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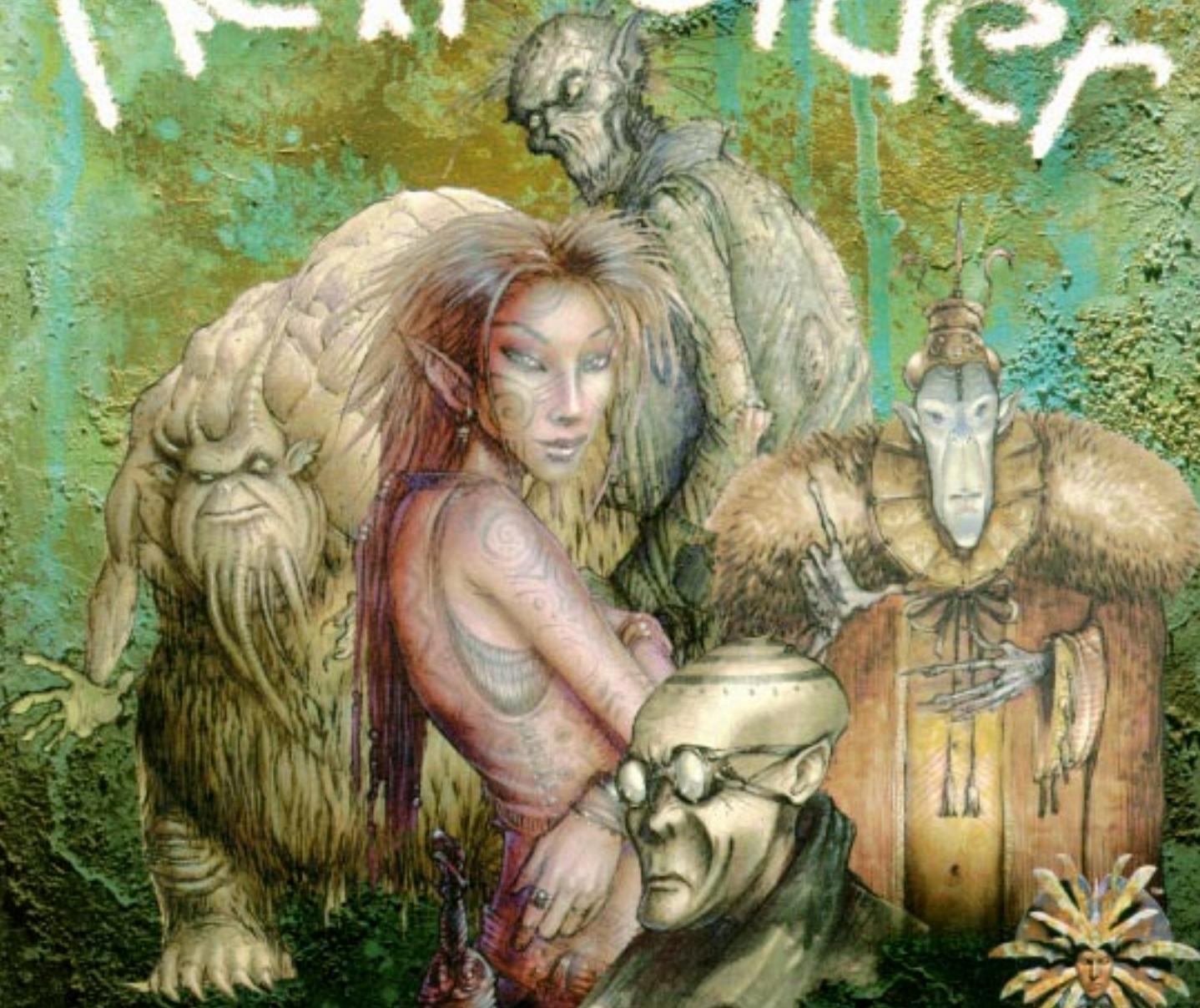
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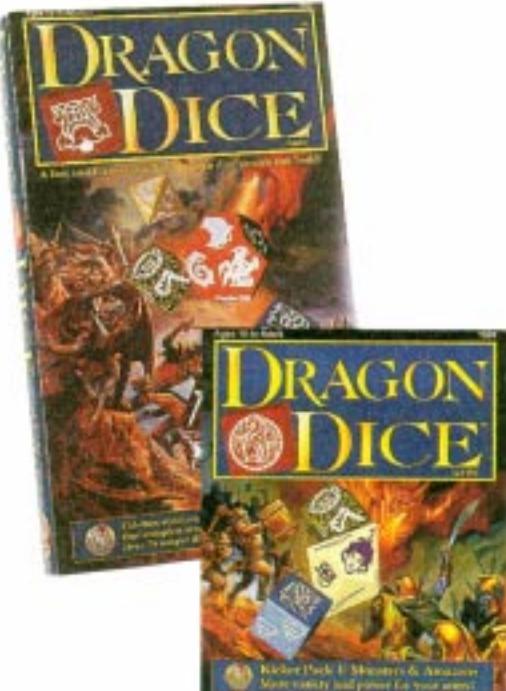
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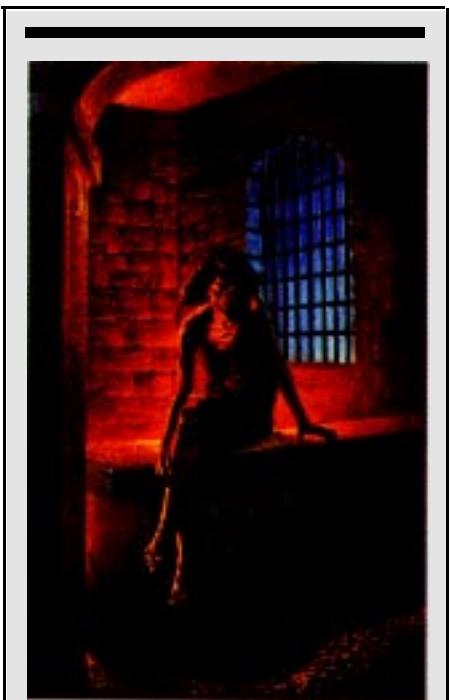
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COVER

This month's cover by West Coast artist Hung Mac was part of his portfolio submission. We felt it was too cool to let it just sit in the file drawer, so it became a most appropriate cover for our Undead issue.

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What did you think of this issue? Do you have a question about an article or have an idea for a new feature you'd like to see? In the United States and Canada, write to: Letters, DRAGON® Magazine, 201 Sheridan Springs Rd., Lake Geneva WI 53147, U.S.A. In Europe, write to Letters, DRAGON Magazine, 120 Church End, Cherry Hinton, Cambridge CB1 3LB, United Kingdom. If you wish your letter to be published, you must sign it. We will not publish anonymous letters. We will withhold your name if you request it.

What's an Armor Class?

Dear Dragon:
I have a problem with my weekly D&D® group. The players want to get out of the D&D world and into the FORGOTTEN REALMS® and other worlds. Being the DM, I'm all for that, but they aren't ready. When we play a normal D&D adventure, they don't understand Armor Class, saving throws, etc. When they do understand, they won't use it.

Justin Bogert
Houston, TX

You have a problem: armor class is pretty basic to the whole game. Perhaps after a few of their favorite characters are killed off or ignoring armor when they should be wearing it might help, but I doubt it. Have you asked them to describe or draw their characters? AC isn't an abstract number: it relates directly to something they are wearing. Once they've made that connection, maybe you can move on. As a last resort, you may have to recruit new players if the ones you've got can't (or won't) learn the rules. Perhaps someone in the group setting a good example might help.

Foreign Mail and SASEs

Dear Dragon:
You ask readers to send you a SASE. I don't know how to proceed with a SASE since I do not live in the United States.

