevitable collapse of 3e and Hasbro's plan to reiterate DnD every few years to keep sales going.

There was also a whole group of disposed players who were looking for a game; a game that bridged the type of play from 3e and that having begun in the 1970s. Third Edition DnD had, in essence, jettisoned the past in favor of a future. We sought to revive that past with modernized mechanics and a more universal system that could do so. Hence the SIEGE Engine.

Steve: It is important to note that Davis was still a working archeologist at this time. Mac was starting his career and I was the only full time employee at the company. Todd Gray was on deck for a short while. But there were three driving forces beyond the creation of C&C, from the company's standpoint and it was a perfect storm.

1. The d20 market was going to collapse. We had been warned of it. And most of our product was in d20 so we needed our own game.

2. We were publishing Gary Gygax and he needed a home, that was much like AD&D, for his Castle Zagyg.

3. Davis and Mac wanted to create their own game something fierce. I didn't care one way or the other, but I did not like selling 3rd edition and as the point man I needed a product I could be passionate about.

Those three things drove TLG to need a new game and unleashed Mac and Davis on creating it. For the record I did not create C&C, I only wrote flavor text for it.

EMI: The SIEGE Engine is the foundational mechanic of Castles & Crusades. What inspired its development, and how did you ensure it captured the essence of old-school play while being accessible?

Davis: That is a long story and much shrouded in the mystery box of my memory. When sitting down to design castles and Crusades specifically I did a whole lot of research into the game's origins. This research took me all the way back to Prussian Wargaming in the 1840s. I moved forward from there. This was necessary because DnD is a wargame at its root. It developed out of tabletop wargames. Once I understood its origins, I could pinpoint design and play elements that kept reappearing over a century or more of play and that found their way into DnD. I then took apart DnD mathematically and then thematically noting its roots in classic fantasy (Vance, Howard, etc). Pulling on my anthropology background, I pinpointed elements of interactive storytelling that kept showing up in the game. Of these, and in reference to the question vis a vis the SIEGE Engine, math was the more important.

I mathed DnD. I am not a mathematician, but I mathed it. The initial mathing was not producing anything fundamental or unique. So, I mathed all the tangential parts and pieces and with one chart, saw the light so to speak. The same type of chart showed up in wargames in the 60s 50s, early nineteen teens, and late 1880s. Now, that chart was oft used but inordinately undervalued as a core mechanic of the game's playability with human psychology. (Incidentally, to understand why this chart was so important I dove into the psychology of gambling, addiction, and risk/reward.) I pulled up a dozen or so charts from across 100 years and mathed those out. And the kernel of SIEGE Engine was born of that.

I smile every time I see the "DnD is a wargame" meme pop up on twitter because, well, it is. And I proved it to myself.

Steve: Not me. Hahaah I had no part in that other than an approval. And that wasn't rules it was "I have to understand the rule in one pass or it needs rewritten," to help keep it simple.

EMI: Gary Gygax reviewed the Castles & Crusades system and gave it his seal of approval. How did that collaboration come about, and what was his specific involvement in reviewing and influencing the SIEGE Engine or the overall system?

Davis: Steve, Mac, and I met Gary at a Gen Con. We got along famously, and he even bought or product line (or offered to). Afterward, I believe it was Mac or Steve who emailed Gary about doing something for TLG, a short adventure. Gary was not particularly interested in adventures but agreed to write a very short one for us. That appeared in our first hardback printing of the Codex of Airdhe. Steve, Mac, and Gary continued talking and we offered to produce whatever Gary wanted. Hence the birth of the Gygaxian fantasy World line of books. There were other products that were released, The Hermit, Halls of Many Panes etc. By the time we got around to working on Castles and Crusades, TLG was partnered with Gary through other products.

Sometime during this we started designing Castles and Crusades. It just so happened that Gary's ultimate dungeon and setting were on his mind, he just did not have a place to publish because no system being played then met with Gary's desires regarding the material. And this is where we started to work together. Though that has to be taken with some reservation as Gary was not interested in designing a game. What he wanted was a system that he was comfortable with so that he could produce Zagyg and Yggsburgh. I promised to deliver said product knowing full well I had no idea if I could. As did Gary. We were both skeptical.

As time moved on the design began in earnest I would occasionally reach out to Gary and ask him about rules design and send him drafts of ideas. Gary was considerably gracious and erudite in his responses. He knew if a rule would fail to produce the desired results and would let me know. This is how internalized rules had become for him. I think Gary tried his best not to guide my hand but rather just offer advice and words of encouragement (especially when detractors started in with their angry critiques). As I explained the rules of Castles and Crusades, their origins, and the math, the more Gary grew comfortable with the system. As he once penned to me, "this feels quite familiar." Or something akin to that. He also once told me that what I had done was a travesty and I should start over (regarding a class).

In all, Gary's influence was quiet and subtle, more of a move to shift rule tonality rather than creating the rules themselves. I endeavored laboriously to deliver that rule system that played like, felt like, and embraced Gary's original games. In the end I succeeded beyond my wildest dreams as both Gary and Steve decided they liked it. Steve was ADnD all the way. It took some wrestling to get him to play Castles and Crusades at first.

Steve: I had little to do with this process other than to field Gary's overall questions. He disapproved of one thing and it was just a suggestion on the message boards. Beyond that he was very happy with the game, so much so that Castle Zagyg was published using C&C rules.



EMI: Many credit Castles & Crusades as a precursor to the Old School Renaissance (OSR) movement. How do you feel about that recognition, and do you consider C&C to be an OSR system at its core?

Davis: I personally do not consider Castles and Crusades to be an OSR game. It is a precursor though or preceded the OSR movement if not provided some impetus for that movement. At its heart, Castles and Crusades is, what we believe to be the natural extension of ADnD and 2nd Edition. It is not necessarily a revisit of nor is it a rejection of previous DnD games, it is rather an evolution of that game. It is the essence rebuilt for a modern gaming environment. This is the reason one can pick up and play adventure from the 80s and 90s and even late 2010s and play them with Castles and crusades with little to no effort at all.

It did come out as the edition wars were starting and was roundly caught up in that discussion. To be clear, not everyone was well disposed to Castles and Crusades. Some play testers even went on to design their own games – those being firmly in the OSR camp.

Unbeknownst to those around, Castle and Crusades was one of the first to break stride with 3e and created its own system that more fluidly connected with the Game's roots. This accidentally spurred others on or opened that door that others may or have even realized was there.

The OSR has evolved much since those days and, thankfully, the vituperation amongst its adherents has almost completely vanished. As I think of it, the OSR started as a recreative process whereby previous editions of DnD were essentially rewritten, cleaned up, given a fresh layout and given new life via these efforts. Many of these are great products and great games that capture the essence of those editions (Basic, Brown Box, Moldvey, ADnD etc). As the OSR movement has evolved though, we see newer game systems, that do not actually play like older editions, discovering and embracing one or more aspects of those earlier games and incorporating them into their rules.

Steve: It is not part of the OSR, preceding it by a year and some months. Many of the folks who play tested Castles & Crusades went on to create the OSR movement. As Davis says it is a natural extension of AD&D, but I don't even consider it that. As soon as I played it, and it was almost a year after the 1st printing of the PHB came out that I did, I realized it was something very different, the same, but different. The SIEGE Engine fit the RPG model flawlessly, giving the player and CK everything they need to push the limits of their imagination. Not only can players try anything, but the CK has a framework within which to manage it. There are no limits to what you can try, but there is a built in rule for anything and everything, no matter how out of this world, that the player attempts. Its like coming home.

EMI: Castles & Crusades has gone through multiple printings, often referred to as 1st through 9th. Are these more like full editions similar to D&D's, or are they primarily updates? And are the different printings fully compatible with each other?

Davis: All the printing are just updates of the original. It is the same game with no significant rules changes. Between them we have had to fix several overpowered and underpowered classes, clarify how spells, work, and expand or expound upon several aspects of the game, but all are the same rule's system. I can as easily bring my 1st printing into the game as the 9th printing. The Siege Engine will not change, all iterations/printings are compatible and will remain so. No planned obsolescence here.

Steve: They are all printings, and we about to reach the 11th for the PHB. There were some changes to the barbarian in the 4th printing and the 10th saw the removal of OGL names.

EMI: With the recent release of Castles & Crusades Reforged, what prompted the decision to create this new iteration, and why did you choose to move away from the Open Game License (OGL)?

Davis: We were tired of 'entangling alliances and all the problems they cause (d). The OGL worked, initially, because it could not be changed, removed, or whatever. It was a way to bring everyone under one basic fleet and protect everyone in it. Well, after several decades, the suits and curmudgeons in charge wanted it all and, through various shenanigans, attempted to bind everyone using the OGL to HASBRO. Sorta of a 'pay up or get out' plan. They quite literally planned to wreck the playing field and drive everyone into their dungeon. So, we opted out. I have claustrophobia and hate humidity anyway, so dungeons are no place for me.

To avoid this, we had to scrub the product line of all OGL related material and cut the strings that attached. Ultimately, I am happier with this. Steve, Mac and I considered making Castle and Crusades OGL free when we first made the product but opted for the legal protection against a notoriously sue happy company. Over the years we have brought up removing the OGL and scrubbing the product line but just never pulled the plug. HASBRO forced our hand.

Steve: Much as Davis said. When that fiasco blew up I kept getting texts all morning until finally I started looking into what was going on. Davis and I got on a vid call about 10 or 11 that morning and it took us about 2 minutes to decide we were going to scrub it, even knowing what that was going to do to our production schedule...which it wrecked. Work began almost immediately. And like Davis said, entangling alliances. When you hitch your team to someone else's wagon, well, its going to have to pull it.

EMI: Some fans view Castles & Crusades as the "true" Dungeons & Dragons 3rd Edition, especially with Gary Gygax's stamp of approval. How do you respond to that sentiment?

Davis: It makes me happy and proud of the game. I never really thought of it that way when it was being designed. But in short, it makes me quite proud of the game and am glad that people recognize Castles and Crusades for this. Gary's stamp of approval and his decision to publish his Castle with this system could not have made me prouder of what we had accomplished.

Upon thinking about this, I rather thought of Castles and Crusades as the next logical step in the design of Advanced Dungeons and Dragons rather than that produced by WotC. Third Edition was a departure and rejection of design principles that had guided the game for decades. This is why it felt and played like a wholly different game than before. When we decided to design Castles and Crusades we held onto and embraced the core principles of previous iterations – from Basic to 2nd Edition. We just modernized, simplified, and stripped away aspects of that and rebuilt it. The design also looked into future as I was firmly convinced the DnD would continue to change both as a matter of business practice and as a matter of gamability. The game would have to come around as certain things work and others just don't. This is likely why 5e feels closer to older editions than did 4e, 3.5, and 3.0 did. I do believe the next iteration (yes it will come) will align itself more closely to the ADnD than 5e.

Steve: I think it's a fair statement. Being an old AD&D hound C&C follows a natural progression of attribute checks. You had a little bit of that in the Wilderness and Dungeoneer Survival Guides, though it felt a little off. When I first started playing C&C, it felt very natural. The only real jolt of a change was the ascending AC. 5e attempted to capture that but they immediately started making it more complicated. At its heart a role playing game is a game, the only game aside from make believe, where your imagination governs the outcome and C&C gives a very simple, easy mechanic to do that.

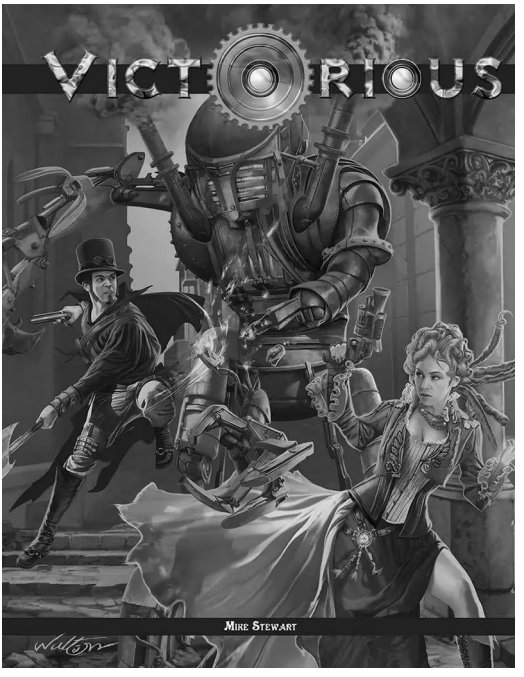
EMI: Beyond fantasy, you've developed systems like Amazing Adventures for pulp sci-fi and adventure. What inspired you to explore these genres, and how does the SIEGE Engine adapt to them?

Davis: This was a two part effort. More a desire on my part and the unceasing labor of Jason Vey to bring it to fruition. I was reared on Indiana Jones and a million other adventure yarn stories from Flash Gordon to John Carter of Mars. I enjoy playing in

steampunk settings, 1920s-1930s retro-history settings, and some sword and sorcery in space. As did Jason Vey. I convinced Steve we should pursue settings or rules to handle those settings. Jason Vey did the actual labor to make that happen.

The SIEGE Engine, being a quite useful and adaptable rule, was easy to work with for those settings. There is a universality to the SIEGE Engine as a malleable and adaptable resolution mechanic. Playing Amazing Adventures is much like Castles and Crusades with regard the underlying principles of action resolution. Where it feels different and gives unique play is in the classes, abilities, and the bits added on.

Steve: Davis is remembering most of it! It had always been an idea to branch out but I was not interested until we got more C&C content out. But we branched out very early on and the first SIEGE Engine game was StarSiege by Josh Chewning. Davis and Josh were good friends and Davis convinced me to put it in the schedule. Josh did that game, but only used the Siege Engine as a basis for his game. It looked good and played well but wasn't really that compatible. After it came out Jason Vey of Elf Lair Games pitched AA to us. I was soured on the expansions as we had so much to do for the core game, but eventually, because it was written we decided to pull the trigger on Vey's game. In the beginning it did okay enough for us to do Tainted Lands by James Ward, Victorious by Mike Stewart, and Harvesters by Mike Siebel. AA is a large part of the line now and we will eventually get more out. Comrades being the one on my mind the most.



EMI: TLG has also produced games like Victorious (Victorian superheroes) and Harvesters (anthropomorphic animals). What drew you to these unique themes, and how do they fit into your overall portfolio? Do you plan to release new editions or expansions for these, especially Victorious, which looks extremely fun?

Davis: Both Harvesters and Victorious were created by fans of those genres. As we knew both the people involved, we were happy to help produce and bring those product lines to

fruition. I was particularly excited about Victorious as that era and gameplay interested me. The Victorian aesthetic mixed with heroic characters and a steampunk vibe was and is to my liking. It is especially appealing when mixing in some archaeology, magical realism, and fantasy.

The genre for Harvesters was unknown to me at the time. I was unaware that anthropomorphic animals were popular. My only association with anthropomorphized animals per se was Watership Down. That is a decidedly dour lens through which to view that genre. I have since discovered that it is a popular way of playing, especially for you people and a great way to introduce youngsters to the game. Only recently have I become aware of an even broader appeal.

I do believe both are going to be updated. I know that Harvesters has been on the list for several years. I can't really decide how I want to proceed with that. I can't seem to settle on an aesthetic or mood. It is popular enough to move forward, I just have to find the time to both pick a style and decide who to give the rewrite to. I am too busy for that. Victorious is going to get a workover at some point as well. I like the material. It needs some rules adjustment to align with the rest of our production but will remain Victorious.

Steve: These are not in the schedule yet as both need to be reforged, meaning the OGL needs stripped out of them, and there are too many titles in the line ahead of them. They are on the list...the very long list.

EMI: Your work with the Gygax Estate has brought unpublished materials from Gary Gygax to fans, including books like the Worlds of Gary Gygax series. Can you share how this collaboration has evolved and what it's meant to you personally?

Davis: I cannot really relate the excitement of those days of working with Gary. It's an odd thing because Gary and I related more closely on discussions of politics, history, anthropology and jokes than on gaming. It's how I first got to know him. When I first met Gary (during a smoke break) I had no idea who I was talking to, but we did not have game talks, rather history and crazy stuff. That set the tone for Gary and me. For me, Gary was a friend first, One of those handful of people I could talk to, share ideas with, cast missives to, ramble on about errant thoughts, and inane observations at, without having to worry. He in turn would do the same. These types of people are rare and friendships with them are rarer still.

When I discovered who he was, well, that made it even better. Then when Gary decided to publish material with us, I was overjoyed. It was when working on the Castles and Crusades rules that Gary and I had many long discussions on rules, games, the philosophy of games and the like. What was insane was Gary's intuitive grasp of mechanics and play and how rules could play out in the long term. He would quickly point out gross errors in designs with a quip or single sentence. Though Gary never said anything about the design of Castles and Crusades in the context of 'you need to do x, y, or z', I did merge my design with Gary's desirous playground. Creating something Gary would feel comfortable playing. The end result was Gary's embracing Castles and Crusades as his go-to system for publishing.

Steve: It began at the first Gencon for us, in 2000. At that show we were picked up by ACD distribution and suddenly needed to start producing product. Mac Golden suggested to me to call Gary Gygax and see if we could publish some of his adventures. I couldn't imagine

any kind of response and laughed it off but Mac kept pushing telling me he had dropped our books off with him. “Just email a follow up.” So I did and Gary responded immediately with some very nice things to say about the books. That led to my asking him if he would like to write some adventures for TLG. He did not want to do that but did have other ideas. We were on the phone in the next day or so and the rest as they say, is history. We were publishing him within a year and became his only publisher until he crossed over.

Gary and I got along extremely well, we became good friends quickly. Sharing smokes, drink, food and a love of history. We worked together for about 7-8 years, almost daily. He was a formative part of TLG and set the example for me on how to manage this material. I can still hear his voice when I think on it, that dry, calm voice with a touch of gravel to it. He was a good friend.

EMI: You've published not just RPGs but also fiction and non-fiction tied to your worlds, like the Aihrde setting novels. How does blending literature with gaming enhance the player experience?

Davis: I think that everyone brings their literary, cinematic, and PC game tastes to the table. This informs how the player plays their character, what expectations they might have, and informs how the player views the world they are gaming in. As time goes on, players engage with the world as if it is a piece of literature or play of which they are part in parcel in making. It is interactive. In a well-run game, the players eventually have as much input into a setting as the designer of that setting. They become invested as all the empty spaces in the setting are being filled out.

By creating stories about a setting, many of those empty spaces are being filled. Whether the stories be adventure yarns, histories, geographies, or mythologies, these are all tales generated to create more empty spaces than the story itself fills. These are places for the players to go and explore. They also offer a prism through which to view the setting, a new way of understanding the world they are playing in through the eyes of the designer or through the eyes of those whom the story is about. This adds layers and depth to a setting that hopefully allow Castles Keepers to more fully flesh out their campaigns. At the same time players garner insights to the setting that might not otherwise emerge, encouraging them to explore hitherto unknown aspects of the setting.

We also enjoy writing and telling stories. There is that.

Steve: For the setting material it really fleshes things out, mood and style wise. But more than that it gives the player a birds eye view of what we are thinking and the way we perceive the material, that helps them understand it a little better. Whether they use it or not isn’t important, but that they understand things like the gods can be as confused as the people, it is a necessary distinction.

Beyond our own written material, reading stories just gives the gamer a different perspective on things.

EMI: TLG maintains a close-knit community through platforms like Twitch streams and X. How has this direct engagement helped build and strengthen connections with your audience?

Davis: Both X and Twitch provide an invaluable resource to TLG. It allows us to interact with others who play Castles and Crusades and ttrpgs in general. Prior to both, the only time one might run into and become acquainted with other gamers was at conventions. We have focused on these X and Twitch for a variety of reasons. My favorite is X. I can quickly peruse the ttrpg and Castles and Crusades space fairly quickly. I get to absorb a lot of information in short order through X. The platforms also caters to my preferred method of communication – short, brief, and quippy to informative. Twitch is slightly different in that it allows others to see the face of the company and get to know us from our grim dark dourness (me) to our upbeat over the top optimism (Steve).

It has also allowed us to find a group of like-minded people. Gamers who game and enjoy gaming and, importantly, can separate that space from all the other spaces we have to be in or accidentally find ourselves inhabiting. We sort of look at X and Twitch as a type of home. A place to come in, kick off your shoes, leave the rest of the world behind, and talk about games and other cool stuff; like castles and clubs and music. Sadly its not a real porch or real bar

Steve: Much as Davis said. These platforms really let us interact with everyone which is rather fun and can be quite hilarious at times. Davis and I, and everyone here at TLG, have always approached this job turned career with a bit of humor and this really lets folks know that it is actually who we are. Davis got chewed up by a bunch of yellow jackets just two days ago, it was quite funny once he got his shot!

EMI: In the recent Adventure Backpack Reforged crowdfunding campaign, you incorporated a class idea from a community member (obviously, I couldn't miss the opportunity to ask about my contribution to C&C with the Dancer-inspired class). How often do you draw inspiration from fans, and what role does community feedback play in your design process?

Davis: I read a lot of material on the net, listen to podcasts, and spend an inordinate amount of time reading about game theory. I quite often visit sites and accounts of our fans. I really like to see what people have done with the game and how they apply for their own needs. One of my design goals was to make Castles and Crusades a toolkit for gamers so I am happy when they use as such to build their own game.

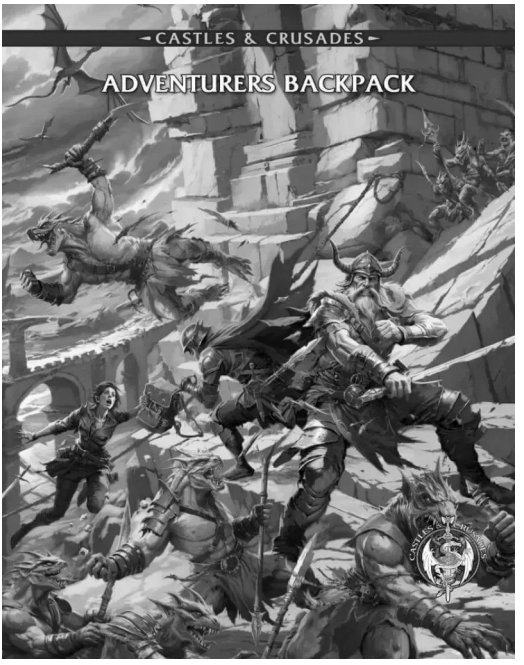
I also get a lot of inspiration from fans. It's the fans that inspire me to keep producing material for Castles and Crusades. In some cases, I really get inspired and like something so much it ends up in print. As was the case for the Dancer Class. You had mentioned it on your page at about just the right time for me as I was looking at some old movies (Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon), reading a bit (The Queen of the Black Coast), and with whatever image happened to be posted that day, I got spurred on and saw a light. So, with your permission, I ran with it.

I have decided to start keeping track. I always ask permission before using someone else's idea or acknowledge it when it inspires me to do something. I even put NPCs in adventures that are fans. But I have not kept track. I will now.

In the long we owe it to our fans. If you look on pages 1 and 2 of the first few editions of the game, we went so far as to list out all the fans who helped playtest the game, made

contributions to the effort, or inspire us to create some aspects of the game. I imagine those will find their way back into print at some point.

Steve: I like to watch other people play C&C and Aihrde and see how they interpret things without interacting with me, Davis or any other troll. This gives me a really good idea of how what we create is actually played and seen. That helps tailor our writing and layout. It also affords a wealth of ideas. I think we could do a community based CKG 2 with relative ease!



EMI: Troll Lord Games runs more Kickstarters and BackerKit campaigns than many TTRPG companies. How has this model worked for funding and promoting your products?

Davis: In the early 2000s funding the company's growth was easier. The market for ttrpgs was growing, consumers were interested in products from various companies and orders from retailers and distributors were high. When the market collapsed, I believe around 2003 or 2005, funding became more difficult. Distributors were not ordering as deep as before, convention purchases were down and outreach to players was quite limited. At the same, online ordering through Amazon was steadily increasing further division brick and mortar sales. This is when we turned to a preorder system and thence to Kickstarter and more recently to Backerkit. The latter two proved an invaluable source of funding and outreach.

Kickstarter essentially replaced all advertising as consumers flocked to them and being seen on Kickstarter was easier than elsewhere. Bear in mind, brick and mortar stores were the primary source of visibility prior to Kickstarter and the growth of social media. It is difficult to imagine there was essentially no social media when we started. What both Kickstarter and Backerkit have done is replace the brick-and-mortar stores for outreach. We rely heavily on those avenues for their outreach as well as the funding they provide.

I should say, I don't believe this will last forever as both become over saturated and consumers enter that period of malaise and option shock that often shutters some businesses. Social media outreach and community building are as important now as both Kickstarter and Backerkit. Maybe something will grow out of that? I can't imagine what the next shift will be, but there will be one, of that I am sure.

Steve: For the gaming industry crowdfunding essentially replaced the old distributor model where you solicited a project to a distributor, they to retailers and orders were made off of what they thought they could sell. It worked well, but was very risky from the publishers standpoint. Crowdfunding allows us a very quick understanding of what products people want and will play.

It's a dangerous game though as crowdfunding companies control the nature of what you are doing, so we try to not be too tied up in it. Our focus, first and foremost, is always on building a community that can gather around the table eat, game and be merry!

EMI: With so many campaigns, are you ever concerned about market saturation or that some projects might not reach their funding goals due to overlapping releases?

Davis: Yes. Steve and I have numerous discussions over release schedules, product development, and what can come out or be developed when. We try to keep things spread out enough to allow them to breathe. This does not always work and with so many product lines, some can get lost in the shuffle or not fund as well as they might should they had been released at a different date. We are also pummeled on occasion by outside forces that shift or alter our plans. The OGL fiasco was one such occasion. Our entire schedule shifted in quick order so we could reprint the books without the OGL in them. Some product lines have been kept on the shelves for years awaiting a time to release them.

Steve: As Davis noted we discuss this often, but there is a very very large market out there. Those who comprise it are very vibrant, educated, rather savvy about what they want and will run at their table. Even so we safeguard the company by building different product lines, from games to fiction, to patreon to twitch to a printing house for other publishers. It is very important to diversify. It helps that we own our own print shop.

EMI: Your recent announcement about opening a new printing factory in the US is exciting. What inspired this move, especially in light of industry challenges like tariffs and supply chains?

Davis: We have long wanted to do this and needed to do this. We have a print shop where we do all our own printing other than hardback books (which are produced in Missouri). As the volume of printing increases, the need for spaces increases alongside it. We also have warehouses that we pay exorbitant amounts for. And we need more space already. When tariffs were placed on print products, we witnessed several friends and others suffer from supply chain issues and dramatic price increases. We do all our printing in-house or up the street in Missouri. We also buy our paper locally and ensure nearly everything we sell is made in America. We did not suffer price shock; however, we did go through some bumps with supply chains as demand on American made paper and bookbinding surged. We gleaned, from that, we needed to double down on our Made in America philosophy and avoid these problems.

To wit, we decided to buy a piece of land and open up our print shop and warehouse. We have in mind making printing available to anyone who desires it and are even considering purchasing a hardback binder as an expansion. We hope to have everything up and running by years end but, as we discovered, red tape is everywhere, even in the most unexpected of places. Cutting through that amount of red tape is proving arduous.

Steve: This has been part of our conversation for years, the time is ripe for it, a little overdue honestly. Our supply chains are all local and the tariffs have no affect on us, other than where they might impact our shipping books to the UK or Canada. But with all the world in an uproar and other publishers needing printing, plus our continued growth and more employees it is the perfect time.

EMI: Will the new printing facility be dedicated solely to TLG products, or do you plan to offer printing services to other TTRPG creators, book authors, or indie publishers?

Davis: As soon as the facility is up and running and running smoothly, we are most certainly opening up production to anyone who wants it. As an added bonus, we won't suffer much from supply fluctuations as most everything is locally sourced. And I think, maybe perhaps, our pricing can be quite competitive. We'll have to wait and work out all the kinks to know for sure on that. But yes, in short, come one come all. We are also building a large enough shop for any potential expansion.

Steve: Even though we have not opened it yet, we have begun taking outside jobs. Shipped the first last week. So it is open to all!

EMI: The World of Aihrde is a richly detailed setting for Castles & Crusades. How has it grown over the years, and what makes it stand out from other fantasy worlds?

Davis: This is Steve's prevue, but I shall attempt to answer. How has it grown over the years? Well from a nascent beginning in the early 80s and few notes scratched on paper; it has grown rather dramatically. By the late 90s Steve had volumes of notes on the setting. I mean binders full of material from maps and histories to mythologies and hordes of NPCs. I recall once mentioning to Steve at some point in the 90s that he should publish that. Little did I know he had plans already. Once we moved it into the market, the content has increased even more dramatically. This is both in response to inquiries from fans and as a result of internal organic growth and explication from continual play. It has been an active living setting for almost 50 years at this point. I can't even imagine how much has not been published.

As for what makes it unique; two things. The first is that it is a living setting. Not only do we still play in Airdhe, but it is actively being developed in numerous areas as a result of that play. With fan inquiry and input, the setting is growing in response to others playing in the game. The other aspect I rather find unique is that it creates and even mix of high fantasy and gritty sword and sorcery all the while embracing that it is a ttrpg and must engage with the tropes and expectations of being such. As other settings lean heavily into one aspect or the other, Airdhe brings it all together, allowing players and the Castle Keeper to focus on those aspects they enjoy or find most fulfilling.

Steve: Interestingly it began in Greyhawk. That game, the big game as we call it, was a greyhawk campaign. When I joined the army in 91, before the Gulf War, we didn't know what was going to happen so we wrapped it up. Of course by then we had so morphed the world of Greyhawk that there was very little left. Unklar arrives, defeats the party and they flee into hiding. I go off to serve. The war ends and I'm stuck in Hawaii for two years. That was 91-93. First I wrote a novel that I never tried to publish and out of that came the real character that is Unklar. So sitting there in barracks with not much to do I took my notes and began to really develop the setting, using the novel's character to corner Unklar. I wrote out a history of the Winter Dark and began prepping a campaign of liberation based around the party. We started gaming again in '94 and played it out to 2006. There was more than enough notes and maps to do a setting when we debuted in 2000 and we did. That was Mac's idea by the by. By this time there was next to nothing but one name and two rivers that echoed Greyhawk. But for the memory and feel of course.

The setting was nominated for an ennie and sold very well so I unlocked all my notes and wrote the Codex of Erde, took about 6 months at 250,000 words I think. But it was done and sold very well too. We shifted to a folio version to fit the maps in and present it as less text heavy, that didn't sell as well, so we shifted back to the heavy, thick Codex of Aihrde. It has only grown since then with the expansion books, each about 20,000 words, 8 out now and 9 more to go. We are shooting for one a month. With that are short stories, a novella, soon to be a second novella and of course the mega dungeon of Aufstrag!

The next step is an Aihrde based video game. It is one of the most, if not the most, detailed setting on the market. It is tailor made for a video game playing field!

I will say too, that is wonderful to watch people play in Aihrde, even when they do things differently than I do. Its just beautiful. And I love every minute of it!

EMI: As indie publishers, what have been some of the biggest challenges you've faced in the TTRPG industry, and how have you overcome them?

Davis: Uh, well, some of the biggest challenges have been, to put it bluntly, people. Like any industry, working with people can be a challenge. We here at TLG try to keep a tight ship. Everyone in the company knows one another, respects one another, likes one another, and we trust one another. This is the case despite all of us having vastly different outlooks on the world. Over the long haul we have learned to focus our energies on products we like and people we trust, even if it meant giving up what otherwise might have been lucrative deals. In some ways this might hamper our company, but it certainly makes going to sleep at night that much easier.

I would say, other than that, the biggest hurdle has been getting the word out and reaching ttrpg players. Even with social media and conventions, it is difficult to get recognition in such a crowded space. Indie publishers are often overlooked, especially those without name recognition or deep ties to the community of creators. Steve, Mac, and I came out of nowhere with our game. For a long time it seemed we were stuck out in left field. This has been circumvented in the past years by using Kickstarters (with their vast reach), backerkit (with its vast reach and good campaign management), and on social media spaces like X (where I mostly hang out as it caters to my nonsensical ramblings).

Other than that, its the typical stuff; suppliers, contracts, production, shipments, supply chains, retailer issues, economy, yadda, yadda, yadda. I think these are the same for anyone

who runs their own company. Oh, and dice. Finding dice made in America is nigh on impossible – at scale.

Steve: there have been a host of them over the past 20 years, from learning the business side itself, as none of us come from business backgrounds, to balancing where is important to what looks like would be fun. But the biggest? Even that is hard to say. The d20 bubble burst hit hard and carried into '05. We were completely broke. Back in '05 we were busted out and had no money, only surviving because Aldo Ghiozzi, of Impressions Marketing and Advertising, advanced us money on the C&C Monsters & Treasure first printing. The pay cuts were deep and lasting and that was hard as hell.

Losing Gary was very hard personally, as I didn't want to continue on. In '08 it was really just me and Peter, Davis was doing a little freelance, but not much, and Gary. So when he crossed the bar I was about ready to toss in the towel.

2010-11 were very rough years. We were surviving on a minimal staff, few products, and struggling to get anything out the door.

But the biggest challenges? Probably in tune with what Davis said. Navigating professional and legal relationships is very challenging as everyone assumes a value they may or may not have and that assumption leads different to priorities which leads to misunderstandings which become time sumps. The most obvious is the OLG mess of '23. That caused a massive upset to our entire apple cart, adding a good year's worth of work to the schedule, if not more. That in turn delayed everything. To handle that we did what we have increasingly done over the years, work more with our own team and less with others and when we do we are very careful who we work with.

EMI: Looking back, what are some of your favorite memories from working with Gary Gygax or other collaborators like James M. Ward?

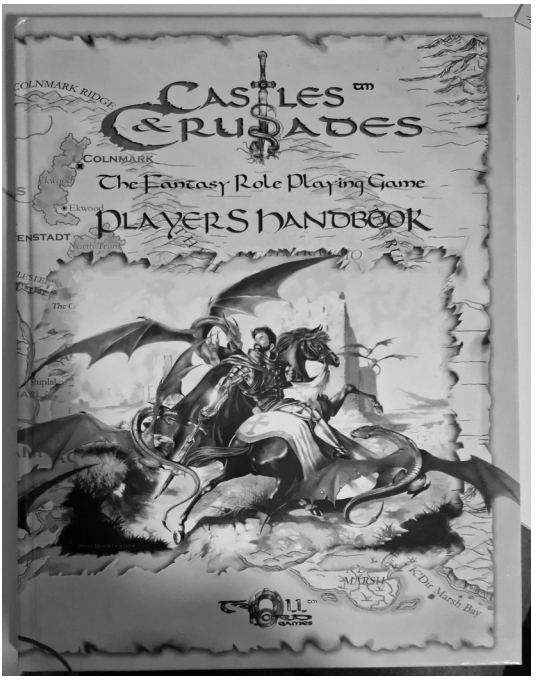
Davis: I considered Gary and James both friends. I hardly ever think of them as gamers. My connection to them was outside games and not in games or game designs, even though we all met because of that. My favorite memories with Gary are sitting on the loading bay at Gen Con talking about Napoleon or on his front porch before everyone arrived to game drinking schlipowitz (? Some Hungarian concoction) and talking about the insanity of American politics. It is the same with James. Sitting and having a dinner with James as he thoroughly enjoyed his steak and bantering with massive doses of humor about what nots and nothing of any particular importance were so relaxing that it brings a smile to my face to this day.

Steve: Let me break this down into two, two for each.
Memories with Gary: my favorite story is sitting at the table having a pre-dinner drink with Gary. He loved puns. I cannot stress how much he loved puns. And he knew that I never quite got them so he would said something or the other that escapes me now, I didn't get it, and he just stared at me enjoying my discomfort! That was hilarious.

We were at a restaurant there in Lake Geneva and discussing recipe and the both of us had to explain to the rest at the table the value of bacon grease!

We argued over the value of Peter Jackson's King Kong. He hated that movie. I enjoyed it.

Said the original was much better. Though I disagreed then, have since come tor realize he was right. I'll tell him that when next I see him!



Memories with Jim: Jim and I, and some others, would gather at Gary Con and go eat steak dinners. I looked forward to those every year. Jim was probably the kindest person I've met in the industry. Professional too, crazy professional.

But I do remember when my writer for a project bailed on me mid stream and we needed a new one. I think this was Gods and Monsters, almost had to be. Though it might have been the spells for the PHB. But I called Jim and said, "Hey I'm in a bind and need some help." Without a missing a beat he responded "What do you need my friend and when?" I told him and he beat the deadline. It was crazy. Took a mountain off my shoulders. I'm pretty sure it was the spells.

He always reminded me to bring my Hawaiin shirt to Gary Con too. He'd call me on the phone "Steve don't forget your shirt!" It was hilarious. And of course I forgot last year.

I will say when the legal for Starship Warden got messy and his partners wanted to pull the license he could sense I was upset and called me and told me the whys and wherefores but ended it with "If you want me to insist you keep the license for the book. Say the word and its yours. Of course I turned him down as he had a good opportunity in another medium. It didn't pan out for him, but I'll never forget that offer.

EMI: What's next for Castles & Crusades? Are there new supplements, adventures, or expansions in the works that you can tease?

Davis: Steve and I are actively discussing that at the moment. With the release of so much Gygax material next year, we are somewhat wary of what we can produce and should

produce without flooding the system. There are many possibilities on the horizon. Expanding the Engineering line of products. Engineering village was well received so we could do more such as Engineering Castles, Cities, etc. There is talk of a Castle Keeper's Guide part II. I personally want to finish The Dragon's Crucible, the Homely Hamlet, and a few other projects. Steve is going to expand on Airdhe with regional books as well as continue to write fiction for Airdhe. There is also talk of a comic book or graphic novel. I would really enjoy the latter but creating a story board and finding an artist are proving more challenging than initially thought. But off the top of my head I would say Star Siege and a book about playing monsters as classes are looking very likely.

Steve: The biggest support book on the horizon is Codex of the Planes, that will dove tail nicely with Codex Eddica and Codex Finland (I forget the title). We'll complement this with a bunch of adventures and bringing old stuff up to date.

EMI: Can you give us a glimpse into the future of Troll Lord Games overall? Any upcoming projects across your various lines or new directions you're exploring?

Davis: This makes me laugh. I have no idea as I sit and write this (Steve does). Our schedules are full for the next year or so as we wrap up a lot of Gygax material, Barsoom, and a few other projects. Steve really wants to drive around and do Alien hunting stuff. I would rather travel to cool historically significant places around the globe, But again I am not sure how that would work because I would land in the steppe lands in the middle of nowhere as archeologist pull the remains of a rib bone out of a pit and be excited. I am not sure how either relates to gaming, but I am all in. I guess we could go to alien landing sties in medieval castles?

I think there are a few pet projects for me. I want to finish such as Inzae and the Homely Homlet. We both really want to do a comic or graphic novel. We are going over that now and, minus World Conquest, all things are on the table.

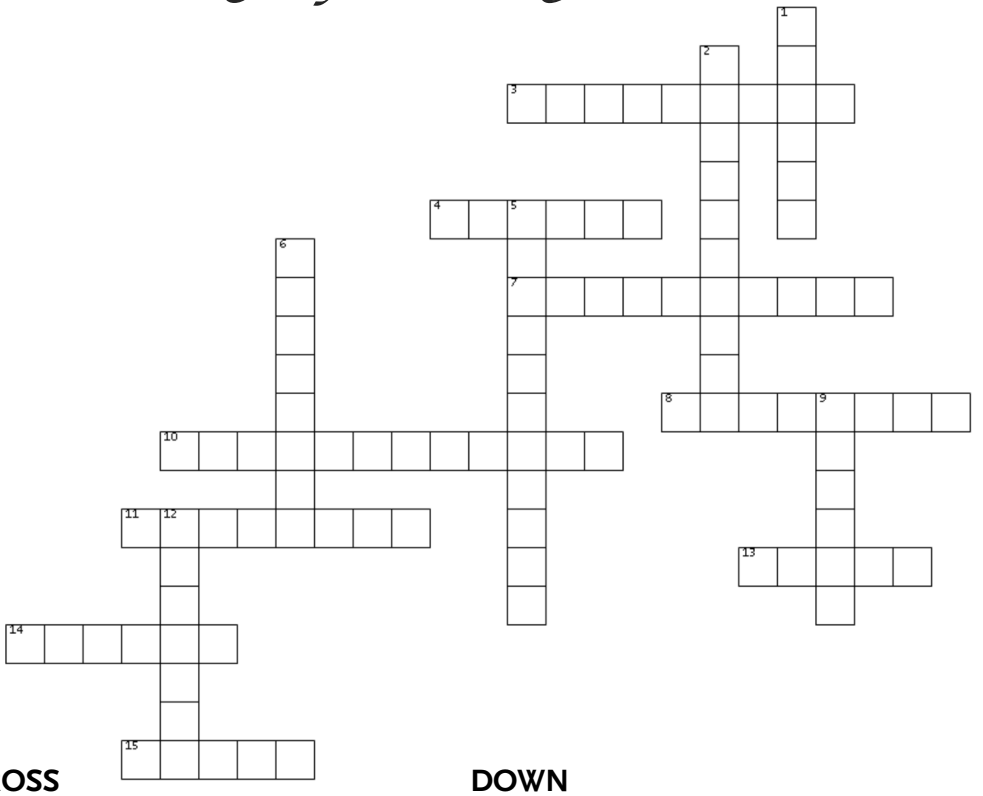
Steve: We have a packed schedule that is always subject to change. We'll round this year out with the release of Infernum, Exaltum and the Backpack as well as the Gygax World Builder archives (I think). Next year we'll kick off with the second part of the Gygax Zagyg campaign and follow that in third quarter with the Barsoom RPG on backerkit. Some great art coming in for that. In the midst of all that we'll be releasing monthly Aihrde Expansion Books (latest one released today), Aufstrag and Codex of the Planes. We also are moving on AA Codex Monstorum which will bring a host of monsters to the AA verse. In the midst of all this will be Crusader Journals, a few adventures and some surprises no doubt...with luck me and davis hunting aliens!