Benoit Chassé
Montreal, Canada

I'm glad you asked. Anyone in a foreign country can go to the local post office and request International Reply Coupons (IRCs) which they can enclose with the unstampeded self-addressed envelope. By international agreement, one IRC is the rough equivalent of a domestic first-class stamp in the country using it. What that means is that we usually recommend two IRCs if you want a reply to reach you before the turn of the century.

More Books to Buy?

Dear Dragon:
Is it really necessary to buy the new editions of the *Player's Handbook* and *DUNGEON MASTER® Guide* if I already own the last printings?

Sean O'Dell

We get asked that one a lot. No, the old printing — as long as it is 2nd Edition — is fine. The material is the same; it was just reorganized and given a facelift.

The Truth About Armor

Dear Dragon:
Alison Brooks' article "Out of Armor" (issue #219) certainly holds some interesting points. Unfortunately, it is centered around the outdated notion that armored knights were as helpless as turtles. This is not only laughable (why on earth would anyone venture onto a battlefield helpless?), but is rooted in latter-day speculation. Drawings cited to support the turtle myth frequently originated centuries after the age of plate.

One passage in particular fired my blood: "... in fact, knights in full plate armour used hoists or ramps to mount their horses, because they literally could

not swing up into the saddle."

Museum Replicas, Ltd., a supplier of battle-ready weapons and armor, printed the following in a recent catalogue. It concerns a knight's typical exercises:

"He leapt onto a horse without placing foot in stirrup, fully armed.... Placing one hand on the saddle-pommel of a war horse and the other near the horse's ears, seizing the mane, he leapt from the ground through his arms and over the horse. Next, between two high walls an arm's length apart, he would climb to the top and down again, simply using the strength of his legs and arms—fully armed."

Their source? The Marshall of France, 14th century.

We also have proof you can see today. A single afternoon at an SCA event or Renaissance festival can provide a world of information.

Laurence MacNaughton, IV
Mansfield Center, CT

Drinking Redux

Dear Dragon:
Rev. James Wyatt brought up interesting points about drinking in the letters column in issue #220.

The main issue concerning alcohol consumption is responsible drinking.

Is there a moral difference between a 17-year-old and a 25-year-old who drank responsibly even if the drinking age is 21? There may be a legal difference, but there is not a moral one.

Age is not a definition of responsibility. While there may be statistically more irresponsible drinkers in the younger age bracket, it is not proof of an individual's lack of responsibility.

Andrew Norris
Knoxville, TN



Aak Oops!

In DRAGON Magazine issue #219, the authors of "Run! A Guide to Heroic Flight" and "Out of Armor" were inadvertently misidentified on the contents page.

"Run! A Guide to Heroic Flight" was written by Daniel Mark Vyleta, and "Out of Armor" was by Alison Brooks. DRAGON Magazine apologizes to the two authors, and the two gentlemen who were identified as the authors.

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"DEATH, NATURE'S NEMESIS, CREATED HIS OWN RACES TO WREST CONTROL OF THE ELEMENTAL POWERS. THE MOREHL, OR LAVA ELVES, WORSHIPED FIRE AND DESTRUCTION. THE TROGS, A GOBLIN RACE, SPRANG FROM EARTH AND CORRUPTION. FROM THE INSTANT OF THEIR CREATION, FIERCE CONFLICT ENVELOPED THE WORLD. HORDES OF SELUMARI, VAGHA, MOREHL, AND TROGS SWEPT ACROSS THE LAND IN ENDLESS BATTLE, USING THEIR ELEMENTAL MAGIC TO WREAK HAVOC AND SUMMONING DRAGONS TO TURN THE TIDES OF WAR."

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Wisconsin Dreamin'

As associate publisher Brian Thomsen said in his editorial in issue #218, "change can be good." I would like to hope so.

It has been less than a month since I was furiously packing box after box of books in my apartment in California's Silicon Valley. A whirlwind courtship with TSR had produced an offer to leave sunny California to take up an editorial position working on the RAVENLOFT® and DRAGONLANCE™ lines. At the time, I was associate editor of a cutting-edge-technology computer magazine; but I wasn't interested in computer chips or application-specific integrated circuits (ASICs), and using the word "architecture" as a verb every day (as in, "the device is architected with a 1.5µm CMOS technology...") grated on my nerves. I needed a change.

Moving from the San Francisco Bay area to a small rural community is a system shock, but I made the saving throw. Those living in this area in need of a mall fix must go to Racine or Kenosha, I have found. If one wants theatre (not theater, mind you; *theatre*) Milwaukee or Chicago, 45 minutes and an hour away, respectively, are the destinations. Exotic, ethnic cuisine is not a Lake Geneva specialty, but we do have one fine coffee spot in Kyle's Top of the Bean downtown. One must cope, and adapt.

Some changes come quickly. I was a RAVENLOFT editor for roughly six hours when I was called downstairs by the Powers That Be and asked if I would be interested in editing DRAGON® Magazine. After three picoseconds of careful thought, I said yes, and moved into a game-lined office.

The TSR offices are great, but it took me two weeks to learn where some people were. Wandering the mazes that are Cube City (upper and lower), I finally under-

stood how this company's signature product, focusing on mazes and labyrinths, came about. My own office is on a corner in what we call the French Quarter. No one will tell me quite why we call it the French Quarter, but I suspect it has something to do with cheap booze, spicy food, and lots of both.

Working with all these creative people is a thrill, but gaming with them can be stressful. One of my favorite games is SPELLFIRE™. There are people here with half a dozen different, specially tuned decks, one of which they will choose depending on whether they want to squash you right away like the bug you are or slowly drag your fate out to an hour or more of torture before the inevitable smutching. And try playing DRAGON DICE™ (my newest addiction) with people who created the thing. Lester Smith tells me he regularly has people come up to him claiming to have created The Unbeatable Strategy; and then he calmly sets about destroying their best laid plans, sending them away with their tails between their legs. What chance do mere mortals have against his like?

There are quite a few different AD&D® campaigns going on, too, and I'm looking forward to lunches in the games library, where playtesting is part of the job. Gee, ma, they *pay us* for this... really.

I have been working most closely with David Gross, editor of DUNGEON® Adventures, and our editorial Jill-of-all-trades Michelle Vuckovich; both have been showing me the ropes here since my predecessor, Wolfgang "The Sexiest Man On Earth™" Baur, departed before I arrived. Art director Larry Smith's patience with a clueless new editor during his deadline crunch phase is amazing.

Another change here in the French Quarter is the addition of Pierce "the

habanero king" Watters as editor-in-chief of TSR periodicals. Pierce is going to be overseeing both DRAGON Magazine and DUNGEON Adventures, and dealing with all the dull, corporate things, allowing Dave and me to actually put magazines together instead of doing meetings all the time. What a guy...

It's a rush to sit in the chair of the editor of DRAGON Magazine; ever since I was a kid I've wanted to be here. Toto, this isn't Kansas; it's the Emerald City. I still remember being a 16-year-old fantasy and SF fan playing my first D&D® game back with the old white boxed set. Anyone out there remember DRAGON's old "melting letters" logo, *Strategic Review*, and the *Judge's Guild Journal*? Those were the days. There were fewer rules, but more chaos. Now we have options galore to choose from. Still got the chaos, though,

Yes, change can be good.

More changes are coming for DRAGON. I can't be too specific now, but I can suggest that you Watch This Space.

One thing that will never change is that, as always, we are interested in your opinions. Drop us a line at Letters, DRAGON Magazine, 201 Sheridan Springs Rd., Lake Geneva, WI 53147, or e-mail us at tsr.mags@genie.geis.com.

Oh... for those of you who keep writing in and asking, TSR *still* stands for Tactical Studies Rules. Hey, not *everything* has to change.

It is a new age for heroes beneath the crimson sun, a time for the best and bravest to step forward to shape the destiny of Athas and help save our dying world. • After a decade of turmoil, even nature seems to revile us. Earthquakes tear the land asunder. Revolution rages like wildfire across the Tyr Region. Far to the north, the alien tri-kreen empire rises, ready to invade. To the south, in the obsidian wasteland, the ground trembles with the emergence of the undead. With the coming of each day, new dangers appear. merely the pangs Athas looms With weapons of shields of reptile m'kallot hide, and minds, we heroes must stop the chaos.



DARK • SUN

From lands once thought to be nothing more than legends – and we must seek help from quarters not dreamed of in the past. • This new age may be a dark time, but our hope springs from the well of victory, for the Dragon and his sorcerer-kings have been destroyed, showing us that we can make a difference in our savage world beneath the Dark Sun.

The salvation of Athas promises to be no easy task.

—The Wanderer

The New-DARK • SUN Dawns
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It All Started With Tarzan

By Douglas Niles

Tales of fantasy, science fiction, espionage, military heroics, westerns, mystery, and murder—pretty much the whole gamut of adventure—have lined my bookshelves since I became old enough to choose my own reading material. Edgar Rice Burroughs quickly became my favorite author.

I especially liked the Tarzan stories. Those melodramatic adventures, despite (or perhaps because of) their setting in an Africa that never existed, are really fantasy tales. From cities of lost legionnaires and Atlanteans to colonies of ant men (and magical potions to reduce Tarzan to diminutive size) to the fabulous hollow world environment of Pellucidar, the settings and events portray a broad array of heroes, villains, and treasures. The 20-plus novels of the Tarzan series have remained in my library, well-thumbed and replaced numerous times.

Writing my own stories (each with an adventure theme) became a hobby starting in about eighth grade. I found it very gratifying to tell a tale that provoked an emotional reaction in a reader. Lacking any avenue for publication, I turned these manuscripts over to friends and family members and was encouraged by a great deal of constructive feedback.

A change in the kinds of stories I enjoyed occurred very suddenly, with a single, memorable book. An older friend gave me a copy of Frank Herbert's Dune, and for the first time I grasped the full, magnificent sweep of epic adventure. My interests turned toward Tolkien, Lloyd Alexander, and a whole host of science fiction authors.

At the same time, I discovered wargaming, cutting my proverbial teeth on several Avalon Hill oldies. My brother Don and I spent a lot of time over the *Luftwaffe** and *France 1940** boards, though we had little exposure to the scope of the hobby beyond those games (which Don had received as gifts).

Though it seems ironic when I look back, I went to college and forgot about writing and wargaming as hobbies. I continued to read and enjoy fantasy, but my time at the typewriter was devoted to more pragmatic pursuits, like long letters

to my girlfriend and the occasional term paper. I blinked once or twice, and suddenly I was a high school teacher; those stories from my own adolescent days were just a pleasant memory of something I used to enjoy.

One hears, often, of the difference a single teacher can make in a student's life. In my case, it was a single student who made a great difference in the course of my future. Her name was Heidi Gygax, and her father had invented this game...

Actually, I didn't know much about Heidi (except that she did "A" work in speech class) until she came into my room one afternoon with an excuse to miss school the following day. The reason given on the excuse was "Interview with *People* magazine." Now, in Clinton, Wisconsin, interviews with nationally distributed publications were far from daily occurrences, so this aroused my curiosity. When I asked why she was going to be interviewed, she explained that the magazine was doing a feature on her dad because he was the inventor of the DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® game.

I had heard of the game, but I'd never seen or played it; I mentioned to Heidi that I thought it sounded kind of interesting. The day after the interview, she brought me a brand-new copy of the old blue-boxed Basic Set, thus ensuring her grade of an A for the semester (just kidding). Anyway, I believe that was a Wednesday. By Friday I had the rules read, a group of friends invited over, and a dungeon ready to run.

That was sometime in 1979, if my memory serves me correctly. A fantastic night of adventure gaming began a campaign that lasted several years. Some of the characters from the very first night, such as my best friend's thief Bonzo, and my wife Chris's cleric Guida, lasted the entire time. (In fact, Guida survives, at least in name, in the person of our cat, who has lived to the ripe old age of 17.)

Before that school year was over, I had started a campaign with some students who met around my desk after school was out. We drew some raised eyebrows from the principal, but we managed to have a lot of fun. (One of those students, by the

way, is now a teacher in his own right; I run into him every year at the GEN CON® Game Fair.)

With several D&D® campaigns going, I found myself with a delightful new hobby, and (as DMs are wont to do) I devoted a lot of time to designing campaigns, drawing maps, and inventing encounters. Still, simply playing the game didn't seem to be enough. One day during a summer vacation, after I'd been playing for a couple of years, I pulled my typewriter out of the basement, dusted it off, and wrote the prologue to a fantasy novel. It was fun, so I kept going, writing chapter after chapter, watching with a kind of detached amazement as the pages piled up beside me.

In retrospect, of course, that's not the best way to go about writing a novel—in fact, the story that resulted wasn't fit for publication, though a few elements (such as a bard, a hound, and a horse) went on to show up in *Darkwalker on Moonshae*. But, for me, playing the D&D game opened up a desire to create, to become a storyteller—a desire that had lain dormant for quite a few years.

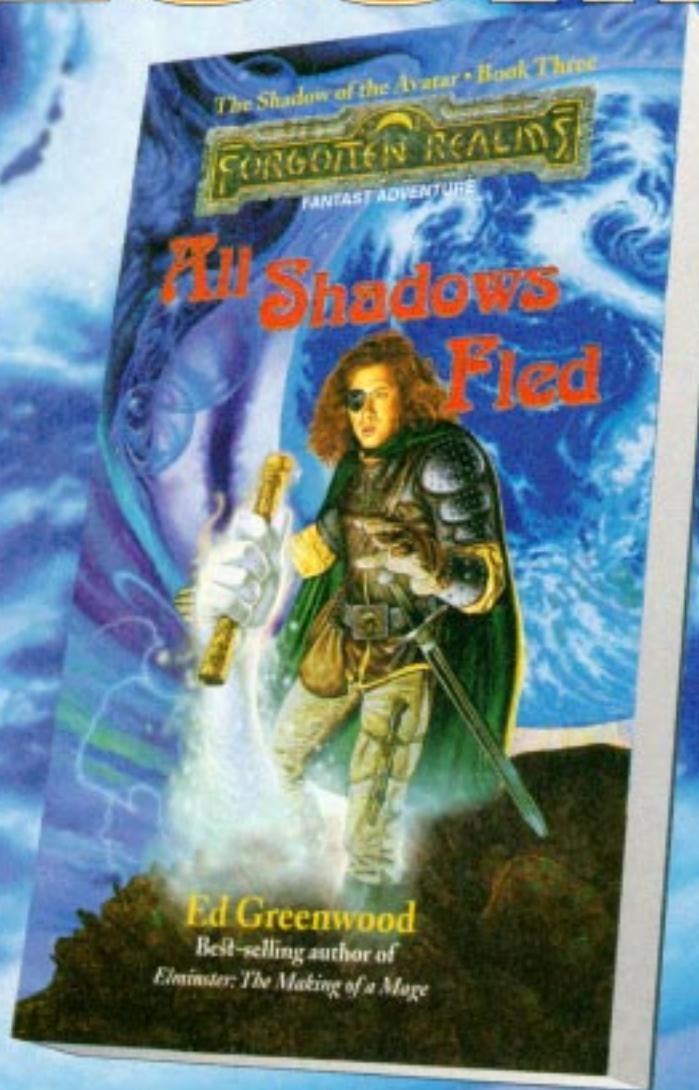
Finally, in the autumn of 1981, with the encouragement of a friend who'd gone to work for this very magazine, I tucked my unfinished manuscript under my arm and went over to the TSR buildings to apply for a job as a game designer. After five successful interviews, I was hired, joining the design staff in January of 1982.