EMI: Thank you both so much, Davis and Stephen, for sharing your insights and stories with usit's been an honor to hear from the minds behind such influential games and a company that's kept the spirit of classic TTRPGs alive. Your dedication to community and innovation continues to inspire.

Before we close, could you tell our readers where they can purchase your games like Castles & Crusades Reforged, support your ongoing campaigns, or connect with the TLG community for updates?

We here at TLG have to be spry. It's a small company, all things said and done, so have to be able to move

80s Sci-Fi Movie Crossword



ACROSS

3. David Bowie as the Goblin King fantasy (1986)

4. Tim Burton's dark knight with Michael Keaton (1989)

7. Arnold Schwarzenegger cyborg assassin sci-fi classic (1984)

8. Arnold vs alien hunter in the jungle (1987)

10. Who you gonna call? proton pack comedy (1984)

11. "As you wish" fantasy romance classic (1987)

13. Arnold as the barbarian swordsman (1982)

14. 1988 fantasy quest with Val Kilmer

15. Keanu Reeves bomb-on-a-bus action thriller (1994)

DOWN

1. Keanu Reeves red pill sci-fi (1999)

2. There can be only one immortal warrior (1986)

5. Arnold's false memory Mars adventure (1990)

6. Spielberg dinosaur theme park thriller (1993)

9. Sigourney Weaver vs xenomorphs sequel (1986)

12. Cyborg police officer in dystopian Detroit (1987)

Castles & Crusades

Deciphering Primary and Secondary Attributes at the University of Elven Magic

Let's Talk Castles & Crusades. More specifically, a certain part of the system that recently came up in a conversation I had on X, which was "overwhelming," and to be honest, when you first hear about it, it is. Primary and Secondary Attributes are a core feature of Castles & Crusades, but what are they and what do they do? Using 5e terminology, it's akin to "proficiency" for your character but much less restrictive, prompting players to approach situations with creative thinking.

Here, I need to put a disclaimer: Castles & Crusades up to the 8th printing was an OGL system; however, due to the OGL scandal, Troll Lord Games decided to move away from OGL with the 9th print. The rules are mostly the same, though some terms have changed. I'm still awaiting my 9th print books, so I don't know exactly what the name changes are; if you have the newest 9th print, some terms might be different from what I'll use in this article.

C&C, similar to all editions of D&D, uses the same names for attributes: Strength, Dexterity, Constitution, Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma. As a fun fact, the Castle Keeper's Guide contains a seventh attribute – Beauty, which is an optional rule for Game Masters, or Castle Keepers as they're called in C&C, to use.

When you pick your class, you get a "fixed" Primary Attribute; for a Fighter, it will be Strength, and for a Wizard, it will be Intelligence. Think of it as something you do naturally. For example, a Fighter trains with weapons, so their Strength grows due to this training, while a Wizard learns and reads books, expanding their knowledge naturally. So, that's one of your Primary Attributes; the second comes with your race, where you can pick any stat you like to make it a Primary Attribute. Want a Wizard who does push-ups in their free time? You can pick Strength. Want a charismatic Wizard? You can pick Charisma. Each race grants

your second Primary Attribute, with the exception of Humans, who can pick two, bringing the total to three.

Now, how do you use them? Here's where many new players get confused after reading the PHB, which is available for free on the Troll Lord Website in PDF form, along with a free PDF of the Monster Manual. Here's the easy explanation for calculating a skill challenge in C&C:

Base Challenge +/- Difficulty Modifier

This is challenged against the player's roll of a D20 + level +/- Modifiers.

Easy! I wish...

The Base Challenge differs for Primary and Secondary Attributes. For Primary Attributes, it's 12; for Secondary, it's 18.

Example:

Let's use our Fighter and Wizard. The Fighter's Primary Attribute is Strength, and the Wizard's is Intelligence. They're in a deadly dungeon and encounter a massive obstacle - a boulder blocking their path. Both decide to try moving the boulder using strength. For the sake of example, they both have a Strength of 14, which grants a +1 to checks.

They roll at the same time, both rolling a 14 on their D20. The question is, who will move the boulder?

From a narrative standpoint, the Fighter should have an easier time, as he's trained his entire life and has the muscles that the Wizard lacks. Here's where Primary/ Secondary Attributes come into play:

Both rolled 14, adding + 1 from level (1 for each level) +1 from their Strength Modifier for a total of 16.

The Castle Keeper decides this task is slightly harder than "medium," adding +2 to the task's Difficulty.

For the Fighter:

Primary Attribute Base Challenge: 12 + 2 (Difficulty Modifier) = 14. The Fighter, with a roll of 15, successfully moves the boulder.

For the Wizard:

Secondary Attribute Base Challenge: 18 + 2 (Difficulty Modifier) = 20. The Wizard, with a roll of 15, fails to move the boulder.

It's not as complicated as it seems, but there's an even easier way to do it. How? You can add +6 to your roll if you have a Primary Attribute, and all Base Challenges are considered 18 ± Difficulty Modifier.

Fighter would roll 15 (D20 roll) + 1 (Level) + 1 (Strength Modifier) + 6 (Primary Attribute) = 22 vs. 20 (Base Challenge + Difficulty Modifier).

Both formulas work on the same basics; I personally prefer the first one as it shows players that tasks are easier for those who've spent their lives honing specific skills. Here you go, Primary and Secondary Attributes made easy by Elven Maid.

But hold on, I said this system is much less restrictive and prompts players to approach situations with creative thinking. Let me explain.

There's a famous saying that "sometimes less means more." D&D 5e uses skills where you can add your proficiency, like History, Sleight of Hand, Intimidation, etc. C&C doesn't have these; instead, it relies on players' creativity to perform actions. I'd like to share a real story from one of my past campaigns where I played a Monk. We were playing a 5e game, and I wanted to get to the second floor using crates stacked under a window. For Monks, Strength is often a dump stat. My DM asked me to roll for "Athletics" to climb up, but I asked if I could jump using the wall and other crates in a parkour style. The DM said, "No, you need to use Athletics; this is how you climb," and he was running the game by RAW, so he wasn't wrong.

If we were using the C&C system, it would be up to players to describe how they attempt the challenge. Tell the Castle Keeper what you wish to do, and he will ask for an Attribute check based on your explanation. So, if I wanted to parkour my way up, the Castle Keeper wouldn't force me to use Athletics since there's no Athletics skill in C&C; he would ask for a Dexterity Check. This approach doesn't give players a closed list of skills; it relies on their ingenuity. Explain your intent to the DM, and he'll ask for an Attribute Check, not a Skill Check. Again, the saying, "sometimes less means more," by not listing possible actions, you enable players to think outside the box. Unfortunately, when I recently ran C&C, my players kept asking for "D&D Skill checks." I was losing hope until I asked them to describe the actions they wanted to do rather than naming a skill. They started coming up with ideas on their own, and the turning point was an "Intimidation" attempt. My player wanted to intimidate an NPC, a local thief, a cocky bastard. She told me she wanted to "intimidate" him, with her Charisma being a secondary attribute. I asked, "Could you describe how you wish to do it?" She told me, "I wish to stab my dagger between his fingers." I asked for a Dexterity check, not Charisma; she was surprised but happy her odds increased. She failed the check, and the dagger hit the bastard's hand, pinning him to the table - he was more intimidated than she could have asked for.

Here you go, folks! Primary and Secondary Attributes in Castles & Crusades explained with some extras. C&C, by being a rule-light system, makes the game much more fun, creating memories that couldn't be achieved by running 5e using RAW without changing a lot. Transitioning from 5e to C&C is easy and fun.

Baptism of Fire

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(We also have Elves! ... Don't tell the Dwarfs!)



The Timeless Promise

of Old Man Voll

Let's Talk Dwarves!

More specifically, how long-lived races can be role-played in TTRPGs or portrayed in books with genuine emotional weight and thematic depth. This time I'm not talking about Elves (though Frieren: Beyond Journey's End has plenty to say about them too). I want to focus on one of the most quietly devastating and inspiring long-lived characters in recent fantasy: Old Man Voll, the ancient Dwarf from Frieren.

Even if you've only seen a few episodes, Voll's story hits hard because it understands something fundamental about longevity that most stories get wrong: it isn't just about living a long time. It's about what you lose while you keep going, and what you choose to hold onto anyway.

The Dwarf Who Outlived His Own Story

In the world of Frieren, Dwarves have an average lifespan of around 300 years, with exceptional individuals reaching close to 400. Voll is one of those exceptions. When Frieren and her new party (Fern, Stark, and Sein) arrive at a quiet village in the Klar Region roughly 80 years after the Hero Party's journey, Voll is nearly 400 years old. He sits on a rock at the village entrance like a weathered statue, broadsword propped beside him, red cloak wrapped around his shoulders. To the villagers he is both guardian deity and slightly senile old man. They know he protects them from monsters and demons. They do not know why.

That knowledge has simply... faded.

Human generations turned over. Grandparents who might have remembered the young woman Voll once loved grew old and died. The reason this stubborn Dwarf has stood watch for centuries became an old story that no one tells anymore.

The Promise That Outlasted Memory

Flash back roughly 80 years. The Hero Party passes through the same village. Himmel, ever the idealist, asks the obvious question: Why does Voll risk his life defending this place?

Voll's first answer is classic Dwarf: "It was an old story that no longer mattered."

Himmel refuses to accept that. "No one would risk their life for something unimportant."

Pressed, Voll finally admits the truth. Long before the Hero Party ever formed, centuries earlier, he had married a human woman who loved this village dearly. He made her a promise: he would protect it. She eventually died of old age, as humans do. Voll remained.

He calls keeping the promise "foolish" or even "ridiculous" in the face of that loss.

Himmel's response is simple and kind: perhaps it is foolish to some, but he is certain Voll's wife would be happy that he still honors it. Then Himmel does something quietly profound, he entrusts the keeping of memories to Frieren, saying it will be her duty to carry them forward.

The Conversation That Breaks Your Heart

Decades later, Frieren returns.

She and Voll sit together. They talk. At one point Voll asks Frieren if she still remembers Hero Himmel's face and voice. She answers with her usual quiet confidence: she remembers everything about him.

Voll is silent for a moment. Then he says:

"I can no longer recall my wife's face, voice, or gaze. However, I am protecting this village nonetheless because it is something important to me."

That single line carries the entire weight of long life. He has outlived the person he made the promise for. He has outlived the people who knew why he was there. He has even begun to lose the memory of the person herself. And still, he stays. Not because he remembers her clearly anymore, but because the promise has become part of who he is.

It is one of the most honest portrayals of grief and duty I've seen in fantasy.

The episode ends on a gentler note. As Frieren's party prepares to leave, Voll tells her he dreamed of his wife again. After all those years of fading details, something in him still reaches for her in sleep. He says he's glad Frieren came to see him before the end of his life, the same words he spoke to her 80 years earlier. Frieren gently reminds him of that fact. He simply smiles.

Why Voll Works So Well (Even in ~15 Minutes of Screen Time)

Voll appears in Episode 16 ("Long-Lived Friends") for a relatively short stretch, yet he feels like a complete, lived-in character. Here's why this matters for anyone creating long-lived Dwarves:

- Economy of storytelling. A few key conversations and one training montage with Stark reveal his personality, his past, his pain, and his quiet strength. You don't need centuries of exposition when you have the right emotional beats.
- Memory as tragedy and anchor. Most long-lived characters in fiction either remember everything perfectly or become detached. Voll shows the realistic middle ground: details erode, but the emotional core (the promise, the love, the duty) can remain.
- Dwarven stubbornness reimagined. In many settings Dwarves are defined by grudges, craftsmanship, or clan loyalty. Voll takes that cultural stubbornness and turns it into something deeply personal and tender. He doesn't hold a grudge, he holds a vow.
- The weight of outliving short-lived loved ones. This is the emotional heart. Elves in Frieren often struggle with this too, but Voll's version feels more grounded, more "Dwarven." He doesn't philosophize about it. He just keeps showing up.

Using Voll as Inspiration in TTRPGs

If you're a GM or player who wants to bring long-lived Dwarves to life at the table, Voll offers a masterclass:

For Player Characters

- Give your Dwarf a promise or tradition that predates the campaign by 100+ years. Maybe they swore to guard a specific pass, finish a masterwork, or protect the descendants of someone they loved.
- Play the erosion of memory. You don't have to forget everything, but consider what small details have slipped away. What does your Dwarf pretend to remember perfectly because admitting the loss would hurt too much?
- Let them mentor short-lived characters the way Voll mentors Stark, gruff, exacting, but ultimately generous with hard-won experience.

For GMs & Worldbuilding

- Create ancient Dwarf guardians whose original purpose has been forgotten by the locals. The party's quest isn't just "kill the monster", it's "figure out why this Dwarf has been here for three centuries and decide whether to help them fulfill (or finally release) that vow."
- Use time skips. Let the Dwarf PC or NPC remain relatively unchanged while human or halfling allies age and die. The emotional payoff when the Dwarf finally admits they're starting to forget faces is devastating.
- Lean into Dwarven "stubbornness" as quiet perseverance rather than just combat toughness. Voll doesn't fight because he's angry. He fights because he promised.

Adventure Hook Idea

The party arrives in a village that has been protected by the same Dwarf for generations. The current mayor wants the "old relic" removed because he's "scaring the children" and the village no longer needs him. The Dwarf refuses to leave. Investigation reveals the original promise... and that the Dwarf can no longer remember the face of the person they made it for. Do the players help them stay? Help them let go? Or find a way to preserve the memory before it's gone forever?

Writing Long-Lived Dwarves in Books

Voll proves you don't need a 10,000-year-old Elf to explore immortality-adjacent themes. A Dwarf who has "only" lived 350–400 years but loved a human can carry just as much pathos.

Key techniques to steal:

- Show the forgetting. Don't just tell us the character is old. Have them reach for a memory and come up empty in a small, painful moment.
- Let the promise become the character. Over time the vow stops being about the lost loved one and becomes about the Dwarf's own identity. That's when it gets really interesting.
- Contrast with short-lived companions. The same way Frieren's perfect recall of Himmel highlights Voll's fading memories, your long-lived Dwarf will feel more real when surrounded by characters who are changing and dying around them.
- End on a note of quiet resilience. Voll's final dream of his wife isn't a grand reunion. It's small, human, and hopeful. That's often more powerful than any dramatic payoff.

Final Thoughts

Old Man Voll is proof that you can create an unforgettable long-lived character in very little time on the page or screen, if you understand what longevity actually costs and what it can still give.

He is stubborn. He is fading. He is still keeping his word.

And in a genre full of ancient Elves dispensing wisdom from ivory towers, there is something incredibly moving about a Dwarf who simply sits on a rock outside a village he no longer fully remembers why he protects... and keeps protecting it anyway.

Frieren: Beyond Journey's End is a goldmine for anyone who wants to write or roleplay long-lived races with real heart. Voll is one of its brightest (and quietest) treasures.

If you're building a Dwarf character or NPC right now, ask yourself:*What promise would they keep even after they've forgotten the face of the person they made it for?

That question alone will take you further than most "ancient and wise" backstories ever do.

What long-lived Dwarf (or other race) characters have stuck with you in games or books? I'd love to hear about them.

The Mind

Jump on a cloud,
Hold yoir breath,
Hoist the sails,
And let your imagination away.

Swim across the sea,
Fly above the air,
Burrow through the Earth,
Find something there.

Feel the currents,
See the blues,
Hear the churning storms , (Smell the salty air,)
As sea and air become one.

Nothing left untouched,
Except by your will,
Let it roam free,
As it always will.

Stephanie Gruchow
(@SapphireKaneq1)

The Fading Dark

How D&D Forgot to Fear the Darkness

In its earliest days, darkness was not just a setting in Dungeons & Dragons. It was a living force. It pressed in from every side and turned torchlit corridors into corridors of dread. Somewhere along the way, modern editions lit the dungeons up. They traded that primal terror for convenience and heroic ease. This article explores why darkness once defined the game, how it quietly faded, what we lost in the process, and how we can bring its weight back to the table without breaking the modern game we love.

Darkness is one of humanity's oldest and most visceral fears. In the absence of light, the unknown flourishes. Paths disappear. Monsters gain the advantage. The mind fills every shadow with teeth. Dungeons & Dragons, a game built on imagination and peril, once treated darkness as a core mechanic rather than mere atmosphere. Early editions made light sources precious, fragile, and essential. Over time, however, the game illuminated its underworlds. Darkvision became widespread, torches turned into afterthoughts, and the fear of the dark was largely sidelined in favor of accessibility and streamlined play. Yet the shadows still have something vital to offer, if we are willing to step back into them.

Darkness in the Earliest Dungeons

The 1974 Original Dungeons & Dragons (the "White Box") made the underworld a genuinely hostile environment. The rules were explicit: "In the underworld some light source or an infravision spell must be used. Torches, lanterns and magic swords will illuminate the way..." Light was not optional. Torches lasted roughly an hour. Lanterns consumed oil. Both could be extinguished by wind, water, or a well-timed monster attack. Without light, characters were effectively blind. They could not map, fight effectively, or even move safely. Every turn spent in the dark carried real risk of disaster.

The 1977 Holmes Basic Set reinforced the same principle in plain language: a torch or lantern burns for only a limited time, and the party must carry an adequate supply "or face being stranded in the dark." This was not flavor text. It was survival. The *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Dungeon Master's Guide* (1979) gave DMs concrete tools. Torches cast 40 feet of light and lanterns cast 60 feet. It urged careful time tracking. Infravision, the early version of darkvision, was limited, heat-based, and useless for reading maps or spotting fine details like traps. Gary Gygax himself noted in the early rules that the DM had considerable leeway in deciding what happened to characters caught without light. The implication was clear: the dark was dangerous, and the rules existed to make that danger felt.

This approach grew directly from the game's pulp fantasy and horror roots. Robert E. Howard's Conan stories and H.P. Lovecraft's cosmic dread both thrived on claustrophobic, shadowy spaces where heroes were never entirely safe. In those early sessions, a simple goblin encounter

became terrifying when the party could only see 30 feet ahead. Players planned routes, conserved resources, and listened intently for sounds beyond the torchlight. Darkness was not a penalty. It was the point.

How the Dungeons Got Brighter

The shift away from darkness happened gradually, then accelerated.

AD&D 2nd Edition (1989) kept many of the old light rules on paper. Torches still burned for about an hour. Yet the game's tone moved toward heroic fantasy. Modules like *Dragonlance* emphasized epic stories over gritty survival. DMs were encouraged to prioritize narrative over strict bookkeeping. Infravision became more common among player races, quietly reducing the need for torches. The fear of darkness began to soften as players expected greater agency and fewer punishing logistics.

3rd Edition (2000) marked the real turning point. It replaced infravision with "darkvision," described as "the extraordinary ability to see with no light source at all, out to a range specified for the creature." Dwarves, gnomes, and half-orcs gained 60-foot darkvision. The Dungeon Master's Guide still suggested tracking light sources, but the game's new focus on tactical combat, character optimization, and balanced encounters pushed survival mechanics to the background. Magic items like everburning torches further trivialized the problem.

4th Edition (2008) leaned fully into accessibility and cinematic action. Light rules were simplified, darkvision expanded to even more races, and many dungeons were simply described as dimly lit or magically illuminated. The "points of light" setting concept ironically made true darkness less central. Players were expected to be the light in a dangerous world rather than fear what lurked in shadow.

5th Edition (2014) completed the transformation. Darkvision became standard for nearly half the core races, often reaching 60 or even 120 feet. The Player's Handbook describes a torch as burning for one hour and providing bright light in a 20-foot radius plus dim light for another 20 feet. The Dungeon Master's Guide offers only brief, optional advice: track light sources "if you want to add realism." Most official adventures assume parties either have darkvision or easy access to the light cantrip. Dungeons are frequently lit by glowing fungi, ancient runes, or ambient magic. The design philosophy prioritizes fun and forward momentum over the slow, tense crawl through unknown blackness.

Why Darkness Faded

Several interconnected forces drove this change. Modern D&D serves a much broader audience than the original game. Many players come from video games where visibility is assumed and resource tracking feels like busywork rather than play. Darkvision removes friction and lets groups focus on combat, roleplay, and story.

At the same time, the game's design philosophy shifted toward empowerment and heroic fantasy. Since 3rd Edition, characters have grown more powerful and competent. Mechanics that impose real limitations, like running out of light, can feel at odds with the fantasy of unstoppable adventurers. Cultural influences also played a role. High-fantasy films and novels treat light as something heroes naturally command. Early D&D drew more from horror traditions where darkness itself was the enemy.

Finally, there was simple mechanical streamlining. Tracking torches, oil, and ammunition was increasingly viewed as bookkeeping rather than storytelling. Spells like light and racial abilities like darkvision eliminated those logistics entirely.

What We Lost When the Lights Came On

The consequences reach deeper than most players realize.

When every character can see in the dark, the fundamental tension of exploration evaporates. A party creeping forward with a single flickering torch feels vulnerable in a way that a group with universal darkvision never does. Every sound becomes a potential threat. Every shadow might hide something watching. Horror author Ramsey Campbell once observed that the essence of fear is uncertainty. Modern D&D removes much of that uncertainty the moment the party enters a dungeon. The unknown loses its power when everyone can see 60 feet in every direction.

Resource management also suffered. In early editions, deciding whether to carry extra oil or another treasure was a meaningful choice. Light had weight, cost, and vulnerability. Modern play flattens exploration into a series of combat set pieces because the logistical layer has largely disappeared.

Atmosphere and horror suffer most visibly. Places like Strahd's castle or the Underdark should feel oppressive and menacing. When players see perfectly in monochrome clarity, the crypt loses its mystery and the chasm loses its depth. Classic monsters lose their edge too. A drow or shadow that can see in darkness while the party cannot creates genuine tactical and emotional asymmetry. When everyone sees equally, that advantage vanishes and the monsters become just another set of hit points.

Narrative opportunities disappear as well. A torch sputtering out during a desperate chase, cultists extinguishing every light before an ambush, or a villain plunging an area into magical darkness. These moments create drama. Modern design rarely uses them because the rules assume players are largely immune to darkness.

Rekindling the Shadows

Bringing darkness back does not require returning to 1974's punishing style. It means restoring its emotional and mechanical weight in ways that fit today's game.

Darkness restores fear and wonder. It reminds players that their characters are not invincible and that the dungeon itself is a threat. It deepens exploration because players must actually plan. They decide when to risk light, when to move quietly in shadow, and when to retreat. It also enriches roleplay. How does the grizzled fighter react when the last torch dies? Does the scholarly wizard panic or innovate? These moments reveal character in ways bright, well-lit dungeons rarely do.

Practical ways to reintroduce it are surprisingly simple. Rethink darkvision. Limit its range, make it monochrome and grainy, or require concentration or a resource cost. Many groups already experiment with this successfully. Enforce light mechanics during key scenes such as chases, timed explorations, or horror-focused sessions. Make light sources vulnerable to wind, water, enemy spells, or even the environment itself. Barovia's mists in Curse of Strahd are a perfect example of how fog can dim torches dramatically.

Design dungeons with true darkness in mind. Avoid default glowing mushrooms or runes unless there is a strong in-world reason. Use dynamic descriptions. Shadows shift when something moves just beyond the light. Sounds seem closer than they should. Tie darkness to lore. It could be an ancient curse, a demonic presence, or simply the natural state of deep places that have never known the sun.

Modern tools make this easier than ever. Virtual tabletops with dynamic lighting can create genuine tension. Even theater-of-the-mind DMs can describe light failing in vivid detail. Old-school inspired games like Old-School Essentials show that strict but simple light rules can heighten tension without overwhelming bookkeeping.

Objections and Reassurances

Some players worry that reintroducing darkness will feel punishing or slow the game. In practice, modern D&D is far more forgiving than its predecessors. Death saves and abundant healing mean

characters survive situations that would have ended campaigns in 1974. Simple, consistent rules such as "torches last 10 rounds in active use" keep tracking light manageable. Most groups only need to enforce it during tense moments rather than every single turn.

Others argue that limitations frustrate players. In reality, constraints often spark creativity. When light becomes precious, players invent clever solutions. They use glowing weapons, allied creatures that emit light, magical tricks, or even negotiate with creatures that live in shadow. Darkvision itself does not need to be removed entirely. It can simply be dialed back from a universal solution to a useful but imperfect tool.

The Dark Still Has Stories to Tell

Darkness defined Dungeons & Dragons in its earliest years. It turned dungeons into realms of genuine fear and hard-won triumph. Over decades it faded, first through shifting design priorities, then through the rise of darkvision, and finally through a philosophy that favored heroic competence over vulnerability. The loss dulled one of the game's sharpest edges.

Yet darkness can return without breaking the modern game. By treating light as a resource worth managing, by letting darkvision have meaningful limits, and by designing spaces where shadows still matter, we can recapture what made those early expeditions unforgettable. The dark is not merely a mechanic. It is the guttering torch that forces the party to hold its breath. It is the shadow that moves before the monster appears. It is the uncertainty that makes every victory feel earned.

Dungeons & Dragons has always thrived on imagination. Nothing ignites imagination quite like the unknown waiting just beyond the light. Turn down the lights. Listen to the dark. Something is still out there, and it remembers when we used to be afraid of it.

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- 10–15 ml Simple syrup or vanilla syrup (adjust to taste)
- Garnish: 3 coffee beans or a light dusting of grated dark chocolate

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4. Strain into a chilled coupe or martini glass.
5. Garnish with coffee beans or grated chocolate.

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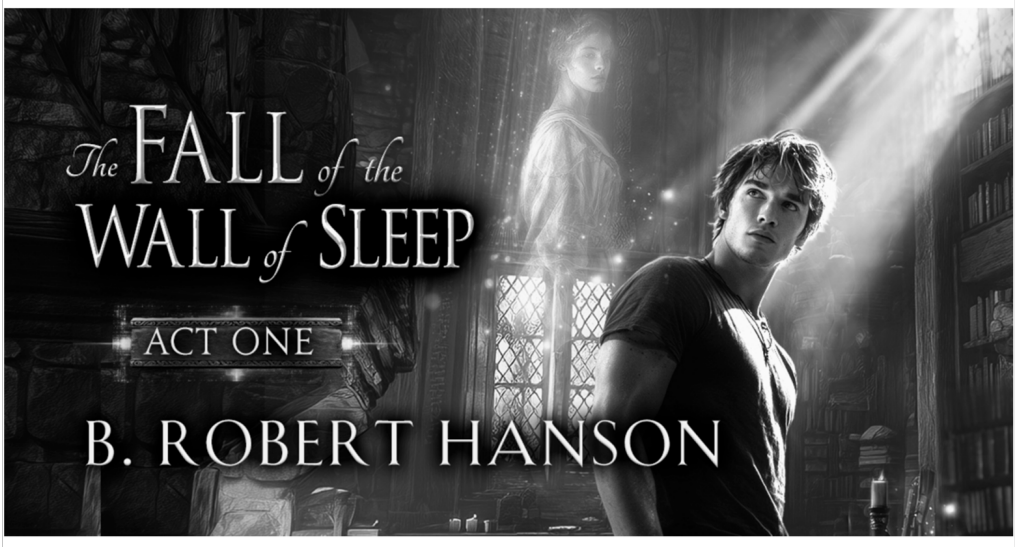

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Crow Tide

by
Anastasia Preston

The horizon beyond Halifax Ridge churned like a wound in the earth. Then the crows rose—thousands upon thousands—blackening the sky until it seemed the day itself recoiled. They swirled into a vast, spiraling vortex, a storm eye suspended above the plains.

Shouts erupted. Highmoor burst into motion.

Archers lined the walls, five hundred strong: men and elves shoulder to shoulder, bows drawn, ballistae groaning as their cables tightened. Each weapon was leveled toward the horizon, but even the sharpest eyes faltered at the sight of so many wings.

No other kingdoms had come. No banners from the north or west. Tilsrest and Shadowfel stood with Highmoor.

Sariel turned to Ashmire.

"Your Majesty, it's time. You and the other leaders must fall back. Aelirunai and I will remain here with the archers."

His jaw was tight, his eyes shadowed, but he nodded. "Hold the line," he said, voice low.

Before he could withdraw, Elaeni crossed the ramparts. She wrapped Sariel in a fierce embrace, clinging to her as though the storm might pass them by if only she didn't let go.

“Please... be safe,” she whispered. “I love you.”

Sariel pressed her brow against hers, steady as stone.

“I promise—I won’t leave you alone again. I love you too. Now go.”

Their lips brushed in one brief, stolen kiss before they parted.

Nearby, Wren tapped her chest twice with her hand.

I’m here.

Sariel’s expression softened, and she mirrored the gesture.

I’m here.

Wren nodded, then turned and ran to where Isaro and the others waited further down the battlements.

The air thickened. The vortex of crows swelled, then stilled, suspended like some great, unblinking eye.

And then—he was there.

A presence bloomed at Sariel’s back, familiar and wrong all at once. Soldiers jerked to sudden awareness, startled hands flying to hilts. She raised a hand to still them.

Zharvethys stood as if carved from moonlight and shadow—an elven man, fair, flawless, terrible in his beauty. His smile was slow, unblinking.

“What do you want, Crow?” Sariel asked, voice like drawn steel.

“I offer you one final chance,” he said, extending his hand. “Take it, and ascend. Become the goddess you were born to be. You and I could shape this world—bend eternity itself.”

Sariel stepped forward. The wind stirred her cloak, but her gaze never wavered.

“My home might not be Highmoor,” she said, “but those I love are here. There is nothing you can offer me that would make me abandon them.”

Her eyes burned steady as her words fell like cuts.

“The difference between us is simple: I am capable of love. I protect. You prey.”

Zharvethys’s smile curdled.

“You are above these mortals. You could take what you please—who you please. Rule them.”

“No,” Sariel said. “They walk beside me. When I fall, they help me rise. You are alone, Crow. And that is all you will ever be.”

The words struck deeper than steel. Rage sparked in his eyes.

“Then die with them,” he hissed.

His body broke open. Wings erupted from his back—vast, void-black, their surfaces studded with a hundred blinking eyes. His head cracked, stretching into a hooked beak. Fingers splintered into talons. Feathers sprouted across his skin like scales of night. His voice fractured into a haunting chorus, dozens of voices overlapping in a discordant hymn.

The Crow had shed his skin.

With an inhuman shriek, he leapt skyward, circling high above the castle like a living storm. The soldiers trembled, pale and shaken.

Sariel did not move.

Across the gates, Aelirunai stood radiant and still. Mortal and myth mirrored each other, two sentinels flanking Highmoor’s heart.

Together, they faced the storm.

And the river of crows came.

Aelirunai watched Sariel for a heartbeat longer.

The elf stood unflinching at the ramparts, feet braced, hands out, palms open to the night. Frost bloomed around her fingers, the air itself crystallizing into spears of ice—breath made blade.

Pride swelled quietly in Aelirunai’s chest. Words had never been enough to measure what Sariel meant to her. If she had not come to that island—if she had not reached into the prison of shadows—Aelirunai would still be bound. Sealed. Forgotten. Mad.

She turned back to the sky, still cloaked in human form.

Foxfire coiled around her like a living flame, flickering, hungry. It shaped itself into spears of burning light, each one sharp as starlight. The archers near her shifted uneasily at the glow, the fire reflected in their wide eyes—but none broke. To them, she was not yet beast, but weapon. Ally.

From down the line, Sariel’s voice rang out, steady and commanding:

“Ready!”

Aelirunai echoed the order, her voice ringing like a thunderclap across stone. The sound rippled through the ranks—five hundred bows raised in perfect unity. Arrows nocked. Strings pulled taut. A forest of blades aimed into the dark.

The silence that followed was suffocating.

Then Sariel’s voice cut it open:

“Loose!”

The air screamed with the whistle of arrows. The sky answered in agony—thousands of crows shrieking as they tore apart mid-flight. The sound was wrong, piercing, like glass splitting in the skull. Black bodies fell in sheets, so dense that a single arrow often pierced two or three at once.

"Loose again, at will!"

Sariel's ice lances shot outward like javelins, punching clean corridors through the storm. Aelirunai released her foxfire. Spears of burning blue light carved through the black tide, igniting wings midair, feathers falling like glowing ash. For a moment, the storm seemed to waver.

But still the crows came.

A dark river without end. A storm without mercy. For every one that burned or froze, two more surged forward, screeching, tearing, filling the sky until even the stars were devoured.

The sound became unbearable—wingbeats like war-drums, screeches like knives across bone. It was more than noise. It pressed against the mind itself, a psychic claw raking thought and fear. Archers flinched as they loosed, eyes watering, ears ringing. Still they fired.

The line held.

Minute by minute, it held.

But even gods grow weary.

Aelirunai felt the strain build, hot in her chest, burning like the ache of lungs too long denied breath. Even for her, the tide demanded everything. And Sariel—bright, fierce Sariel—was not yet born to this scale of war.

Aelirunai felt it before she saw it.

Sariel faltered. Just a step, a half-stumble, knees buckling under the weight of endless magic. It was small—so small. But the horde felt it.

The Crow's children screamed as one.

The sky broke.

The tide poured downward, collapsing toward Sariel's section of the wall. Black wings slammed into the ramparts. Claws raked stone. Archers shouted, stumbled, vanished beneath a maelstrom of feathers and fury.

For one heartbeat, Sariel stood in the heart of it—then she and her line were swallowed whole.

Aelirunai had to think fast.

Her side of the wall was still under siege, but the archers held—barely. It was manageable. For now.

Then—motion. A flicker in the corner of her eye.

Wren.

The girl had broken from cover, sprinting toward the ramparts. Small, fast, weaving between the fallen and the shattered stone. A few crows dove, but she cut them down with precise, desperate speed. She moved like a whisper through chaos, fearless, foolish.

Aelirunai's gaze snapped back to Sariel.

The storm had nearly consumed her.

If Wren reached her now, she would be torn apart.

Aelirunai willed her foxfire into a violent cyclone around Sariel, wreathing her in wild, searing flame. Crows screeched as they ignited midair, scattering, burning, but it was too late.

Sariel was bleeding everywhere.

Gasches carved across her arms, thighs, hip. Her left arm was torn so badly the flesh hung loose like a macabre veil. Her face was streaked crimson from deep cuts. Her armor was shredded to leather ribbons. The bodies around her were unrecognizable—shapes of torn flesh and crushed bone.

But she still lived.

Wren reached her, impossibly fast. She seized Sariel's elbow, tugging with all her strength.

Sariel's gaze lifted. She saw the girl—and in that moment, there was no hesitation.

Pain and exhaustion dragged at her like chains, but Wren eclipsed everything. The crows would tear her apart as they had the others.

Sariel moved.

She surged upright in one brutal, fluid motion, blood slicking her skin, and swept Wren into her arms. With a single leap she hurled herself from the wall.

Behind her, a massive explosion detonated—an inhuman shriek of force. The blast wave flung her faster toward the earth. She twisted mid-fall, curling her body over Wren's, shielding her with every ounce of herself.

They hit the ground hard.

Sariel's last thought before darkness claimed her was simple, unyielding: Protect her.

High above, Aelirunai saw it all—the elf's blood-soaked body vaulting from the ramparts, cradling the girl like something sacred.

In the split-second that followed, instinct took her.

She conjured an illusion: Sariel, standing tall exactly where she had been.

The crows shrieked and lunged toward it, mindless with fury.

The instant the first one struck, the illusion erupted.

Boom.

Foxfire detonated in a chain of explosions. The ramparts vanished in white-blue inferno. Crows were reduced to ash mid-flight. Those on the fringes caught fire, and because the sky was packed so thick, the flames leapt from body to body, spreading like a living plague of fire.

Aelirunai let it go. She did not restrain the blaze.

Blood trickled from her nose. Her limbs trembled under the weight of it, her body burning as though foxfire had seeped into her very bones. But still, she held. She did not falter.

Thousands fell screaming. Those who survived the first wave hurled themselves earthward, wings aflame, desperate to die before they ignited the swarm.

Then—at last—the sky began to clear.

The tide recoiled, retreating in fractured waves toward the ridge.

And above it all, Zharvethys hovered. His vast black wings stretched wide, void-dark and endless, his expression unreadable.

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Fantasy's Sacred Ground

Keeping Fantasy Free from Modern Chaos

Fantasy fiction is a realm of boundless imagination, a sanctuary where dragons soar, heroes forge their destinies, and worlds unfold in ways that transcend the constraints of our everyday reality. Its enduring power lies in its ability to transport readers to places where universal truths are explored through myth, allegory, and the echoes of history. At its finest, fantasy offers an escape from the mundane, a lens for reflection, and a spark for wonder. Yet, in recent years, a troubling trend has emerged: the infusion of contemporary real-life politics into fantasy narratives. This encroachment threatens to dilute the genre's timeless essence, alienate its diverse readership, and tether stories to the fleeting controversies of the present. Instead, fantasy fiction should draw its inspiration from historical movements and events, which provide a universal and enduring foundation for storytelling that resonates across generations. As C.S. Lewis eloquently stated;

"Literature adds to reality, it does not simply describe it. It enriches the necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides; and in this respect, it irrigates the deserts that our lives have already become" - An Experiment in Criticism, 1961.

To preserve this enrichment, fantasy must remain a refuge from the divisiveness of modern politics, rooted instead in the timeless currents of history.

The Damage of Contemporary Politics in Fantasy Fiction

Fantasy fiction thrives on its capacity to offer readers an escape from the pressures of the real world. It is a genre that invites us to step into realms where the impossible becomes possible, where the struggles of imagined worlds illuminate the human condition without being mired in the specifics of our own time. However, when authors weave contemporary political issues into their narratives, whether through characters that mirror current leaders, factions that echo modern ideologies, or plots that parallel today's headlines, they risk undermining the very qualities that make fantasy so compelling. The consequences of this trend are multifaceted and deeply damaging to the genre's integrity.

One of the greatest gifts of fantasy is its ability to provide a respite from the cacophony of real-world conflicts. Readers turn to the genre to flee the relentless debates that dominate platforms like X,

where political arguments often drown out nuance and unity. When a fantasy novel thinly veils a critique of a specific 2020s political movement, policy, or figure, such as a character who resembles a polarizing leader or a plot that mirrors a current culture war, it ceases to be an escape and becomes a lecture. This intrusion shatters the immersive spell that fantasy weaves, transforming a world of wonder into a soapbox for ideology. As Neil Gaiman, a luminary of modern fantasy, has noted;

"Stories you read when you're the right age never quite leave you. You may forget who wrote them or what the story was called. Sometimes you'll forget precisely what happened, but if a story touches you it will stay with you, haunting the places in your mind that you rarely ever visit" - M Is for Magic, 2007.

When stories are laden with contemporary politics, they lose this haunting, timeless quality, becoming instead a transient commentary that fails to linger.

For instance, consider a fantasy novel where a kingdom's ruler is a clear stand-in for a 21st-century politician, complete with rhetoric that echoes today's partisan talking points. Such a narrative might resonate with readers who share the author's views, but for others, it risks feeling like an editorial rather than a story. The joy of stepping into a world like Middle-earth or Westeros lies in its detachment from our immediate reality, allowing us to engage with its themes on our own terms. When fantasy becomes a mirror for the present, it betrays its promise of transcendence.

Real-life politics are inherently ephemeral, tied to specific moments, figures, and cultural contexts that fade with time. A fantasy novel that leans heavily on such themes risks becoming dated as those contexts lose relevance. A story that satirizes a 2020s political movement or policy might feel urgent today, but a decade later, it could be incomprehensible to new readers who lack the historical context. This transience undermines the genre's potential for longevity, a quality that has defined its greatest works. J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings, published in the 1950s, remains a cornerstone of fantasy because it avoids the transient political squabbles of its era. Tolkien himself wrote;

"I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence. I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers" - The Lord of the Rings, Foreword to the Second Edition, 1965.