I've often wondered what course my life might have taken if I'd taught a different subject in a different school—or even if Gary Gygax had been interviewed by *People* during a different semester. I'd like to think that I would have discovered the game on my own, and that my career would have proceeded along a similar path. But who knows?

All I can do is take the chance offered by this forum and say, "Thanks, Heidi!"

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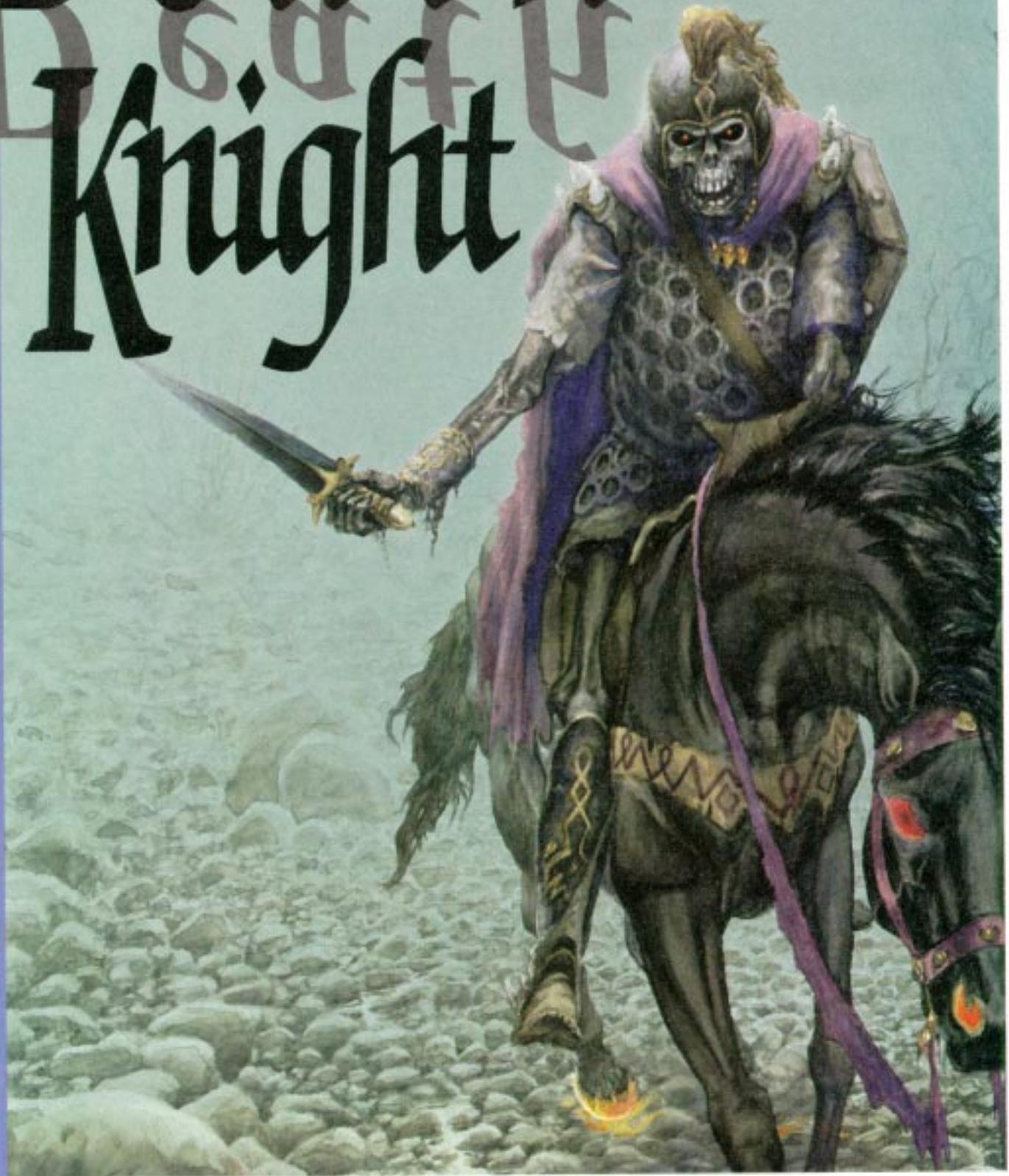


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The Death Knight



Inject a little life into your campaign

by Ed Stark

Artwork by Robert Klasnich

"As you force the door to the tomb open, dust and cobwebs blow into your faces."

"I hold up my cloak to ward it off!"

"I hold my breath!"

"I turn away and close my eyes!"

"Okay, okay. The dust and cobwebs don't hurt you, and the stale air from inside the tomb starts to dissipate. You push the door inward, slowly but firmly, and its ancient hinges groan —"

"I pull out some oil and splash it on the hinges!"

"I ready my crossbow! I'm also ready to throw a torch in the room!"

"Remember — we're not stepping inside the door! We're pushing it open from outside!"

"Fine. The door's open. Inside, you see dust and cobwebs covering two large mounds. Gold and silver, only partially covered by the dust, peek out through the cracks in the cobwebs. There appears to be a body lying on top of each of the piles —"

"I'm throwing some oil on the nearest pile!"

"My torch follows it, buddy! Oh, and I've still got my crossbow ready!"

"I pull out my holy symbol and peek out between the two fighters!"

"Good. Fine. The oil splashes on both piles, and the cobwebs catch fire easily. Old garments and death shrouds burn away, and you see gold and silver underneath. You also see the bodies of two large warriors, covered in ancient armor and clutching mighty swords. They are skeletal—any remnants of flesh left on their bones has been burned a way."

"All right—undead!"

"I put away my crossbow—it's no good versus skeletons."

"Hah! Don't worry about these skeletons, boys—I'm 4th level! They're going bye-bye as they start to move!"

"Right. And move they do. The body on the right stands up clutching a two-handed sword. It swings it once, as if to make ready, while the other pulls a morning star and a shield out from under its feet. Both are moving fluidly, as they were once practiced warriors."

"Yeah, yeah. C'mon, let's start counting the gold."

"Do I see anything that looks magical?"

"I hold up my holy symbol. Begone, foul creatures! Back to the sleep of death!"

"Nice. They don't seem impressed. In fact, they seem so unimpressed that one strides forward and points at the fighter looking over its pile of gold. The other one doesn't seem nearly as dramatic—it steps forward and takes a swing at the thief."

"Wait a minute! I thought you said these were skeletons!"

"Yeah! What do you mean it swings at me? Skeletons are slow! I'd have plenty of time—"

"Hold it! I turn skeletons automatically at 4th level! These can't be—"

Silence.

"Death knights! Aaaah!"

Are you up to your armpits in nameless undead? Are low-level encounters with the spawns of evil becoming predictable and tiresome? If you hear one more player joke "Brains, we want brains..." when your supposedly horrific necromantic creations shamble forth to do battle, are you going to scream?

Well, then, inject a little *death* into your campaign.

A death knight, to be specific.

The Death Knight as NPC

Originally found only on the world of Krynn, death knights pervade the planes and worlds of the AD&D® game like, well, undead warriors out for blood. They do battle with the forces of good and evil alike, pursuing their nightmarish destinies

on their own terms. They make your game a little more interesting in the process.

The NPC death knight described in this article is based on the "Death Knight" entry in the *MONSTROUS MANUAL™* tome for the AD&D game. That book features the "basic" death knight—a powerful, interesting adversary for the heroes in its own right, and a good place to start with this terrifying new NPC class.

Creating the Death Knight

All death knights were once proud and able warriors, and their statistics reflect this. Even the most inexperienced death knight must have had *some* ability before it died, or it would not have been made a death knight in the first place. Incompetence is not the same as true evil, after all (though it may sometimes seem like it).

As a result, death knights seldom have *any* ability scores below 10. The following chart shows how to determine a death knight's basic abilities.

| Characteristic | Die Roll |
|----------------|----------|
| Strength | 18+d100* |
| Constitution | 14+1d4 |
| Dexterity | 12+1d6 |
| Intelligence | 8+1d10 |
| Wisdom | 8+1d10 |
| Charisma | 10+1d8** |

* The death knight's Strength may improve (see below).

** Living beings may or may not find the death knight horrific in appearance, but there is no denying its presence or power of command.

All death knights are evil in alignment. Almost all are chaotic evil, but a few (10%) are able to resist the chaotic pull of undeath and stay either lawful (30%) or neutral (70%) evil.

Death knight NPCs seldom start out at 1st level. Whatever evil force creates them usually "rewards" them with power to reflect the evil might they had in life. And, because the death knight is an intelligent and fairly independent creature, it can advance in level after its creation.

Death knights use the same XP table as rangers and paladins, roll ten-sided dice for hit points, and have the same rules for proficiencies and weapon specialization as warriors. Their THAC0s are the same as for warriors of their level, though many death knights specialize in their chosen weapons and, therefore, gain certain bonuses.

Death knights make saving throws as either warriors or priests, whichever save is better. They have no level limits, though

death knights over 9th level are extremely rare (thank goodness!).

Unlife Abilities

The evil that creates and motivates a death knight rewards its servant with certain special abilities. All death knights have the following characteristics:

- When a death knight performs an act of pure, unmitigated, imaginative evil (like corrupting a lawful good character and convincing him to take evil actions), it gains +10% to its Strength. But with each such act, it becomes more and more difficult for the death knight to gain another bonus. Thus, death knights with high Strength bonuses are extremely inventive in their evil. The Strength incentive inspires them to new lows in evil. (There are rumors that some death knights, by achieving acts of unspeakable horror and depravity, have actually advanced their undead Strength *beyond* the 18/00 limit and up to 19 or 20.)

• Unlike most other undead, death knights cannot be turned by a priest of any mythos or level. Death knights can be dispelled by a *holy word* spell, however, and this one weakness makes them hate and fear all good priests.

• Each death knight gains a magic resistance equal to 30% plus 5% per level of experience. A 4th-level death knight has a 50% magic resistance, while a 9th-level death knight resists magic at 75%. However, no death knight may have a magic resistance higher than 95%.

• All death knights involuntarily radiate *fear* in a 5' radius. This sometimes makes their dealings with the living much more interesting.

• Death knights can use any magical items not prohibited to fighters. Some death knights (who were multi- or dual-classed in life but lost those abilities in undeath) can use wizard (10%) or priest (15%) items as well. No death knight can use a potion or item that must be ingested, since it has no natural bodily functions and cannot eat, drink, or breathe, even if it desired.

• The force of evil that creates a death knight often provides it with magical weapons, armor, and other equipment it can use in the fight against good. The most basic magical item a death knight usually has is a magical sword or other weapon.

• Every death knight has a 10% chance per level of gaining a roll on the table below. For example, if you create a 5th-level death knight, check five times to see if it gains a magical weapon; once at 10%, then 20%, 30%, 40%, and finally 50% to reflect the five opportunities the knight has to gain such a weapon. Swords are listed, but feel free to substitute other weapons with corresponding powers.

• A death knight's magical weapon is not acquired in the manner of other such items. The weapon is usually placed where the death knight will find it only if he commits a terrible, evil act. Once the death

knight has rolled successfully for a special weapon, he can never roll again on the following table, even if he loses his weapon.

| Roll | Death Knight's Weapon |
|-------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1 | <i>Long sword</i> +2 |
| 2 | <i>Two-handed sword</i> +3 |
| 3 | <i>Two-handed sword</i> +4 |
| 4 | <i>Short sword of quickness</i> |
| 5 | <i>Short sword of dancing</i> |
| 6 | <i>Short sword of life stealing</i> |

Experience Before and After Death

As mentioned above, living warriors who become death knights retain some of their experience and abilities, depending on how evil they were in life and how terrible the force of evil is that creates them. For example, Lord Soth, the most famous (if not most powerful) death knight of all, murdered his wife so that he could continue an affair with an elf maid. The fact that Lord Soth was supposedly an honorable Knight of Solamnia made this an even more terrible crime, and it "earned" him great power at the beginning of his death knight "career."

It is unlikely that any force of evil, no matter how weak or powerful, would create a death knight at less than 4th level—except as an extraordinary punishment for a warrior who once fought against evil but finally succumbed. Begin your death knight NPC at the lowest experience total possible for the level desired, and let it progress using the ranger/paladin XP chart in the *Player's Handbook*.

Remember, death knights use the same rules for proficiencies and specialization as living warriors, so determine their abilities along those lines.

As do some living characters, death knights earn more abilities as they achieve higher levels of experience:

- At **4th level**, a death knight radiates *fear* in a 5' radius, and it can cast *detect magic* and *detect invisibility* at will.
- At **5th level**, it can cast *dispel magic* twice per day.
- At **6th level**, it can cast *wall of ice* at will.
- At **7th level**, it can cast one of the following spells, once per day: *power word stun*, *power word kill*, or *power word blind*.
- At **8th level**, it can cast *symbol of fear* and *symbol of pain* once per day.
- At **9th level**, it can cast *fireball* once per day.

All of the death knight's magical spells function at twice its own level of ability, to a maximum of 20th level. For example, a 2nd-level death knight casts spells as a 4th-level caster.

Companions of Evil

Upon achieving 9th level, a death knight becomes an extraordinary force of evil in its own right. It begins to radiate dread

and undeath wherever it goes, and other undead sense and seek out the source of the evil. The death knight attracts undead followers and allies that it can use to hatch and execute its schemes.

Undead Followers

The followers of the death knight include skeletons, zombies, ghouls, ghosts, wights, and other low-intelligence undead that may be wandering around the DM's chosen world. These creatures feel the evil in the death knight and rise from their resting places, wandering by twilight and darkness toward the death knight's abode, knowing only that they must serve a power greater and more evil than their own.

For every month that a death knight spends in a particular area, it attracts 1d20 undead followers of this type. Many death knights actually loathe these followers and either assign them menial or pointless tasks (like digging a hole through the earth or carrying water from the sea to an adjoining river) to get them out of the way, or send them on suicide missions against more powerful foes-like walled towns or armed citadels. The undead respond without question and obey the death knight; that's all they can contemplate doing.

But some death knights use their followers to set up a gruesome parody of a living court. Inside a death knight's castle, zombies and skeletons act as pre-programmed servitors, jugglers, and ghastly courtiers, playing out roles the death knight sets for them. They act out plays, fight duels, and guard the walls, all as if they were living, breathing men and women in a high court of the land.

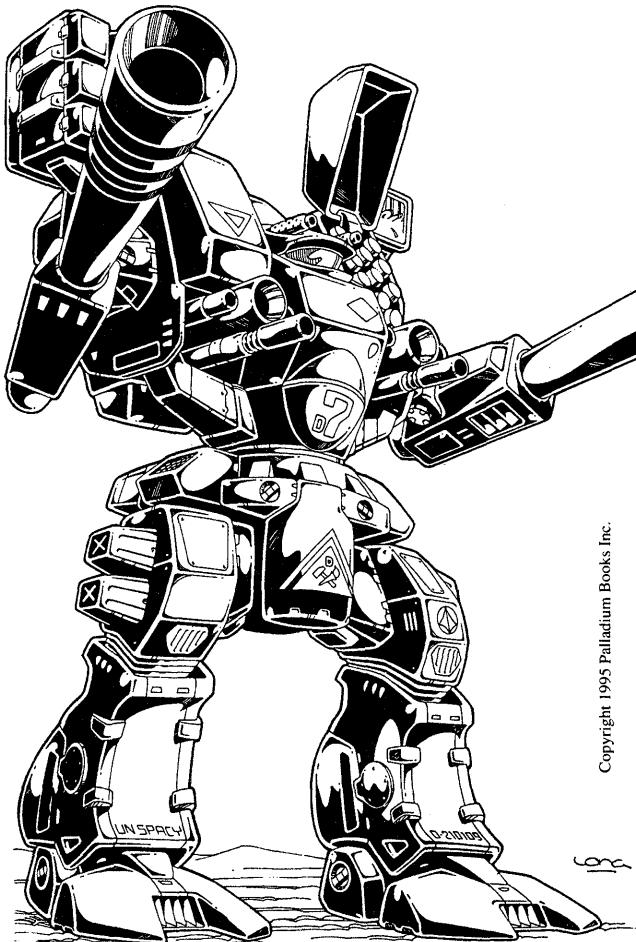
The most common use a death knight has for its undead followers is to disturb the living. The death knight uses its minions to raid villages, carry off the living, and wipe out caravans. The death knight has no concern for its own losses—more undead find it every month. It is fortunate that the chaotic nature of most death knights makes them feel this way; if they merely waited a few months or years, they could build unstoppable armies of the dead.