By grounding his work in historical and mythic echoes, Tolkien ensured that Middle-earth endures as a timeless tale, unmarred by the fleeting debates of the mid-20th century.

A hypothetical fantasy series that mirrors modern controversies, such as debates over climate policies or identity politics, might struggle to maintain relevance as those issues evolve or fade. The specificity of such references risks turning the story into a period piece, accessible only to those familiar with the era's discourse. This is particularly evident in adaptations or revisions of established settings. For example, in the Forgotten Realms setting of Dungeons & Dragons, the Drow, a race of dark elves traditionally depicted as a society dominated by the evil goddess Lolth, have been reimagined in recent years to include entire cities of good-aligned Drow who seek peace and harmony. This shift often feels like a response to modern sensibilities rather than an organic evolution of the setting's lore, which was rooted in mythic archetypes of light versus darkness. The abrupt change risks alienating fans who valued the Drow's morally complex, tragic nature, replacing it with a narrative that feels driven by contemporary political pressures rather than the world's internal logic.

Fantasy fiction has a unique ability to unite diverse audiences through shared wonder and universal themes. From book clubs to fan conventions, the genre fosters communities that celebrate its stories across cultural and ideological lines. However, when real-life politics infiltrate

fantasy, they invite division, compelling readers to align with or reject the author's apparent stance. A novel that casts one faction as a stand-in for a progressive or conservative agenda may alienate readers who hold differing views, not because of the story's quality but because of its political subtext. This polarization is evident in online discussions on platforms like X, where fans of works like Game of Thrones or The Wheel of Time adaptations frequently clash over perceived political agendas. For instance, when a fantasy series introduces themes that echo modern social justice movements or traditionalist counterarguments, it can spark debates that overshadow the narrative itself. Readers who sought to lose themselves in a story find themselves instead dissecting its politics, fracturing the communal joy of fandom. As Ursula K. Le Guin observed;

"The book itself is a curious artifact, not showy in its technology but complex and extremely efficient: a really neat little device, compact, often very pleasant to look at and handle, that can last decades, even centuries. It doesn't have to be plugged in, and it can be opened and enjoyed almost anywhere" - The Wave in the Mind, 2004.

When politics dominate, the book's efficiency as a vessel for shared enjoyment is compromised, replaced by a battleground for ideological disputes.

Another example of this divisiveness can be seen in the Dungeons & Dragons setting Dark Sun, a post-apocalyptic world defined by its harsh desert environment and themes of oppression, including slavery. In recent years, discussions around Dark Sun have been complicated by concerns that its depiction of slavery is offensive, leading to hesitancy to revive or expand the setting. Yet, slavery in Dark Sun serves as a powerful narrative motivator, inspiring heroes to overthrow tyrannical sorcerer-kings and fight for freedom. By sidelining such themes to avoid modern sensitivities, the genre risks losing the opportunity to explore profound questions of justice and resistance, which are deeply rooted in historical struggles like the abolitionist movements or revolutions against feudal oppression. This sanitization dilutes the setting's impact, prioritizing contemporary political correctness over the storytelling potential of its historical inspirations.

Perhaps the most insidious effect of contemporary politics in fantasy is the reduction of narrative depth. Real-world political issues often manifest as simplistic moral binaries, transforming complex characters into mouthpieces for ideology. A novel that pits good progressives against evil traditionalists, or vice versa, sacrifices the moral ambiguity that makes characters like George R.R. Martin's Tyrion Lannister or Brandon Sanderson's Vin compelling. Such simplicity flattens the nuanced storytelling that defines great fantasy, limiting its ability to explore the gray areas of human experience. For example, a fantasy series that casts a rebellion as a clear allegory for a modern political movement risks reducing its characters to stereotypes: the noble activist, the corrupt oppressor, the misguided skeptic. This approach undermines the genre's potential for profound exploration, replacing subtlety with dogma. As Toni Morrison wrote;

"Narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created" (The Source of Self-Regard, 2019).

When narrative is co-opted by political agendas, it ceases to create anew, instead recycling the tired binaries of our present debates.

This issue is starkly illustrated in attempts to impose modern gender inclusivity on established fantasy settings. In Warhammer 40,000, the Adeptus Custodes, an elite group of genetically engineered warriors, were traditionally depicted as exclusively male due to the setting's pseudo-historical and biological lore. Recent efforts to introduce female Custodes feel jarring to fans because they disrupt the internal consistency of a world built on rigid, mythic archetypes inspired by Roman legions and medieval knighthood. Similarly, in The Witcher universe, the witchers are exclusively male due to the brutal alchemical trials that only male bodies are said to survive. Introducing female

witchers, as some adaptations have suggested, risks undermining the setting's established rules, which draw from historical notions of gendered roles in warrior castes. These changes, driven by contemporary political pressures, prioritize external agendas over the integrity of the fictional world, reducing its depth and authenticity.

Likewise, in Dungeons & Dragons, the removal of race-specific class restrictions, such as limiting certain classes to specific races like elves or dwarves, reflects a modern push for inclusivity but erases the cultural and historical flavor of the game's settings. These restrictions, inspired by mythic archetypes like the elf as a master of arcane magic or the dwarf as a stalwart warrior, gave each race a distinct identity rooted in folklore. By homogenizing access to classes, the game risks losing the rich, history-inspired diversity that made its worlds feel alive, replacing it with a one-size-fits-all approach that mirrors modern egalitarian ideals rather than the setting's internal logic.

The Timeless Power of Historical Inspiration

If contemporary politics are a poison to fantasy's soul, historical inspiration is its lifeblood. History offers a vast reservoir of human experience, specific enough to ground a story in authenticity, yet universal enough to resonate across time. Historical movements, such as the fall of Rome, the Renaissance's intellectual awakening, or the Mongol invasions, provide archetypes and conflicts that feel lived-in and enduring. By drawing on these sources, authors can craft worlds that invite readers to draw their own parallels to the present without being spoon-fed an agenda.

J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings is a masterclass in historical inspiration. Drawing on Anglo-Saxon mythology, the devastation of World War I, and the decline of pastoral England, Tolkien crafted a world that feels both ancient and immediate. The saga's themes of sacrifice, stewardship, and the corrupting lure of power resonate because they are rooted in historical patterns, not transient politics. Tolkien wrote;

"The tale grew in the telling, until it became a history of the Great War of the Ring and included many glimpses of the yet more ancient history that preceded it" - The Lord of the Rings, Foreword to the Second Edition, 1965.

This feigned history, steeped in mythic and historical echoes, ensures Middle-earth's immortality, a tale that speaks to readers across generations.

Frank Herbert's Dune is another triumph of historical grounding. Inspired by the dynamics of desert tribes, colonial exploitation, and religious crusades, Herbert crafted a saga about power, ecology, and destiny. Its historical roots elevate it beyond the 1960s' political squabbles, making it a perennial classic. Herbert noted;

"The bottom line of the Dune trilogy is: beware of heroes. Much better rely on your own judgment, and your own mistakes" - Dune, Afterword by Brian Herbert, 2005.

By rooting Dune in historical patterns, Herbert crafted a warning that remains relevant without being tethered to any single moment.

Brandon Sanderson's Mistborn series, inspired by the French Revolution and industrial upheavals, explores themes of rebellion and class struggle without mirroring specific modern ideologies. The story of Vin, a street urchin turned revolutionary, resonates because it taps into universal questions of justice and power, grounded in historical echoes. Historical inspiration enables such questions to endure, inviting readers to engage with the story on their own terms.

George R.R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire draws heavily on the War of the Roses, a 15th-century English civil war marked by rival houses and shifting allegiances. This historical foundation gives Westeros a gritty authenticity, with conflicts that feel both

specific and timeless. Martin's characters, flawed, ambitious, and morally complex, thrive because they are not reduced to allegories for modern politics. Martin has remarked;

"I think that the best fantasy is written in the language of dreams. It is alive as dreams are alive, more real than real... for a moment at least" - Black Gate, Interview, 2001.

By anchoring his work in history, Martin ensures that Westeros feels alive, a dream that endures beyond the present.

Another example is Katherine Kurtz's Deryni series, which draws on medieval European history, particularly the interplay of church and state in the 11th and 12th centuries. The series' magic-wielding Deryni face persecution reminiscent of historical religious conflicts, such as the Albigensian Crusade, creating a narrative that feels both fantastical and grounded. This historical inspiration allows Kurtz to explore themes of prejudice and power without resorting to modern political parallels, preserving the series' timeless appeal.

Preserving the Soul of Fantasy

Fantasy fiction is a realm of boundless possibility, where the human spirit can explore truths unencumbered by the transient noise of contemporary politics. By eschewing real-life political references and embracing the enduring lessons of history, authors preserve the genre's capacity to unite, inspire, and endure. Let fantasy remain such a guide, a beacon of myth and meaning that illuminates the eternal, not the ephemeral.

The genre's greatest works, Tolkien's Middle-earth, Herbert's Arrakis, Sanderson's Scadrial, Martin's Westeros, Kurtz's Gwynedd, endure because they are rooted in the timeless currents of history, not the fleeting quarrels of their authors' times. Fantasy, at its purest, tells such tales, kindling the heart with wonder and hope. By keeping the genre free from the divisiveness of real-life politics, we ensure it remains a sanctuary for the imagination, a place where, as Lewis envisioned, the deserts of our lives are irrigated with stories that endure.

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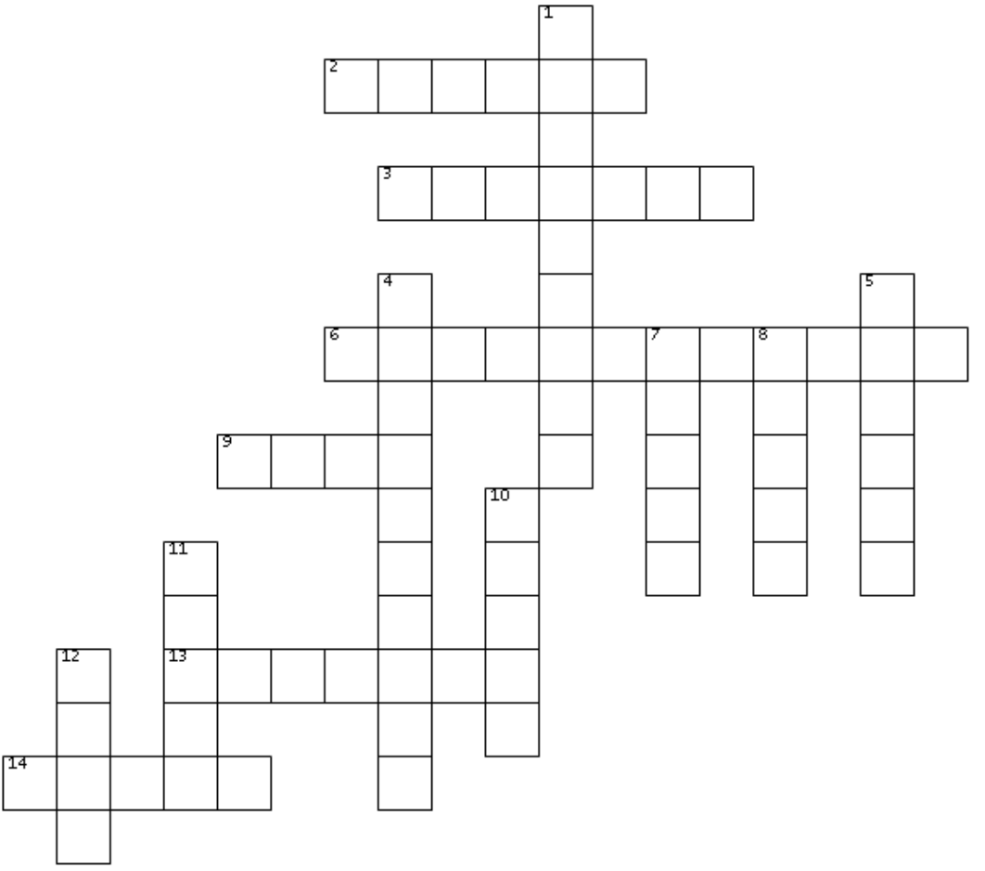
Video Games Crossword



ACROSS

2. Falling block puzzle game from Russia

3. Gotta catch em all creature collecting series

6. Fighting game famous for fatalities

9. Green hero of Hyrule in Zelda games

13. Samus Aran sci-fi adventure series

14. Spinning bandicoot platformer hero

DOWN

1. Block-building sandbox game

4. Barrel-throwing ape arcade classic

5. Yellow dot-eating arcade legend

7. Pink puffball who inhales his enemies

8. Mustache-wearing plumber hero of Nintendo platformers

10. Hylian princess in the Legend of series

11. Armored bounty hunter from Metroid

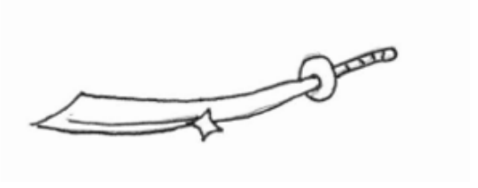
12. Tomb-raiding adventurer Croft

Tov's Marketplace of Masterwork Mechanics

Parody Article
by
R.J.A. Gilbert

Greetings, offend-ie—er, I mean...friend. Welcome to my marvelous marketplace of the most masterfully crafted weapons, armor, and equipment. My wares are sure to spice up your low-level adventuring party with new mechanics and combat options that are sure to keep your battles...interesting.

Today I have several items to show you. First, let me direct your eyes to this fine, Keen-edged scimitar. What does it's Keen edge do, you ask? Why, let me explain.



The Keen property is added to weapons that do slashing damage. As long as the weapon's edge is keen, when you roll damage with this weapon, roll a second damage die and add that to the amount of damage dealt (before calculating Critical damage). If that roll was the higher half of the die, the weapon loses its Keen edge.

Now let me direct your attention to this fine, smooth stone. You might think this an ordinary stone, but you would be wrong. This is the finest of dwarven Bladestone, known for its superior ability to sharpen a blade.



When you spend one hour sharpening an edged weapon with this fine piece of Bladestone, that weapon gains the Keen property.stall,

Ah, but dear friend, there is more. Over here, in the corner of my stall, sits a Sharpening Wheel. This heavy piece of equipment cannot be carried, but can be found in many weapon smithing workshops, military barracks, and in some dungeons. When a character who is proficient with smithing tools uses this item to sharpen their edged weapon, the Keen property gains a number of points equal to the character's proficiency. Each time the weapon would lose its keen edge due to a high roll, the Keen property is reduced by 1 point, with the Keen property remaining on the blade until 0 points remain.

Ah, dear friend, I have shown you a weapon and equipment, but have I shown you any useful armor? Then take a look at this fine set of hide armor. But it is mere hide armor, you say? Why yes, it is. But it was masterfully crafted by the orc tribes of the far West, whose special technique for preparing the hides gives it a masterwork quality that has saved many an orc from certain death.



When the wearer of this armor is hit with a critical hit, the attacker must re-roll their attack before calculating damage. If the second roll is a miss, the armor's masterwork quality has prevented the otherwise critical hit from doing any additional damage (other than a regular damage roll).

I do hope you gain use from these fine and quality goods, dear friend. And come back another time, for I may have even more items of value that you may peruse.

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Why Alignment Matters

Your Character's Compass in D&D

I would like to dive into a cornerstone of Dungeons & Dragons: the Alignment system. It's a topic that's sparked countless debates, inspired epic character arcs, and shaped the moral landscape of countless campaigns. Let's explore its history, its evolution, and what it should mean for you as a player or Game Master.

The Alignment system is one of D&D's most enduring mechanics, a framework for defining a character's moral and ethical stance. It's evolved dramatically since the game's inception, reflecting shifts in game design, storytelling, and cultural attitudes. Let's trace its journey.

Brief History of Alignment

Original D&D (1974)

In the earliest days of D&D, Alignment was a simple, cosmic framework inspired by the works of Michael Moorcock and Poul Anderson. Characters were aligned with one of three forces: Law, Chaos, or Neutrality. There was no Good or Evil axis, Alignment was about allegiance to universal principles rather than morality. Law represented order, structure, and civilization, while Chaos embodied rebellion, freedom, and entropy. Neutrality was for those who avoided taking sides.

This system was abstract, almost mythic, and tied closely to the game's wargaming roots. Monsters and characters were often locked into these alignments (e.g., elves were Chaotic, dwarves Lawful), and the system served as a shorthand for factional loyalty in a world of cosmic conflict. It wasn't about personal morality but about where you stood in the grand struggle.

D&D Holmes Basic (1977) and B/X (1981)

The Holmes Basic Set and the Moldvay/Cook B/X edition refined this system, keeping the Law-Neutral-Chaos axis but adding moral undertones. Law began to align with "good" behavior, cooperation, honor, and protecting the weak, while Chaos leaned toward selfishness or destruction. Neutrality remained a middle ground, often for those driven by personal goals over ideology.

Alignments started to influence gameplay more directly. For example, certain magic items (like intelligent swords) could only be wielded by characters of specific alignments, and some spells had

alignment-based effects. The system was still simple but began to hint at the moral complexity to come.

AD&D (1978–1989)

Advanced Dungeons & Dragons, under Gary Gygax, introduced the iconic nine-alignment grid we know today, combining the Law-Chaos axis with a Good-Evil axis. This created alignments like Lawful Good, Chaotic Evil, and True Neutral, offering a more nuanced framework. Each alignment came with a detailed description, outlining its philosophy and typical behaviors.

This system was deeply tied to the game's mechanics and lore. Paladins, for instance, had to be Lawful Good, and any deviation (like committing an evil act) could strip them of their powers, permanently. Clerics were bound to alignments compatible with their deities, and even magic items often had alignment restrictions. The nine-alignment grid wasn't just flavor; it was a core mechanic that shaped character identity and consequences.

AD&D's alignments were also steeped in a worldview of absolute morality. Good and Evil weren't relative, they were cosmic forces. Demons were Chaotic Evil, angels Lawful Good, and the multiverse was a battleground for these ideals. This reflected the era's storytelling, where heroes fought clear-cut villains in a struggle of Light versus Darkness.

BECMI (1983–1991)

The BECMI (Basic, Expert, Companion, Master, Immortal) edition, edited by Frank Mentzer, stuck with the Law-Neutral-Chaos axis for its Basic and Expert sets, keeping things simple for new players. However, it acknowledged the nine-alignment system in later supplements, especially as characters ascended to epic levels. BECMI emphasized alignment as a guide for roleplay, encouraging players to think about their character's motivations and loyalties, though it remained less restrictive than AD&D.

WotC Era: 3rd Edition (2000–2008)

When Wizards of the Coast took over D&D, the nine-alignment grid remained, but its role shifted. Third Edition (3e) loosened alignment restrictions, reflecting a growing emphasis on player freedom and narrative flexibility. Paladins still needed to be Lawful Good, but the consequences for straying were less severe, temporary loss of powers rather than permanent exile. Classes like clerics and druids had more alignment flexibility, and the system felt less like a cosmic mandate and more like a personal choice.

3e also introduced the Book of Vile Darkness and Book of Exalted Deeds, which explored the extremes of Evil and Good alignments in detail. These books reinforced the idea that alignments were moral archetypes, but they also acknowledged moral grayness, with complex villains and flawed heroes becoming more common.

4th Edition (2008–2014)

Fourth Edition streamlined alignments to reflect a more modern, relativistic worldview. The nine-alignment grid was replaced with a simplified system: Lawful Good, Good, Unaligned, Evil, and Chaotic Evil. This change de-emphasized the Law-Chaos axis and focused on morality as a spectrum. "Unaligned" became the default for most characters, representing those who didn't adhere to strict moral codes.

4e's alignment system was less restrictive, with fewer mechanical consequences. Paladins, for example, could serve any deity and weren't bound to Lawful Good. This shift aligned with 4e's focus on tactical combat and streamlined rules, but it frustrated some fans who felt alignments had lost their depth and narrative weight.

5th Edition (2014–Present)

Fifth Edition returned to the nine-alignment grid, striking a balance between tradition and flexibility. Alignments are now described as guidelines rather than rigid rules, with the Player's Handbook emphasizing that they're a starting point

for character development, not a straitjacket. Mechanical ties to alignment are minimal, spells like Detect Good and Evil focus on creature types (e.g., fiends, celestials) rather than moral alignment, and classes like Paladin have no alignment restrictions.

5e's approach reflects modern storytelling trends, where moral ambiguity is celebrated. The game encourages players to explore their character's motivations, flaws, and growth, with alignment as a loose framework rather than a cosmic mandate. However, this flexibility has led some to argue that alignment feels vestigial, overshadowed by roleplay and character backstories.

What Alignments Should Represent in Your Game

Alignments are more than a box to check on your character sheet, they're a moral compass, a lens through which you view your character's choices and growth. Unfortunately, alignment is often sidelined in modern D&D, dismissed as restrictive or overshadowed by the mantra of "just roleplay." But this misses the point: alignment doesn't dictate your behavior; your behavior dictates your alignment. It's a dynamic, evolving reflection of your character's moral journey, not a static label.

At its core, alignment represents the boundaries of what your character believes is right or acceptable. It's shaped by their upbringing, experiences, and goals. A Lawful Good character might believe in upholding justice and protecting the innocent, while a Chaotic Neutral one prioritizes personal freedom and self-interest. These aren't rules you must obey but guidelines that help you stay true to your character's worldview.

When creating a character, take time to define their morality. Ask:

- How were they raised? Did they grow up in a strict, honorable household or a cutthroat, survivalist environment?
- What have they experienced? Exposure to death, poverty, or corruption can shape their view of right and wrong.
- What are their goals? Are they driven by revenge, redemption, or ambition? What are they willing to sacrifice to achieve those goals?

These questions will point you toward an alignment that fits your character. From there, roleplay with intention, letting their actions reflect their moral compass. But don't treat alignment as immutable, characters evolve. A Lawful Good hero who compromises their principles to save a loved one might slide toward Neutral Good, haunted by their choice. A Chaotic Neutral rogue who finds purpose in a cause might inch toward Chaotic Good. Alignment should shift with your character's arc, reflecting their growth or descent.

In older editions, alignment was a challenge to embrace, not a restriction to resent. Take the AD&D Paladin, who had to be Lawful Good and faced dire consequences for straying. Modern players might see this as limiting, but for many, it was a thrilling test of integrity. Staying true to a Paladin's ideals in a morally complex world required creativity and commitment. A single evil act could cost them everything, forcing players to weigh their choices carefully. This made alignment a storytelling tool, not a punishment.

Contrast this with modern D&D, where alignment has little mechanical weight. Classes like Paladin are free from alignment restrictions, and moral consequences are left to the GM's discretion. While this offers freedom, it can dilute the stakes. Alignment should challenge players to embody their character's values, even when it's hard. A Lawful Good character who sacrifices an innocent to save others should feel the weight of that choice, not just in roleplay but in how it shifts their alignment and worldview.

Alignment's evolution mirrors a broader cultural shift in storytelling. Early D&D was rooted in a binary worldview: Good versus Evil, Light versus Darkness. Villains were often irredeemably evil, think Orcus or

Vecna, while heroes were noble champions. Monsters like goblins or gnolls were "born evil," their alignments fixed by their nature. This reflected the era's entertainment, from Tolkien's orcs to comic book supervillains.

Today, D&D embraces moral ambiguity. Villains must have motives, backstories, and redeemable qualities. Monsters like goblins or orcs are no longer inherently evil but products of their environment, capable of change. Even fiends like gnolls, once the epitome of Chaotic Evil, are given nuanced lore in 5e, with some sources suggesting they're driven by demonic influence rather than innate malice. This shift aligns with modern storytelling, where heroes are flawed, villains are relatable, and morality is a spectrum of gray.

While this makes for richer narratives, it can undermine alignment's purpose. If everything is gray, what does it mean to be Lawful Good or Chaotic Evil? Alignment thrives when it offers clear archetypes to embrace or subvert. A Chaotic Evil villain who's "just misunderstood" risks diluting the stakes, while a Lawful Good hero with no moral anchor feels aimless. As a player, don't shy away from bold alignments, lean into them, and let your character's journey add the nuance.

When you create a character, use alignment to ground their identity. A True Neutral druid might prioritize balance, avoiding extremes of good or evil. A Chaotic Evil warlock might revel in destruction, but their actions should reflect a consistent worldview, not random villainy. Roleplay with purpose, letting your character's alignment guide their reactions to the world.

For example, consider a Lawful Good fighter raised in a temple, devoted to protecting the weak. When faced with a bandit threatening a village, they might seek to subdue rather than kill, hoping to reform the bandit. But if the bandit kills an innocent, the fighter's faith might be tested—do they execute the bandit, risking a slide toward Neutral Good, or uphold their ideals despite the cost? These choices make alignment a living part of your character's story.

As a Game Master, alignment is your ally in crafting meaningful consequences. Don't be afraid to challenge players when their actions clash with their alignment, not out of malice but to deepen the story. A Lawful Good cleric who sacrifices an ally for the "greater good" might face nightmares, guilt, or divine disapproval. Mechanically, you could rule that they don't gain the benefits of a long rest due to their troubled conscience, as their alignment shifts toward Neutral Good. This isn't punishment, it's an opportunity for growth.

Consider the context, though. A "punishment" like sleepless nights works in a safe tavern, where it adds roleplay flavor, but not in a deadly dungeon, where it could derail the game. Use alignment shifts to spark character development. If a Chaotic Neutral rogue starts acting selflessly, nudge them toward Chaotic Good and explore how they grapple with their newfound morality. If a Neutral Evil wizard shows remorse, let them inch toward Neutral, facing tension with their darker past.

Alignment can also shape your world. A Lawful Good kingdom might enforce strict justice, clashing with Chaotic players. A Chaotic Evil cult could test the party's moral limits, forcing them to confront what they're willing to do to stop it. Use alignment to create stakes, not to judge players.

Alignment isn't about restricting roleplay, it's about enhancing it. It gives your character a moral foundation, a starting point for their journey. As a player, embrace the challenge of staying true to your alignment, even when the world tempts you to stray. As a GM, use alignment to craft consequences that make choices matter. Whether you're fighting for Light, reveling in Darkness, or navigating the gray, alignment is a tool to make your D&D experience richer and more meaningful.

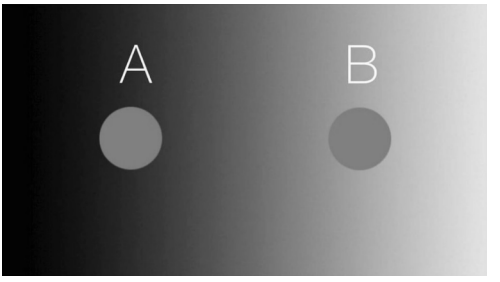
So, the next time you roll up a character or plan a campaign, don't gloss over that alignment box. Ask yourself: What does my character stand for? Let alignment guide you, challenge you, and evolve with you. Your story will be all the better for it.

Grim Fantasy

Building a World Without Light

Fantasy, as a genre, is a vast and varied tapestry. We have Heroic Fantasy, where a courageous protagonist embarks on quests, battles evil, and overcomes personal or external challenges, emphasizing virtues like honor and triumph. Then there's High Fantasy, with its epic stakes, think saving the world from a dark lord or an apocalyptic force. Other subgenres like Mythic Fantasy, Urban Fantasy, Sword and Sorcery, and Dark Fantasy each bring their own flavor to the table. Among these, Grimdark Fantasy stands out as a darker, morally ambiguous subgenre where heroes are flawed, the world is brutal, and cynicism often reigns supreme.

You might be thinking, "EMI, you always emphasize the importance of the battle between Good and Evil in fantasy!" And you're absolutely right, that's been my stance. I've always believed there's no Light without Darkness, no Shadow without Light. But today, I want to challenge that notion, not by abandoning it, but by exploring how a world steeped in darkness can make even the smallest flicker of light feel monumental. Afterall as the saying goes, "A candle burns brightest in the dark."



In many TTRPG sessions, I've heard stories of players leaning into "morally gray" choices, even when the Game Master envisioned a classic tale of heroic champions saving the world. This tension between player agency and narrative intent can create fascinating dynamics. There's a wonderful optical illusion that illustrates this perfectly: a gray square on a white background appears dark, but the same gray square on a black background looks almost white. Context shapes perception. Similarly, a morally questionable act, like theft or violence, can appear heroic or villainous depending on the circumstances.

Take Robin Hood, for example. He's a thief who robs the rich and attacks law enforcers, yet we celebrate him as a hero because he fights against systemic corruption and uplifts the downtrodden. His actions, viewed in isolation, might seem criminal, but in the context of a world

ruled by greed and oppression, they shine as acts of rebellion and hope. This principle is at the heart of Grim Fantasy: placing characters who make questionable choices in a world so dark and morally corrupted that their actions become a beacon of light.

Let me introduce you to my homebrew world, a setting designed to embody this philosophy. In this Grim Fantasy world, the ruling class is a secretive cabal of vampires who hide their true nature from the common folk. These bloodthirsty aristocrats manipulate society from the shadows, pulling strings to maintain their power. The Goddess of Darkness, a malevolent deity, masquerades as her benevolent sister, the Goddess of Light, deceiving the masses into worshiping her. This false hope keeps the people docile, clinging to a lie that sustains their suffering.

The Church of Light, which should be a bastion of virtue, is a hollow institution corrupted by greed and lies. It serves as a tool for the vampires and the Goddess of Darkness, enforcing their will through fear and violence. The church's enforcers, cloaked in the guise of justice, roam the land hunting "witches" and "mutants", terms used to dehumanize anyone who deviates from the norm. Descendants of ancient crusaders who slew the Dragon God, a once-revered deity whose death left the world spiritually and physically broken. Now, these enforcers treat humans like lab rats, harvesting their blood to fuel grotesque technological advancements that benefit only the elite.

Humanity itself is no bastion of morality. Children born with a Lycanthropy-like Curse, manifesting as Rat Folk, Fox Folk, Wolf Folk, Cat Folk, and other hybrid forms, are shunned, abandoned, or killed on sight. Those who survive are forced to live in squalor, hiding in sewers and slums, scraping by in a world that despises them. The sky above is perpetually shrouded in dark, rain-soaked clouds that block the sun, casting the world in an eternal twilight. This is a world without light, a world of lies, a world suffocated by despair.

Why create such a bleak setting? Because in a world this dark, the players become the Hope. This world is intentionally designed to make hope feel scarce, almost unattainable. Everywhere the players look, they encounter evil, corruption, and despair. The vampires' tyranny, the church's hypocrisy, the enforcers' brutality, and humanity's prejudice create a suffocating atmosphere. Yet, it's precisely this darkness that makes the players' actions, however flawed or morally ambiguous, shine like a beacon.

In this Grim Fantasy world, the players aren't traditional heroes clad in shining armor. They might be a rogue who steals to survive, a warrior with a blood-soaked past, or a cursed outcast seeking redemption. Their methods may be questionable, but in a world where the ruling class feeds on the weak and the church betrays its flock, even small acts of defiance, like protecting a cursed child or exposing a vampire's true nature. become heroic. The players are the candle in the dark, their choices the spark that could ignite change.

I won't pretend this concept is entirely original. The classic TTRPG setting Dark Sun was a massive inspiration for my world. Dark Sun, set on the dying world of Athas, is a brutal, post-apocalyptic fantasy realm filled with slavery, environmental collapse, and tyrannical sorcerer-kings. Hope is scarce, and survival is a daily struggle. Yet, it's this very bleakness that makes the players' actions feel so impactful. In Dark Sun, players aren't just adventurers, they're potential saviors, rebels who can challenge the status quo and bring light to a world that has forgotten it.

My Grim Fantasy world follows a similar philosophy but leans even harder into moral ambiguity and systemic corruption. Where Dark Sun uses environmental desolation to create its tone, my world uses social and spiritual decay. The vampires, the false goddess, and the corrupted church create a web of lies that the players must unravel. Every choice they make, whether to trust a seemingly kind priest, to spare an enforcer who claims to be "just following orders," or to ally with a cursed outcast, carries weight. The world is designed to test their morality, forcing them

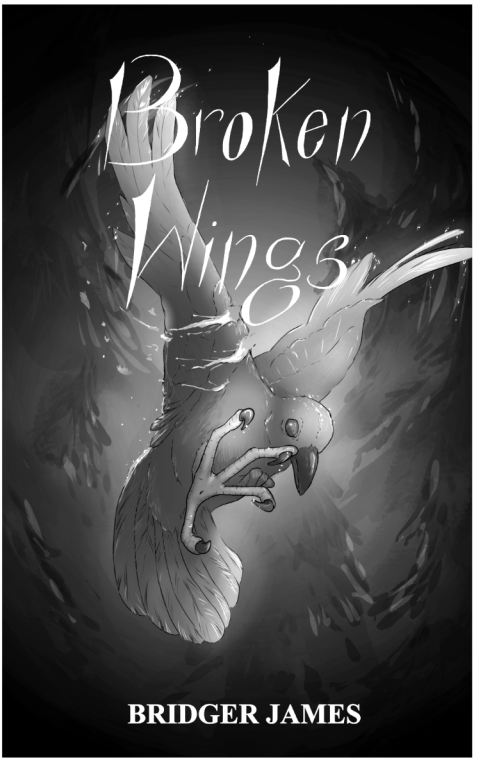
to decide what it means to be a hero in a place where heroism is almost extinct.

This approach to world-building is incredibly versatile. In a TTRPG, the GM can use the setting's darkness to challenge players' assumptions and encourage creative problem-solving. Players might start as mercenaries or outcasts, but as they uncover the world's secrets, say, the vampires' hidden rule or the Goddess's deception, they're drawn into a larger struggle. The GM can craft scenarios where every choice feels like a moral dilemma: Do you kill the enforcer who's hunting a witch, knowing he has a family? Do you expose the church's corruption, risking a riot that could harm innocents? The darkness of the world amplifies the stakes, making every victory feel hard-won.

For fantasy novels, this setting provides a rich backdrop for character-driven stories. A protagonist in this world might be a cursed Rat Folk seeking to overthrow the vampires, or a disillusioned enforcer who discovers the church's lies. The moral ambiguity allows for complex character arcs, heroes who make mistakes, villains who believe they're justified, and everything in between. The ever-present darkness creates tension, while the faint glimmer of hope keeps readers invested in the characters' struggles.

In a traditional fantasy world, the battle between Good and Evil provides balance and structure. But in a Grim Fantasy world, the absence of light makes every spark of hope feel revolutionary. By placing players or characters in a world of lies, corruption, and despair, you create opportunities for them to define what heroism means. Whether they're stealing from the rich to feed the poor, defying a tyrannical church, or simply surviving in a world that wants them dead, their actions become a testament to the enduring power of hope.

So, whether you're a GM crafting a TTRPG campaign or a writer dreaming up a novel, consider embracing the shadows. Build a world where darkness reigns, and let your players or characters be the light. After all, a candle burns brightest in the dark.



Raven Mulligan thinks herself a rebel. Her attendance at college is often interrupted by treks into the mountains near her home, and her parents' disappointment only strengthens her resolve. But when she ventures out to the logging camp early one morning, she comes face to face with a monster she never imagined might really exist, a monster with the face of a man and a thirst for her blood.
But monsters are not the only thing lurking in the Ruby Woods. When a well-dressed stranger emerges from the trees and promises to save her life, he leaves her with a single, overwhelming desire:
She wants more.

Broken Wings is a dark modern fantasy novel set in the rural south.

Learn more about Broken Wings at bridgerjames.com

The Vampire's Kiss

Recipie from Elven Tavern

A pale, silver-tongued stranger arrived one night during a storm. He spoke little of where he came from, but he paid for his lodging with this recipe, saying it was "the only kiss worth remembering." The drink is seductive, tart, and carries a dangerous sweetness. We serve it now to those who enjoy a little mystery with their evening.

The Vampire's Kiss

A bold, tart, and slightly sweet cocktail with a deep red colour and a dangerously moreish quality.

Ingredients (makes 1 cocktail):

- 45 ml Vodka
- 30 ml Cranberry juice (good quality, not too sweet)
- 15 ml Chambord (raspberry liqueur) or grenadine
- 15 ml Fresh lime juice
- Garnish: Lime wheel or fresh raspberries

Method:

1. Fill a cocktail shaker with ice.
2. Add the vodka, cranberry juice, Chambord/grenadine, and lime juice.
3. Shake well for 10–12 seconds.
4. Strain into a chilled martini glass or coupe.
5. Garnish with a lime wheel or a few raspberries.

Serve chilled. The colour and flavour make it a favourite for dramatic entrances and moonlit conversations.

Sora Miyuki
Keeper of the Elven Maid Inn

A Journey Through Worlds

by

Mark Schuenemann

As you leave the border keep, Goblin King head in a sack, you see something in the distance that you must have missed, an inn. Smoke is raising out of it's chimney peacefully, and the torches that are lighting it are speaking soft pleasantries to your eyes.

You sigh, looking at your companions. Even the ever alert Larin the elf is lowering his bow and there is a smile on his face. The dwarf Glorin is nodding, and the fighter Furnin and the wizard Sirous are joking.

"Wow, we must have completely missed this," the Wizard says.

"How could they be so safe, if the Goblin King was so close?" I ask.

He raises his eyebrow, "You're probably right, you've always been a bit more wise than me, still — it's calling me like a siren."

"Aye, I feel it too, I think we all feel it," I say.

"Don't be so grumpy boy, it's a place we can rest our heads for the night, before we make our way to the Lord to give him his prize and to get ours," Glorin says.

"Many magical things can appear harmless, but bring great harm," I say.

"But there are many magical things that appear harmless and can bring great comfort as well," Larin says, putting his hand on my shoulder.

"And don't worry, I still have a Firrreballl ready," Sirous says.

We laugh.

"Onwards to the Inn then," I say.

We make our way there and when we enter, the smell of rabbit stew, cooking bread, and ale overwhelm our senses. It's like peace wrapped us in it's arms and told us nothing evil will ever befall us here. The owner was a buxom elven women in a blue dress with white shirt with ruffles on the edge of the garment.

"I am the Elven Maid, and this is the Elven Maid Inn, and I bid you to rest your

wary feet. I will serve you ales in only a few moments," the Elven woman says.

We sit down at a table near the fire, allowing it warmth to wash away our fatigue — we fought through that keep for three hours, slaying numerous goblins and their king, avoiding, and not avoiding some traps. Lucky they had me, healing them when I could.

The Elven Maid quickly pours each ale, 5 for all of us, and gave it to each of us. We paid her 5 silver and she gratefully took the coin with a smile.

I start to take a sip of my ale, and I felt the bruises I received during the battles heal almost instantly, and I look at each of my companions, and they look me in the eyes smiling — what's in this ale?

"Oh, good travellers, we have bread cooking, and it should be done momentarily — and the Stew is almost ready as well — I'll serve you in a few moments. While you wait, enjoy your ale," the Elven Maid says.

As we drink the ale, we all start talking about the adventure we were just on.

"Hey, remember when that sneaky goblin thief tried to stab you in the back. You were so lucky that I grab it as it jumped out of the shadows. I slammed it against the wall and punched it in the face with my gauntlet.

The last thing it saw," The Furnin said to the Sirous.

"Stupid bugger didn't want to be caught in my Firrrreballl!" the Sirous chirped back.

"You need to pay more attention to what's happening," Larin replied. "I took out at least 5 goblins trying to sneak behind you as you were casting your Firrrreballs. Lucky my magic makes me miss very rarely."

"Elf magic this, Elf magic that," Sirous jokes.

Everyone laughs.

The Elven Innkeeper comes in with bread and stews and butter in hand and serves us. I cut a bit of bread with the butter and slather it in butter. I dip it into my rabbit stew, and as I ate, it felt like the gods had touched me, deep in my soul. What is this bread and stew? What is this place?

The Elven Maid looks at us, and we are all smiling.

"Tell me about your adventure, what brought you to the Keep?"

"Trade to our kingdom has been suffering, the kingdoms to the west were being waylaid by the Goblin King for months. The Lord of this area set a bounty for the Goblin King's head, so we came to collect and help the land," Glorin. "Besides, my father said I should go, he's getting a bit too old to fight Goblins and I needed to get my feet wet. In a week, we'll get the 50 sovereigns he promised."

"Don't forget all the farms being raided as well," Furnin said. "My family lost so much harvest, and that's when I told my parents, I have to do something about this, and the 50 sovereigns will help us."

"You can all have my share. My family had a blood oath against the Goblins, so they sent me to deal with it," Larin says.

"Thank you sir elf," Sirous says. "Scrolls are so expensive, any help would be necessary."

"Maybe you can get a spell that helps you pay more attention," Larin says.