Undead followers who must normally check morale do not do so when following a death knight. Perhaps this is because the death knight is such a charismatic leader, or, more likely, it is because the undead innately fear the wrath of the death knight more than any other possible fate.

Undead Allies

Once per month the death knight has a chance to attract a powerful undead ally such as a lich, vampire, skeleton warrior, or other creature. This chance is equal to 5% per level of the death knight. The ally arrives at the death knight's lair as a possible servitor, master, or partner in evil, depending on the death knight's power and prestige.

For example, a newly arrived death knight could attract a powerful lich that



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would attempt to subvert it and force the death knight to do its will, resulting in a battle between the two creatures. Most likely, however, the force of evil that controls the death knight keeps the two from becoming deadly enemies, and they work together (at least at first) to plague the living. Once a death knight has attracted an undead ally, it will not attract another until the first has departed or been destroyed. It continues to attract undead followers, however.

The Lair of the Death Knight

Death knights can and do exist anywhere. They usually try to make their abode in undeath mimic the abode they had, or wanted to have, in life—if they do not still possess that lair, that is. But a death knight's strange nature wars with its desires, and the holding becomes a house of horror soon enough.

All death knights "remember" being great warriors and, possibly, lords in life. They seldom build castles or palaces, but they are happy to take them over after putting their occupants to the sword. On rare occasions, death knights construct their own castles, and these tend to be horrors of impossible architecture and torture, maintained only by the evil will of the death knight and the efforts of its undead followers.

The interior of a death knight's lair smacks of incongruity. All the floors and furnishings in a given room may be old and covered in dust and cobwebs—except for a vase full of fresh, red roses that seem to thrive in the dark, dank atmosphere. Or a wall might be covered by moth-eaten tapestries, majestic, sad banners from battles long lost or won—and the freshly killed body of a cleric, pinned to the wall with a spike through his chest. Something old, something new, something bloody, something blue—death knights lead the undead with their "fashion statements."

As a result of this strange life-and-death juxtaposition, hirelings and henchmen (and other NPCs) who venture into a death knight's lair automatically lose two ranks from their morale. The bizarre horror and twisting terror of the lair strike fear into even the bravest and most loyal souls.

Building the Death Knight

Begin with the living character. Who was he (or she)? What order of honor and goodness did he serve? What heroic deeds made his later fall so tragic and his betrayal so complete? How has he made himself so infamous since becoming undead? The following is an example of a death knight you can use to make your world darker and more deadly

Lady Jane Restfield, a.k.a. "Bloody Jane the Damned"

Lady Jane Restfield once served the forces of order and goodness with bright steel and an even brighter soul. A paladin, she fought to keep evil at bay and bring goodness and fair play to all the corners of her world. She numbered among the Twelve Knights of the Golden Realm, and she was chief in their order when darkness fell.

It began with an attack on her family. It was not a physical attack, oh, no—Lady Jane and the Restfields could handle any battle an enemy brought to them. Two of the three Restfield sisters (Lady Jane included) had distinguished themselves at the Battle of Broken Lances, and Jane's third sister, Antonia, was a wizardess without peer.

The attack was slander. First, Antonia was accused of dabbling in dark magic and forbidden lore. The family's own investigators, employed to clear the young woman's name, found evil tomes hidden among her belongings. Though Antonia swore she'd never seen or used them before, doubt began to grow.

Then Lady Jane's second sister was killed. That would not be dishonorable, but her body was found in a tavern of ill repute, a knife in her back and a tankard in her hand. Though her own retainers swore that she'd been nowhere near the tavern that night and that they'd never seen her drink a drop of ale in her life, the body (and the evidence) was plain.

Amidst all the scandal, Lady Jane strove to distinguish herself and shield her family. She became more aggressive in battle and won the nearly impossible Siege of Hightower almost single-handed. But when rumors of bribery and dishonorable battle practices shrouded even that victory in shadow, Jane found herself in despair.

No one knows what pushed Jane over the edge. Perhaps it was her mother's apparent suicide, or Antonia's lapse into madness. Whatever the cause, one day Lady Jane killed an entire audience of courtiers who had come to demand her presence at a trial of honor, and she rode off into the night.

The next time anyone saw "Bloody Lady Jane," she had changed dramatically. Her skin, once white and clear, was now bleached and gaunt to the bone. Her eyes were hollow and her beautiful, raven tresses were gray and brittle. She was undead.

Lady Jane the Damned, as the people of the Golden Realm call her, rode down on the estate of her birth with an army of undead. She slew the groundskeepers and those of her distant family who still inhabited the place, and she butchered all who came to fight her off. Now she holds court in that villa of the damned, content to sing of her terrible betrayal and expedition into unlife only so long as no one approaches her gates. If anyone ventures onto the lands of Bloody Lady Jane, they are never seen again . . . *Alive*.

Adventure Suggestions

Death knights come from anywhere and can go anywhere. Though they tend to be territorial, inhabiting places that remind them of their previous lives, a few wander the land almost like revenants, seeking some lost meaning for their undead lives.

Most death knights are not motivated by a hatred for the living but by a loathing for their own horrible existence. While no death knight would ever succumb to destruction voluntarily, they resent all those who have and cherish life, since they, at some point, despaired and embraced evil and unlife (consciously or not).

As a result, death knights exist to torment the living and sorely test the valorous. They desire to prove that they made the only choice possible to them during their lives by continually corrupting the good and noble and bringing them down to their level of evil. A death knight that succeeds in corrupting a truly good individual does not experience bliss or triumph, however. Something in its makeup forces it to loathe even *that* victory, and the death knight usually destroys anyone who succumbs to its evil.

Death knight adventures should be centered around cleverly woven traps and hard choices. For example, it would be characteristic for a death knight to kidnap the entire family of a good character and threaten to torture and kill those innocents, while at the same time sending its undead legions and allies against a village the PC is sworn to protect. The PC has time to save only one group, his family or the village—which will it be? If the death knight has its way, the PC's choice is always the wrong one.

Sometimes, death knights hatch even less straightforward schemes. Kidnapping and torture are always good motivations, and the death knight seems to have an uncanny ability to manipulate PCs into doing what it wishes. It might kidnap a loved one or loyal retainer and force the PC to "prove" his valor by fighting monsters, performing quests, and eventually choosing between good (and the death of his loved one) or evil (and the loved one's survival).

A Final Word

Though this article must end, there is no end to the usefulness of the death knight as an NPC villain. The death knight begins as a tragic character that the PCs might actually feel sorry for (make certain they know or learn of its history), but it becomes a terrifying evil that must not be allowed to roam free.

What's more, the death knight is not just a villain: It is a *promise*. PCs who ignore their alignments, break their vows, or make "the hard choices" too easily and without conscience can look at a death knight and wonder: How far away from that am I? Ω

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The Necrology of the Penanggalan

To Lord Briar of Thornwood, Grand Master of the Order of Storm.