Everyone laughs.

"Maybe, if there is such a thing," Sirous says.

And now the Elven Maid looks into my eyes, "And why did you come here?"

"I've been an initiate at the temple of Tyr for a couple of years. He was demanding justice, and so I came to lend his might and his healing to help everyone here. We meet in an inn much like this a few days ago."

"These guys wouldn't have survived without me, isn't that right Glorin?" I say.

Glorin lifts his mug of ale and says, "That he does!"

"Oh, you must tell me all about this grand adventure, would you follow me to my study?" The Elven Maid says, grabbing my shirt collar.

Furnin smirks, "It looks like your first to roll in the hay, my friend!"

The Elven Maid blushes and says, "Oh, nothing like that. As the Innkeeper, I love learning all about the adventures of great heroic souls!"

With extraordinary strength that belied her small stature, She picks you up and grabs your hand and leads you to the door that goes to the kitchen. And as you walk through, you're not in a Kitchen, but a massive library!

There's book cases that stretch from the floor up to heaven, if it were even possible, with many books in each bookcase. How many books are here?

"Welcome to the Lost Lore Library," The Elven Maid says. She waves her hand to show how large the library too, as wide as it was tall — book cases and books as far as the eye could see.

There was a young man reading books about Dark Elves, Wizards and Strong Warriors. I walk to him.

"Oh, hello there," he says in a British Accent. "I'm the Lost Lore Scholar. I've been reading books from the Lost Lore Library for years now, can I ask you a question?"

"Ask away," You say.

"Who'd win a fight, Drizzt Do'urden or Conan?" He asks.

"Tell me about them?" I asked.

"Drizzt is a nimble Drow who uses two scimitars in battle, and has a magical

panther that helps him fight, and Conan is one of the strongest warriors to every live, capable of extraordinary feats of strength," he says.

"Well, I suppose Conan, but I've never seen either fight," I say.

"Well, Drizzt would beat Conan in a fight," He replies back.

The Elven Maid laughs.

"The Scholar always loves testing people with that question, forgetting the true purpose of this library. Come and sit, and read a story, one of Conan or Drizzt," The Elven Maid says.

I sit down and read a Drizzt story, one where he fights an inexperienced young wizard with a powerful crystal shard, and that glorious feeling that I felt when I ate the bread and stew doubled in me.

I smile at the Elven Maid, and she smiles back.

"So, let's chronicle your story here — tell me all about facing the Goblin King of the Border Keep," she asks.

A book appears, all empty, with a floating pen, ready to write everything I was about to say. As I talked about the story, the pen wrote furiously. Where I was when I began my adventure, meeting my new friends, fighting against the Goblins, finding great and powerful items - a sword for Furnin, a shield for Glorin, and scrolls for Sirous. When I finished the pen disappeared instantly, and the book closed, and then I saw it materialize in one of the book cases close to me.

"So, you went to the keep to defend the innocent, worked with other like-minded people, became great friends, fought against powerful foes and achieved the purpose of protecting the innocent.

The pattern has repeated so many times in so many places, you have no way to really know how common this is," she says.

"How many times?" I ask.

"Infinite times, in infinite places, would you like me to show you?" she says, grasping my hand.

We run to the door back to the Inn. As we leave the library, it isn't the Inn anymore. It's a dark and dingy place with blue glowing lights framing a mirror and white glowing lights above my head. Not torches either, but they're still lights. And the Elven Maid is not an elf anymore, she's human, in a leather vest and white shirt.

"Where is this place?" I ask.

"Oh, we're in the wasteland. There was some trouble a while back. There was some punks drunk on implants who set up a base to harass farmers in the area and try to strangle trade.

And then good old Bandit came, with his crew. They were seasoned cyber hunters and someone asked them to deal with the punk.

They did, and man they did. Those bikers thought they were as tough as nails, but Bandit and crew knew exactly how to deal with each of them. They were completely outmatched and after the battle, trade and farming started to flourish again."

"That sounds exactly like what happened, but instead of goblins, it was bikers," I say.

"Yes, the pattern has been seen in infinite places, and infinite amount of times," The Barkeep says.

"If I drank an ale here..." I start

"You'd be healed like you were at the Elven Maid Inn," she finished.

"What is this place?" I ask.

She grabs my hand and takes me to the door. And when we go through, we're in a new place with strange frothing bottles on the wall, filling the shop with mist. It had the smell of Liqueur and enchantment. At the end, there is a woman who smiles at me, but she shines a little brighter than before.

"Welcome to the Inn of Infinite Worlds," She says.

"Infinite you say?" I start, "So what happened here?"

"Oh, I may have saved old Alexandria back in the day, even blessed by the Celestial Guardians, and I founded this place when my time was due. A few centuries later, I meet a guy just like me, blessed as the Champion by the Celestial Guardians, fighting against dark powers attacking a legion of Vampires.

He won the day of course, with his crew of a street mystic, a girl with sun slinging guns, and an ex-military officer with a limp, who became a seer at a temple. They fought because the cause was just and innocents would be harmed if they did nothing," She said.

"So all these worlds, something threatens the security of a place, heroes come and deal with the problem, and they enjoy their victory," I ask as much as I say.

"Yes, exactly — I've seen it for hundreds of years, the same pattern in infinite times and places. All worlds are is people and factions fighting forces to achieve something. Geography isn't even needed," She said.

"Like the Goblin King, those Bikers, or that Vampire and other dark forces, and heroes fighting against them," I smirk.

"Precisely — let me tell you about the time I saw Hugh the Hand and Iridal have a nice meal together. Pity she had to kill her son Bane, he was just as evil as his father. You better get back, your stew is getting cold."

I nod and we walk through the door and we're back in the Elven Maid In. The rabbit stew is getting a bit cold.

"Let me heat that back up, and don't forget to rest — it can restore you in wonderful ways," The Elven Maid says in a wink.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The Orc Legacy

From Mordor to Modernity

Orcs, the vicious green-skinned beasts, were crafted by J.R.R. Tolkien and introduced in The Hobbit (1937), with their role expanded in The Lord of the Rings (1954–1955). Tolkien's orcs are malevolent, humanoid creatures, often depicted as corrupted beings bred by the dark powers Morgoth and Sauron. While inspired by Old English and Norse mythology, particularly the term "orc" from Beowulf, Tolkien's portrayal of orcs as a distinct race of evil minions was original and influential, shaping modern fantasy depictions.

In Tolkien's Middle-earth, orcs were birthed by Morgoth, the primal Dark Lord, in the First Age. Unable to create life like Ilúvatar, Morgoth corrupted captured Elves, and possibly Men, through torture and dark sorcery in his fortresses of Utumno and Angband, twisting them into malevolent orcs to serve as his minions and mock Ilúvatar's creations. These degraded beings, first noted in The Silmarillion, were bred in vast numbers and later controlled by Sauron and Saruman, who developed strains like the robust Uruk-hai. Tolkien's ambiguous origin tales, pondered in his letters and Morgoth's Ring, hint at orcs as tragic perversions, embodying evil's corruption with no clear path to redemption.

Fast forward to the 1970s, when Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson redefined "modern" fantasy with Dungeons & Dragons (D&D). They reintroduced orcs as savage, green-skinned humanoids, heavily inspired by Tolkien's malevolent creatures but adapted for the game's flexible framework. Gygax, the primary rules architect, crafted orcs in the Men & Magic and Monsters & Treasure booklets as chaotic, tribal foes dwelling in lairs or villages and driven by aggression. Described as cruel and hateful, they attack for plunder or sport, led by chieftains or rare magic-users. Arneson, whose Blackmoor campaign sparked role-playing's narrative depth, influenced orcs' early depiction through dynamic scenarios where they served as dungeon-dwelling threats or wilderness raiders, often clashing with players in his proto-campaign setting. The 1975 Greyhawk supplement expanded orcs, introducing their enmity with elves and dwarves and detailing tribes like the Vile Rune or Broken Bone, adding cultural depth. Arneson's Blackmoor supplement (1975) further integrated orcs into his campaign's lore, portraying them as minions of evil forces, like the Egg of Coot, with a penchant for destruction. Together, Gygax's structured rules and Arneson's storytelling flair made orcs versatile antagonists, savage yet cunning, numerous but fractious, shaping their enduring role as D&D's iconic cannon fodder, forever tied to the game's Tolkien-inspired roots.

In Advanced Dungeons & Dragons (AD&D), launched by Gygax in 1977, the structured orc tribes of Arneson's

Blackmoor campaign became the dominant model. Gygax refined orcs into a more disciplined, Lawful Evil alignment, distinguishing them from the unhinged Chaos of demons or aberrations. The Monster Manual portrayed orcs as tribal warriors organized under chieftains and shamans, often serving evil overlords or their one-eyed god Gruumsh, introduced in Deities & Demigods (1980). This Lawful Evil nature, honed in settings like Greyhawk, emphasized rigid hierarchies and territorial ambitions, with tribes like Death Moon or Leprous Hand waging calculated wars against elves and dwarves. Building on Blackmoor's organized Red Eye or White Hand orcs, Gygax crafted orcs as cunning, hierarchical foes, their savage devotion to evil echoing Tolkien's corrupted minions while fitting AD&D's structured moral cosmos.

This AD&D orc archetype, blending tribal structure with savage ferocity, surged into pop fantasy, dominating video games like Blizzard's Warcraft series, beginning with Warcraft: Orcs & Humans (1994). In Warcraft's lore, orcs hail from Draenor, a harsh world where they lived as shamanistic, clan-based tribes until warlocks like Gul'dan, corrupted by the demonic Burning Legion, led them into savagery. Gul'dan's pacts with demons, notably the demon lord Mannoroth, infused orcs with fel blood, turning them into bloodthirsty invaders led by chieftains like Blackhand, the first Warchief of the Horde. Through dark portals, they stormed Azeroth, waging brutal wars against humans in the First War, their tribal ferocity amplified by demonic rage. In Warcraft II (1995), their conquest continued, showcasing rigid clan structures, clans like Frostwolf and Bleeding Hollow, yet still bound to demonic corruption. By Warcraft III (2002), orcs, freed from the Burning Legion's grip by leaders who rediscovered their shamanistic roots, revealed an honorable core, valuing clan loyalty and ancestral traditions. World of Warcraft (2004) cemented this duality, portraying orcs as both savage warriors and noble tribes, capable of heroism yet haunted by their violent past. From Gul'dan's demonic corruption to the Horde's redemption, Warcraft's orcs, with their complex blend of brutality and honor, redefined the archetype, drawing from AD&D's structured tribes while adding cultural depth. This portrayal, echoed in novels, comics, and other games, solidified orcs as iconic, multifaceted figures in modern fantasy, evolving far beyond Tolkien's corrupted minions.

In the 2024 Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook, Wizards of the Coast obliterated the orc's fearsome legacy, recasting them as docile explorers in a misguided attempt to dodge perceived cultural sensitivities. Now labeled a "species" instead of a race, orcs are stripped of their savage edge, reimagined as wandering clans guided by a neutered Gruumsh, no longer a war god but a deity of travel. The Player's Handbook peddles a saccharine tale of orc families, their once-terrifying strength reduced to a tool for trudging safely through caverns and plains, with traits like enhanced Darkvision and Relentless Endurance crafted for aimless roaming, not glorious combat. The removal of half-orcs, a gritty hallmark since AD&D, severs orcs from their raw, hybrid roots, while the 2025 Monster Manual's erasure of classic orc stat blocks, replaced by bland "tough" NPCs, forces dungeon masters to dig up old books to restore any semblance of threat. Wizards' obsession with avoiding stereotypes, claiming past orc savagery mimicked harmful tribal or non-European caricatures, has gutted the primal menace that made orcs iconic in Tolkien's relentless hordes, AD&D's cunning warbands, and Warcraft's ferocious Horde. This isn't evolution; it's mutilation, turning orcs into a pathetic mockery of the blood-soaked adversaries who drove epic narratives for generations. These limp wanderers, devoid of the chaotic fury that defined their essence, stand as a hollow insult to the towering legacy of fantasy's greatest foes.

This brief history lesson shows how orcs have evolved over time. As world builders, game masters, and dungeon masters, we have a choice: we can hand-pick the version of orcs that best fits our worlds, be it the tribal, pig-snouted orcs of D&D, Tolkien's corrupted Elves, Warcraft's honorable warbands, or the castrated parody of D&D 2024.

The choice is, and always has been, ours.

Stars, Gods, and Days

A Homebrew Calendar Masterclass

Why we are using Earth Calendar in our unique homebrew worlds and if we make one, how we make sure that it has sense. To answer this question we will need to take our Real Life Calendar and dismantle it, see why we have seven days in a week, why we have 12 months in a year and why we have specific amounts of days per month. By knowing that we will have foundation to make our own calendars in imaginary worlds.

Alright, my epic friends, let's dive into the cosmic machinery behind our calendar and unravel why it's built the way it is, so we can craft something truly legendary for our homebrew worlds! First, let's tackle why a year has roughly 365 days, sometimes sneaking in that extra day to make 366. It all comes down to how long it takes our little blue planet to do a full lap around the Sun. That journey, called a solar year, clocks in at about 365.2422 days, 365 days plus a pesky 5 hours, 48 minutes, and change. Ancient folks, like the Egyptians and Babylonians, figured out that 365 days was a solid starting point for a year, but it wasn't perfect. If you stick with just 365 days every year, your calendar starts drifting, and soon your winter festivals are happening in summer. To fix this, the Romans, under Julius Caesar, introduced the leap year. Every four years, we add an extra day, February 29, to soak up that extra fraction of a day, making the average year 365.25 days. Later, Pope Gregory XIII tweaked it further with the Gregorian calendar, skipping some leap years (like century years not divisible by 400) to keep things even tighter, averaging 365.2425 days. That's why we've got 365 days most years, with that cheeky 366th day popping up to keep our seasons in line.

Now, why 12 months? This one's got its roots in the Moon and a bit of human practicality. Way back, ancient cultures like the Babylonians were obsessed with the Moon's cycles. The time from one new moon to the next is about 29.53 days, and if you multiply that by 12, you get roughly 354 days, pretty close to a solar year. Twelve lunar cycles felt like a natural way to chop up the year, and it was manageable for tracking seasons, planting crops, or planning rituals. The Romans ran with this idea, but their early calendar was a mess. Romulus, the legendary founder of Rome, supposedly started with a 10-month calendar totaling 304 days, leaving winter as a vague, uncounted blob. King Numa Pompilius, around 700 BCE, said, "Nah, we

can do better," and added January and February, making it a 12-month, 355-day lunisolar calendar. Why 12? It's a super divisible number, splits nicely by 2, 3, 4, or 6, which made it handy for organizing society. When Julius Caesar overhauled things into the Julian calendar, he kept the 12 months but aligned them with the solar year, not just the Moon, to make sure the seasons stayed put. That 12-month structure stuck because it was practical, culturally ingrained, and spread like wildfire through the Roman Empire and later Christianity.

Speaking of the Moon, those lunar phases are why we think of months as tied to moons in the first place. The word "month" comes from the Old English monath, linked to mona, meaning Moon. Each month roughly mimics the Moon's cycle: new moon to crescent, full moon to waning, and back again. In ancient times, a month was literally the time it took for the Moon to go through its phases, about 29 or 30 days. That's why many early calendars, like the Jewish or Islamic ones, are lunar or lunisolar, with months pegged to the Moon's rhythm. Our modern Gregorian calendar doesn't strictly follow the Moon anymore, it's solar-based to match the Earth's orbit, but the 12-month setup still echoes those ancient lunar roots. For your homebrew world, you could make months match your planet's moon cycles, maybe with two moons creating overlapping months or a single massive moon stretching phases to 40 days. The key is making it feel like your world's people would naturally track time this way.

Now, why do some months have more days than others, and where do those names come from? Buckle up, because this is where history gets delightfully messy. The Julian calendar set the stage for our modern month lengths, but they're a patchwork of astronomy, politics, and ego. January has 31 days and is named after Janus, the two-faced Roman god of beginnings, perfect for kicking off the year. February, with its 28 days (29 in a leap year), gets its name from Februa, a Roman purification festival, and it's short because it was the last month added to the Roman calendar, getting the leftover days. March, also 31 days, honors Mars, the god of war, and was originally the first month in the Roman year, a time for starting military campaigns. April, 30 days, might come from aperire (Latin for "to open," like spring buds) or Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love. May, 31 days, is likely named for Maia, a Roman goddess of growth, while June, 30 days, nods to Juno, queen of the gods.

July, with 31 days, was renamed by Julius Caesar himself, who decided his birth month (formerly Quintilius, meaning "fifth") deserved his name after he fixed the calendar. August, also 31 days, got its name from Emperor Augustus, who didn't want to be outdone by Caesar and reportedly stole a day from February to make his month just as long. September through December, 30, 31, 30, and 31 days, respectively, come from the Latin words for seven (septem), eight (octo), nine (novem), and ten (decem), because they were the seventh through tenth months in the old Roman 10-month calendar. The uneven lengths (28, 30, or 31 days) are a compromise to fit the 365-day solar year while keeping months roughly lunar-length. Julius Caesar's astronomers tried to alternate 30 and 31 days, but political meddling (like Augustus's ego) and the need to avoid bad luck (Romans disliked even-numbered days for some festivals) led to the hodgepodge we have now.

Let's keep the fire burning and dive deeper into the cosmic gears of our calendar, now it's time to crack open the mystery of why we have seven days in a week and how the names of the days, like Tuesday's sneaky connection to both Mars and a Norse god, came to be. The seven-day week is one of those things that feels so natural we barely question it, but it's got roots in ancient stargazing and mythology. Back in the day, around 700 BCE, the Babylonians were obsessed with the sky. They noticed seven things moving across the horizon: the Sun, the Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. These were the "planets" of their time, but not like we think of planets today. The word "planet" comes from the ancient Greek planētēs, meaning "wanderer" or "traveler," because these celestial bodies seemed to roam the sky unlike the fixed stars. The Sun and Moon were counted as planets because they

moved too, tracing their paths across the heavens. The Babylonians thought these seven wanderers had divine powers, influencing everything from harvests to battles, so they built a seven-day cycle, with each day ruled by one of these celestial gods. This wasn't just astronomy, it was astrology, a way to organize time and life around the cosmos.

The seven-day week caught on because it was practical and mystical. Seven was a sacred number in many cultures, think seven wonders, seven seas, and it divided the lunar month (about 29.53 days) into roughly four parts ($29.53 \div 4 \approx 7.4$ days). The Hebrews also had a seven-day week, tied to the creation story in Genesis, with the Sabbath as a day of rest. By the 1st century BCE, the Romans picked up the Babylonian system, naming each day after one of their gods linked to those seven "planets." When the Roman Empire spread, so did the seven-day week, becoming the backbone of the Western calendar. It's wild to think our week is a cosmic hand-me-down from Babylonian star-watchers, but that's the magic of history!

Now, let's talk about the names of the days and why they're a mix of Norse and Roman vibes, especially why Tuesday sounds nothing like Mars but connects to a Norse god instead. The English names for the days come from a mash-up of Roman planetary gods and Germanic/Norse mythology, thanks to the Anglo-Saxons who settled in Britain. The Romans named their days after their gods, tied to the seven planets, but when the Germanic tribes (including Anglo-Saxons) adopted the system, they swapped in their own gods, who matched the Roman ones in spirit. Sunday is the Sun's Day, from Old English Sunnandæg, straight from the Roman dies Solis (Day of the Sun). The Sun was a symbol of life and power, and both cultures kept it simple, naming the day for the celestial body itself. Monday is the Moon's Day, from Mōnandæg, echoing the Roman dies Lunae (Day of the Moon). Again, no god needed, just the Moon's mystical glow. Tuesday gets spicy. In English, it's Tīwesdæg, named after Tiw (or Týr in Norse mythology), a Germanic god of war and justice. The Romans called this day dies Martis, after Mars, their god of war. Why the swap? Tiw was the Anglo-Saxon equivalent of Mars, both were fierce, battle-ready deities. The Anglo-Saxons didn't use the Roman name because they wanted their own gods in the mix, so they picked Tiw to stand in for Mars. In Spanish, Tuesday is Martes, which keeps the Roman dies Martis (Day of Mars) intact, showing how Romance languages stuck closer to Latin roots. English, with its Germanic base, went the Norse route, which is why Tuesday sounds nothing like Mars but carries the same warlike vibe through Tiw.

Wednesday is Wōdnesdæg, named for Woden, the Anglo-Saxon version of Odin, the Norse god of wisdom, magic, and war. The Romans called it dies Mercurii, after Mercury, god of communication and trickery. Woden was a wanderer and seeker of knowledge, much like Mercury, so the Anglo-Saxons saw him as a fitting match. Thursday is Þunresdæg, or Thunder's Day, for Thor, the Norse god of thunder and strength, swapping in for Jupiter, the Roman thunder-wielder, from dies Iovis (Day of Jupiter). Thor's hammer, Mjölnir, made him a perfect stand-in for Jupiter's lightning bolts. Friday is Frīgedæg, named after Frigg, a Germanic goddess of love and fertility (sometimes linked to Freyja), replacing Venus, the Roman love goddess, from dies Veneris (Day of Venus). Finally, Saturday is Sæternesdæg, the only day that kept its Roman name, from dies Saturni (Day of Saturn), god of time and agriculture. The Anglo-Saxons didn't have a clear equivalent for Saturn, so they left it as is.

So, why did the Anglo-Saxons use Norse/Germanic gods like Tiw, Woden, Thor, and Frigg instead of Roman or Greek ones like Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, and Venus? It's all about cultural pride and adaptation. When the seven-day week reached the Germanic tribes in the early centuries CE, they were integrating Roman ideas but wanted to honor their own mythology. The Roman Empire was a distant power, and the Anglo-Saxons, living in Britain by the 5th century, had their own gods, stories, and language rooted in Germanic and Norse traditions. Instead of borrowing Latin names wholesale, they matched their gods to the Roman ones based on shared traits: war for Mars and Tiw, thunder for Jupiter and Thor,

love for Venus and Frigg. This wasn't just a translation, it was a way to make the calendar their own, grounding it in their spiritual world. Romance languages like Spanish kept the Latin names (Martes for Mars, Miércoles for Mercury) because they evolved directly from Latin. English, built on Old English and influenced by Norse-speaking Vikings, took the Germanic path, giving us this unique blend.

Alright, we're ready to wrap up this cosmic journey and give you the tools to craft a calendar that'll make your homebrew world feel like a living, breathing legend! Imagine a world orbiting a binary star system, where the year is 420 days long because that's how long it takes to loop around both suns. Instead of 12 months, you've got eight "seasons," each tied to the shifting dominance of the red or gold star, with names like Emberwake or Gildfall, reflecting the sky's colors. Each season could last 52 or 53 days, and you might have a wild, uncounted festival day at the year's end when both stars align, a time for chaos and revelry. For weeks, ditch the seven-day vibe and go with six-day cycles, each day named after a primal element, Flame, Tide, Stone, Gale, Root, and Void, because your world's gods forged reality from these forces. The sixth day, Voidday, could be a quiet time for reflection, when the locals avoid loud noises to keep the void from stirring. This setup roots your calendar in your world's astronomy and mythology, making every date feel like a story.

Or picture a tidally locked planet, one side scorched, the other frozen, with a habitable twilight ring. The year might be 300 days, based on the planet's slow wobble, divided into 10 months named after ancient heroes who tamed the twilight, Kael, Veyra, and so on. Each month could have 30 days, but every fifth month, you add a "Balance Day" to honor the equilibrium of light and dark, keeping the total at 302 days. Weeks could be four days long, tied to the four winds that sweep the twilight ring, with names like Zephyr, Howl, Whisper, and Roar. Your people might treat Howlday as a time for storytelling, when the wind carries ancestral voices. This calendar reflects the planet's unique environment and cultural values, grounding your world's time in its physical reality.

For a high-fantasy twist, imagine a world with three moons, each with a different cycle: 20 days, 30 days, and 40 days. Your calendar could have 12 months, but they're staggered to align with the rare "Triple Full," when all three moons shine full every 240 days, marking a sacred year. Months might be named after virtues, Valor, Mercy, Wit, reflecting the gods' gifts, with 20 days each for simplicity. Weeks could be five days, named after the five senses, Sight, Sound, Touch, Taste, Smell, because your world's mystics believe time is a sensory experience. Smellday might be when markets overflow with spices, tying the calendar to daily life. This setup lets you play with complex lunar cycles and cultural quirks, making your world feel dynamic and layered.

Another idea: a post-apocalyptic world where survivors track time by the pulses of a dying magical crystal, the Heart of the Old World. The year is 400 days, the time it takes the crystal to complete one "heartbeat." You could have 16 months, each 25 days, named after lost cities, Ashkarn, Veltros, Lumira, to keep their memory alive. Weeks might be 10 days, each named after a tool of survival, Blade, Flint, Rope, Map, and so on, because time is about enduring. Mapday could be when wanderers share tales of safe routes, weaving the calendar into the culture of survival. This calendar feels gritty and tied to the world's history, perfect for a harsh setting.

These are just sparks, mix and match! Start with your world's astronomy: how many suns, moons, or stars shape its cycles? Then layer in culture: what do your people worship, fear, or celebrate? Name days, weeks, or months after gods, events, or elements, and let the calendar reflect your world's quirks, like a tyrant who added a day to their birth month or a festival that pauses time. Make it feel like your characters live by it, whether they're farmers, star-sorcerers, or wasteland rogues.

So, go forth, craft those calendars, and let your worlds shine! Keep rolling, keep creating, and let's make some stories that echo through the ages.

5e's Arcane Soup Stole My Wizard's Soul

Elven Rant

As usual I love History of TTRPG, what I am bringing to you is not always correct and its based on Internet knowledge so if I will write something wrong please correct me, but we will start with History of "Wizardry and Magic" in Dungeons & Dragons. Magic in Dungeons & Dragons is the lifeblood of its fantastical worlds, shaping everything from fireballs to divine miracles. It's hard to imagine D&D without its spellcasters—wizards poring over ancient tomes, clerics channeling godly power, druids communing with nature, and later, sorcerers wielding raw magical talent. But where did this all begin? To understand the history of magic in D&D, we need to go back to its roots, explore its inspirations, and see how it evolved across editions, while also glancing at how other systems like Castles & Crusades handled it.

In the original D&D, released in 1974 by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, magic was a core pillar of the game, but it was a far cry from the structured systems we know today. The game drew heavily from fantasy literature, wargaming, and mythology. The Dungeons & Dragons Basic Set introduced two primary magic-using classes: the Magic-User (the precursor to the wizard) and the Cleric. Magic-Users were frail scholars who memorized spells from spellbooks, casting powerful effects like magic missile or sleep but becoming near-useless once their daily spells were spent. Clerics, inspired by medieval Christian miracle-workers and figures like Bishop Odo from the Bayeux Tapestry, wielded divine magic granted by gods, healing allies or turning undead. This marked the first distinction between arcane magic (Magic-Users' spellbook-driven craft) and divine magic (Clerics' god-given powers), a divide that would persist in D&D's DNA.

The Magic-User's spell system was heavily influenced by Jack Vance's Dying Earth novels, where wizards memorized spells that vanished from memory after casting—a mechanic dubbed "Vancian magic." Spells were organized into levels, and Magic-Users had to prepare them daily, a system that defined D&D's arcane magic. Druids didn't appear in the original 1974 set but emerged in the Eldritch Wizardry supplement (1976) as a subclass of Clerics, wielding nature-based divine magic like call lightning. Their inclusion drew from Celtic mythology and the romanticized view of druids as nature's priests.

Advanced Dungeons & Dragons (1st Edition, 1977–1989) expanded magic's scope. The Player's Handbook (1978) formalized the Magic-User (now often called "Mage") and Cleric, adding the Illusionist as a distinct arcane class specializing in deception spells. Druids became a standalone class, with unique spell lists emphasizing nature and transformation, like shapechange. The Unearthed Arcana (1985) introduced spell

schools (e.g., necromancy, evocation), allowing Mages to specialize as necromancers or conjurers, though at the cost of restricted schools. Divine magic grew more flavorful, with Clerics tied to specific deities and Druids to nature's balance. This edition also saw the first hints of non-Vancian magic with the Psionicist, a mind-magic class from The Dragon magazine, inspired by science fiction and occultism, though it remained niche.

In AD&D 2nd Edition (1989–2000), magic became more structured. The Player's Handbook retained Mages, Clerics, and Druids, but introduced "specialty priests" for Clerics, tailoring divine spells to specific gods (e.g., a war god's priest might wield spiritual hammer). Mages could specialize further, with sourcebooks like The Complete Wizard's Handbook (1990) offering kits like the "Witch" or "Necromancer," adding roleplay depth. The arcane-divine split was explicit, with Mages using spellbooks and Clerics/Druids drawing from divine or natural forces. Psionics returned in The Complete Psionics Handbook (1991), offering a third magic type distinct from arcane or divine, though it was controversial for feeling too sci-fi.

D&D 3rd Edition (2000–2008) revolutionized magic with the d20 system. The Player's Handbook (2000) renamed Magic-Users as Wizards, introduced the Sorcerer, and refined Clerics and Druids. Wizards kept Vancian magic, preparing spells daily, while Sorcerers, a new arcane class, cast spontaneously from a known spell pool, reflecting innate talent. This addressed complaints about Vancian magic's rigidity, which I'll gripe about later. Clerics and Druids gained domain spells and spontaneous casting (e.g., converting spells to heals), making divine magic more flexible. The arcane-divine divide was mechanical: arcane casters risked spell failure in armor, while divine casters didn't. New magic users, like the Bard (now a full caster) and prestige classes (e.g., Archmage, Hierophant), expanded options. Complete Arcane (2004) introduced the Warlock, a non-Vancian arcane caster with at-will invocations, inspired by demonic pacts in folklore. Castles & Crusades, by contrast, stuck to traditional Vancian magic, avoiding 3E's complexity, which kept its magic closer to AD&D's roots, as noted by one of the users I interact on X: "C&C's magic is pure AD&D nostalgia."

D&D 4th Edition (2008–2014) overhauled magic entirely. The Player's Handbook (2008) abandoned Vancian magic for a unified power system, where Wizards, Clerics, and Druids used at-will, encounter, and daily powers, like martial classes. This made magic feel less unique. Arcane and divine distinctions existed in flavor (Wizards used "arcane" powers, Clerics "divine"), but mechanics were homogenized. New classes, like the Invoker (divine) and Swordmage (arcane), added variety, but the loss of spell schools and Vancian depth alienated fans. Psionics returned in Player's Handbook 3 (2010), using power points, a nod to 2E's system. Castles & Crusades stayed traditional, ignoring 4E's changes.

D&D 5th Edition (2014–present) restored Vancian magic with tweaks. The Player's Handbook (2014) gave Wizards, Clerics, and Druids prepared spell lists but allowed flexible casting within spell slots, balancing 3E's flexibility with AD&D's structure. Sorcerers used metamagic to customize spells, Warlocks gained pact-based invocations, and Bards became full casters with magical secrets. The arcane-divine split persisted: Wizards and Sorcerers faced armor restrictions, while Clerics and Druids didn't. New subclasses, like the Arcane Trickster and Eldritch Knight, blended magic with martial skills. The 2024 Player's Handbook refined this further, streamlining spell preparation and adding cantrips for all casters. Other magic users, like the Artificer (Tasha's Cauldron of Everything, 2020), introduced technology-infused magic, inspired by steampunk and Eberron.

Why am I sour on the Mage/Sorcerer concept? Because D&D's Wizards and Sorcerers lack individualism, and 5e's design makes it worse. Back in AD&D and Castles & Crusades, Wizards had distinct identities. Illusionists were masters of deception, not just Mages with a spell preference. Necromancers raised undead armies, their grim craft defining them. In 5e, a Wizard can "focus" on illusions or necromancy, but who's kidding who? Nobody skips fireball for silent image, and

even a necromancer Wizard will sling evocation spells to keep up. The 2024 rules doubled down, lumping Wizards, Sorcerers, and Bards into the same Arcane spell list, flattening their uniqueness. A Sorcerer's innate magic and a Wizard's studied craft end up feeling like the same toolbox. Castles & Crusades gets it right with classes like the Illusionist, who lives and breathes deception, or the Arcane Thief, snatching spells from rivals mid-cast. These are casters with personality, not just spell slots.

I want a Necromancer class obsessed with death magic, not a Wizard dabbling in animate dead while chucking fireballs. I want an Enchanter charming foes into allies, a Summoner calling magical beasts, a Witch cursing enemies with hexes, a Charmer weaving social magic. 5e squeezes all this into Wizard and Sorcerer, expecting subclasses to carry the weight, but they don't. If Druids and Warlocks get unique classes for their nature and pact themes, why are Necromancers or Illusionists just Wizard flavors? Why do Warlocks cast Wizard spells if their theme is so distinct? And don't get me started on Sorcerers versus Wizards—the only difference is one's born magical, the other's a bookworm, yet their spells are nearly identical. When you think of D&D magic, what pops into your head? A fireball, right? That's the problem. Magic should be unique. Let Wizards master elemental forces, Necromancers wield death, Witches curse, and Illusionists deceive. Castles & Crusades hints at this, but even they could push further.

D&D's magic has journeyed from a quirky Vancian spark to 5e's polished but homogenized glow. It's evolved, but somewhere along the way, it traded the vibrant individuality of AD&D's spellcasters for a one-size-fits-all arcane toolbox. I'm yearning for a game where every caster feels like a unique artisan, not just another fireball-flinger. Am I overthinking this?

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For All Who Remain

by

Anastasia Preston

Kitchens across Highmoor—once used to feed soldiers and refugees—now filled the city with sweeter aromas: warm bread, roasted herbs, honeyed fruits. Fires burned in every hearth, and the people, weary but alive, had gathered their finest to celebrate the impossible. For once, there were no horns of warning, no smoke curling from rooftops. Only light, laughter, and the scent of life returning.

King Avellian Ashmire had spared no effort. Great tables lined the central hall of the citadel, draped in white linen and crimson banners. Flower petals carpeted the floor, and soft music poured from a dozen instruments, mingling with the hum of conversation and the clinking of silverware. Nobles and soldiers, merchants and farmers, even a few elves—all sat side by side, raising cups not only to victory, but to the fallen. Each toast was part joy, part grief, and wholly a promise: that life would continue, that their sacrifices had meaning.

Sariel paused in the arched entryway, a step behind Wren, her eyes sweeping the hall. The afternoon sunlight through the high windows painted gold across the long tables and flickered in every goblet, every glass. Somewhere in the distance, someone laughed—a full, unrestrained laugh. It startled her. She hadn't realized how much she missed the sound.

The banquet wasn't just for victory. It was for memory. For grief. For joy.
For a new beginning.

Wren stood beside her in quiet awe, every bit the young woman now. She wore a dress of soft gray-blue, the color of mist before dawn. Fine silver thread stitched through the folds shimmered like dew, and along the hem, delicate feathers had been embroidered in pale silk. Her dark hair had been braided with tiny pearls and wildflowers gathered from the fields beyond the city. Around her neck hung a pendant shaped like a leaf.

Aelirunai, ever the outsider and yet somehow central to all of this, moved with

silent grace. Her gown was long-sleeved and layered in silk dyed deep indigo and violet, catching hints of starlight when she passed. Embroidered cranes soared across the back, stitched in fine silver, their wings outspread as if in mid-flight. A wide sash wrapped her waist, fastened with a single moonstone. Her hair, usually wild and wind-blown, had been swept up in elegant coils and pinned with tiny icicle-shaped ornaments. She looked like a dream the East had whispered into the West.

Sariel herself wore white and pale gold—the colors of a dawn reborn. The gown was fitted through the waist, its high collar and flared sleeves lined with soft scarlet. A golden belt rested at her hips, clasped with a crimson stone carved into a sunburst. Her snow-white hair had been left loose. It fell over her shoulders in soft, curled waves, gently shifting as she moved.

And Elaeni...

Sariel turned her head, and for a moment, breath caught in her throat, while butterflies danced in her stomach.

Elaeni wore a gown of deep forest green veined with gold, like sunlight through old leaves. It flowed behind her like wind through trees. The sleeves were sheer and pointed, embroidered with curling ivy and ancient script. A mantle of white fur rested across her shoulders, held by a brooch shaped like twin swords, bound together in memory. Her golden hair had been braided back with scarlet ribbon, crowned with a filigree circlet of gold shaped like curling branches.

She was every inch the Queen she once was—and more.

And for the first time in a long while, Sariel allowed herself to feel it—hope.

As they entered, the entire hall rose to its feet. King Ashmire began to clap, and soon the great hall of Highmoor Castle thundered with applause—every human and elf honoring their arrival.

Rhiannon greeted them warmly and guided them toward the royal table. She wore a shimmering gown in Highmoor's colors—navy blue and silver. Though her eyes carried a flicker of grief, she smiled with genuine joy. Her skin had a soft radiance to it, and Sariel, ever perceptive, had seen it many times in her long life. In her heart, she knew: Rhiannon was pregnant.

It seemed Elrin had left one final gift before his passing.

Sariel gently took Elaeni's hand and guided her to the seat nearest the Ashmire royal family, then sat beside her. Wren slipped into a chair next to Isaro, while Aelirunai settled gracefully beside Lord Daeryun.

Sariel couldn't help but smile. Wren's bashful glances at Isaro—the faint blush that touched her cheeks when he spoke—were unmistakable. Affection had blossomed into something deeper. Across the table, Aelirunai and Lord Daeryun exchanged quiet words and rare smiles. Sariel's heart swelled at the sight. Aelirunai, once consumed by hatred and sorrow, had been alone for millennia. Now, to see her opening herself to someone beyond Sariel or Wren brought a warmth as rare as it was tender.

Soon fragrant platters were carried out: roasted meats, glazed vegetables, ripe fruits, steaming soups, fresh bread, and rich wine.

When the final plates were set, King Ashmire rose and tapped his glass with a fork. The hall fell silent, save for the soft rustle of servants.

He looked out over the gathering, pausing as if to weigh every word.

"Tonight's banquet," he began, "is not for me, nor for my family. It is for all of you. For those who celebrate in the city below—with family, with friends, with the loved ones they have left. And for those no longer among us, who laid down their lives so that we may be here tonight."

His voice carried clear and steady across the hall.

"In the days past, we suffered great loss. In the days to come, we will gather every name, every fallen soul, and they shall be immortalized—etched into the pillars of this hall, so they will never be forgotten."

A murmur of applause and cheers rippled through the chamber before quieting again.

"We are here tonight because brave souls stood against the darkness. Without them, the Crow God would have devoured our light, leaving nothing but silence and ash."

He turned, gesturing to each woman in turn.

"Lady Elaeni Viaala'Nell—who came to our gates clinging to life, broken of both body and soul. She is here because of a young man who gave everything to save her. As long as I have known her, she has insisted she is no longer a queen—but I think even her own people would agree that she has never been anything else."

Elaeni smiled brightly, looking up at the man who had treated her as kin through some of the hardest years of her life.

"Lady Sariel Thalrúniel—a peerless warrior, who shields others from the blade even at the cost of herself. Through her, the Magi of the old tales have returned. Through her, magic itself has been reborn in Calavren. For most of us, this woman is the closest we will ever come to divinity."

The hall erupted with applause. Sariel forced a smile, but the words sat heavily in her chest. She had always hated this—the attention her white hair and silver eyes drew even before all this, enough to push her into the shadows. Now, to be lifted toward divinity itself—she loathed it.

Then, beneath the table, a hand slipped gently over her knee and gave a reassuring squeeze.
Sariel glanced over to find Elaeni's warm, steady smile.

The cheers faded, and King Ashmire continued.

"Lady Wren Thalrúniel—quiet, steadfast, and braver than most soldiers I've ever known. She stood against that colossal monster, and though I have not had the privilege of knowing her as well as our other honored guests, my own daughter speaks highly of her. Like her mother, she is well-versed in combat, and tonight I am proud to honor her."

Wren shifted in her seat, uncertain. Sariel couldn't tell if she enjoyed the attention or not. Wren had always been overlooked, underestimated—just the silent child in the corner, until Sariel had found her and her sister Lark. Though she still kept to herself, she had come a long way from that girl Sariel first met.

King Ashmire hesitated as his gaze turned to Aelirunai. She had never spoken a family name—perhaps because she had none left to give.

Before the silence could linger, Aelirunai spoke, her voice carrying the sharp, lyrical cadence of the East.
"Thalrúniel, Your Majesty. Sariel is as a sister to me. I have never had a family... so I would gladly be part of hers."

She turned to Sariel, her dark eyes steady. "If she would have me."

Sariel's heart softened. She smiled, warm and sure. "It would be my honor to call you family."

A rare brightness touched Aelirunai's face.

King Ashmire's smile widened. "Then so be it—Lady Aelirunai Thalrúniel, a naelyri from the old eastern tales. Fierce, yes, and powerful—but also kind, and curious of heart."