Sire:

It is with the deepest sorrow and regret that I hereby resign from the Order of Storm.

True, the vows of paladinhood are supposed to be eternal and only can be taken away by our beloved Deity; yet in my instance, I know that this is simply a matter of time.

Let me assure you and my other brothers that this is not a matter of cowardice or failure to complete my first mission. You sent me to slay the beast of Boltang Swamp, and it is done. I did not hesitate to take this quest, nor did I falter when combat was joined. Strength flowed through my body in response to my prayers, and His aura shielded me from the worst of the beast's attacks. Although I was wounded, my sword found its way into the monster's heart, and now its head rests on a stake along the old swamp road.

Nor is my leaving the Order in any way related to what some of my brothers perceive as my "womanly weakness." I fully realize that you did not share this warped view, but there are several who sneered and whispered among themselves when I made my application. They cared little of my dying father's last wish that I become a paladin like him. Although he regretted not having any sons to follow his example, he did his best to mold me into a true holy knight. Well do I recall your decision to give me a chance, and I thank you for your faith in me, even though so many doubted.

Now my ambition to fulfill my father's wish, indeed my ambition to live, is gone, the spark extinguished; not from cowardice, not from female weakness, but from an all pervasive dooming evil that has consumed my body and soul beyond human aid or assistance. Having been thrown on to this evil path, I can do the only honorable thing, which is to resign, fast in the wilderness, and pray for divine relief from this curse.

It is my fervent hope that this letter reaches you so that others will learn of and avoid this threat's wicked grasp. The fellow I hired to deliver this letter was attracted by the fire at the Abbey, and he seems trustworthy enough. I can only hope that he finds the 20 pieces of gold I gave him enough incentive to make the long trek to Castle Midgard and put this in your hands.

How did this all begin? It started on the day that I slew the swamp beast. I wanted to press on and return swiftly, if for no other reason than to show my doubting brothers that a woman paladin indeed had a place in this world. But old Squint feared that I had been hurt too badly and insisted that we stop at the Abbey of St. Marlowe for the night. The beast had smashed my shield with his great spiked club and it had left my arm flaming with pain, so it took little persuasion to stop and ask for hospitality that night.

I should have known that something was amiss from the beginning. When I rang the bell at the gate, a young servant lady, about my age, came out bearing a torch. She introduced herself as Marla

and advised us that we were welcome but all the friars were absent, having answered a call of distress from Thistledale. It seemed that plague had broken out there, and the Abbey had been left in Marla's sole care. I was quite amazed at her friendliness and lack of fear for one who was all alone.

Looking back on it, I should have seen that this tale was highly improbable, but the pain in my arm distracted me from clear thinking. Why would the friars of St. Marlowe, a celibate order, keep such an attractive servant lady in their midst? She was quite pretty with shining raven hair, blue eyes, and a figure that most women would envy. And why would they not send for the aid of our Order to stem this outbreak of disease? And was it not unlikely for them to leave their monastery in the hands of one servant in a countryside all too well known for its fierce monsters and ruthless outlaws? Oh, would that I had been more alert!

Marla noticed my damaged shield and how I favored my left arm as I dismounted and offered to fix me a hot bath after a good meal. I gratefully accepted, hoping that a good soak would help on the morrow's ride. She then showed Squint where to stable our mounts and directed me to one of the austere apartments that the friars kept for visitors. After lighting the single lamp, Marla bade me take off my armor while she prepared my meal and bath.

The small room was quite plain: a simple bed with woolen blankets and pillow, a wardrobe with two doors, a few pegs on the wall, a chamber pot, and a small table

and candle by the bed. On one wall was a small painting of St. Marlowe, and there was one small window next to the door.

My armor was difficult to get off — some of the snaps and clasps had been jammed by the blow of the beast's club and several of the bands were bent inwards so I had to call for Squint, housed in the neighboring apartment, to assist me. He had no more success than I, and had to go to the stables where he found some tools. These worked well, but it was obvious that my wonderful blue banded armor was due for repairs at the armorer once we were to get back to Castle Midgard.

Equally obvious was the fact that the beast's club had hurt me far worse than I suspected. Squint was the first to notice it. Just above my wrist were the edges of a large purple bruise. Rolling up my sleeve revealed the worst: it radiated all the way up my left forearm and no doubt it would eventually turn an ugly yellow. I uttered a quick prayer and laid my hand upon the area and the bruise receded a little, and it seemed that it would be a few days before the forearm would be totally healed.

It was while I was contemplating the severity of the wound that Marla returned. As she opened the door, she saw me praying with my hand on my injured arm, and Squint of course was kneeling in prayer as well. I confess that I did not even hear her open the door (nor did Squint), and when she asked in an icy voice whether she wanted her to return later, both my squire and I jumped a little.

Looking at her, I was taken aback by her truly frightening look: her forehead was tightly creased and she positively glared at us. Her face was such a mask of fury that for some reason (instinct? training?) I clutched my holy medallion and attempted to detect for any evil.

Simply put, there was none,¹ which was hardly a surprise. (After all, how could a simple serving girl emanate powerful evil?) Still, her look was so intense that I had to say something, so I said, "Marla, is something wrong?"

"No, milady," she replied stiffly, "I see you want privacy so I shall leave."²

Suddenly I saw what she was thinking, and I laughed.

"No, Marla, it's all right. Squint and I were just uttering a prayer together. Squint is an old family retainer and my squire. He often prays with me when I am healing."

She looked confused for a moment, then asked, "Healing? Are you not a knight, milady?"

"Yes, Marla," I replied, "a knight I am, but did you not notice the emblem on my shield?"

She looked to the corner where my poor shield, though battered, still clearly showed the three yellow lightning bolts. She shook her head.

"Lady Rebecca, I know not these colors."

"Well," I explained patiently, "this is a shield of the Order of Storm, a brotherhood of paladins, holy knights who heal the sick and protect the weak. Our keep is Castle Midgard, two days west of here. You have never heard of us?"

Marla parted her lips slightly and her eyes widened in curiosity and she said, "A paladin? But I only thought men...."

I interrupted: "Generally, yes; but the world is changing, girl. As far as I know, I am the only one in this land, but I doubt that I shall be the last."

At this, she smiled widely³ and stated that she had brought us supper and that a warm bath awaited me when I was done. She then brought in a tray with a bowl of hot mushroom and lentil soup, a loaf of bread, and jug of herbal tea. The smell of something other than cold jerky and dark tack was wonderful and as I took my first sip of the soup, Marla told Squint that his food was waiting in his room.

After my meal, she took me to the monks' bath house where a large tub of steaming water was waiting. Marla insisted on personally attending to me as I was still hurt, and I did not complain. How wonderful the water felt, and how gentle this raven-haired servant was. Best of all, she washed my hair with a delightful soapy mixture that smelled like newly picked strawberries, and after it was dried, my hair, short as it was, looked positively lustrous.

After I returned to my room, Marla loaned me a comfortable, high-necked nightgown, bade me a good night's rest, and left. It did not take me long to drift off into a deep, peaceful slumber.

But, my lord, my sleep did not remain that way. Upon reflection of the last few days' events, the memory of my dream has returned. At first, it was a wonderful dream. There I was on the grassy banks of the River Excelsior. It was sunset and the breeze was cool but not overly so. As the sun reached the horizon, it turned the waters a lovely pink, and then orange, and then red. And then a deep red-like blood-and the hitherto clear waters became choppy while the wind transformed into a long, hot breeze. Then an endless line of heads, bobbing on stakes, came floating down the river. To my horror, I saw that they were all the heads of the beast of the Boltang Swamp. As each passed me by, it laughed and laughed and laughed."