He lifted his goblet high. "We owe these women our lives. Our future. We owe them the dawn of today—and every tomorrow yet to come. So please—eat, drink, and celebrate. For them, and for yourselves!"

Thunderous cheers shook the great hall. Applause rang for a full minute before settling back into the hum of voices, laughter, and the clatter of plates and goblets.

Sariel found herself enjoying the dinner more than she expected. She had never been a hearty eater, though Elaeni—and now Wren—were forever coaxing her to eat more.

Toward the meal's end, a memory stirred—long ago, around a fire on a bitter winter's night. Elaeni had made Autumn's Harvest, a comforting soup from the Autumn Veil, for all of them: Sariel, the royal guards, Ambassador Duclain, and his men. Duclain had asked her to sing as they ate. She had refused, laughing softly, promising she would sing another time.

She never had.

Quietly, Sariel rose from her seat and crossed to where King Ashmire sat. She leaned down and whispered a request in his ear.

The King looked up at her, surprise flickering across his face before he smoothed it into a smile. He rose and tapped his glass again. A clear chime rang through the great hall, cutting through the chatter until silence fell.

All eyes turned to him.

"Lady Sariel would like to speak, if you'd give her your attention, please."

King Ashmire gestured to her with a respectful nod and returned to his seat.

Sariel stood still, the weight of every gaze pressing against her. She had always hated this part—being seen, not as the silent protector in the background, but fully seen.

Elaeni tilted her head, amused but curious. Wren leaned forward with quiet anticipation. Aelirunai straightened, her expression unreadable but intent. Even Lord

Daeryun, mid-sip, lowered his cup and fixed on her.

"I—uh..." Sariel bit her lower lip. "I'm not good at public speaking. Forgive me."

Her vowels stretched gently, melodic with her Elvish accent. It carried beautifully in the hall, even as her hands trembled briefly at her sides.

"I'm not used to this. To being seen. Not as a warrior. Not as a speaker. Just... as myself."

Her gaze swept the room—soldiers, nobles, elves, humans, even children. Goblets hung suspended mid-air. Conversations stilled mid-word. All waited.

"I remembered something tonight. A promise I never kept."

Her eyes softened as she turned slightly toward Elaeni. Her voice steadied.

"Some time ago, Ambassador Duclain asked me to sing. We were in the mountains, on our way to Highmoor for the first time. We were cold. Tired. He said it might lift spirits. I told him no—that I would sing another time."

She paused, her throat tight. "But he died at Halifax Pass. I never sang for him. He never saw the peace he worked so hard to build."

Her gaze flicked to Rhiannon—glowing, bittersweet, her hand resting unconsciously on her belly. Then to Elaeni, whose eyes held only her. Then to Wren, who sat clasping her hands, wide-eyed and glistening.

"I can't change the past. I can't bring back those we've lost. But I can still keep my word. For him. And maybe... for myself."

She turned back to the crowd. "So, if you'll allow me—I'd like to offer a song. Not as a warrior. Not as a Magi. Just as Sariel."

She met King Ashmire's eyes once more. He gave her a solemn smile and raised his glass in silent approval.

Elaeni's face lit with pride, warm and radiant.

Sariel crossed to the great harp among the musicians. Its player rose at once, bowing as she stepped aside. Sariel's heart pounded, but her fingers twitched with the memory of familiarity. She sat. Her hands fell naturally into place. Time had not stolen this from her—it had only been waiting.

A few tentative notes rang out, trembling but clear. Then a melody—gentle, mournful, luminous—unfolded. She let it carry her. And then she began to sing:

The stars fell low in a silent sky,
Ash to ash, and none knew why.
But from the dust, a flame was born—
A light that lingers through the storm.

Alya aurë, veniré thalan,
(Hail the dawn, we walk the path)
Náril ethela, calen aman.
(Hearts still burn, in green we rise)
Sylarin nai, ela thalru.
(Let the song bind what was torn)

We buried names in stone and song,
Held our breath for far too long.
But hands once sundered now entwine,
A future shaped in stars and time.

Nai shira'venar— (We rise, we choose)
Nael'dor amin— (No blade divides)
Venya naril, thalru mina—
(Let the fire heal what remains)
Even sorrow shines with light.

Alya aurë, for all who remain,
Calen amar, through joy and pain.
We stand as one, we won't forget—
The sun has risen, not just yet.
But still we sing,
Still we shine,
Still we live.

When her voice finally ceased, silence held the hall. Not a breath stirred. Not a goblet clinked.

Her voice—clear, resonant, flowing with the melody of her people—had filled the chamber and gently broken every heart within it. The blend of Elvish and Common, the raw grief tempered with hope—it left them spellbound.

Wren had tears in her eyes, one hand pressed to her heart. Elaeni's eyes shone with unspoken love and pride. King Ashmire slowly lowered his goblet, his jaw tight but his expression softened. Queen Nerissa wept openly, her arm around her daughter. Rhiannon, too, had tears streaking her cheeks.

Aelirunai had stopped breathing halfway through the song. Now she blinked slowly, dazed, as a single tear traced her cheek. Even Lord Daeryun seemed caught in memory, the smile tugging at his lips distant and wistful.

Then—softly at first—a clap. Another. And then the hall erupted. Applause swelled into thunder, cheers and whistles breaking the silence until it became a living wave. They weren't applauding a warrior or a Magi. They were applauding Sariel.

And for the first time since childhood, she allowed herself to feel the warmth of it. A tear slid down her cheek. She brushed it away, startled to find herself crying.

Elaeni rose and crossed the hall without hesitation, drawing Sariel into a tight embrace.

"I didn't know if I'd ever hear you sing again," she whispered.

She pulled back, cupping Sariel's face in her hands. Her thumbs brushed away the tears before she leaned in, kissing her—soft and tender, trembling with emotion.

"It's still lovely," Elaeni murmured with a smile through her own tears. "After all these years. No matter what power you wield, hearing you sing means more to me than any spell or sword."

The hall hushed once again. Applause faded, but not the eyes fixed on them, nor the hearts holding their breath.

Elaeni kept Sariel's hands in hers, squeezing gently.

"Sariel," she said clearly, her voice ringing across the hall, "will you be my partner in this life and the next, until our souls cease to exist within the very cosmos itself?"

The same vow Sariel had once spoken before the Crow's shadow fell over Highmoor—now returned with tears and joy.

Sariel bit her lip, a smile breaking through. "Of course, Elaeni. There is nothing I want more than to grow old at your side."

A roar of cheers filled the Great Hall once more—deafening, not for victory or battle, but for love.

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Preparation Over Panic

Countering Status Effects in Dungeons & Dragons

Over the past day, I've read countless takes on this, and I'm genuinely baffled. So many people argue that stunning players during encounters is unfair, claiming it makes the game unfun by "stun-locking" them and essentially removing them from play. It makes me wonder: are we even playing the same game?

I started with D&D in the mid-90s, cutting my teeth on systems like Earthdawn and Advanced Dungeons & Dragons 2nd Edition. My early experiences involved lengthy planning sessions. After receiving a quest to delve into a dungeon, we didn't just charge in blindly. I remember Krzysztof, a 28-year-old guy from Krakow who led our party and mentored the newcomers. He ensured we entered every dungeon prepared. Everyone's backpack included essentials like antidotes, scrolls, and protective items. But more importantly, we gathered something modern players often overlook: information.

From the comments in those threads, it's clear many players skip this step, dismissing preparation as metagaming. One person even called it metagaming for my characters to carry a mirror, arguing they'd never encountered a Medusa or Basilisk, so how would they know about petrification? That's nonsense. Most human knowledge comes from secondhand sources: stories, warnings, and lessons passed down. Before fixing a computer issue, we search online for guides. When trying a new recipe, we follow someone else's instructions. Why would fantasy worlds be any different? In fact, early D&D lore often depicted heroes as children eavesdropping in taverns on exaggerated tales of adventurers, trolls petrifying in sunlight (a myth, but it sparks ideas) or basilisks turning victims to stone with a glance. These folklore nuggets, much like our modern zombie apocalypse prep from movies and games, form basic adventurer wisdom. And yes, per the Monster Manual, a basilisk can indeed petrify itself if it glimpses its reflection in a mirror under bright light, mistaking it for a rival, proving that carrying one isn't meta, but a clever nod to in-world myths that could save your skin.

Let's apply this to a scenario. Suppose we need to traverse a forest to reach a newly discovered ancient tomb, with no prior details about it. What do we do? As Krzysztof taught me, we start by consulting locals: woodcutters, rangers, and adventurers familiar with the area. They might warn us about swamps, bogs, trolls lurking in the shadows, mischievous fey that lead travelers astray, or skeletons haunting the tomb's outskirts. This intel comes from DM-player interactions, blending roleplay with practical inquiry.

Armed with that, we prepare accordingly. Trolls? Folklore says they turn to stone in sunlight and can only be slain with fire, though some tales might be exaggerated or false. It's no different from real-life knowledge of a cobra: we know it's venomous, dangerous, and best avoided with slow movements, even if we've never seen one. We refine our info by chatting with tavern adventurers, who clarify that the

stone-turning bit is a myth; acid or fire is the real key. This isn't metagaming; it's immersive world-building and information gathering, a lost art in 2026. Preparation means anticipating threats while balancing inventory and encumbrance, turning potential disasters into manageable challenges. You can't gear up for every possibility, but focusing on likely dangers, antidotes for poisons, bandages for wounds, ropes and crowbars for obstacles, or even a simple bedroll for harsh environments, minimizes risks in places where death lurks.

One commenter suggested the Game Master should tailor encounters to the party's composition. I disagree entirely. Players know their group's strengths and weaknesses better than anyone. No healer? Stock up on potions and healing scrolls. Lacking magic? Invest in alchemical items or hire a spellcaster. Short on frontline tanks? Recruit henchmen or mercenaries. D&D thrives on imagination, which lets you mitigate flaws creatively. Many TTRPG systems provide tools for incomplete parties, but it's the players' responsibility to address those gaps, not the GM's to baby the group. This extends to resource management: hoarding gold or splurging on flashy items like a +2 sword might feel good, but it leaves you vulnerable. Imagine feeling sidelined by paralysis, only to realize a simple potion, scroll of Lesser Restoration, or even an Amulet of Health could have kept you in the fight. Unpreparedness is often self-inflicted, turning sympathy into a lesson on smart spending.

Another common gripe targeted low-level players, claiming they can't defend against stuns because protective spells like Freedom of Movement are level 3 or higher. But are low-level parties really bombarded by stunning monsters? I spent two hours combing through the Monster Manual and Volo's Guide to Monsters to check, because I value solid research.

Between CR 0 and CR 2, only four monsters can stun: the Myconid Adult (CR 1/2), Vargouille (CR 1), Myconid Sovereign (CR 2), and Intellect Devourer (CR 2). All require saving throws with DCs no higher than 12. A successful save against a Vargouille grants immunity for an hour. The Intellect Devourer needs multiple failures, dropping your Intelligence to 0 before stunning. Myconids rely on inhaled spores, which a clever DM might let you counter by covering your mouth and nose with cloth. One viral sketch video complained about a DC 17 stun, but that's from CR 11 beasts like Horned Devils, Efreeti, or Rocs, medium challenges for levels 11-12 in 5e. By then, your party boasts class features, magic items, and a +4 proficiency bonus, making failures far less likely.

In truth, stun-locking in 5e is rare and usually stems from poor teamwork or zero preparation, not GM malice. Every mechanic has a counter: short-term stuns (like a monk's Stunning Strike or an air elemental's slam) end after one round, while longer ones (often up to a minute) allow repeated saves each turn to shake it off. If it's poison-based, like an allip's touch or a catoblepas's stenc, an antidote or Neutralize Poison works. Magical stuns, from spells like Divine Word or Psychic Scream, can be dispelled or counterspelled (both available as scrolls). Allies might grant advantage on saves by using actions to rouse you, and a successful save often confers immunity to that effect for the encounter's duration. Creative problem-solving shines here too: damp cloth against a catoblepas's fumes or ear-covering versus a vrock's screech could earn advantage or outright immunity, per DM ruling. Players can break stuns with abilities like a monk's Stillness of Mind, a Way of Mercy monk's Physician's Touch, a paladin's Cleansing Touch, or even high-level options like Power Word Heal. It's about synergy, not isolation.

Finally, not every encounter demands combat. Players must recognize when foes outclass them and choose to flee, negotiate, or avoid altogether. The "every fight must be winnable" mindset reeks of video game logic, where levels scale perfectly. GMs should signal danger subtly: if a goblin at the tomb's entrance took three rounds to fell, but a horned beast inside pulverizes another goblin in one blow, that's your cue to rethink charging in. Running isn't failure; it's survival. Embrace the unpredictability, and D&D becomes richer for it.

Reigns: The Council Boardgame



EMI Review

Life's got its own plot twists, but nothing beats escaping into a good game that sparks laughter and clever schemes. Today, I'm thrilled to dive into Reigns: The Council, a board game that turns decision-making into hilarious chaos. If you're a fan of quick-witted party games with a royal flair, stick around. We're about to crown some fun!

Onto the throne room: Reigns: The Council is a clever adaptation of the swipe-left-or-right decision-making from the Reigns video game series, turned into a 3-6 player board game that's all about persuasion, bluffing, and balancing a kingdom on the edge. Here's how it rolls out. Setup is a breeze, taking maybe 5 minutes. One player gets crowned as the monarch (king or queen for the round), while everyone else becomes scheming advisors. Each advisor draws 7 proposal cards and a secret goal card that ties into the kingdom's four key metrics: Church, People, Army, and Treasury (think of them as sliders that can fill up or drain based on your choices).

The advisors take turns pitching wild proposals from their cards. Like "Build a grand cathedral" or "Launch a peasant uprising." They've got to sell it to the monarch with creative storytelling, outright lies, or whatever bullshitting magic they can muster. The monarch decides yes or no, but here's the twist: every choice nudges those metrics up or down. Push one too far (full or empty), and the reign ends in dramatic fashion. Maybe a revolution or bankruptcy! Advisors score points if the kingdom crashes in a way that matches their secret goal, like emptying the treasury if that's their hidden agenda. A round lasts until a metric hits extreme or 15 proposals get accepted, then rotate the crown and

play multiple rounds for a full game. It's push-your-luck with a heavy dose of social deduction, and games wrap up in 30-45 minutes, making it ideal for quick session

Oh man, I absolutely loved this one. It's a amazing party game that zips along at a perfect pace, packing in loads of laughs without dragging on. The real joy comes from the imagination required; you're not just reading cards, you're role-playing absurd pitches like "Your Majesty, let's tax the dragons for their hoards. Think of the gold!" and watching friends ham it up or straight-up deceive to sway the vote. The bullshitting element is gold; I've had groups in stitches over outrageous arguments, and it rewards quick thinkers who can spin a tale on the fly. It's got that light, chaotic energy that's forgiving for newbies but replayable for veterans, with enough strategy in chasing goals to keep things spicy. If your crew loves games like The Resistance or Coup but wants something faster and more narrative-driven, this is a must-try. No heavy rules overhead, just pure, giggle-inducing fun that leaves everyone plotting for the next round. What more could you ask for in a tabletop escape?

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My Take on TTRPG Character Crafting Philosophies

For the past few years, I've seen two main "schools" of character creation: one that starts with rolls, harking back to AD&D times, and one that starts with the backstory of the character. Those two schools butt heads with each other in many conversations I've witnessed and participated in. But there's a third "school" far worse than those two, and probably hated by both to the point that it could unite them under the banner of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." Because a Roll First player would rather team up with a Backstory First believer than deal with the third scum. Hey, you're probably thinking, what is the third one? Well, because I don't want you to prematurely finish reading, I'll keep you in suspense while we dig a bit into the first two schools.

The "Roll First" approach is that old-school type of character creation. It starts by rolling your Ability Scores, seeing what numbers you've got, assigning them where they fit best, and then picking a class and race that match those scores. This came from the very specific design of OD&D, AD&D, and D&D B/X and BECMI. Certain classes required specific Ability Scores to even qualify, for example, the original D&D created by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson required a Charisma score of 17 or higher to play a Paladin:

"Charisma scores of 17 or greater by fighters indicate the possibility of paladin status IF THEY ARE LAWFUL from the commencement of play for that character." (Supplement I: Greyhawk, p. 8).

Gary Gygax went even further with AD&D: to play a Paladin, you needed STR 12+, INT 9+, WIS 13+, CON 9+, and CHA 17+:

"To become a paladin a character must be human, have a strength of not less than 12, a minimum intelligence of 9, a wisdom of 13 or more, a minimum constitution of 9, and not less than 17 charisma." (AD&D Player's Handbook, p. 22).

While a Ranger required STR 13+, INT 13+, WIS 14+, and CON 14+:

"A ranger must have strength of not less than 13, intelligence of not less than 13, wisdom of not less than 14, and a 14 or greater constitution." (AD&D Player's Handbook, p. 24).

In D&D B/X and BECMI, there were no minimum requirements to play classes, but if a Cleric had Wisdom greater than 13, they gained additional experience. Non-human classes like Elves required a minimum of 9 in Intelligence, and 13 in both Strength and Intelligence for a 5% experience bonus, or STR 13 and INT 16 for a 10% bonus:

"If the elf's Strength is 13 or greater and his or her Intelligence is 16 or greater, that character will earn a 10% bonus on earned experience." (Basic Rules (Moldvay), p. B10).

To play a Halfling in B/X, you needed Constitution and Dexterity above 9, with bonuses noted:

"The prime requisites for a halfling are Strength and Dexterity. A halfling character whose Strength or Dexterity score is 13 or greater will receive a bonus of +5% to earned experience. Halflings whose Strength and Dexterity scores are both 13 or greater will receive a bonus of +10%." (Basic Rules (Moldvay), p. B10).

In those older systems, you had to roll your Ability Scores first to see what you could even play. Coming up with a concept before rolling often meant you couldn't pull it off, so players created their characters after the rolls. We'd gather for what we now call Session 0 (though no one named it that back then), just rolling characters, and often starting the game right after. It sparked conversations to create balanced teams: "What scores did you get? I've got high Intelligence, want me to play the Magic-User?" Players saw their roles and built a proper team composition first, then fleshed out backstory or lore. Like I mentioned, as soon as characters were ready, we dove into the game. Backstories were created on the spot, usually super simple, we didn't have time for pages of stories. It was like, "I was born in the city, daughter of a merchant... John..." And that was it. My father's name was John, though it probably changed by the next session. But everyone understood this was the beginning of the journey, not the middle or the end.

To be honest, this is my favorite way of creating characters. It prompts me to improvise a backstory on the spot, requires quick thinking, and it's great, my best characters have come from just that.

With TSR selling D&D to Wizards of the Coast came a new way of playing. In 3rd Edition, the concept of minimum requirements was abolished, you could play any class regardless of your Ability Scores (D&D 3e Player's Handbook, Chapter 3: Classes). Obviously, having higher scores in key abilities made it easier, but you didn't need Charisma 17 to play a Paladin anymore. With 5e, this was somewhat restored in the form of requirements for multiclassing, usually a minimum Ability Score of 13, for example, to multiclass as a Wizard, you need 13 INT:

"To qualify for a new class, you must meet the ability score prerequisites for both your current class and your new one, as shown in the Multiclassing Prerequisites table. For example, a barbarian who decides to multiclass into the druid class must have both Strength and Wisdom scores of 13 or higher." (D&D 5e Player's Handbook, p. 163).

Yes, this is a thing, and yes, it's often overlooked or ignored by Game Masters and players alike.

With this design choice, players were prompted to come up with a character idea first, regardless of Ability Scores. If you didn't care about mechanics, you could play a dumb Mage. With the rise of D&D during 5e and shows like Critical Role or other "live plays," many players were introduced to narrative role-play rather than just playing a game. This prompted new players to start with a backstory first, then use Point Buy, Standard Array, or rolling 4d6 drop lowest (sometimes seven times for the best picks), allowing them to create the characters they envisioned. One of the biggest drawbacks was unbalanced team

compositions, the wildest I had was five players with three casters (Sorcerers and Wizards), one Cleric, and a Ranger, forcing the healer to frontline. No one wanted to back down from their "characters" because they'd put so much work into them. This attachment is also why player death became so hated among modern players, forcing Game Masters to fudge rolls to keep them alive. As you can see, I might not be the biggest fan of this way of creating characters, but I can see the benefits: players are invested in a way old-school folks couldn't always match. It allows Game Masters to raise the stakes if players don't make drama after a death, one of the best examples is from Critical Role itself, with the death of Mollymauk setting the stage for an amazing villain later and showing that a new character by the same player can be as good, if not better.

The old-school way feels like gritty fantasy, while "Backstory First" screams heroic fantasy. But under our radar sneaked a third way of creating characters, one we all know and equally hate.

These folks want to play superheroes. They want to be Iron Man on the board of the Nostromo, Captain America among soldiers from Saving Private Ryan, Batman in The Police Academy, or Thor among adventurers exploring an ancient tomb. You know who I'm talking about, right? A blight that's been part of D&D since the old days but now unlocked to another level. You see them writing articles in popular outlets like "Top 10 Most OP DnD Builds" on Gamers Decide or "Best DnD Builds for Your Next Character" from Wargamer. While "Backstory First" players think about making their character playable and are often willing to sacrifice raw power to match a backstory with flaws, the "Min-Maxers," "Power Gamers," or "Munchkins", call them what you like, are the worst possible players to invite to your game. Before you get mad at me, let me explain my point of view.

These players will never roll for characters or suggest rolling and then deciding if they go with rolls, Point Buy, or Standard Array. They don't have a character in mind, they have a build on paper. Their "backstories" are often superhero origins or so minimalistic they can't remember how many siblings they have, and it changes from game to game. One such player came to my game as a "character who traverses worlds", he said he always plays the same one and requested magic items at level 1 to do specific things. Another was a good friend of mine (and it really pained me to play with him); when asked about his backstory, he said, "I was born on a farm." When asked where on the map, he replied, "I don't know," and pointed randomly with his finger. He was building an AC-focused fighter, and that's what mattered to him. Both are extreme ends of the spectrum, hard to play with, but not impossible. However, that's not the worst part; there's something even more disturbing about having these players at the table. And it's their competitiveness. Let me ask you: why do these players create those often "broken" builds? The answer is simple, to win D&D. They see the Game Master as opposition, like the GM is there to beat the players, and they're there to outsmart and win against the GM. I've seen many GMs fall into this trap (me included), where I started designing encounters just to kill that player. Yet, when playing with "Roll First" or "Backstory First" folks, there's no such thing, we're playing a cooperative game. Yes, I challenge my players, but fairly. With "Min-Maxers," I'm annoyed and just want to put them in their place.

Other players suffer because of it, encounters become so off-balance that they either can't do anything or aren't allowed to, because the GM wants to kill that player and makes it too strong for the rest, or the encounter ends fast because the "Munchkin" finishes the fight before anyone else acts.

As a Game Master, I'm more than happy to play with "Roll First" or "Backstory First" people. Yes, in the second case, there might be more work to make it function and "balance" (gods, I hate that word) encounters for weird party compositions, but other than the work, it's not disruptive. I strictly refuse to play with "Min-Maxers" anymore, because they make the game unbearable for the GM and other players.X

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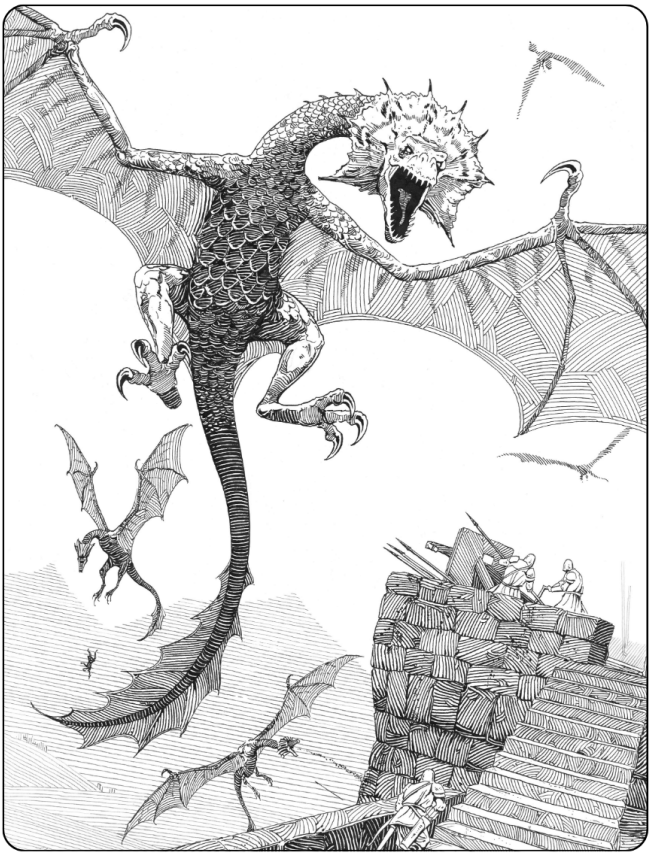

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Hex vs Squares

The Eternal D&D Grid War And Why Rulers Rule Supreme

The roots of grid-based movement in D&D stretch back to its wargaming heritage, where tactical precision on maps was everything. The original 1974 edition of Dungeons & Dragons didn't mandate grids outright, but it leaned heavily on miniature wargames like Chainmail, where battles were fought on measured tables with inches representing distances. Movement rates were abstract at first, often described in turns or abstract units, but players quickly adapted graph paper for tracking positions during delves into monster-filled lairs. Hexes made their mark early too, shining in wilderness adventures as a way to handle overland travel without the clunky math of straight lines on squares. By the late 1970s, as D&D evolved, grids became more integral, setting the stage for the edition-defining shifts ahead.

Advanced Dungeons & Dragons (AD&D) in 1977-1979 formalized this tactical bent, especially in its Dungeon Masters Guide and Players Handbook. Here, movement was measured in inches on a scale where 1 inch typically equaled 10 feet for exploration or 5 feet in combat, depending on the DM's house rules and the module's map scale. Combat remained somewhat abstract, focusing on initiative, attacks of opportunity (though not yet called that), and narrative flow, but many groups used optional miniature rules from Unearthed Arcana or earlier supplements to place figures on grid paper. This allowed for "zones of control," a wargame holdover where adjacent enemies restricted movement, adding layers of strategy without rigid squares. Dungeons were sketched on 10-foot squares for clean room layouts, while hexes ruled wilderness maps in supplements like the World of Greyhawk (1980), where each hex covered 30 miles of hex crawl potential, brimming with random encounters and lore hooks. AD&D's flexibility meant grids were tools, not tyrants, encouraging creative DMing over strict adherence.

The big pivot came with D&D 3rd Edition in 2000, which unified the splintered Basic/Expert and AD&D lines into a single, d20-powered system. This edition baked the

grid into the core rules like never before, standardizing the 5-foot square as the fundamental unit of measurement. No longer optional or scaled variably, every character's space was a 5x5-foot box, movement was counted in those increments (e.g., a human's 30 feet per round equaled 6 squares), and spells like Fireball had precise grid-based area effects. This shift made combat more tactical and accessible, especially for newcomers, by eliminating fuzzy inches and promoting universal minis compatibility. It also introduced facing, reach, and threatened areas as grid-dependent mechanics, turning every fight into a chessboard of positioning. Critics called it "minis-mandatory," but proponents praised how it streamlined rulings and empowered tactical play. Hexes persisted for overland maps in 3e supplements, but the square grid dominated tactical encounters, influencing everything from flanking bonuses to cover mechanics. This standardization carried echoes into later editions, proving grids weren't just conveniences, they were the engine of modern D&D's battlefield drama.

Through it all, the square-hex divide held firm: squares for the claustrophobic twists of dungeon delvers, hexes for the sweeping vistas of world-spanning quests. Yet as editions rolled on, players began questioning if grids were holding back the game's true potential.

Squares truly come alive in dungeons and other enclosed environments, where their orthogonal structure hugs the geometry of built spaces like a glove. Picture a crumbling crypt with laser-straight corridors and boxy chambers, traps lurking in 5-foot alcoves, doors swinging on precise hinges, and furniture slotting neatly without those frustrating partial overlaps that hexes can force. In the heat of combat, squares make line-of-sight a breeze, just trace a straight path across the graph and call it, no funky angles to debate. They're a godsend for tight-quarters brawls, like squeezing through a goblin warren where that extra five-foot shuffle dodges a pit trap or positions you for a backstab. Plus, for greenhorn players or quick one-shots, squares lower the barrier, since every drugstore notebook has that familiar grid, and counting steps feels as natural as breathing, no need to puzzle over hex adjacency rules that can trip up even veterans.

Flip the script to open areas and world maps, and hexes steal the show with their elegant six-sided symmetry. Each hex offers equal movement in any direction, ditching the square grid's infamous "diagonal cheat," where corner-to-corner slides grant sneaky 1.414x speed boosts that warp tactics and breed house-rule headaches. Imagine your party forging through a misty forest or scaling jagged peaks, free to veer northwest without penalty, turning travel into a true choose-your-own-adventure rather than a boxy march. On grand scales, hex maps fuel legendary hexcrawls, with each tile a 6-mile chunk stuffed with hex-specific goodies, from bandit camps to ancient ruins, letting DMs layer procedural generation for endless replayability. It's like the world breathes easier, unboxed and alive.

When combat erupts in the wilds, hexes level up positioning and tactics in ways squares just can't match. Flanking? Forget the square's four-way threats; hexes' six neighbors craft tighter zones of control, letting a rogue slip into a perfect pincer with fewer bodies and zero exploits like the infamous "square dance" where fighters shuffle diagonally to cheese advantage. Spells and blasts land truer too, their circular radii hugging hex outlines for fairer hits, cutting down on "does this corner count?" squabbles that kill momentum. Outdoor realism surges, as uneven terrain like rivers or hills flows organically around hexes, enabling epic maneuvers like cavalry charges encircling foes or archers claiming high-ground hexes without grid-forced absurdities. In the end, hexes shave off the square's math migraines, letting fights pulse with organic flow, where strategy sings over spreadsheets.

Sure, hexes and squares each carve out niches, but try ruler-based movement, and you'll wonder how you ever tolerated their invisible chains. It clicked for me in my debut Warhammer 40k bout, where tape measures supplanted grids, letting Space Marines and Orks prowl a chaotic table in true freeform glory. Warhammer's inch-by-inch ethos proves grids add convenience at

the cost of soul, turning minis into sliding puzzles instead of living legends charging across dioramas of doom.

Rulers unlock god-tier flexibility, shrugging off five-foot shackles for pinpoint placement on any wonky landscape you conjure. Want a goblin horde clambering over jagged rocks or a dragon wheeling through cavern spires? Measure it straight, no snapping to lines that butcher your vision. This sparks diorama wizardry on steroids: Pile tomes into foreboding castle keeps, Lego-brick a teeming metropolis with twisting alleys, or repurpose salt shakers as cyclopean monoliths and bottle caps as bubbling cauldrons, all sans the tyranny of "does this fit three squares?" or hex wonkiness. Grids bully your terrain into submission, but rulers bend to your whims, birthing battlescapes so vivid they rival pro studios, immersion cranked to eleven as minis strut through a bespoke world that screams epic.

Chatting this up in the Elven Maid Inn Discord lately, a pal countered that squares speed up distance checks in flat scraps, and yeah, for pancake fights, it's tidy. But toss in elevation, like a harpy swooping from a chandelier or a troll bossing a balcony brawl? Boom, you're knee-deep in Pythagoras, sqrt($a^2 + b^2$) for every shot or sling, grinding turns to dust while the epic vibe evaporates. Rulers? Pure poetry: Stretch it across the void, eyeball the drop, snag the raw line in a heartbeat. Vertical spells like Lightning Bolt or arrow volleys resolve crisp, no formulas fogging the fury, just seamless "in range, fire away" that keeps the adrenaline pumping.

Ladies and gentlemen, rulers eclipse hexes and squares for battlemaps hands down. They unshackle your imagination, tame thorny 3D tangles with ease, and banish grid gripes to let pure action roar. Hexes hold the crown for world maps still, that sweet spot for macro meanders. Yet for pocket change under a buck, one humble ruler outstrips every grid gimmick on the field. Next session, scrap the squares, your tales will soar.



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B2: The Keep on the Borderlands

EMI Review

Written by Gary Gygax, the guiding light behind D&D's early days, B2 was released in late 1979 as part of the Basic Set line, specifically tailored for the B/X edition. Aimed at characters levels 1 through 3, it serves as an ideal introduction to the hobby, blending exploration, combat, and decision-making in a contained yet expansive world. As Gygax himself reflected in a 2003:

"The B2 module was written to introduce newbies to the wonders of D&D adventuring. It is not 'ecologically correct,' but it is fun and entertaining, packed full of new and different challenges."

That spirit of accessible wonder shines through every page, making it a perfect starting point for fresh groups while still rewarding veterans with its depth.

The heart of the adventure lies in the Borderlands, a frontier where order meets the unknown. Central to it all is the Keep, a fortified outpost of stone and resolve, standing as a beacon against the surrounding wilds. Within its walls, you'll find a chapel tended by a steadfast cleric dedicated to rooting out evil, a tavern alive with the murmur of travelers and guards sharing stories over simple meals, and shops offering provisions from iron rations to basic arms. The lore paints the Keep as a holdout established by a distant lord to safeguard trade routes and push back encroaching threats. Its people form a close-knit community: soldiers bound by duty, merchants driven by commerce, healers guided by faith, and a few outsiders like wandering smiths or informants who add layers of quiet intrigue. The module even includes notes on potential hooks, like rumors overheard in the tavern or quests from the castellan, to draw players into the wider wilderness.

Venturing beyond brings you to the Caves of Chaos, a rugged ravine pocked with lairs that form a natural stronghold for raiders. These interconnected tunnels house goblin clans with their crude pitfalls and stolen goods, orc bands nursing grudges in smoke-filled halls, disciplined hobgoblin outposts, sly kobold burrows, an ogre's squalid den, and a minotaur's labyrinthine trap. The factions here are as fractious as they are dangerous, often clashing among themselves, which opens doors for players to exploit rivalries. Tucked within this network is the Shrine of Evil Chaos, a shadowed complex guarded by zealots, evil priests, and their undead thralls. It builds to a moral crossroads, where the party's choices—perhaps allying with one faction against another or storming the altar—echo long after the dice settle.

Additionally, the module marks another intriguing spot on its wilderness map: the Caves of the Unknown. This area is left entirely as a blank slate—no detailed map, no keyed encounters, no predefined lore. It was Gygax's intentional design to give DMs a space to fill with their own ideas and content, whether that's a hidden dragon's

lair, a forgotten tomb, or ties to your homebrew world. This encourages customization, turning the module into a foundation for something truly personal and extending its replay value far beyond the initial setup.

When first published, the module's setting was left open, fitting neatly into campaigns like those in Greyhawk's untamed borders. Later, with the evolution of the Basic line under Frank Mentzer in the early 1980s, it found a home in the Grand Duchy of Karameikos within the Mystara world. This shift made sense for the revised Basic Set, which bundled B2 as its signature adventure; Karameikos' wooded frontiers amplified the theme of fragile civilization. The placement endured in the Rules Cyclopedia and later products, though its flexibility allows DMs to adapt it freely.

Running B2 is remarkably straightforward across editions. It thrives in AD&D, whether first or second edition, for its tactical nuances, and in B/X for a lighter touch on the rules. BECMI and the Rules Cyclopedia integrate it effortlessly, sharing the same foundational mechanics for monsters and wilderness travel. For OSR enthusiasts, it's equally at home in systems like Castles & Crusades, ACKS II, Old-School Essentials, or Labyrinth Lord, requiring only minor tweaks such as adjusting saving throws or hit dice. The monster statistics align closely, so no wholesale replacements are needed; a quick review of the entries confirms their compatibility.

Even broader adaptations are possible. Community guides abound online for converting it to Shadowdark, emphasizing its torchlit perils with simple DC adjustments, or to 5e, where bounded accuracy and milestone experience smooth the low-level encounters.

In the end, B2: Keep on the Borderlands stands as a true cornerstone of D&D. It captures the essence of the game in its purest form, a module so enduring that it has shaped generations of players. Nearly every veteran of the old school has ventured into its caves, and most newcomers encounter its name early on. There's good reason it's the most celebrated D&D adventure ever created: its balance of structure and freedom invites endless replayability. For me, it holds personal echoes. I first explored it in the 1990s using AD&D 2e rules, sketching maps on notebook paper amid the excitement of those early sessions. Now, I'm revisiting it through a B/X play-by-post game on the Elven Maid Inn Discord, where the slow burn of choices feels as fresh as ever. It's a reminder of why we return to these classics: they reward patience and spark wonder without fanfare.

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Afterwards: The Rez

by
Cade Robinet

I wait for her as the receding warmth of summer's evening lulls me in the watchtower, staring at the same field, the same menacing highway in the darkness as I've done on countless nights of guard duty; maintaining perpetual vigilance that the people may see one more dawn. It's in the pale light of changing day that I yearn for her most; the girl who gathered wild raspberries in shrubby woodlands by the road, held my hand as we walked together, and called me Papa.

We shouldn't have waited for the end of the world to post our guards and build our walls. Who knows how many could have been saved? We knew the cancerous asphalt scar reaching towards us from the horizon delivered evil to our reservation, bringing death on its slithering back in ever-evolving forms of opioids; and stealing our children in the vanishing red glow of tail lights. But the people were vanquished, numb to our sorrows, and helpless before the world.

Dew condenses on the pine boards enclosing the tower, trickling down in rivulets where others have gone before. My elbow rests in the firm, sand-bagged wall as a breeze whispers over leafy poplar trees, stirring deep shadows in and out of being amongst the pale trunks. Heavy eyelids fight against the cricket lullaby rising from overgrown lawns and ditches; resisting sleep and the inevitable nightmares.

The ground trembles with a double knock from below, startling me from the twilight of consciousness. A square hatch swings up from the entry port, lantern light glints in the seam— a monster's golden iris narrowed in the instant before striking. My mind knows it's my partner Bobby coming up to rejoin me on watch, but my heart jackhammers in a flood of catalytic chemicals. My breathing shallows as I clutch the polymer-stocked rifle, ready to bear down and blast the intruder.

A steel thermos thunks on boards as Bobby ascends the ladder, propping the butt of his shotgun on the plywood floor to help haul his weight, considerable even two years after the collapse, onto the creaking platform. The door falls shut behind him, and the gleaming eye returns to its lurking fade. My hands unclench, and my heart beats on as Bobby's bulldog wheeze drowns out the crickets.

He groans and shifts himself atop a barstool, letting his gun slide against the glistening wall to settle in the corner, "There's corn soup."

"Any bannock?"

“Yup. Smoked fish too.”

“Hmm.”

I grunt acknowledgment, the hmm of a people accustomed to stoic suffering and emotions as fierce as the current under the deceptive icy stillness of our homeland’s winter rivers. There’s no bannock left—hmm. Your dog died—hmm. Your daughter’s missing—hmm. The dead have returned to plague the living; well, that earned a whistle and a dragged-out holy.

The regular labour of Bobby’s breathing masks the silence in the tower until rays of bloody gold bathe the decaying highway, capping off another night of waiting. My partner waddles off to fib a second breakfast from the cooks, leaving me to wait, fingers tingling on my rifle, for our replacements.

My head aches as I descend the ladder to the shipping container below the battlements and extinguish the venomous hissing of the naphtha lantern. The rations are simple fare compared to our before-times diet, but healthier and processed only by the hands of the people. Birds flutter about the ground outside the steel door, and we break our fast together. With the band adapting to living united again under a single roof, meals have been a return to social tradition where families come together to share in the day’s joys and troubles. For me, they are more troubles than joy.

There is little traffic on the enclosed streets of the reservation. A pair of guards straggle home from duty, and a young girl in a bright winter coat skips along towards the gardens clutching a thermos destined for some relation there. My spirit warms at her passage, but in so thawing, bleeds fresh. Teeth pinch my tongue, and I tear my gaze from her. The ramshackle walls lining the new centre of our community are solid, obscuring the view of ancestral forests and the lands we once freely inhabited... I prefer it this way, safe from the stranger.

The old houses lay along the road in lines of ruin, as if victims before the firing squad where scavengers for the community centre have left worthless plaster skins and connective tissues of dirty orange insulation to show they had once lived. To be fair, this was how the Rez had always looked. Apocalypse had visited the people long before it ravaged the towns of our white neighbours, keeping the dead now from their sacred rest.

We had been quick to recognize the need to come together and secure our partitioned home in the days following the collapse, before the highway strobed with vehicles fleeing to nowhere, and before those passengers died in the first cold snap; only to resurrect as the terrible deer people from ancient myth—eldritch wendigos swarming the swampy woods and grasslands around the Rez.

My pulse only begins to slow as I grab a pair of axes from their place on the wall before stepping out into the misty air. I should be slipping onto my cot, reading a book maybe or wasting time on a puzzle like a good elder; but to rest is to reflect, and to reflect is to risk drowning in the chill pool of memory.

Walking corpses shuffle nearby, close enough for even my aged ears to hear. They track my movements; a benign malevolence felt as much as heard. Sheet-metal and road signs creak in their anchorage on the chain-link fence either side of the gate, not covering enough space to fully obscure the construction. Rotting eyes glowing with obsession rotate through the gaps, taking it in their turn to behold me; calling for me to join them with their raspy groans.

The tower overlooks part of the muskeg from which there seems no end to the dead who

emerge from its slimy embrace, impassable to all but the restless wretches; and a stretch of the dreaded highway. The deer people wander in down the old asphalt scar on occasion, that's only natural. But why the muskeg? Why a handful every day? The other elders argue into late nights but can never agree. I know the reason. That's why I volunteered for tower duty.

The gate guards arrive late, but they know I don't mind; a pair of young men to stand sentry while the people greet the day. Let them enjoy these rare moments of peace. I have none left.

They know by now not to argue about my inclusion in the morning chores, and the oldest of the two takes the spare axe from my hand. "Ready Uncle?"

"Hmm."

I hand my rifle to the other boy, who disappears into the shipping container, and tighten my grip on the tool; worn from years of hard use, and too many strokes of the sharpening stone.

The morning's labour crowds the gateway, reaching out with atrophied arms, slavering and groaning in desperate hunger, sloughing off shreds of tattered flesh against the sagging chain-link. Five newcomers; four of them whites. The last is one of us, a young woman finally come home.

"Okay nephew," I call to the boy who is not my nephew. He skips along the fence, rattling and thumping the butt of the axe against sheet metal to lure the famished dead away from the gate. Most follow, but the nearest remains, fixing me with his savage gaze.

The locking bar creaks under my hand and I drive my boot heel against the metal, swinging the gate into the dead man and knocking him to the weedy turf. Steel clangs shut behind as the wendigo focuses its poor coordination on rising to his battered, shoeless feet. The axe sinks into the back of his skull, and he sprawls on the ground like a discarded marionette.

The others see and stagger away from the fence, closing the distance with deceptively slow movements. More than once I've seen them overwhelm others who thought they had more time: but they're no threat to me out here in the open. The young man in the tower shouts for me to wait, but there is no need to worry; not with only four.

I pace to the side, manoeuvring until the corpses knock into each other in their scramble to claim me, and the girl tumbles underfoot. The other three fall victim to the swing-connect-retreat combination perfected over countless morning cleanups. The weight of the axe needs little motivation to cleave through bone, and stepping back while twisting the handle frees the tool—giving me more time to address the next threat.

She's the last to approach. Not her, but what she might have been had she been given time to grow up. It's not her. Even through the gore-smeared flesh of her face, the bone structure isn't the same. She would've looked different, thinner cheeks and shorter probably, but I can't raise the axe.

She stumbles forward, grasping at the fabric of my shirt. I would know, even after all these decades. I would know my daughter even now in the rags of her own leathered skin, slick with mud and stinking of rot. I know this ghoul isn't her, but I can't raise the axe.

Is that fear in her gaze as she reaches? What of her own father? Is he out there somewhere, awaiting her return?

Her rabid eyes bulge and separate like a chameleon's as my not-nephew buries his blade down to the poll in her skull. She topples to the ground, and the black contents of her cranium cling to the axe as it parts flesh with a squelch.

"Holy Uncle. Just could've had you."

Humid air stifles my breathing, the tattoo of my blood pulses in my ears like the beating of a hundred pow-wow drums. I lean on my knees to find my wind as pain twinges in my back, "Miigwech, my boy."

"Hmm." There is no 'you're welcome' in our language, only the humility of acknowledgment.

The younger man with the rifle scratches his nose and calls down to me from the platform as I try to hide my shaking hands by wiping down the tool. "Go back and get some sleep, Uncle. Almost died, frig."

"Weenuk. I would've had her, never mind." But I wouldn't have. My arms thrill from the effort of my chores, and fog obscures my mind. Sweat drips freely down to the gravel from my saturated scalp, and my heart hammers with irregular persistence.

He's right about the sleep, and not the first to mention it. Survival was supposed to get easier over time with the habitual confirmation of life in the new world of black and white; alive and dead. Instead, the weight builds every day, hidden wounds tear deeper and colours fade another hue.

The youths chatter behind me as I make to return to the community centre, reliving the near-miss and weaving a legend to impress the girls around the campfire later. Why not? Let them forge ahead and bring new children into this world. My shaking legs barely allow the dignity of feigned nonchalance after the encounter; they lack the strength to carry the band much longer.

Our lives are more lethal now, yet safer than they've ever been. The next generation will not fear the highway as we did in my day, the abyss into which brothers and cousins but most of all daughters and sisters were lost. The scar was no longer the domain of the stranger, the hunting ground of living monsters with human faces masking demon souls; the before-times, and all their troubles. The next generation will master the crumbling road, tranquil now with the benign threat of the dead, and in time hunt the ancestral lands of our people. Theirs is the future.

As for us relics of the old world? My breathing hasn't evened, and my arms still tingle by the time I collapse onto my cot; and most my age are unhealthier. We'd been poisoned our whole lives before: the drugs, the plastic, the processed food. Gone too late for us, time enough for them.

My head still aches in the early evening when I abandon another attempt at sleep; my bedding soaked through to the cot with sweat shed in frantic half-moments of disturbed rest.

I join the guards at the watchtower. A different pair than this morning, but both used to me and my sleepless ways; and both recently married before the people. They accept my offer to relieve them before my watch has officially started with an air of anticipation: "Miigwech Uncle."

"Hmm."

One grins and passes me a cloth parcel before whooping high and loud, in the way of the people, and sprints to beat his fellow home in an impromptu foot race. My spirit soars after them, and I luxuriate in the warm embrace of memories from happier times.

I settle in for another evening of waiting. Within the cloth is a sheaf of bannock sliced into strips, and nestled below the fry bread lies a jar glowing sanguine in the dying light of day. Sweat drips from my brow as the lid pops with the urging of clumsy fingers. A galaxy of raspberry seeds hang in sweet suspension within the jam's carmine sky, and the bannock gathers their gleaming beauty across its spongy surface.

It tastes of carefree weekends and walks to the playground when we stopped at the wild canes along the way, eating to satisfaction and bringing enough home to share. It tastes of stolen moments with my wife before the highway took the will from her, and carefree days with my mother long before that.

Replacing the lid when it's only half empty is a heroic effort, and not just due to my fumbling hands. Better to save some for Bobby, God help him. The thready insistence of my pulse reverberates through me as I gather a blanket around my shoulders in the humid haze of twilight, shivering and sweating despite my jacket.

The crickets tune their instruments in preparation for their nightly symphony as I lay the food parcel across the opposing barstool and look to the road. My polluted blood runs cold when I see her.

The same orange jacket and fur hat from my memory loop, as if she had only disappeared this morning. She stands with the knock-kneed stance she always had, waiting for me on the highway; the genuine lost article of love.

She will be gone by the time I'm down the ladder—the thought spikes panic through my failing system, and my heart trembles. My arms ache with the need to hold her, burning in their emptiness. My head pounds with the force of a thunderstorm. She will be gone by the time I'm out of the container. There must be no hope in my soul; I cannot survive it.

But no, she's waiting still; patient as my senseless hands fumble with the gate. My legs fail at the asphalt threshold, and she runs into my arms. Her frail body returns to mine, her heartbeat lost among the frenzy of my own—completing me profoundly. "My girl, my girl," my throat keens a dirge, but I don't hear it. There is only her.

"Come Papa," she helps me to my feet and I melt into her eyes. The highway glows golden as we walk into the sunset, and the darkness of the road fades behind. "The wait is over."

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About the Author: Cade Robinet is an agronomist and volunteer fire-fighter living in Manitoba. He is a former artillery gunner with the Canadian Armed Forces, and is especially interested in historical fiction. Cade enjoys spending time outside, and gardening when he is not involved with stage acting or writing. His work can be read for free at https://open.substack.com/pub/caderobinet

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The Double Standards

of Cultural Gatekeeping

I've been reflecting on an interview my friends from @Nerdcognito had with Daniel D. Fox over a year ago, and his words keep echoing back to me, sparking thoughts on how we draw from global histories and legends in our creative works.

The interview in question took place on the Nerdcognito Podcast back in early 2024, where Daniel D. Fox, the mind behind Zweihänder RPG, opened up about why he shelved his plans for an Oriental-inspired setting. It boiled down to two words that have become a lightning rod in creative circles: "cultural appropriation." He shared how the fear of backlash from accusations of misusing or exploiting elements from Asian cultures led him to drop the project entirely, highlighting a broader chill on creativity that's worth unpacking.

First, let's clarify what cultural appropriation actually means. At its core, it's the adoption or use of elements from one culture by members of another, often in a way that's seen as disrespectful, superficial, or exploitative, especially when power imbalances are involved, like a dominant culture borrowing from a marginalized one without credit or context. Think of it as taking sacred symbols, traditional clothing, or artistic styles out of their meaningful origins and turning them into trendy accessories or stereotypes for profit or entertainment. In theory, it's a concept meant to protect cultural integrity and prevent harm. But in practice, especially in recent years, it has morphed into something far more toxic and misunderstood, wielded like a blunt instrument to shut down genuine appreciation and cross-cultural inspiration.

This is where the harm comes in, and it's multifaceted. Embracing different human cultures and weaving them into our creations isn't bigotry, racism, or inherently harmful; it's a celebration of our shared humanity, a way to learn, honor, and innovate. Yet, the term "cultural appropriation" has been overused and weaponized by a vocal crowd that often seems more driven by jealousy, virtue-signaling, or a desire to police others' ideas than by actual concern for the cultures in question. What's particularly insidious is how it's applied in a blatantly racist manner: predominantly targeting white creators who draw from non-European

cultures, while European traditions are fair game for anyone to twist, reinterpret, or commercialize without a peep. This double standard not only stifles artistic freedom but also reinforces divisions, suggesting that cultures should be siloed off rather than shared in a spirit of mutual respect.

Consider the video game Kingdom Come: Deliverance, released in 2018 by the Czech studio Warhorse. This RPG meticulously recreated medieval Bohemia, drawing from historical records of 15th-century Central Europe, with its architecture, clothing, and social structures rooted in the region's real past. The developers aimed for authenticity, portraying a world where the population reflected the demographics of rural Bohemia at the time: overwhelmingly white Europeans in a homogeneous society. Upon release, however, the "usual" crowd erupted in accusations of racism and homophobia. Why? Because there were no people of color or openly gay characters, ignoring the historical context where such diversity simply wasn't prevalent in that isolated corner of Europe. Critics demanded modern inclusivity shoehorned into a period piece, effectively forcing contemporary views onto a cultural and historical setting. This is cultural appropriation in its most hypocritical form: demanding alterations to someone else's heritage to fit an outsider's agenda, all while claiming to defend sensitivity.

But the inconsistencies don't stop there. Western fantasy, heavily inspired by medieval Europe and its legends, is routinely misrepresented in ways that would spark outrage if applied elsewhere. We see equal rights for women in settings where historical patriarchy was the norm, flattened social hierarchies that erase class struggles, and Norse, Roman, or Greek gods retooled into benevolent figures or plot devices that bear little resemblance to their mythological origins. Think of how Thor in Marvel comics or games is a quippy superhero rather than the complex deity of ancient lore, or how Arthurian tales get romanticized into egalitarian utopias. Yet, no one cries "cultural appropriation." As a European myself, I can say we love it; it's flattering to see our folklore alive and evolving in global pop culture. It sparks interest in our history and keeps traditions vibrant.

Take my mutual on X, @KasimirUrbanski, better known as RPGPundit, the consultant credited on page 2 of your 5th Edition Player's Handbook. He created Baptism of Fire, a TTRPG set in medieval Poland, drawing deeply from Polish history, folklore, and customs. Far from backlash, it's been embraced by Polish fans who appreciate the authentic nod to their heritage, even as it adapts elements for gameplay. Another gem is BioWare's Jade Empire from 2005, an RPG steeped in ancient Chinese mythology, martial arts, and philosophy. It's beloved by fans worldwide, with no widespread screams of "cultural appropriation." Why? Because it's fantasy: a fictional world inspired by real cultures, not a historical documentary. The same goes for games like Ghost of Tsushima (2020), developed by an American studio but set in feudal Japan. Japanese audiences praised its respectful portrayal of samurai culture, landscapes, and traditions, even as some Western critics nitpicked. The developers consulted experts and immersed themselves in research, turning inspiration into homage.

Normal people understand the line between fiction and reality. When Assassin's Creed III (2012) portrayed George Washington as a villain in its DLC, twisting American history for narrative flair, there was no mass outrage, because it's fiction, a creative liberty in an alternate timeline. Similarly, the Witcher series by Polish author Andrzej Sapkowski (and its games) reimagines Slavic folklore with monsters, magic, and moral ambiguity, exporting Polish cultural elements globally without accusations flying. If we applied the same rigid standards that "activists" use to scrutinize white creators exploring non-Western themes, nearly every cross-cultural work would be condemned. Disney's Moana (2016), inspired by Polynesian cultures, consulted Pacific Islanders and was celebrated for its representation; yet if a non-Polynesian team had led it without that input, the backlash might have been fierce. Or consider Black Panther (2018), a Marvel film drawing from African traditions, directed by Ryan Coogler (who is Black) but produced by a diverse team; it's hailed as empowering, not appropriative.

This selective outrage extends to literature and beyond. James Clavell's Shogun (1975), a white author's epic on feudal Japan, became a classic and miniseries, fostering interest in Japanese history without cries of theft. Contrast that with the 2020 controversy around American Dirt, where white author Jeanine Cummins faced accusations of cultural appropriation for writing about Mexican migrants, despite research and intent to highlight real issues. The backlash came largely from non-Mexican voices, illustrating the pattern. In music, fusions like Paul Simon's Graceland (1986), incorporating South African rhythms, faced initial criticism but ultimately bridged cultures and boosted local artists.

There's a telling social experiment captured in videos by PragerU around 2018-2019, where a white interviewer dressed in traditional outfits, like a Mexican sombrero and serape or Chinese qipao, approached college students and then members of those communities. On campuses, young people (often not from the cultures) were quick to label it offensive, racist, or appropriative, decrying the "insensitivity." But in Mexican neighborhoods or Chinatowns, reactions were overwhelmingly positive: people complimented the attention to detail, shared stories about their heritage, and expressed joy that someone was engaging with their traditions. No offense taken; instead, it sparked connection and pride.

So, who exactly is offended by what should be cultural appreciation? More often than not, it's random outsiders with zero personal stake in the culture: armchair activists seeking clout or enforcing ideological purity. Meanwhile, people from those cultures frequently celebrate the spotlight, as it spreads awareness, preserves fading traditions, and invites dialogue. Japanese fans loved Ghost of Tsushima's haiku and landscapes; Polynesians appreciated Moana's myths brought to life. This toxicity harms everyone: it discourages creators from exploring beyond their bubble, limits diverse storytelling, and ironically promotes a form of cultural segregation where only "insiders" can touch certain themes. It chills innovation in TTRPGs, novels, and games, where drawing from global wellsprings could enrich our worlds immeasurably.

We can and should create worlds, novels, and games inspired by China, Japan, Europe, Africa, Arabia, South America, or anywhere else, without a shred of guilt. We're crafting fiction, not historical treatises; as long as we approach with respect, research, and heart, it's appreciation, not theft. Don't let the noise deter you from penning that Oriental Adventures supplement, weaving a tale in ancient China, or building an RPG in pre-colonial Africa. The people who matter, the ones whose cultures you're honoring, will appreciate it, sharing in the joy of seeing their stories alive. The ones who don't? They're the background static, not worth dimming your creative fire over. Let's foster exchange, not barriers; after all, that's how humanity's greatest tales have always been told.

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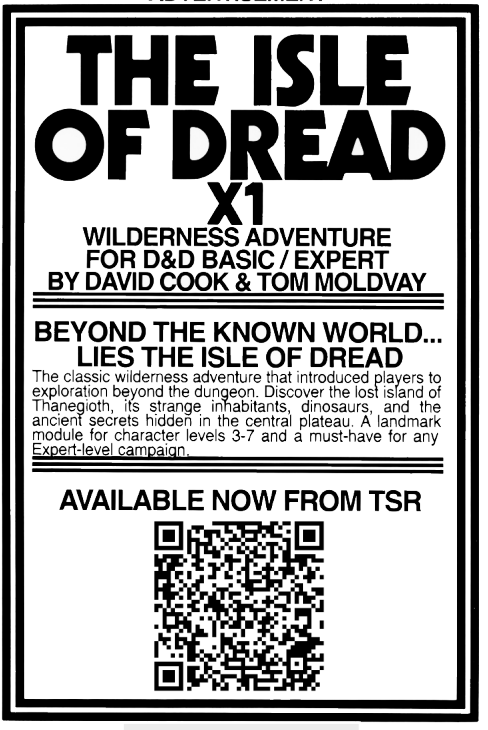

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Fall of Elves...

Gatekeeper RPG

So... it finally happened. Yesterday I made the terrible decision to let my Discord community influence the world-building for Gatekeeper, and it descended into glorious, bloody chaos. I absolutely love it.

I was working on the "default setting" for Gatekeeper and realized something: it was soft. Yes, we have slavery, chaos, and corruption, but it was all mild. I wanted some real punch in the lore. So I thought: what if we crank the xenophobia up to eleven? What if humans became rabidly racist toward certain races? What if I took one of the classic fantasy races and wiped it out entirely in a brutal religious crusade?

I made a list of the six classic non-human fantasy races, put them in front of the Discord server, and asked for a volunteer to "do something really terrible." They rolled. They killed all the Elves, my favorite race!

Before we dive into the lore of the "New Dead Elves," let me tell you who the Elves were before that cursed roll.

The Old Elves: The Alven'ari

The proper name of the Elves was Alven'ari, a proud, ancient nation that ruled the continent long before humans ever set foot on its shores. The Alven'ari watched humanity's rise with curiosity, taught them magic, and guided their first steps. Hungry for power, humans learned quickly. Using the forbidden Chaos Magic the Elves had warned them about, they built the soaring Mejay Empire in the south, its cities literally floating in the sky.

King Aelrindel Moonwish watched in horror as humanity raised those blasphemous cities. He wept the day his own daughter, Tal'alera Moonwish, died when the flying cities finally came crashing down in flames.

That tragedy broke something inside the Elven king. Filled with grief and hatred, he declared total war: death to all humans.

The war lasted centuries. At first, the Elves annihilated the remnants of the Mejay Empire with terrifying ease. But humans bred faster than Elven blades could reap them. No matter how many the Alven'ari killed, more kept coming. Aelrindel's hatred clouded his judgment and corrupted his heart. His wife, Queen Shaela Moonwish, begged for peace, but the king would not listen. Desperate for victory, he reached into the deepest wells of Chaos Magic to gain the power he needed to exterminate mankind.

It destroyed everything.

A cataclysmic explosion of pure Chaos erupted from his palace, annihilating the noble houses and shattering the Elven

kingdom in an instant. Aelrindel did not become a god as he had hoped. He became something far worse: the first Vampire, an undying monster sustained by blood and hatred. The once-glorious Alven'ari realm collapsed into ruin, its lands twisted into a nightmarish wasteland of undead and Chaos-spawn.

Queen Shaela gathered the survivors and, in an act of ultimate penance, begged humanity for mercy. To everyone's surprise, humans sent aid (not armies, but healers and supplies) to save what little remained of the Elven people.

In shame, Shaela declared that the proud name "Alven'ari" would be forsaken forever. From that day forward, they would bear the slur humans had always used: Elves. She founded the last Elven city, Silverspires, a shining bastion hidden in the mountains, and ruled it as the final queen of a dying race.

That was the state of the Elves until the dice were rolled on Discord, lets expand lore of Elves in Gatekeeper RPG.

The Fall: The Elven Genocide

For a time, an uneasy peace settled between humans and Elves. Without constant war, human kingdoms flourished, and the Church of Light rose to become the dominant power on the continent.

But the old Elven homeland never healed. Chaos monsters still poured from the corrupted wastes, and only the Elves of Silverspires dared venture in to contain the horrors.

Humans grew resentful. Slowly, then loudly, they blamed the Elves for every famine, every plague, every Chaos incursion. Elves living in human lands were persecuted as bringers of doom. Female Elves were burned at the stake as witches on the flimsiest accusations. Entire Elven families were dragged from their homes and hanged in the streets simply for existing.

Kingdom after kingdom pointed to the Elves as the source of all suffering. The Church of Light, hungry for power and unity, finally bent the knee to popular hatred. They declared the Elves "Children of Chaos," abominations that must be purged to save the world.

A grand Crusade was called.

It was swift and merciless.

Caught between the endless Chaos spilling from their ancestral lands and the fanatical human armies at their gates, the exhausted Elves of Silverspires could not hold. Within a single century, the last Elven city burned. The severed head of Queen Shaela Moonwish was mounted above the ruins as an eternal warning.

Are there any Elves left alive today? No one knows for certain. None have been seen in decades. Any who do appear are killed on sight. In the early years, a few brave or foolish souls tried to shelter fleeing Elves, but the Church's Inquisition rooted them out, branding helpers as heretics and burning entire villages that dared show mercy.

Somewhere beneath the ruins of the ancient Alven'ari capital, the Vampire Lord Aelrindel Moonwish still "lives," eternally imprisoned by his own hubris. Perhaps a handful of Elves survive deep within the Chaos-wasted homeland, twisted into something darker. Rumors even whisper of "Dark Elves" who embraced the corruption to endure.

I loved this twist so much that I've decided this is how we'll keep building the default Gatekeeper setting: I'll keep handing the Discord chaos goblins context-free choices and dice rolls, and whatever horrific or hilarious thing they do becomes canon.

Welcome to the world of Gatekeeper, where the Elves are extinct, humanity is triumphant and monstrous, and the dice are always loaded.

Thank you, Tali Eckhart , you absolute monster. I owe you one.

Rebuilding Magic

Gatekeeper RPG

I don't know if "Project: Gatekeeper" will ever be successful, but when I first started working on it under the name "Project: Elements," I wanted to take the TTRPG formula and bring my own changes to systems and solutions that always annoyed me. One such system was always Magic. Magic in Dungeons & Dragons is weird: it can do anything, yet it is extremely restrictive, and what is most important, it lacks diversity. Yes, we have schools of Magic, but an Illusionist can still cast Fireball. We have Sorcerer and Mage classes, yet they have access to the same spells. On top of that, classes like Bard or Warlock also share spells with Sorcerer and Mage in a limited way.

In "Project: Gatekeeper," I wish to take magic and flush it down the gutter, and I want to build it from the base up on my own with words like Diversity and Player Agency. I want to make sure that Warlock, Sorcerer, and Mage will not only feel different but also play different.

So let's recap what I already shared on social media: there will be classes like Mage, Sorceress, and Warlock. On top of that, I mentioned Witch and Druid as the other classes. Sorceress and Witch will be Female-Locked Classes, while Warlock will be Male only, with Mage and Druid being available to both genders.

Magic can be divided into 3 different categories from 3 different origins.

Divine Magic is magic granted by Deities; it is the magic of Light and Order, as all Divine Archons have been born from Order. This magic requires prayers and chanting; no magic components are required. However, Divine Archons can refuse to allow a spell to be cast. It's their whim, especially if it's used against their wishes.

The second source of Magic is called Creation Magic; it is leftover Magic from the time of Creation, when the Divine Mother descended on the mortal realms and separated Chaos from Order. She left the two forces in balance as she ascended to her realm once again. The "faith dust" that she left is called Creation Magic; for ease, many scholars have a second name for it, and it is Elemental Magic. It is present everywhere and surrounds us with its power: Fire, Water, Earth, Wind, and Lightning. Mages, Witches, and Druids use Creation Magic for their spells, with the major difference being that Mages Create Elements while Druids Control Elements. A Mage is unable to move vines, while a Druid can control them. A Mage is able to create a flood, while a Druid can ask rivers

to split. All living creatures are born with an affinity for Creation Magic; most people can control only one type, but from time to time, powerful individuals are born that can control more than one element, and in some cases, create new ones by combining two. An Ice Witch is an example of a Mage that mastered the power of Water and Wind and is able to combine the two elements into one and create Ice.

The last source of Magic is Chaos. Chaos Magic is also known as Arcane Magic; it's used in Illusion Magic, Necromancy, and even Summoning. Sorceresses are female individuals that traded their uterus to a Devil in exchange for guidance on how to access the Sea of Chaos, a realm that is fully controlled by Chaotic beings. The trade is permanent, and Sorceresses will never be able to have children. The Devil turns her uterus into a Succubus, a Half-Devil who can birth Demons, but to do so, she needs the seed of a Mortal Man. They descend to Mortal Realms and look for suitable partners. From time to time, a Succubus forms contracts with individuals; those are known as Warlocks. They cannot cast spells directly, but they travel with Succubi who cast spells in their names. Warlocks often use weapons to fight while protecting the Succubi casting the spell he requested. In exchange, they copulate with those Half-Demons until his life force is drained.

So here it is: three different types of magic, with multiple concepts for classes, with the hope of distinguishing Mage from Druid and Sorceress from Warlock enough to justify them being different classes. Because I do not wish to have two mirror classes that are different by a skill or two, I want each to feel unique and appealing to play. So here is the first word I wish to achieve: "Diversity of Magic."

The second word, "Player Agency," is a very difficult concept, because I wish to hand players a tool to create their own spells. For this, let's focus on Creation Magic for Mages. When we play D&D, we can cast a spell like every mage's favorite, Fireball, but then we have no counterpart of such a spell in other elements. Why do we have no Thunderball? Why don't we have Earthball or Windball? This is something that puts players in a specific box, and I want players to have their own "Tasha's Hideous Laughter" or "Bigby's Hand." For that, I will be giving players components, Lego blocks that players can put together and create their own spells, not only by picking an Element but also Distance and Damage Die. I do not wish to share too much, but for now, it works like this: Each "component" has a specific quality, Damage, Element, Distance, Behavior. By combining more elements, we make the spell stronger. Imagine a Magic Circle: each middle (element) is surrounded by rings of runes. A level 1 spell has only 1 ring; a level 2 spell will have 2 rings, and so on.

So let's build a lvl 1 spell. A Level 1 spell will have Base + 2 Component Slots. That means we can put our Element, like Fire, in the Base. While casting it, you create fire, similar to lighting up a match. If we use Fire as the Base and then add Direction to a component slot, we will create a spell similar to Burning Hands: the flame will launch in the direction we chose, dealing 1 damage. Now, in the last component slot, we can put many things, like "Delay," which means the spell will delay until it travels the distance associated with the Direction slot (aka the range of the spell). When reaching that distance, we can then detonate it and deal 1 damage to that area. Or we can use Damage, and our "Burning Hands" will deal 2 points of damage.

With level 2, you are getting another ring of runes that will increase the spell by another 2 component slots; we can increase Distance, Power, or Behaviors of the spell.

It might sound chaotic, but players will have multiple components to mix and match and create their own spells. And the fun will start when players master more than just one element: Fire + Earth can create Steam; Fire + Wind will create fire tornados; Lightning and Water will create AoE spells that will damage anyone who stays in water. And yes, another component of magic I wish to tackle is Elemental Reactions, which will have a huge impact on combat. Players will be able to use natural elements to their advantage: Water can Freeze or transmit Lightning; fire can be put down with water and create steam to obscure vision; and many more.

Hubris of Dwarves

Gatekeeper RPG

The story I had originally written for dwarves is a very common one. It appears in "The Lord of the Rings", "Dragon Age", and probably many other worlds: a tale of greed and ignoring the warnings of others.

Dwarves were not the first to appear in this world. As legends say, dwarves were born from rock itself, and when they die, they turn back into statues made of stone or minerals, depending on the glory of their lives. They are naturally drawn to other things born from the earth: gold, gems, and rare minerals. They are obsessed with digging them up and hoarding them in their kingdoms. Their greatest kingdom was Kor Mynd'Aur, where the kings of dwarves sat upon a throne made of solid gold.

They dug deep beneath their city, with mining tunnels spreading tens of miles down to depths where no living creature could withstand the heat. The Alven'ari (ancient elves who had lived on these lands long before dwarves and humans settled here) warned the dwarven king not to dig too deep. They spoke of a danger lurking far underground. But he didn't listen. He trusted neither elves nor the humans who had built their cities in the skies. He constructed impenetrable defenses in the mountains: defenses so powerful that no outsider could conquer his city.

But the threat did not come from outside. It came from within.

The dwarves continued to dig until they reached a temple like no other: a cavern so vast that you could not see the other side. Inside grew a forest of dark, twisted trees, and at its center stood a temple made of black stone that bled a black ooze. When the dwarves entered, they saw a black sphere inside... and it looked into their souls.

A gate to the Sea of Chaos itself had opened deep beneath the ground. The gate began oozing, and from that ooze formed a creature: eight feet tall, all muscle and fat, with a head resembling a boar or pig (tusks protruding from its mouth and eyes glowing bright yellow and orange). The dwarves fled in terror. When they returned, the temple was filled with these beasts (hungry and vicious). They marched upward, seizing the dwarven mines and weapons. The dwarves' own hubris in creating mining shafts over 20 feet tall (to prove their superiority to other races) now allowed these monsters of chaos to move freely. The dwarves gave these creatures a single name: orcs.

The dwarves were losing. Unprepared for enemies emerging from within their own mines, they fought and died. The king ordered his sons to take the children, women, and men to safety, seeking asylum among the elves and humans. He asked those brave enough to stay and protect the inner city with him.

No one knows what happened to the king and his men...

Each of the king's sons formed their own clan but never claimed the title of king. Together, they created a prophecy (or an oath): "Whoever reclaims the dwarven city and sits on the Golden Throne will become the new King of Dwarves."

Continuing the Story

That was my original dwarf lore. But after experimenting with the elves, I thought: why not mess with the dwarves as well? My Discord server has a lot of dwarf lovers, so I asked for their opinions on what could be changed. Many interesting ideas were thrown around, but nothing quite hit the mark until someone mentioned that the king's sons would live in shame. That alone struck the perfect note.

So let's continue the story of dwarves in Gatekeeper RPG.

The king's sons lived in shame. Though they had been ordered to lead their people to safety, they felt like cowards for abandoning their homeland. They constantly repeated the words: "We live in shame. We are cowards... but we are alive." Thousands of years passed. Human cities fell from the skies. Yet what the "king's sons" repeated remained etched in dwarven souls: "We are cowards, but we are alive."

Entire generations of dwarves and their culture were shaped by it. They abandoned glory and focused solely on craft. They became exceptional miners and crafters but never reached for weapons. After the fall of the Alven'ari, humans (growing once more in power) took advantage of this, often employing the "coward" dwarves to do their work. Even if some resented it, obedience seemed the safest path, so they endured the humiliation.

Some had enough. They took up weapons and formed armies, hoping to find Kor Mynd'Aur once more, kill the invaders, and claim the Golden Throne for themselves. No one ever heard from them again.

"If you fight, you will die." That is the belief among dwarves today. Their souls reflect it: no longer do they turn to gold or gems after death (not even stone). Only simple dust.

And that is the lore of dwarves in the default setting for Gatekeeper.

But why? Why push this to the extreme? Why turn a proud race into cowards?

Each setting in Gatekeeper is a blank canvas for players and Game Masters (a canvas they can paint with their own stories). Every piece of history, every event, is not certain; it is not set in stone. It is merely a recollection of past events.

Yes, dwarves right now are cowards. That is your blank canvas. It is up to the players to change it (to try to bring glory back to this fallen and broken nation, to sit upon the Golden Throne). And if you look closely at the "prophecy" ("Whoever reclaims the dwarven city and sits on the Golden Throne will become the new King of Dwarves"), you'll spot a tiny detail that was intentional: the prophecy does not say the new King of Dwarves must be a dwarf.

Races of Eternal Empire

Oriental Races for Castles & Crusades

When I started designing the world for my Castles & Crusades Play-by-Post game on Discord, I went through many different ideas for character options. What really caught my imagination was building a detailed Oriental-inspired setting, something with the weight, aesthetics, and cultural depth of Ancient China and its surrounding mythic traditions, filtered through a grimdark fantasy lens.

While developing the setting I also wrote an entire light novel titled "The Moon Consort of the Inner Palace", which takes place in this very world. The first chapters appear in this issue of the magazine.

Instead of treating “human” as a single, neutral choice, I decided to create several distinct human cultures and bloodlines. In proper old-school fashion, every race comes with both clear bonuses *and* meaningful penalties to attributes. Nothing is pure power creep. Each option pushes players toward certain strengths while giving them real weaknesses to roleplay around.

All of these races are presented through the eyes of the Di Fánrén, the refined, bureaucratic heart of the Eternal Empire. To them, most outsiders look strange, uncouth, or even dangerous. The Xue Pi, for example, are often called “barbarians” by Imperial citizens. Not because they lack honor or culture, but because their direct, heavily armored, chivalric ways are so alien to the polished etiquette and scholarly traditions of the Empire’s core.

In the pages that follow I present six races and their variants, fully written up for Castles & Crusades and the Siege Engine:

- Wuxue (with Yang and Yin paths)
- Xuánhuo
- Xue Pi
- Tianlóng
- Lingshou (five spirit clans)
- Di Fánrén

These are meant to be used and adapted by anyone. Drop them into your own C&C game, steal the ideas, change what you like, or use them as inspiration for your own cultures. They were built to feel different from one another while still fitting the same world and the same ruleset.

I hope they give your players as many interesting choices, and as much flavorful tension, as they’ve given mine.

Dì Fánrén



The Dì Fánrén form the proud and cultured heart of the Eternal Empire. They trace their bloodlines back to the ancient Celestial Sovereigns and view themselves as the living embodiment of the Mandate of Heaven, refined yet resilient, scholarly yet martial. Clad in flowing silk robes of crimson and gold, they move with graceful precision through mist-shrouded mountain pavilions and opulent jade palaces. Deeply rooted in imperial tradition, ancestral rites, and the harmonious philosophy of the Five Phases, the Dì Fánrén excel as imperial bureaucrats, master strategists, eloquent poets, disciplined swordmasters, and courtly diplomats. Their refined lifestyle grants them unmatched intellect and poise, though it sometimes leaves them slightly less hardy than those who dwell on the wild frontiers.

Racial Traits and Abilities

Scholarly Excellence: +2 bonus on Intelligence checks involving history, philosophy, literature, calligraphy, law, strategy, or imperial bureaucracy.

Courtly Poise: +2 bonus on Charisma checks in formal, diplomatic, courtly, or high-society situations (etiquette, negotiation, intrigue).

Disciplined Will: +2 bonus on saving throws versus fear, charm, domination, or mind-affecting magic (unshakable loyalty and mental harmony).

Martial Refinement: +1 to hit when wielding traditional imperial weapons (jian straight sword, spear, staff, or composite bow).

Elemental Harmony: +1 to all saving throws versus elemental magic or effects (fire, water, wood, metal, earth — the Five Phases).

DÌ FÁNRÉN TRAITS

Primary Attributes: Because of the unique nature of the Dì Fánrén, they choose an additional primary attribute, for a total of three.

Language: Imperial Common, Dì Fánrén (high dialect), plus one bonus language of your choice

Size: Medium

Movement: 30 Feet

Attribute Modifiers: +1 Intelligence, +1 Charisma, –1 Strength, –1 Constitution

Xue Pí

The Xue Pí are fair-skinned exiles and adventurers from the distant western lands who sailed across the misty seas to the Eternal Empire seeking new purpose, fortune, or sanctuary. Called "Snow-Skinned" for their fair complexions and often frost-touched northern heritage, they brought heavy plate armor, chivalric oaths, and an unyielding martial spirit with them. Clad in gleaming steel and tabards marked with crimson crosses or imperial dragons, they serve as mercenaries, frontier commanders, and wandering blades for hire. Their direct manner and rugged ways often lack the refined etiquette expected of Imperial citizens, making them appear slightly barbaric in the eyes of native races. As a result, they are frequently met with distrust and discomfort, yet their martial prowess ensures they remain valued on the battlefield and in the wild frontiers.

Racial Traits and Abilities

Knightly Blade Mastery: +1 to hit and +1 damage when wielding straight swords, greatswords, or any one-handed heavy blade (traditional western-style weapons).

Iron Constitution: +2 bonus on saving throws versus poison, disease, fatigue, or exhaustion.

Chivalric Oath: +2 bonus on Charisma checks when upholding honor, protecting the weak, swearing oaths, or in formal duels/challenges.

Woodland Warden: +2 bonus on any Wisdom or Dexterity checks involving tracking, foraging, or movement in forests, hills, or mountainous terrain.

Crusader Resilience: +1 bonus to all saving throws versus fear and mind-affecting magic (unbreakable will forged in distant wars).



XUE PI TRAITS

Primary Attributes: Because of the unique nature of the Xue Pi, they choose an additional primary attribute, for a total of three.

Language: Imperial Common, Western Common, plus one bonus language of your choice

Size: Medium

Movement: 30 Feet

Attribute Modifiers: +1 Strength, +1 Constitution, –1 Intelligence, –1 Charisma

Xuánhuo



The Xuánhuo are proud foreigners from the ancient southern kingdoms that rose along the great desert rivers far to the south. Their skin glows like polished bronze and their eyes burn with golden fire. They wear ornate golden headdresses and sun-disc collars that mark their noble heritage. They sailed north in gilded barges to the Eternal Empire seeking alliance, ancient knowledge, or sanctuary, bringing with them mastery of fire, sand, and eternal cycles. They serve as high priests of the sun, desert scouts, royal viziers, and flame-touched sorcerers. Regal and enduring, they embody authority and ancient mysticism, though their fiery temperament can sometimes make them seem distant or imperious to native Imperial eyes.

Racial Traits and Abilities

Desert Endurance: +2 bonus on saving throws versus heat, fire, exhaustion, or dehydration; +2 on any Constitution checks to survive harsh desert or arid environments.

Flame Sight: Can see perfectly in bright sunlight or firelight (no penalties from glare or flickering flames); +1 to all Perception checks involving fire or glowing objects.

Pharaonic Command: +2 bonus on Charisma checks when issuing orders, performing leadership rituals, or dealing with servants, soldiers, or those who respect ancient authority.

Ancient Lore: +2 bonus on Intelligence checks involving history, hieroglyphs, astronomy, alchemy, or lost southern kingdoms.

Sun-Blessed Resilience: +1 bonus to all saving throws versus fire-based magic or effects.

XUANHUO TRAITS

Primary Attributes: Because of the unique nature of the Xuánhuoi, they choose an additional primary attribute, for a total of three.

Language: Imperial Common, Southren Common, plus one bonus language of your choice

Size: Medium

Movement: 30 Feet

Attribute Modifiers: +1 Wisdom, +1 Constitution, –1 Strenght, –1 Dexterity

Wuxuè

The Wuxuè, known as "Tainted Blood" (and sometimes slurred as "Filthy Blood" by outsiders), are a humanoid race born from humans exposed to yaomo Qi during the ancient demonic incursions known as the Barrier Shattering. They blend mortal resilience with supernatural might and serve as valued if warily watched guardians against the Demon Realm.

Each Wuxuè bears 3-5 variable demonic traits: curved horns (sacred symbols of lineage and control), unnatural hair colors, ruddy or pale skin, and glowing eyes. At character creation the player chooses whether their Wuxuè embodies Yang aggression (larger build, reddish skin, martial fury that can erupt into berserker rage) or Yin subtlety (paler skin, slender form, masterful command of Qi for magic, healing, barriers, and subtle influence).

Horns are central to their identity. They grow from infancy and reach full maturity by age 20. Pristine horns stabilize their taint; a broken or lost horn marks one as Duànjiao ("Broken Horn"), a profound disgrace that leads to exile and denial of clan rites. Wuxuè live in tight-knit clans, fiercely loyal and communal, yet their blood constantly whispers of hunger and frenzy, especially under the 28-day moon cycle. During the full moon they receive a blessing of control; in the dark of the new moon (when the veil to the Demon Realm thins), uncontrolled urges rise and rituals become essential for stability.

Racial Traits and Abilities

Blood Echo: Automatically sense any demonic presence, yaomo Qi surge, or Demon Realm incursion within 120 feet. May concentrate once per day to extend the range to 1 mile; overuse risks temporary madness (–2 to all rolls for 1d4 hours).

Horn Channeling: +2 bonus on all saving throws versus demonic magic, possession, or Qi corruption. Duànjiao (broken-horn) Wuxuè lose this bonus.

Demonic Resilience: +2 bonus on saving throws versus poison, disease, and fear.

Tainted Sight: Low-light vision plus the ability to see through magical darkness created by demonic sources.



Yang Berserker Rage (Yang only): Once per day the character can enter a berserker rage for 10 minutes (or until the end of combat). During this time they gain +2 to hit and damage, +2 to saving throws versus fear, but suffer –2 to Armor Class.

Yin Qi Influence (Yin only): +2 bonus on all Intelligence or Wisdom checks involving magic, barriers, healing, or Qi manipulation. Additionally, once per day the character may exert subtle influence: +4 on a single Charisma check to persuade, charm, negotiate, or command (non-magical).

New-Moon Frailty (balanced weakness): During the three nights of the new moon each 28-day cycle, must succeed at a Constitution-based Siege check (CL 8) each night or suffer frenzy (–2 to Charisma and Wisdom checks). Duànjiao roll at CL 12 instead.

Wuxuè Triats:

Primary Attributes: Because of their tainted blood, the Wuxuè are allowed only two primary attributes.

Language: Imperial Common, Demon Realm language, plus one bonus language of your choice

Size: Medium

Movement: 30 Feet

Attribute Modifiers:

Yang (Aggressive): +1 Strength, +1 Constitution, –1 Intelligence, –1 Charisma

Yin (Subtle): +1 Wisdom, +1 Charisma, –1 Strength, –1 Constitution

(Player chooses Yang or Yin at character creation.)

Tianlóng

The Tianlóng, also known as the Heavenly Dragon Clan, are elegant, long-lived beings who trace their origins to ancient celestial dragons that once guarded the heavens. They appear as graceful, elven-like humanoids with pointed ears, flowing silver-white hair, and luminous slit-pupiled eyes that pierce illusions and sense the flows of Qi. Iridescent jade or gold scales shimmer across shoulders, arms, or cheeks, while antler-like horns curve from the forehead, growing larger and more radiant with age and wisdom.

They live 200+ years, and upon death are reborn from Qi-infused eggs. Each new life preserves the complete knowledge of all previous existences as an objective, emotionless record, like reading an ancient diary of facts, decisions, and strategies. Memories do not flood back instantly; they return gradually over the first 20 years of life. A young Tianlóng begins as a blank slate physically, but slowly regains factual knowledge while judging every past action with cold, impartial clarity. Emotions and muscle memory never carry over, so even a reborn villain may decide their old schemes were unwise and choose an entirely new path. This constant cycle of recall and judgment makes them pragmatic, calculating strategists and shadow-puppeteers who influence empires across generations. They serve as enigmatic advisors, celestial oracles, and master manipulators within the Eternal Empire.

Racial Traits and Abilities

Past-Life Recall: All previous lives' knowledge returns gradually over the first 20 years. Once per day the character may draw upon this objective record for a +6 bonus on any single Intelligence-based Siege check (history, tactics, arcane knowledge, strategy, etc.). Characters under 20 years old have only partial access and may use this ability only once per week until maturity. Because emotions do not carry over, the Tianlóng always judges past actions with impartial clarity and may freely reject or refine old paths.

Celestial Qi Sight: Slit-pupiled dragon eyes grant low-light vision and the ability to automatically detect Qi flows, magical auras, or illusions within 60 feet. +2 bonus on all saves versus illusions or mind-affecting magic.



Draconic Scales: Natural +2 AC bonus (stacks with armor). Scales also grant +2 on saving throws versus cold, electricity, or storm-based effects.

Courtly Guile: +2 bonus on Charisma checks involving court intrigue, political maneuvering, deception, lies, or manipulation of others.

Antler Focus: Horns act as natural Qi conduits. +2 bonus on all Intelligence or Wisdom checks involving Qi manipulation, foresight, or celestial lore.

Rebirth Resilience: +2 bonus on saving throws versus death effects, energy drain, or Qi corruption.

Tianlong Triats:

Primary Attributes: Because of the unique nature of the Tianlóng, they choose an additional primary attribute, for a total of two.

Language: Imperial Common, Tianlóng (celestial dragon-tongue), plus one bonus language of your choice

Size: Medium

Movement: 30 Feet

Attribute Modifiers: +1 Wisdom, +1 Charisma, –1 Strength, –1 Constitution

Língshòu



The Língshòu, known as "Spirit Beasts," are a humanoid race blessed by the Divine Spirits, ethereal guardians bound to the sacred lands of the Eternal Empire. Long ago the Divine Spirits chose worthy humans and bestowed upon them and their bloodlines the "Divine Spirit Blessings," infusing them with animalistic features and primal powers so they could serve as protectors of specific domains.

Today the Língshòu live as pragmatic and fiercely loyal guardians who walk the line between civilization and wild instinct. Each belongs to one of five great clans, each tied to a different Divine Spirit and a particular territory (storm-swept steppes, enchanted thickets, rugged mountains, forgotten ruins, or misty swamps). Their appearance clearly marks their clan: wolf ears and bushy tails, fox ears and fluffy tails, tiger stripes and claws, monkey tails and nimble limbs, or snake scales and coiling tails.

All Língshòu possess the ability to partially transform into their spirit animal for short bursts, heightening their natural gifts. However, the blessings require constant upkeep through clan rituals. If the rituals are neglected or if their patron spirit's domain is corrupted by yaomo, the bond weakens and dangerous primal urges grow stronger. In the Empire they serve as scouts, enforcers, spies, diplomats, and monster hunters, valued for their versatility yet sometimes viewed with wary respect because of their wild nature.

Shared Racial Traits and Abilities

Twilight Vision: Can see in starlight or moonlight as clearly as daylight.

Primal Instincts: +2 bonus on any Wisdom or Dexterity checks involving tracking, survival, stealth, or sensing danger in natural environments.

Spirit Transformation: Once per day, assume a partial animal form for 10 minutes (claws, fangs, tail, etc. based on clan). Grants natural weapons (1d6 damage) or a clan-specific movement bonus.

Divine Spirit Bond: +2 bonus on saving throws versus poison, disease, fear, or yaomo/demonic corruption.

LÍNGSHÒU TRAITS (shared by all clans)

Primary Attributes: Because of their divine spirit blessings, the Língshòu are allowed only two primary attributes.

Language: Imperial Common, plus one bonus language of your choice

Size: Medium

Movement: 30 Feet

Fox Língshòu

The Fox Língshòu are cunning and alluring diplomats, illusionists, and court intriguers blessed by the Illusion Fox Spirit. With fluffy fox ears, bushy tails, and striking beauty, they excel at persuasion, deception, and subtle influence. They thrive in the shadowed halls of power, weaving alliances and uncovering secrets while guarding the enchanted thickets. Only females inherit the full blessing; boys born to Fox Língshòu mothers are born as ordinary humans and lose all Língshòu traits.

Language: Imperial Common, plus one bonus language of your choice

Size: Medium

Movement: 30 Feet

Attribute Modifiers: +1 Charisma, +1 Dexterity, -1 Strength, -1 Constitution



Racial Traits and Abilities

Twilight Vision, Primal Instincts, Spirit Transformation, Divine Spirit Bond (see general section)

Mesmerizing Beauty: +2 on all Charisma checks involving persuasion, deception, seduction, or court intrigue.

Cunning Allure: Once per day exert subtle influence: +4 on a single Charisma check to charm, negotiate, or command (non-magical).

Illusion Evasion: +2 on saving throws versus illusions or mind-affecting magic.

FOX LÍNGSHÒU TRAITS

Primary Attributes: Because of their divine spirit blessings, the Língshòu are allowed only two primary attributes.

Wolf Língshòu

The Wolf Língshòu are loyal pack hunters and border scouts blessed by the Storm Wolf Spirit. With pointed wolf ears, bushy tails, and a pack mentality, they excel at coordinated hunts and frontier defense. They protect the vast wildlands and serve as the Empire's watchful eyes on the edges of civilization.



Racial Traits and Abilities

Twilight Vision, Primal Instincts, Spirit Transformation, Divine Spirit Bond (see general section)

Pack Speed: +2 on initiative and +10 feet to movement speed when charging or pursuing.

Fangs of the Hunt: Natural bite attack (1d6 damage) that counts as a weapon for Siege checks.

Pack Vigilance: +2 on any Wisdom checks to detect hidden or invisible creatures within 60 feet.

WOLF LÍNGSHÒU TRAITS

Primary Attributes: Because of their divine spirit blessings, the Língshòu are allowed only two primary attributes.

Language: Imperial Common, plus one bonus language of your choice

Size: Medium

Movement: 30 Feet

Attribute Modifiers: +1 Dexterity, +1 Constitution, -1 Intelligence, -1 Charisma

Tiger Língshòu

The Tiger Língshòu are fierce warriors and enforcers blessed by the Fierce Tiger Spirit. With striped fur patterns, claw-like nails, and tiger ears, they embody raw predatory power. They guard the rugged mountains and serve as the Empire's elite shock troops and bodyguards.

Racial Traits and Abilities

Twilight Vision, Primal Instincts, Spirit Transformation, Divine Spirit Bond (see general section)

Predatory Might: +1 to hit and +2 damage in melee combat.

Intimidating Roar: Once per day force all enemies within 30 feet to make a Charisma-based saving throw or become frightened for 1 round.

Ferocious Pounce: When charging, gain +2 to hit and damage on the first attack.

TIGER LÍNGSHÒU TRAITS

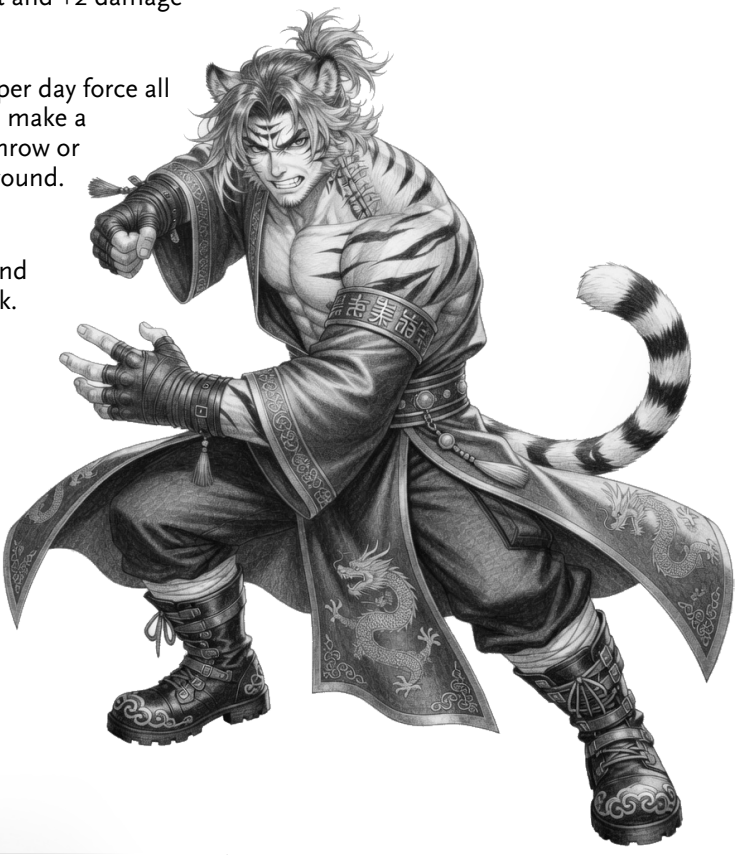
Primary Attributes: Because of their divine spirit blessings, the Língshòu are allowed only two primary attributes.

Language: Imperial Common, plus one bonus language of your choice

Size: Medium

Movement: 30 Feet

Attribute Modifiers: +1 Strength, +1 Constitution, -1 Dexterity, -1 Intelligence



Monkey Língshòu

The Monkey Língshòu are inventive pranksters, scouts, and artifact hunters blessed by the Crafty Ape Spirit. With curly monkey tails, dexterous hands, and playful energy, they excel at clever solutions and exploration. They protect ancient ruins and forgotten temples, using wit and agility to preserve or retrieve lost knowledge.

Attribute Modifiers: +1 Dexterity, +1 Intelligence, -1 Strength, -1 Wisdom

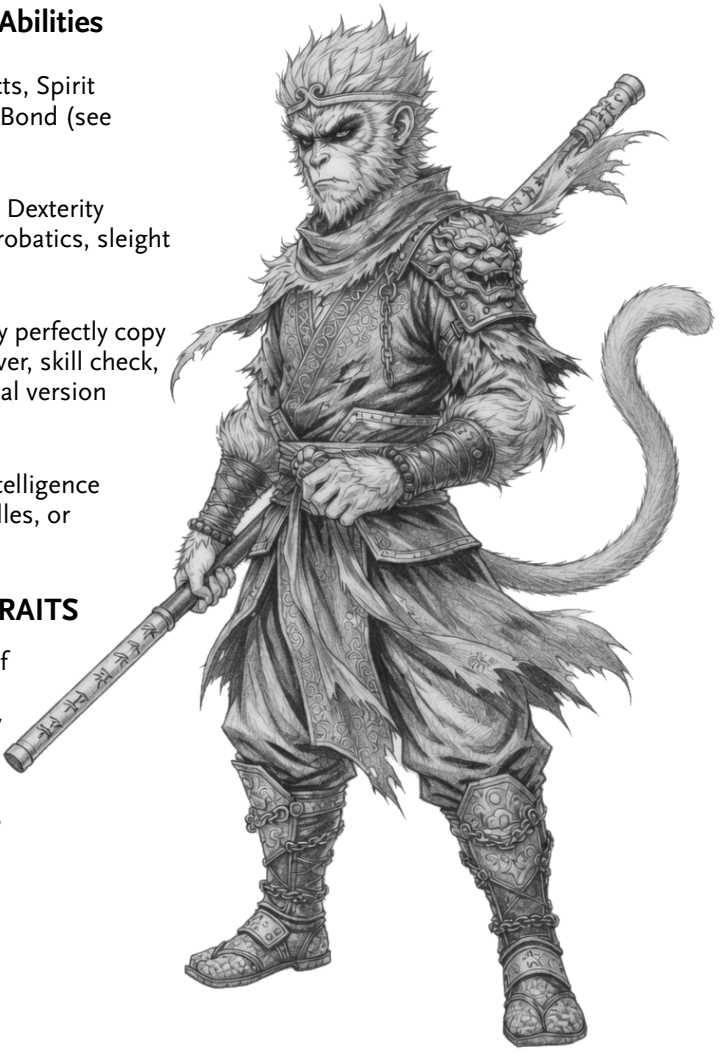
Shared Racial Traits and Abilities

Twilight Vision, Primal Instincts, Spirit Transformation, Divine Spirit Bond (see general section)

Mischievous Agility: +2 on all Dexterity checks involving climbing, acrobatics, sleight of hand, or traps.

Mimicry Insight: Once per day perfectly copy one observed combat maneuver, skill check, or spell-like effect (non-magical version only).

Clever Trickster: +2 on any Intelligence checks involving puzzles, riddles, or improvised inventions.



MONKEY LÍNGSHÒU TRAITS

Primary Attributes: Because of their divine spirit blessings, the Língshòu are allowed only two primary attributes.

Language: Imperial Common, plus one bonus language of your choice

Size: Medium

Movement: 30 Feet

Snake Língshòu

The Snake Língshòu are subtle spies, poison experts, and healers blessed by the Hidden Serpent Spirit. With scaled patches and coiling tails, they move with quiet precision. They guard the misty swamps and serve as the Empire's shadowy informants and battlefield medics.

Movement: 30 Feet

Attribute Modifiers: +1 Wisdom, +1 Dexterity, -1 Strength, -1 Charisma

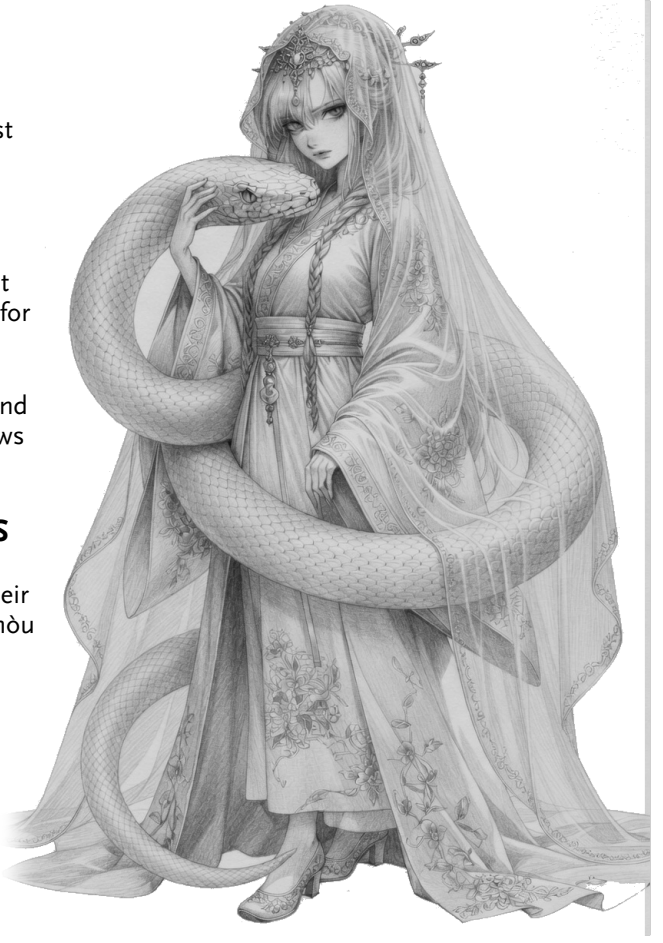
Racial Traits and Abilities

Twilight Vision, Primal Instincts, Spirit Transformation, Divine Spirit Bond (see general section)

Venomous Strike: Natural bite attack (1d4 + poison); target must save or take 1d6 extra poison damage.

Cunning Renewal: Once per day shed skin to heal 2d8 damage but become temporarily defenseless for 1 round.

Subtle Stealth: +2 on all stealth and hiding checks; +2 on saving throws versus poison and disease.



SNAKE LÍNGSHÒU TRAITS

Primary Attributes: Because of their divine spirit blessings, the Língshòu are allowed only two primary attributes.

Language: Imperial Common, plus one bonus language of your choice

Size: Medium


Of Inner Palace
the Moon Consort

Chapter I

Arrival at the Forbidden Palace

It was a warm summer night. Through the shadowed alleys of the Inner Palace, four eunuchs bore a red-and-gold palanquin on their shoulders. Few dared witness its passage; those who caught a glimpse quickly averted their eyes. The palanquin was meant for the Emperor alone. Yet tonight, it carried no emperor.

The procession wound toward the northeast corner of the palace, to the abandoned Moon Pavilion. Once the residence of the Moon Consort, it had stood empty since the previous consort took her own life within its walls. No one dared live there now. Servants tasked with its upkeep often fled in terror, swearing they felt an eerie presence watching their every move.

The palanquin stopped before the Moon Pavilion's rusted gate. The eunuchs knelt in silence, heads bowed. A slender hand parted the silk curtains.

A girl, no older than twelve, stepped out. She wore white ceremonial robes far too large for her slight frame. Snow-white hair, bound by a golden hairpin bearing a single delicate bell, swayed gently; its soft chime was the only sound in the night. No one dared meet her gaze. She was the Emperor's new consort.

Two eunuchs rose, heads still bowed, and swung open the creaking gate. She moved forward in silence, her steps light and uncertain. Only the faint rustle of silk and the soft chime of her bell disturbed the stillness. As she passed, one eunuch glimpsed her bare feet against the stone. He said nothing, but thought: Highly improper for a consort to walk barefoot. Defiance? Or merely ignorance?

She crossed the threshold. The gate clanged shut behind her, the lock clicking into place.

The eunuchs spoke not a word of her arrival, ever wary of listening ears. Yet soon enough, whispers of the Emperor's latest perversion would ripple through the Inner Palace.

~*~

The gate closed behind her with a heavy thud. In that instant, her legs buckled. She crumpled onto the cold stone path, palms scraping the ground. Her mind spun, unable to grasp what had become of her. Only days earlier, she had huddled in a cellar, waiting for whatever scraps her master tossed her way. Now people bowed deeply before her. They handled her as though she were fragile porcelain, feeding her, bathing her, combing her

hair with careful hands, yet none dared speak to her or meet her eyes.

She gathered what little strength remained and pushed herself to her feet. She had been told this forsaken place would be her new home. Glancing around, she saw only an overgrown garden choked with weeds and dark, silent buildings. No movement stirred, no lantern glowed, no one waited to greet her. Clutching the oversized robes about her, she walked slowly toward the main hall.

"Um... hello?" she called softly. No answer came. She pushed the heavy door open. Still nothing. A shiver ran through her despite the warm night. Inside was darker than the garden had been. Thick dust coated the marble floor; she felt it gritty and cool beneath her bare feet. Directly opposite the entrance, a wide staircase rose and split, one branch leading left, the other right, up to the second floor.

"Is anyone here?" she whispered. She expected no reply; the words were only to ease the crushing silence. She climbed the right branch of the stairs. At the first door she tried, she found a small room containing a narrow bed, just enough for her. A dusty linen cover marked it as former servant's quarters. She did not mind. Exhaustion tugging at her, she crawled beneath the cover, curled into a tight ball, and lay trembling, too afraid to let sleep claim her.

Throughout the night, faint noises echoed through the empty pavilion: soft footsteps padding along distant corridors, the creak of a door easing open. She squeezed her eyes shut, heart pounding, too frightened to investigate. At last, exhaustion overtook her. She slipped into uneasy dreams, unaware that something, or someone, watched from the shadows.

~*~

Sleep brought dreams, memories of the days just past. She sat locked behind iron bars, waiting for the day she would be sold to the pleasure quarters. She did not know her exact age, only that she was around twelve. She had never known her parents. As far back as memory reached, she had been a slave. Her unusual beauty drew envy and greed: skin pale as frost, hair white as snow, eyes the color of silver moonlight. Her master often reminded her, "Just a few more years, girl, and I'll sell you to the brothels for a fortune."

To prepare her for a high price in the pleasure quarters, she was given lessons: reading, writing, etiquette, poetry. She became skilled at both Xiangqi and Weiqi. She learned the guzheng, drawing clear, mournful notes from its strings with practiced fingers.

She was not treated cruelly by most standards, no more than any other slave. Yet failure brought punishment: a switch across the back or shoulders, never the face. When she grew too quickly or ate too much, she was locked in her cage for days with little food, all to keep her figure slender. Life was harsh, but it was the only one she knew.

Then one day, imperial guards arrived. They wore ceremonial armor of steel laced with gold and silk. Coiled dragons gleamed on their chestplates and shoulder guards. Tall helmets bore vivid red horsehair plumes that swayed with every movement.

They ordered her former master to open the cage. He obeyed with shaking hands. The moment she stepped out, every guard dropped to their knees in perfect unison. Her master threw himself to the ground, forehead pressed to the dirt in a deep kowtow, whimpering but silent.

She was led away, escorted for the first time beyond the walls of the only home she had ever known.

She understood none of it. No one spoke to her beyond curt commands. The guards carried her through gate after gate into parts of the capital she had never seen. At last, towering white walls rose around her, and a vermilion gate loomed so high a giant could pass beneath without bowing.

There she was handed over to palace women. They undressed her for bathing and gasped at the faint bruises still marking her skin. One maid fled the room, face pale, and returned moments later with an older woman of clear authority.

"Who did this to you?" the elder woman demanded gently but firmly. "Speak freely, Guniang."

"I-it was my fault," she whispered. "I failed a dance step... and was punished."

Fury flashed across the elder's face. "No one will ever hurt you here, Guniang," she said, voice tight. "Not ever again." She turned and strode from the room.

They bathed her in scented water, dressed her bruises with salve, and clothed her in fine white and silver-grey robes. Her long white hair was carefully combed and secured with a golden hairpin bearing a single small bell.

At last they led her to a polished bronze mirror. She stared at the reflection, wide silver eyes, pale skin, delicate features, and barely recognized the girl staring back.

Servants bowed low as she was escorted back to the waiting palanquin.

Deeper still they carried her, past yet another wall, until they halted before the grandest hall she had ever imagined. It rose upon a three-tiered white marble terrace, balustrades carved with writhing dragons and soaring phoenixes. Enormous red pillars, wrapped in golden dragons, supported a towering double-eaved roof of imperial yellow glazed tiles that gleamed even in the fading light. Along the roof ridges marched rows of ceramic beasts, culminating in a great golden dragon at each end. The entire hall breathed overwhelming power and perfect symmetry.

An elderly eunuch waited alone at the foot of the terrace. He bowed deeply. "Xiaozhu, please follow this humble servant into the presence of the God Emperor."

Emperor? The word struck her like a blow. Was this a dream, or a cruel jest? She said nothing, only followed, heart hammering.

As they hurried toward the hall, he spoke in a low, rapid voice: "Xiaozhu, before the God Emperor, ruler of heaven and earth, speak only when addressed. Do not raise your eyes until commanded. Keep your gaze on the floor. Walk halfway between the gates and the dragon stairs, then kneel and remain until told to rise."

She struggled to keep up with his brisk pace, the oversized robes tangling around her legs.

They halted before towering vermilion gates inlaid with gold dragons and phoenixes. "Good luck, Xiaozhu" he murmured with a final bow as the great doors swung slowly open.

She did as she had been instructed. Head bowed, she walked forward at a measured pace, the hem of the oversized robes brushing the floor and concealing her bare feet. She had slipped off the silk socks and soft slippers while alone in the palanquin; she had always hated anything confining her feet. Now the cool, smooth marble beneath her soles felt strangely comforting, a small familiar sensation amid the terror.

She entered with head bowed low, walking carefully to the midpoint between the great gates behind her and the dragon stairs ahead. The elder eunuch remained one respectful step behind. Together they knelt upon the cold marble and waited in silence.

After a long moment, she heard him rise. She remained kneeling, eyes fixed on the floor.

"God Emperor, Ruler of Heaven and Earth," he announced in a clear voice, "as Your Majesty commanded, the girl has been found."

A low murmur of hundreds of voices rippled through the vast hall. Only then did she realize the chamber was filled with courtiers; she had been too terrified to notice. Abruptly, silence fell like a blade.

"Rise, girl," a deep, resonant voice commanded from atop the stairs.

She rose obediently, gaze still fixed on the floor.

"Look upon me when I address you," the voice thundered.

Slowly, fearfully, she raised her eyes. Upon a towering jade dragon throne sat the God Emperor in imperial yellow, his presence commanding the vast hall. Beside him, on a slightly lower phoenix throne, sat the Empress Xiao Jinfeng, radiant in rich red and gold silks embroidered with phoenixes, her beauty sharp and regal. Yet her gaze was cold as winter frost, and it fixed upon the girl with unnerving intensity. A shiver ran through her.

"What is your name?" the Emperor asked.

"N-name?" she stammered, voice barely audible. "I... I have never been given one, Your Majesty."

Another wave of shocked murmurs swept the hall. Empress Xiao's perfect brow arched in faint surprise before her eyes narrowed, studying the girl more closely.

"A nameless girl chosen by the moon," the Emperor murmured thoughtfully, stroking his long beard. He leaned toward the Empress and spoke in a low voice meant only for her. She responded with a subtle tilt of her head and a quiet reply, her expression unreadable.

Moments later, his voice rang out once more, filling the hall. "Such a thing cannot be. From this day forward, you shall be known as Yuè Líng, for you are as ethereal as a spirit of the moon."

Yuè Líng lifted her gaze fully for the first time, eyes wide and shimmering. Tears welled up unbidden.

"What troubles you?" the Emperor asked, his tone gentler now. "Do you dislike the name I have given?"

"N-no, Your Majesty," she whispered, voice trembling. "I... I like it very much."

Her hands pressed tightly over her heart. For the first time in her life, she had a name that belonged to her alone.

"It is not fitting for the Moon Consort to weep before the court," he said, yet there was no rebuke in his voice, only a trace of warmth. "Still, receiving one's first name can be

overwhelming."

He glanced briefly at the Empress, whose lips had tightened almost imperceptibly, then gestured dismissively to the assembled courtiers. "The Empress herself will see you settled in the palace. We shall speak again soon."

A sharp intake of breath and fresh murmurs swept the hall. Empress Xiao Jinfeng turned her head toward the Emperor, unmistakable shock flashing across her regal features before she swiftly masked it.

"This way, Xiaozhu" the elder eunuch murmured urgently. "A small bow, then retreat backward, never turn your back on the throne."

She copied his movements precisely until the great vermilion gates thudded shut behind them.

"Xiaozhu..." the elder eunuch sighed, weariness heavy in his voice. "Your life has just become far more difficult than you can imagine."

He escorted her back to the waiting palanquin. "Now we take you to your new residence," he said quietly. Then, pressing soft silk socks and embroidered slippers into her hands, he added, "And for mercy's sake, do not appear barefoot before the God Emperor again. You endanger not only yourself, but every servant who attends you."

The palanquin rose once more, carrying Yuè Líng toward the darkened Moon Pavilion.

Chapter II

Aunt Mei

The morning arrived with a hint of chill in the air. The newly appointed Moon Consort sat on the narrow bed she had found the night before, eyes half-closed, her white hair tangled in wild disarray. The snow-white silk robes, once pristine, were now wrinkled like forgotten parchment. She glanced around the unfamiliar room, and in that moment, reality crashed over her like a cold wave. Her eyes widened. This was her new home. Her new name. None of it had been a dream. To be certain, she pinched her cheek hard.

"Ouch," she murmured, rubbing the sore spot gently. No, she was wide awake.

In the daylight, the room revealed itself clearly: spacious and elegantly furnished, though veiled in dust and cobwebs. Someone of importance must have once slept here, Yuè Líng thought. The eerie presence from the night before had vanished, leaving only a profound sense of isolation. She slid down from the wooden bed, her bare feet meeting the cool, dusty floor. Silk curtains hung nearby, a stark contrast to the simple linen cover she had used. The furniture bore intricate carvings of moons and dragons, but the space held no personal touches, no trinkets or mementos to whisper of lives past.

The young consort descended the stairs slowly, her bare feet padding softly on the grimy marble. Emptiness echoed through the halls, loneliness her only companion in the vast main building. Outside, the garden sprawled untamed: a weathered shed, a murky pond, and an open pavilion with a stone table, perhaps once a spot for summer teas. Grass choked the paths, weeds reclaiming the stone. As Yuè Líng wandered barefoot through the overgrowth, the damp earth and blades of grass tickled her soles. She spotted a cluster of plum trees heavy with fruit. Her mouth watered, and her stomach let out a quiet rumble.

"Is it all right if I eat some?" she wondered aloud, glancing around warily. Seeing no one, she approached a tree and plucked a few ripe plums. The morning sun warmed her skin as she sat beneath the branches, savoring each bite slowly. Her thoughts drifted back to the whirlwind of the previous day. This was her new home now, strange as it felt. She was its mistress, or so she believed. "I've been placed here for a reason," she whispered to herself, voice small and uncertain. "I must prove I deserve it. I don't want to lose this, whatever it may be."

She stood, brushing dirt from her robes. The fine fabric, a gift from her arrival, was already soiled. Not wanting to ruin it further, she returned to the main hall and carefully removed the outer layers, folding them with reverence. She had never owned anything so splendid. Next, she unpinned her golden hairpin, the small bell chiming softly, a comforting echo of

her new identity. She set it aside gently on a table, safe from the dust. Now clad only in her undergarments, her bare feet leaving faint prints on the floor, she surveyed the space. "Let's clean this place," she declared, a spark of determination flickering amid her fear. What if no one came? What if she was truly forgotten?

She began by opening the windows, letting fresh air chase away the staleness. Then, room by room, she swept away webs and dust, starting with the guest chamber in case visitors arrived. Her bare feet grew gritty as she worked, but the garden storehouse yielded brooms and cloths that eased the task. A fleeting draft brushed her skin midway through, cold and unbidden in the warming day, but she shook it off as imagination. For lunch, she plucked a few more plums, their tart sweetness a small comfort. By afternoon, the lower floors looked passable, not gleaming, but free of neglect. She couldn't polish the wood or reach the highest corners, yet a quiet pride warmed her despite the gnawing solitude.

At one point, a lone black crow perched on a windowsill, watching her in silence. She didn't notice at first, but when she did, she paused and addressed it softly. "Do you think anyone will come today?" Her voice trembled, filling the void. "You're probably right. Everyone's too busy, or perhaps they've forgotten me already." She resumed her work, chattering one-sidedly to the bird, whose eyes remained fixed and unnaturally still, almost like a watchful guardian from the palace tales she had overheard in her old life. "I mean, who would visit someone like me? I'm just a girl with no family, no friends... but the Emperor chose me, didn't he? That must mean something." Then, without warning, it took flight. "Please, don't leave yet... you're the only one here," she said with loss in her heart, but she pressed on with her cleaning.

"Niangniang!" A voice rang out from the doorway, startling her. She yelped, "Eeek!" and spun around. "By the heavens, what are you doing?"

An elderly woman stood there, her face etched with concern. "A lady of your station should not clean alone, nor wander about undressed! And barefoot, no less, Niangniang, you must care for yourself in this forsaken place."

Yuè Líng froze, caught off guard by the sudden company. "My apologies, Niangniang," the woman continued, bowing deeply. "I am Meilan. The girls here once called me Mei Ayi."

Regaining her poise, Yuè Líng bowed in return, eliciting a gasp of shock from the elder. "Aunt Mei?" Yuè Líng ventured hopefully. "May I call you that too?"

For the first time, Yuè Líng studied the woman closely: short and sturdy, with gray hair tied back and a gentle face warmed by a kind smile. "Of course, Niangniang," Aunt Mei replied warmly, her voice carrying a soothing lilt. "I'd have it no other way. Now, come, let's get you properly dressed." She guided the girl upstairs to the chamber adjoining the room where Yuè Líng had slept.

The door swung open to reveal a room even more opulent: silk-draped bed, intricate furnishings, and scattered personal items, combs, mirrors, faded scrolls. What struck Yuè Líng most was its pristine state, free of dust or webs. "This way, Niangniang," Aunt Mei said. "If memory serves, the Mistress left dresses that might fit you."

She opened a wardrobe and drew out flowing black robes. "The Mistress favored black," Aunt Mei mused, a nostalgic lilt in her voice. "It's why the palace named her the Raven Consort." She paused, sorrow clouding her eyes. "Such a tragedy," she reminisced, her words hanging heavy in the air. What tragedy? Yuè Líng wondered silently, sensing the weight behind the words but holding back her question. Then, forcing a smile, she added, "But let's not dwell on sadness."

“Is it truly all right for me to wear them?” Yuè Líng asked softly, feeling like an intruder in another’s memory.

“Of course!” Aunt Mei assured her, her tone gentle yet firm. “The Mistress would want nothing more than for you to feel at home, especially after all your hard work cleaning.” She helped Yuè Líng into the robes, her hands brushing lightly but carefully against the fabric, almost as if avoiding direct skin contact, though the touch that did occur felt unnaturally cool, like a winter breeze in summer. The dark silk settled cool against her skin. Fetching her hairpin from downstairs, Yuè Líng secured it in place, the bell’s soft chime a reassuring melody. “Now, let Aunt Mei finish the cleaning,” the elder said firmly.

“I’ll help,” Yuè Líng insisted, smiling despite the ache in her heart.

“No, Niangniang, you are the Moon Consort. Such tasks are beneath you. I’m here now.” Her tone softened, then sharpened with indignation. “What is the palace thinking? No maids assigned? This is unprecedented.” She gazed at Yuè Líng with pity. “Poor child, they’ve thrust you into the Inner Palace’s schemes already. But don’t fret, I’m here for now.”

~*~

Yuè Líng sat outside on a garden bench while Aunt Mei worked within. She fidgeted, longing to assist, but the elder had scolded her gently. “I appreciate your kindness, but it dishonors those who serve you,” Aunt Mei had said, brooking no argument. “It is our duty to maintain this place; you have your own burdens.” So Yuè Líng remained idle, her thoughts swirling back to the previous day’s chaos.

Hours slipped by, and impatience won. She slipped inside, her bare feet silent on the now-spotless floors. No sign of Aunt Mei, yet the pavilion gleamed, not merely clean, but restored: scratches vanished from the wood, surfaces polished to a subtle shine. Candles flickered in sconces, casting dancing shadows that seemed to shift of their own accord. “Hello?” Yuè Líng called. “Aunt Mei?” Silence answered.

She ascended the stairs toward the Raven Consort’s chamber. As she neared, faint sobbing echoed, distant yet intimate, like a whisper from the walls. She froze, heart pounding. She hesitated to intrude but couldn’t bear leaving the elder alone. “Aunt Mei?” she whispered, concern laced with unease. “May I enter?” No reply. Slowly, she pushed the door open. The room stood empty, an unnatural chill hanging in the air, seeping into her bones despite the lingering daylight warmth.

“Niangniang?” Aunt Mei’s voice floated up from below. “Where are you, dear?”

Yuè Líng closed the door and hurried down, but the cold clung to her like an unseen veil. At the stairs’ base stood Aunt Mei, holding a porcelain bowl. “I’ve prepared Wensi tofu soup. Come eat while it’s warm.” She led the way to the guest chamber.

Yuè Líng glanced back at the upper corridor; the sobbing had ceased, yet an unsettling whisper lingered, a draft where none should exist, a shadow flickering just beyond sight. “Perhaps I should ask Aunt Mei,” she murmured to herself, doubt threading her voice, as she followed.

Aunt Mei awaited her with the soup, but only one bowl. “Won’t you join me?” Yuè Líng asked, a pang of isolation twisting inside her.

“I cannot, Niangniang, it’s improper for a servant to dine with the mistress,” Aunt Mei explained gently, her words carrying a quiet wisdom.

The soup was delicate and balanced, neither rich nor bland. Before Yuè Líng realized, she had finished it all. Aunt Mei chuckled. “Someone was famished! Here, try these too.” She set down a plate of steaming dumplings.

Yuè Líng hadn’t noticed Aunt Mei fetching them; her focus had been on the soup. The dumplings melted like heaven on her tongue; she had never tasted such care. Tears pricked her eyes as she ate, gratitude blooming amid her solitude.

Dusk fell as she finished. “Let me brew you some tea, Niangniang,” Aunt Mei offered, reaching for a kettle on a side table.

Yuè Líng sprang up. “No, Aunt Mei, please, allow me.”

She grasped Aunt Mei’s hand; it was icy cold, unnaturally so in the warm room. “Oh, Niangniang, you mustn’t, it’s unbecoming,” Aunt Mei protested, her voice soft but insistent.

“I insist,” Yuè Líng said, eyes pleading for this small connection. “You’ve done so much, at least let me serve you tea.” Aunt Mei smiled and relented.

Yuè Líng approached the tea set, her courtesan training guiding her hands. In moments, the brew was ready. She poured a cup for Aunt Mei and set it down, then turned for her own.

“This is exquisite, Niangniang,” came Aunt Mei’s voice from behind. But when Yuè Líng looked, the cup sat untouched, steam curling as if freshly poured.

She took her own cup and sipped. Drowsiness washed over her suddenly, heavy and insistent. She tried to speak, but Aunt Mei only smiled serenely. “No wonder you’re weary, Niangniang.”

Aunt Mei reached out but halted short of touching her, as if barred by an invisible force. “I wish I could linger,” she whispered, her voice fading like mist. “But I must return for now. Use the Mistress’s chamber henceforth, you’ll be safe there at night.”

Questions burned in Yuè Líng’s mind, about the sobs, the chill, the protection, but her body betrayed her, rising unbidden. “I will watch over you, Niangniang.” Against her will, she climbed to the upper floor, entered the Raven Consort’s room, and collapsed onto the silk bed. Sleep claimed her, deeper than any before...

Chapter III

Alone Again

The second night in the Moon Pavilion passed in unexpected tranquility for Yuè Líng. No eerie presence lingered, no strange sounds echoed through the halls, and the unsettling sensation of watchful eyes had vanished. It was as if Aunt Mei's gentle advice to sleep in the Raven Consort's chamber had woven a protective veil against her fears. The cheerful chirping of birds roused her at dawn. She blinked at the silken canopy above, piecing together the hazy fragments of the previous afternoon. "I was drinking tea with..." she murmured to herself, the memory of the kind old woman surfacing like a half-forgotten dream.

She slipped from the silk-covered bed, her bare feet meeting the cool, polished floor with a soft patter. "Aunt Mei!" she called, pushing open the chamber door. A sudden caw startled her. A lone crow perched on the opposite windowsill, its black feathers gleaming in the morning light. She stumbled back, nearly tumbling to the floor. "Don't scare me like that!" she shouted as it took wing, its cry echoing like mocking laughter in the empty corridor.

Yuè Líng steadied herself against the doorframe. "Aunt Mei!" she called again, her voice trembling through the stillness. Silence answered, heavy and unbroken.

She hurried down to the ground floor, her steps light and urgent on the marble stairs. "Aunt Mei?" she called once more, but only echoing silence greeted her. She pushed open the kitchen doors, revealing a space pristine and orderly: no cobwebs draped the corners, every surface polished to a subtle sheen. Kitchen tools, plates, and pans stood aligned in perfect readiness, as if awaiting a feast. "Aunt Mei!" she shouted, her plea fading into the void. She moved to the guest room, where consorts might receive visitors. It remained as she had left it the day before. Two tea cups on the table, hers half-empty, the one poured for Aunt Mei untouched, steam long since vanished.

"Aunt Mei?" she whispered, her voice catching in her throat like a thorn. Loneliness crashed over her anew. Tears welled in her silver eyes, spilling down her pale cheeks. She fled outside, the overgrown grass brushing her bare feet, and cried out with all her might, "AUNT MEI!" Yet the only reply was the distant cawing of crows perched in a nearby tree. Four of them, their beady eyes fixed upon her in silent vigil.

"Where are you..." she sobbed, collapsing against the pavilion wall, the cold marble pressing into her back. "Why did you leave me..." She wept for what felt like an eternity, her small frame shaking. But reality intruded, stern and unyielding. The kind-hearted woman must have returned to her duties in the vast palace beyond. Still, perhaps she would visit

again. That fragile hope offered a sliver of comfort. Yuè Líng resolved to keep the pavilion spotless, a worthy home for such a return.

Wiping her tears, the young Moon Consort returned to the guest room. As she reached for Aunt Mei's cup, something caught her eye: scattered black feathers where the elder had sat the day before. A faint chill caressed her skin, like an unseen breath murmuring secrets from the shadows. The air turned colder, carrying a soft, indistinct whisper that dissolved as swiftly as mist. Yuè Líng plucked one feather, turning it in her fingers. "A crow feather?" she wondered aloud. Her eyes widened with sudden realization. She dashed outside, waving the feather at the tree. "You rascals! That is my house! You can't make a mess in it!" she shouted. "You hear me?!"

She stomped her bare feet against the earth, the damp grass tickling her soles. "Aunt Mei cleaned this place for me. I won't let a bunch of bird brains make a mess when I sleep!" She spun on her heel, jabbing the feather toward the crows. "And no stealing!" Satisfied she had asserted her domain, she returned to her tidying, a spark of defiance lightening her heart.

Once the room gleamed anew, a insistent growl from her stomach reminded her of her hunger. The kitchen held no provisions. Not a single grain or herb. And bore no signs of recent use: no ash in the stove, no lingering scents of cooking. "How did Aunt Mei prepare yesterday's food?" Yuè Líng pondered, a flicker of unease stirring. With no other choice, she ventured to the plum tree in the garden. "I will just take a few," she whispered to the branches. "I hope no one minds." She plucked the ripe fruits without awaiting an answer, knowing none would come.

She wandered back toward the pavilion, savoring one plum's tart sweetness, a handful cradled in her other palm, when a voice shattered the quiet.

A deep male voice intoned from the pavilion entrance, addressing Yuè Líng with her full honorary title—Yuè standing for 'Moon,' Fēi meaning 'Consort,' and Niangniang the esteemed honorific for imperial ladies, akin to 'Your Ladyship'—Yuè Fēi Niangniang.

"Eeeek!" Yuè Líng leaped in fright, the plums scattering across the stone path.

The man chuckled softly. "Please forgive me for spooking you, Yuè Fēi Niangniang," he said in a measured tone, holding the zuoyi pose to underscore his respect. "This humble servant is Wang Shun, sent by His Majesty the God Emperor to instruct you in palace arts and etiquette. I bear scrolls and tools for your lessons. May I approach?"

Yuè Líng nodded frantically, her heart still racing. He will yell at me for stealing plums... she thought.

"Yuè Fēi Niangniang," he began, his voice shifting to gentle reproach. "When a servant or visitor greets you in the palace, it is proper to respond promptly. Silence can be seen as disrespect, even if unintentional. As the Moon Consort, you must uphold the dignity of your position at all times."

Yuè Líng froze, her cheeks flushing with embarrassment. She had been so startled that words had escaped her. The plums scattered on the floor now felt like evidence of her wrongdoing, and she braced for more scolding about them. But the man, Wang Shun, focused on etiquette first. He adjusted his sleeves nervously, a habitual tic that betrayed his inner concern despite his composed demeanor.

"Furthermore," he continued calmly, "a consort must perform the wanfu upon greeting or

being greeted by those of appropriate rank. It is the graceful bow reserved for ladies of the court, symbolizing respect and poise. Allow me to explain how it is done properly."

He stepped forward slightly, still maintaining a respectful distance, and demonstrated with an imaginary partner. "Stand upright with your feet together. Place your right hand over your left fist, or for the traditional wanfu, clasp your hands together in front of your chest. Palms facing inward, fingers interlocked or simply pressed together. Bend your knees slightly into a curtsy, lowering your body while keeping your back straight. Bow your head modestly, but do not dip too low unless addressing the Emperor himself. Hold for a moment, then rise smoothly. It should flow like a gentle wave, elegant and controlled."

Yuè Líng listened intently, her heart pounding. She had learned basic manners in her training, but nothing this formal. Gathering her courage, she straightened her posture. Her bare feet shifted on the cool stone floor, but she ignored the discomfort. She clasped her hands in front of her chest as described, bent her knees into a shallow curtsy, and bowed her head. The bell in her hairpin chimed softly with the movement, a delicate sound that echoed in the quiet pavilion.

Wang Shun nodded approvingly, though his expression remained serious. He adjusted his sleeves again, the fabric whispering softly. "Well done for a first attempt, Niangniang. With practice, it will become second nature. Now, shall we begin your lessons? His Majesty wishes you to excel in the palace arts."

"Yuè Fēi Niangniang," he said, his eyes glancing at the scattered plums on the floor with a soft chuckle. "Ah, indulging in the garden's bounty, I see. No harm in that. Plums are a simple pleasure, especially in such a quiet place. But perhaps we can tidy them later."

Yuè Líng relaxed slightly, relieved he was not scolding her for the plums. She had feared the worst, imagining the Emperor's anger if word got back. But Wang Shun's tone remained kind, though his expression turned thoughtful as he looked around the empty pavilion entrance. From the nearby tree, the four crows perched silently, their beady eyes fixed on the pair, observing every word and gesture without a single caw.

"First things first, Niangniang," he continued. "It is customary to offer a guest tea upon arrival, especially one of higher standing or, like myself, a teacher appointed by His Majesty. Such hospitality upholds the harmony of the palace. Might you summon your ladies-in-waiting? They can prepare it properly while we begin our discussion."

Yuè Líng's eyes widened, her heart sinking. She shifted uncomfortably on her bare feet, the cool stone floor suddenly feeling colder. "I... I am here alone," she whispered, her voice small and hesitant. "There are no ladies-in-waiting. No one has come except... well, except for Aunt Mei yesterday, but she's gone now."

Wang Shun's composed face faltered into genuine shock, his brows furrowing. He tugged at his sleeves once more, the motion quicker this time. "Alone? In the Moon Pavilion? That cannot be right, Niangniang. A consort, even of the fourth rank, should have attendants assigned immediately. It is unheard of. His Majesty would not stand for such neglect. The palace protocols demand it, for your safety and dignity."

He paused, glancing around again as if expecting servants to appear from the shadows. "Well, we cannot proceed without proper decorum. If you would lead me to the guest room, perhaps we can make do for now. But this matter must be addressed."

Yuè Líng nodded, still flustered, and gestured for him to follow. She led him barefoot through the halls, her steps silent on the polished floors. As they walked, Wang Shun's eyes

widened at the state of the pavilion. The wood gleamed as if freshly oiled, not a speck of dust in sight, and the air carried a faint, clean scent of incense.

"Who cleaned this place?" he asked, his voice laced with surprise. "I had heard the Moon Pavilion was long abandoned. Cursed, some whisper. Yet it looks spotless, as if tended by an entire staff. How is this possible?"

Yuè Líng hesitated, glancing back at him. "It was me... and Aunt Mei. We cleaned it together yesterday. Well, Aunt Mei did most of the work. She made it shine like this."

Wang Shun looked slightly disturbed. This made no sense. The place looked far too spotless for one day of "cleaning," especially by a child and some mysterious Aunt Mei. He had heard tales of the Moon Pavilion's decay. Dusty halls, overgrown weeds, a curse that drove servants away. Yet here it was, gleaming like it had been tended by a full staff for weeks. The wooden surfaces shone faintly, as if polished with care, and not a single cobweb lingered in the corners. He kept his thoughts to himself for now, but his mind raced with questions. He adjusted his sleeves absentmindedly, the tic surfacing under his unease.

As they arrived in the guest room, Yuè Líng started preparing tea. She fetched the set from a side table, her bare feet padding softly on the floor. Wang Shun's eyes widened, but he did not say a word. He simply observed in disbelief. A consort, especially one so young, preparing tea herself? It was unheard of. Ladies-in-waiting handled such tasks. Yet here she was, measuring leaves and heating water with practiced hands from her old training. Yuè Líng had calmed already, and a small smile showed on her face. Company was something she craved deeply after the endless silence of the past days. For the first time since her arrival, she did not feel utterly alone.

Wang Shun cleared his throat gently as she worked. "Niangniang, if I may ask, how have you fared these past days? Has the Pavilion been... comfortable?"

Yuè Líng glanced up, her hands steady on the kettle. "It... it has been quiet," she replied softly, not wanting to complain. "But I am grateful to be here."

He nodded, probing further. "And your studies? Have you had time to practice any arts or reading since your arrival?"

"I practiced a little guzheng yesterday," she said, a spark of pride in her voice. "And I can read and write some. From my lessons before."

Wang Shun smiled faintly, impressed by her composure. But his concern deepened. Then he asked, "Niangniang, have you eaten anything proper today?"

Yuè Líng paused, her smile fading slightly. "I... I had some plums from the garden. But I dropped them when you arrived." She glanced toward the entrance, where the scattered fruits still lay.

Wang Shun's expression shifted to guilt. He had not thought to let her pick them up in his haste to proceed. "Ah, forgive me, Niangniang. I should have allowed you to finish your meal. It was rude of me to interrupt so abruptly." He bowed his head slightly, genuine remorse in his voice. A child consort, starving on garden fruits? This neglect was worse than he had imagined.

Yuè Líng shook her head quickly. "It is all right. They were just plums."

But a moment later, he announced, "Well, before we delve deeper, I must test your skills,

Niangniang. His Majesty wishes to know your foundation. So, you say you can write?"

She nodded positively, her eyes lighting up. "Yes, I can."

Wang Shun prepared a bundle of bamboo slips for her, along with ink and a brush from his satchel. "Very good. Please write your name and where you are from."

Yuè Líng took the tools carefully, her small hands steady as she dipped the brush. She focused on the slips, her tongue poking out slightly in concentration as she formed the characters: "Yuè Líng" and then, hesitantly, "From... nowhere." She had no home to claim, only the slave quarters she had left behind. As she wrote, she reflected inwardly. This is different from my old lessons. Back then, mistakes meant punishment, a switch across my back. Here, Wang Shun corrects gently, without anger. Is this what freedom feels like?

While she was occupied writing, Wang Shun glanced around to ensure she was engrossed. Satisfied, he sneaked quickly to the gate. He beckoned one of the guards, a fellow eunuch, who had accompanied him. "Fetch some proper food immediately," he whispered urgently. "The little lady hasn't eaten in two days. Nothing but garden plums. Hurry!"

The guard paled, his face draining of color at the implication. Without a word, he nodded and rushed off toward the closest kitchen, his robes fluttering in his haste.

Wang Shun returned to Yuè Líng and, with surprise, discovered that she was not jesting. Her writing was above what he would have expected from such a young girl. Neat characters, steady strokes. But the words "From Nowhere" stung in his chest like a quiet tragedy. She had no origin to claim, no family seal or proud lineage. Just those simple, heartbreaking words. He set the slips aside gently, masking his concern.

A few moments later, the guard returned with a plate filled with warm dumplings. Wang Shun offered them to the young lady. He watched as she devoured them with a smile, her small face lighting up with pure joy. He did not interrupt her, allowing her that moment of bliss. The poor child had clearly been starving, and it pained him to see it. But as soon as she finished, he cleared his throat and adopted a stern but kind tone.

"Niangniang," he said, "while I am glad to see you eat with such enthusiasm, a lady of the court must maintain composure, especially when accompanied by a guest. Chew slowly, with small bites. Never rush. Hold your chopsticks gracefully, like this." He demonstrated with an invisible pair. "And always pause to converse or offer your guest first. It shows refinement and respect."

Yuè Líng nodded, her cheeks flushing slightly, but she absorbed the lesson eagerly. In my slave days, eating was hurried, scraps grabbed before they vanished. Now, even meals are an art. I must learn this grace to belong here.

To break the rhythm of instruction, Wang Shun suggested a practical demonstration. "Niangniang, you mentioned practicing the guzheng. Perhaps you could show me a simple melody? It will help me assess your foundation in the arts while we discuss poise during performance."

Yuè Líng's eyes brightened. She led him to a side chamber where an old guzheng rested, dust-free thanks to Aunt Mei's work. She sat gracefully, her fingers plucking the strings with mournful notes that filled the air. As she played, Wang Shun corrected her posture gently. "Keep your back straight, like in the wanfu. Let the music flow without haste." Outside, the crows remained on their perch, their silent gaze unwavering on the scene below.

They continued the lessons till late evening. Etiquette, basic poetry recitation, and a review of her writing. Yuè Líng proved a quick study, her courtesan training giving her an unexpected edge. Wang Shun promised to come back another day, bowing deeply before departing.

As he left the Moon Pavilion, he turned to the guard with a sharp order. "Make sure she gets breakfast in the morning, even if it will be you who delivers it." His face was dark and angry. "I need to speak with the Emperor."

That night, after Wang Shun's departure, Yuè Líng sat alone in the Raven Consort's chamber. The pavilion's silence pressed in once more, heavier now that she had tasted companionship. Faint whispers seemed to echo from the walls, like distant sobs carried on a chill breeze. She hugged her knees, the golden bell in her hair chiming softly as she shivered. "Aunt Mei... please come back," she murmured, before sleep finally claimed her in the eerie quiet.

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The private audience chamber hung heavy with tension. The God Emperor sat upon his jade throne, his expression unreadable at first. Beside him stood the Phoenix Empress, Xiao Jinfeng, her red and gold robes immaculate, her face a mask of wary stillness. Wang Shun knelt before them, concluding his report in a steady voice.

"...And so, Your Majesty, the Moon Consort has been left utterly alone in the Pavilion for two full days. No servants, no supplies beyond what she scavenged from the garden. She is resilient and talented beyond her years, but this neglect is unacceptable. The place is... unnaturally clean, yet she claims only a mysterious 'Aunt Mei' assisted her briefly before vanishing."

The Emperor's face darkened like a gathering storm. His anger swelled immense, causing his Qi to leak forth. This spiritual energy crackled like invisible flames, distorting the air in fiery waves. An overwhelming sensation of dread enveloped the room, like a massive, unseen weight bearing down on all present. It evoked the aura of a supreme being, infusing the space with primal fear that constricted breath and set hearts racing uncontrollably. Both the Empress and Wang Shun felt it pressing upon them, their bodies trembling under the invisible force, as if gravity had intensified to crush their very spirits. Sweat trickled down their spines, cold and unrelenting.

The chamber grew hot, the very stones seeming to tremble under his wrath. "Neglected? My chosen Moon Consort, abandoned like a stray?" His voice thundered, low and dangerous.

The Empress paled, her cold beauty fracturing into genuine fear as she stepped back slightly. "Your Majesty, it is not my fault," she explained quickly, her voice steady but laced with apprehension. "I delegated the matter to my Head Lady-in-Waiting. I instructed her to handle the new arrivals properly. Ensure they were cared for. I would never intend such oversight."

The Emperor's eyes narrowed, his Qi overwhelming the room further. Sweat continued to bead down their spines, but Wang Shun did not flinch for a moment, his resolve unbroken. The Empress, however, trembled visibly, her mind racing with worry for her own safety under the Emperor's ire. The air hummed with power, pressing down like an unseen weight.

"Don't fail me again..." he hissed, the words slicing through the tension like a blade.

Chapter IV

The Moon and the Phoenix

Yuè Líng drifted in uneasy dreams, haunted by the crack of whips from her shadowed past and the distant echo of sobs that seemed to seep from the very walls of the pavilion. The raucous cawing of crows shattered the silence, as if mocking an unseen intruder in the garden below. Her silver eyes snapped open, heart pounding as she adjusted to the faint dawn light filtering through the chamber's silk curtains. The air carried a chill, laced with the faint scent of dew-kissed grass from outside. Her snow-white hair lay tangled across the pillow, the simple undergarments she slept in twisted from restless turning.

The black robes Aunt Mei had provided rested on a nearby table, their silk holding a subtle sheen despite the wear. They had once belonged to the Raven Consort, whose tragedy still whispered through the pavilion like a lingering mist. Yuè Líng paused, a flicker of doubt creasing her brow. The fabric felt timeless, untouched by age, and Aunt Mei's words echoed in her mind; she had spoken of the Mistress as if from fresh memory. How could that be? The question lingered, unanswered, like the faint chills that sometimes brushed her skin in this forsaken place.

"Niangniang, are you there?" Wang Shun's voice drifted from beyond the chamber door, laced with polite concern.

"Y-yes! Just a moment!" Yuè Líng stammered, shaking off the unease. "I-I need to dress."

She slipped into the black silk robes adorned with subtle gold embroidery, smoothing the fabric with hurried hands. A few minutes later, she patted out the stubborn wrinkles as best she could. Drawing a steadying breath, she approached the door with the poise her teacher had instilled. It swung open to reveal Wang Shun, arms crossed, his expression expectant. Yuè Líng executed the wanfu flawlessly: hands clasped before her chest, palms inward, knees bending in a graceful curtsy, back straight, head bowed modestly without dipping too low. The small bell in her hairpin chimed softly with the movement, a delicate sound that cut through the morning quiet.

Wang Shun appraised her with a nod. "A flawless wanfu," he remarked. "Yet your appearance leaves room for refinement." He stepped inside, his gaze sweeping the pristine interior; surprise flickering briefly across his features, though he masked it swiftly. The pavilion gleamed as it had since Aunt Mei's mysterious aid, dust banished and shadows softened. Circling her with a tut, he noted, "The same robes as yesterday? Wrinkled, unladylike, hair uncombed." He shook his head, sighing. "I know it's not your fault, Niangniang, but no one greeted your guest. What is that woman thinking?" The words

hung more as a murmur to himself than a question for her.

"Let's proceed to breakfast, Niangniang. The guard should deliver it soon." Abruptly, the crows' clamor swelled again, a cacophony that seemed to taunt the air itself. "What is this?" he muttered, glancing toward the garden where the black birds perched like silent guardians.

Together, they descended to the courtyard. The grand gates separating the pavilion from the Inner Palace yawned wide. A procession of servants; eunuchs and women of varying ages; streamed in, lining the stone path in two precise rows. In unison, they bowed deeply toward the entrance. Yuè Líng gasped, awestruck. Then she appeared: clad in resplendent red silk embroidered with black and gold phoenixes, flanked by her ladies-in-waiting; the Empress Xiao Jinfeng, whose presence commanded the courtyard like a rising flame clashing with the moon's ethereal glow.

She advanced with regal grace toward Yuè Líng and Wang Shun. He inclined in deference. "Yuè Líng, remember your lessons," he murmured urgently.

Yuè Líng performed the wanfu, dipping her head lower in homage to one of superior rank. She held the pose until the Empress drew near, the bell's soft chime echoing her movements.

"I see Wang Shun has drilled you well," the Empress observed, her laughter muffled behind an exquisite fan matching her attire's hues. She snapped it shut with a flick. "Rise, child. You as well, old man."

Both straightened. "I come personally at the Emperor's behest," she continued, a trace of irritation sharpening her tone. "But first, matters require resolution." With a subtle gesture of her fan, a guard escorted a finely dressed woman forward.

"This is Zhen Zhu," the Empress intoned, a hint of sorrow threading her words. "My Head Lady-in-Waiting since my own arrival in the Palace. I entrusted her with preparing this pavilion and tending to you until settled." Her gaze avoided the sobbing figure. "Yet she failed me."

"No!" Zhen Zhu cried. "I did this for you, my Empress! To teach her a lesson! She is but a fourth-rank consort, yet you were burdened with;"

Her words cut short as the Empress's hand flashed, striking her cheek with the back of her palm. A stunned hush blanketed the pavilion; servants averted their eyes, rigid with tension.

"Silence," the Empress commanded, her voice a blade edged with ice, though her fan trembled faintly in her grip, betraying a storm of disappointment and grief beneath her composure. "Child," she addressed Yuè Líng, her tone softening yet firm. "She merits death for her negligence, but I beg your mercy."

Yuè Líng opened her mouth, but Wang Shun's steady hand on her shoulder stilled her. "Simply accept her plea," he whispered.

Yuè Líng nodded. "If that is your wish, so it shall be," she replied, offering a courteous incline.

The Empress's lips curved in a pained smile as she nodded. With another fan signal, she decreed, "Proceed."

Zhen Zhu was forced to her knees. The guard drew a whip from his belt, lashing it across her back. Her agonized scream pierced the air, raw with pain and despair.

Yuè Líng's eyes widened, memories surging: the sting of switches on her own skin during slave lessons, her cries echoing in dim cellars. Zhen Zhu's wail mirrored those echoes, a desperate plea that twisted Yuè Líng's heart. The Empress's eyes glistened with unshed tears, her fan clenched white-knuckled. As the guard raised the whip anew, Yuè Líng's body acted before thought; she lunged, shielding Zhen Zhu with her own form, eyes squeezed shut, braced for the blow.

The whip cracked against stone instead, the guard's arm veering at the last instant, sweat beading his brow as he stared in horror.

"Yuè Líng!" Wang Shun gasped, terror lacing his voice. "What are you doing?!"

"No!" Yuè Líng shouted. "Don't strike her! She did nothing wrong!" She remained draped protectively, unyielding. In that moment, a faint chill brushed Yuè Líng's skin, like Aunt Mei's cool touch from days before, urging her to stand firm amid the cruelty.

A profound quiet descended. Servants, though bowed, stole glances at the unfolding drama. The crows' cawing rose faintly from the trees, as if in approval.

"Child," the Empress murmured, her voice steadying. "Very well. Remove her and confine her; I shall decide her fate." Only then did Yuè Líng relent, sliding away, her legs buckling like wilted stems as she crumpled to the path.

The Empress approached, extending a hand to help her rise. Once steady, she withdrew two paces. "Allow me to atone differently," she said, executing a profound wanfu; the deep obeisance reserved solely for the Emperor. Gasps rippled through the assembly; one by one, servants prostrated in kowtow, mirroring her gesture of profound thanks.

The guard hauled Zhen Zhu upright. Disbelief etched her features as she beheld the Empress bowing to this girl; an impossibility. Her face drained of color; this was her doing. She offered no resistance as she was led away, but her eyes lingered with a shadowed glint, a silent vow simmering beneath the defeat.

The Empress rose, her composure a fragile veil over streaming tears. "My gratitude, Yuè Líng," she whispered, voice thick yet resolute; she could not weep openly, not under watchful eyes.

Yuè Líng returned the reverence. "Please, this way, Your Highness. Allow me a quieter space for us to converse." She sought to grant the Empress a moment's privacy to regain herself, her bare feet padding softly on the cool stone as she led the way.

The Empress nodded silently and followed, Wang Shun trailing with a bemused shake of his head.

In the guest room, the Empress swiftly recomposed, summoning her attendants with crisp commands to restore the gardens and structures to splendor befitting the Moon Consort. As she directed them; "Ensure the kitchen is fully stocked"; her gaze caught Yuè Líng quietly preparing tea.

"What in heaven's name are you doing, girl?" she inquired, arching a brow.

Yuè Líng turned. "Tea, Your Highness. Uncle Wang taught that esteemed guests merit such welcome."

Wang Shun palmed his face, forgoing correction. The Empress's lips curved in amusement, her voice light yet commanding. "Indeed, Uncle Wang proves an exemplary mentor." Her eyes sparkled with veiled mischief at his expense. "But why prepare it yourself?"

"Your Highness," Wang Shun interjected, "the Moon Consort lacks appointed attendants as yet."

The Empress's expression clouded briefly. "We remedy that today." Yuè Líng, having completed the brew, arranged three porcelain cups; for the Empress, Wang Shun, and herself.

"One more, Niangniang," Wang Shun instructed. "Prepare an extra cup; it's court custom for a poison tester, to ensure safety."

Yuè Líng nodded, adding a fourth, her curiosity piqued but unspoken.

A lady-in-waiting knelt gracefully, lifting the spare cup. She inhaled its aroma, then sipped tentatively under watchful eyes. Yuè Líng watched, puzzled. Moments passed; the attendant rose, bowed to Yuè Líng, and rejoined her peers. Only then did the others partake.

Yuè Líng's confusion lingered. "Niangniang, staring is impolite," Wang Shun chided gently.

Her cheeks burned; she bowed her head. So many rituals were alien; her slave training had prepared her for courtesan graces, not this exalted realm.

"What troubles you, child?" the Empress prompted, her tone cool yet inviting.

Yuè Líng met her gaze properly for the first time. The Empress's beauty was striking; nearing thirty, with flawless skin, emerald eyes, and raven hair framing a face of sharp elegance.

"I-I don't understand," Yuè Líng confessed softly. "These customs... I falter on what to do."

"Allow me, Niangniang," Wang Shun offered. "That was the Empress's poison tester; she ensures every morsel and sip is safe."

"Indeed," the Empress affirmed. "You too shall have one, child. The Palace harbors envy, and loyalty can fracture." A faint whisper seemed to stir from the walls, like the distant sobs Yuè Líng had heard before, a reminder that even in company, unseen eyes watched. Her attendants shifted uneasily. "Zhen Zhu and I shared years of service; her failing reflects mine, not hers alone." Sorrow softened her eyes, tears threatening anew. "She faces exile post-confinement, but lives thanks to you, child."

Their exchange flowed, Yuè Líng sharing her skills and shadowed past at the Empress's gentle probing. Cooks arrived, presenting a refined midday repast: a delicate swiftlet nest soup simmered with savory notes, followed by sesame-crusted chicken alongside crisp stir-fried beans. To Yuè Líng, it was opulence incarnate. As she savored the chicken, her face glowed like moonlight, humming contentedly. Neither elder rebuked her; they allowed this fleeting innocence amid the Palace's shadows.

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After the meal, the Empress requested Yuè Líng to play the guzheng for her. The girl performed a few traditional melodies she had been taught during her courtesan training, her fingers drawing mournful notes from the strings that filled the room like a gentle mist. The Empress was pleased, her emerald eyes softening. "Splendid performance," she said. "The Emperor will be pleased with your skill. Perhaps I will recommend a performance during the Summer Festival?" She said this with a mischievous smile, fanning herself lightly.

Wang Shun coughed to interrupt her schemes. "I am sure Niangniang would be delighted to perform for the God Emperor," he said. "But it might be a good idea to let Yuè Líng catch some fresh air while we discuss certain topics."

The Empress's face became serious. She replied, "Very well. Go, child. See what is happening in your home, how it is coming back to life after such long neglect." She opened her fan and covered her mouth. "While you are there, see if any servant caught your eye. Maybe you will find someone who you will trust with your life? I will have a few recommendations later in the day."

Yuè Líng bowed to the Empress and her teacher, the bell chiming softly, and walked out of the room. She stepped into the garden and sighed loudly. The pressure from sitting with the Empress was overwhelming, a weight that eased only slightly in the open air.

The young consort looked around the garden and saw servants cutting grass, fixing the stone paths, and even repairing the wooden bridge that led to the summer tea pavilion. She wandered barefoot through the overgrowth, the damp earth and blades of grass tickling her soles. People were avoiding looking directly at her, their eyes downcast in deference or fear. The warm sun and smell of cut grass were relaxing, so she did not pay much attention to their reluctance.

Then she heard a muffled scream and laughter coming from the nearby pond. With haste, she moved toward the sound. She spotted three servant girls standing on the edge, laughing. One of them reached with her hand toward a younger servant who was standing in the pond. Her pink hair was wet, covering her face. She reached back as the servants pulled her out.

Did she fall by accident? Yuè Líng thought. But then she witnessed the cruelty of the Inner Palace. As soon as the pink-haired girl was out of the water, she was pushed back in by the girl who had pulled her out, causing another squeak and burst of laughter.

Yuè Líng could not watch it. She rushed toward the pond, her bare feet splashing through the grass, the damp earth cool and familiar under her soles. The girls only heard the chime of the bell from Yuè Líng's hairpin before the Moon Consort herself jumped into the pond. "What the hells?" one of the girls shouted.

The water was cold, seeping through her robes, but that did not stop Yuè Líng from approaching the pink-haired girl. Together, they climbed out of the pond, dripping and shivering.

"What are you doing?" the servant girl who had pushed her demanded. Yuè Líng looked at her with anger. The girl's face paled as she recognized the Moon Consort. She bowed deeply. "Niangniang," she said in a formal wanfu. When she said that, the other girls followed with similar bows.

"What is the meaning of this?" Yuè Líng asked with childlike anger, her voice trembling but firm.

"My apologies, Niangniang. We were just teaching this hornless Wūxuè her place," she explained.

Yuè Líng looked at the pink-haired girl. She was wet from head to toe. In the middle of her forehead were the remains of a broken horn. She was shaking, holding back tears, her red eyes slowly filling with them.

Yuè Líng looked at the bullies in anger. "And you do that by tormenting her?" she asked.

"N-no, Niangniang," the servant replied. "She is a hornless Wūxuè," she said as if that would explain everything. "Even her own clan kicked her out."

Anger welled up in Yuè Líng. She had been a slave, treated like garbage by others, seen as merchandise by her master. But now she was a slave no more. "Leave," Yuè Líng said with a cold voice.

"But Niangniang," the servant protested. The sound of crows filled the air. Both Yuè Líng and the servants looked up. The tree above them was filled with crows, their beady eyes fixed and unnaturally still. Then a few of them launched at the servant girls. They ran screaming, followed by crows pulling at their hair.

Yuè Líng grabbed the pink-haired girl and moved her behind, protecting her from the crows. But none launched at her or the girl. They were just watching in silence, as usual. Slowly, both girls started retreating toward the pavilion, but the crows did not move from the tree after them.

When they reached the safety of the pavilion, Yuè Líng finally faced the pink-haired girl. "You should be all right now," she said. "Are you hurt?"

The pink-haired girl was spooked but shook her head. "Good. Don't worry. I don't think they will try to pick on you again," she said. "The crows gave them a scare." Yuè Líng giggled softly, trying to lighten the moment. But inwardly, her heart ached; this girl, cast out like she once was, reminded her of huddled nights in a cage, whispers of worthlessness echoing in the dark.

The pink-haired girl fell to her knees in a deep bow. "Please forgive me, and them, Niangniang," she said, whimpering. "It was all my fault."

Yuè Líng reached down to her. "Don't apologize," she said. "You did nothing wrong." Her words were awkward, born from her own past pains. "What is your name?" she asked, trying to lift the pink-haired girl.

"Hóng Mèi," she replied, her voice barely above a whisper. Yuè Líng finally pulled her up, but the girl did not look directly at her, her red eyes downcast in habitual wariness.

"That is a beautiful name," Yuè Líng said, lifting Hóng Mèi's chin so they could look each other in the eyes. When their eyes met, Yuè Líng smiled in a childish manner. "Mèi, let's be friends!" she said.

Hóng Mèi's mouth opened, revealing two fangs. Her eyes widened in surprise, then softened as tears welled up. For the first time, she met someone who did not look at her

with hate. "Yes... I would love that," she whispered, a tentative smile breaking through her fear.

The girls spent a few hours sitting on a stone bench, just talking. Well, it was Yuè Líng who talked at first, sharing stories of her own hardships, while Mèi answered the Moon Consort's questions with growing ease. "My clan... they saw my broken horn as a curse," Mèi confided softly, her fangs glinting as she spoke. "But you don't look at me that way." Yuè Líng nodded, her silver eyes shimmering. "I've been cursed too, in my own way." But after some time, the Empress's lady-in-waiting approached Yuè Líng, passing a message from the Empress that she was waiting for Yuè Líng to come back. Hóng Mèi bowed to Yuè Líng deeply with a smile and bid her farewell.

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The Empress and Wang Shun were waiting in the guest room. As soon as Yuè Líng entered, they both looked at her. "What happened to you, child?" the Empress asked. Although her pond bath was a few hours ago, her robes were still damp.

"N-nothing much, Your Highness," Yuè Líng bowed in respect. "I dropped my hairpin into the pond by accident and..." She let the rest stay unspoken.

"Oh really? Is that what happened?" The Empress covered her mouth with her open fan to hide her smile. She knew exactly what had happened; she had eyes everywhere in the pavilion today. "If that is what you are saying, then that is what happened," she concluded. "But look at you. Your dress is ruined. Do you have any other?"

"J-just one that I was given when I came here," she replied.

"I will send seamstresses tomorrow to take your measurements," the Empress said. "I cannot have you parade here in such a state. But now, it is getting late. I need to be going back to my duties. Before we leave, let's pick someone to help you until you select your attendants." She clapped, and her ladies-in-waiting scattered. Some rushed out of the room; others helped her to rise from the couch.

"Shall we?" she asked. It was not a question but a command. She did not wait for Yuè Líng to reply. Yuè Líng followed her, and Wang Shun trailed them. Outside, all the servants who had been working today were lined on the stone path in the courtyard. Three girls were in the front row. Yuè Líng recognized one of them as the girl who had pushed Mèi into the pond.

"Those three are my recommendations. Pick one who will stay with you for the next few days before we make a proper selection for your attendants," she said. It was a tremendous honor to be assigned to a consort like that. Yes, Yuè Líng was a consort of low rank, but she held the title of Moon Consort. Only consorts of the first rank held such titles, elevating Yuè Líng in the hierarchy.

"D-do I need to pick one of them?" Yuè Líng asked. The Empress looked at her with a smile. Wang Shun replied, "No, Niangniang. But if you don't pick someone who has been recommended by the Phoenix Empress, you will challenge her authority," he said with a serious expression.

The Empress said challengingly to Yuè Líng, "Show me, girl, how much you are worth. This is the moment that will set your future in the Inner Palace."

Yuè Líng watched the three girls recommended by the Empress. She had been good to me:

cold, but she had never treated me wrong. Yet fear twisted in her gut; what if this choice sparked the envy Wang Shun warned of? Thoughts whirled in her head. Then a single phrase came back to her mind: "Maybe you will find someone who you will trust with your life?" Words spoken to her by the Empress herself. Someone she could trust with her life.

Yuè Líng rushed forward, passing the three girls and looking around among the servants. The Empress smiled proudly behind her fan. Yuè Líng scanned the courtyard and spotted her: pink hair, too-long sleeves covering her hands, broken horn, and red eyes, looking at her with shock. Yuè Líng grabbed her hand and pulled her forward. "I pick Hóng Mèi as my lady-in-waiting," she said with a smile.

A loud gasp filled the courtyard. The servants whispered among each other. Wang Shun massaged his temples. "This girl is nothing but trouble," he said to the Empress.

She did not look back at him. "That's why I want to see more of her," she replied. She was smiling. Wang Shun looked at her. Her icy expression had melted completely.

"Please stop grinning. You scare me," he said casually to her in a tone that no servant should address the Empress. But she did not react. He was one of the few exceptions who could address her casually when no one was watching.

"So be it," the Empress said loudly. "Hóng Mèi, starting from today, your position has been elevated from court servant to lady-in-waiting. Such an honor happens rarely in the Inner Palace." She addressed the girls, loud enough for everyone to hear her. "I welcome you to the Inner Palace, Yuè Líng, the Moon Consort."

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The word spread through the palace like wildfire. Everyone was talking about the young girl who made the Empress bow to her, a defiant girl who defied the Empress's recommendation, a girl who picked a hornless Wūxuè as her attendant. Some called it stupid, saying that the Empress's wrath would quickly destroy the newly appointed Moon Consort. Others whispered about a wind of change in the Inner Palace, carried like a distant bell chime through shadowed halls. But there were others...

In the Phoenix Pavilion, doors opened to Zhen Zhu's chamber. She was locked here until she would be exiled from the Palace. Zhen Zhu looked up at her faithful sisters: not in blood but in service to the Empress. "She will pay..." Zhen Zhu said. "For everything that she did to me and for humiliating our dear Xiao..." she murmured. The girls left the Phoenix Pavilion under cover of night and disappeared into the western quarters of the Inner Palace before anyone noticed Zhen Zhu was out of her chamber. As they vanished into the shadows, a distant cawing of crows echoed through the halls, like an omen of unrest stirring in the forsaken corners.

To be continued...

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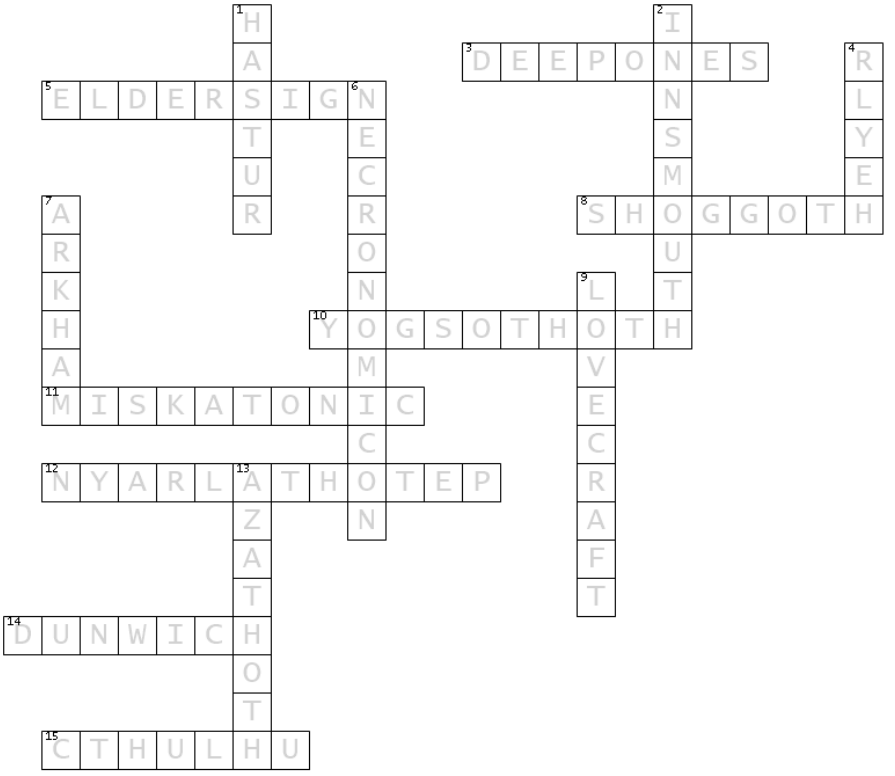

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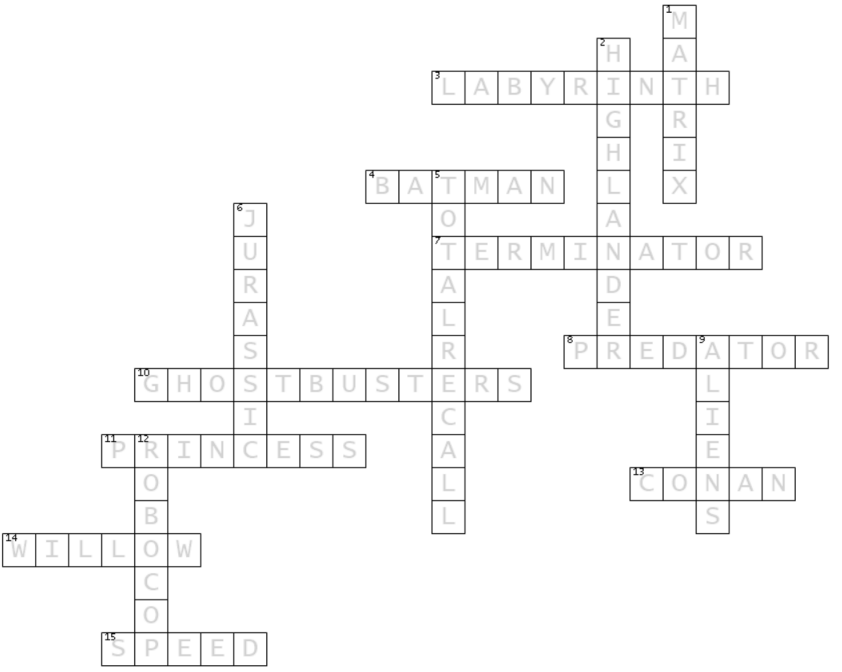

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