At dawn I awoke feeling absolutely awful — my head was throbbing, my mouth was parched, and my body seemed sluggish. I drained the small water jug next to the bed as if I had not drunk in days, and then tried to get up. As I got to my feet, I nearly fainted, and I had to sit on the bed. What was wrong? A hot bath, good meal, and warm bed (even if the sleep hadn't been all that pleasant) should have rested me for today's trip, but I hardly felt refreshed!

As I pondered this, Marla came in with a breakfast of two eggs, thick sausage cakes, and more of the Abbey's bread. She looked very pleased and happy — her cheeks were all aglow, apparently from the morning chill,⁴ and she had a wonderful sunny smile. As she set down the tray and poured me some tea, she remarked that Squint was already up and about saddling the horses, and that he would be in to pick up my armor to pack it up (since it could not be worn). She talked about some other small things as well, but I paid her no further mind; the warm breakfast odor of the meal was too much and I ate like I had never eaten before, even the entire half loaf of bread.⁵ When I had eaten all there was, I laid back down for just a few moments because I was still a bit tired, and I promptly fell back asleep.

Some time later, Squint was shaking my shoulder. My loyal squire gasped and asked what in the nine hells had happened. I told him nothing, just a bad dream, and then got out of bed to look for some riding clothes, and promptly fell down on the floor. Squint pulled me up gently, saying that I looked terrible, and that no, I was not all right, and that he was terribly worried. I repeated that I was fine, but then he held me up to the mirror, and sure enough, I was quite pale. Something was not right, and that moment was another opportunity to realize that there was an evil infecting the Abbey (and now me).

Instead, I became plagued with self-doubt and blame. Paladins, once ordained, were not supposed to get ill, yet here I was, quite weak and sick. Had I done something contrary to the Order? Was He punishing me? I had fought bravely and completed my mission, as well as offering prayers of thanks following my victory. Severing the head of the beast and putting it on display might have seemed barbaric, but you had expressly ordered me to leave a sign for any other denizens of the swamp to dissuade further raids. The display, I had reasoned, would also reassure the local inhabitants that law and order had prevailed. Surely this could not be the reason for the punishment?

Squint summed it up in his usual blunt manner: I needed another day of rest, no arguments, no discussion. Over his shoulder, Marla — who had observed all of this from the doorway—agreed. I got up to protest, but it was no good, I could not even stand up on my own accord.

I reluctantly went back to bed and Squint decided to take the day to sharpen our weapons and see what he could do with my armor. I tried reading from my book of prayers but I had trouble focusing, and instead just rested and enjoyed the sunshine and songs of the robins outside. Marla came back twice during the day, once to change the bed linens and empty the chamber pot, and another to bring another fine meal of roast beef and

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lemonade. Yet another opportunity to unlock the mystery passed by for had I been able to pay attention I would have noticed that on both these occasions the robins stopped singing and would not return as long as Marla was around.⁷

That night, after another fine dinner and bath, I instructed Squint that no matter what, we had to get back to Castle Midgard. Although I felt only a little bit better, I was determined to return and report on my victory. Also I wanted desperately to speak with Father Matthias to see if there was something that I had done so wrong to deserve this illness and what I could do to atone for it. Prior to blowing out the candle, I uttered another prayer and laid hands upon my bruise and again it retracted, but the weakness and dizziness still persisted.⁸

That night my dreams again started wonderfully, with my charger and me relaxing on a hill and enjoying the colors and smells of fall leaves, but then the top of the hill collapsed inward and we fell for a long, long time. I hit the ground hard and found myself weak, broken, and helpless. Next to me was a blood-red iron coffin, barely illuminated by the light at the top of the hole. Then I saw the small brass label, and its writing was clear: "Here lies Lady Rebecca, the first and only woman Paladin of Storm." Then I heard laughing from above as the light went out, and looking up I saw two small red dots upon a black background. They slowly descended toward me, and as I lay helpless the laughter got louder and the dots became eyes that dripped salty blood all over me.⁹

The morning after went much like the previous day. I could not recall the dream, and I was even weaker. Squint disobeyed my previous day's orders and stated flatly that we were staying another day and that if I were not better by the next morning, he was going to ride to Castle Midgard for help. I was in no mood (or condition) to argue the point. The rosily-cheeked Marla readily agreed and reiterated that we were honored guests and could stay as long as we wanted. She also speculated that perhaps the brothers would return to the abbey that day or the next, and perhaps they could help. (Oh, Lord Thornwood, where were my brains? Why did I not question their absence at the outset?)

By now I was afraid to sleep: while I could not then recall the specifics of the dreams then, I knew they were bad. In desperation I prayed long and hard but got no insight at all. I even tried my power to cure disease on myself (I, who could not be diseased!), and not surprisingly, I felt no better. I did feel a little better that evening when I laid hands on my shoulder and the bruise completely healed and vanished. And of course Squint and I enjoyed Marla's good cooking.

Amazingly, on the third night I slept well. If I had a good dream or vision, I do not recall it now. Nor do I remember if it

was bad, only that I slept deeply, the best night's rest since we had stopped.

And when I awoke, I actually felt a little better. Wobbly still to be sure, but my mind was not as muddled and my fear was gone. But all of this was dashed to pieces when a very concerned Marla came in with breakfast and announced that Squint had left. This made me sit straight up and ask (probably in a not too pleasant tone) what had happened. Marla sat at my bedside and looked me in the eyes (hers seemed so lifeless!) and told me that I had cried out so loudly in the night that Squint, sputtering a slew of Dalish curses, had saddled up, told her that he was riding to Castle Midgard for help, and that no matter what, she was to care for me until he returned.

Well, this was a mess. Here I was actually feeling a little better, and Squint had ridden off. Apparently the fever was beginning to break and it would only be maybe another day and I would be able to ride. Perhaps my application of curing disease had done something after all? In any case, I was frustrated and humiliated as I realized how ridiculous my first adventure would turn out. Instead of riding in to the castle in glory, a rescue party of healers would have to come and get me! No doubt they would insist on bearing me in on a litter. This was awful.

And what made it worse was that there was little I could do about it. Although my spirits were up, my body was still weak, even with my laying on of hands and Marla's cooking. I simply did not have the strength to ride yet. But I did persuade Marla to help me out to a chair in the courtyard where I could enjoy the sunshine. Of course she insisted that in return I had to allow her to prepare me a bath that evening, and of course I agreed readily.

This brings us, my Lord, to the final night, the time when I discovered the evil that was infecting my body and soul. And I am sorry to say that I missed the final clue that would have revealed the curse of this place. The clue was in the bath house itself and seemed insignificant. After I had taken off my nightgown, slipped into the warm, soapy water, and begun to wash, my hands ran across some small scabs at the base of my throat.¹⁰ I asked Marla what she could make of these, and she said that apparently I had been bitten by mosquitoes at some point. She suggested that perhaps they had been the cause of my illness. At any rate, she said, they looked well healed. I though no more of it and enjoyed the rest of the bath.

The night's rest was short. It started with peaceful slumber, but soon reverted to an evil nightmare involving a flooded river of blood with me nailed to a circular wooden raft. As it spun in the wild current, I heard a roaring sound, that of a waterfall, and then I was falling down into a wide-opened mouth filled with incredibly sharp teeth.

And as I fell to my doom, I prayed hard and saw that what surrounded the mouth was a face. It was a familiar one: that of Marla, the Abbey's serving girl and my good hostess these past days!

With a shriek I tore my hand free and slashed and cut. But no longer was I on the raft of doom. I was in my room and I was clutching the dagger I always kept under my saddlebag or pillow. My breath was ragged and I scanned the dark room but all I could see was a veil of black with two glowing red eyes. And my breath was not the only rasping sound in the room. Tentatively I reached out with my detection of evil and was repulsed by a sickening glow of pure, seething evil.¹¹

With a hiss, the thing swooped at my throat, and I quickly kicked out of the covers. Simultaneously I grabbed my pillow with my free hand and held it out like a shield. Whatever it was hit it with a thump and a snarl. I rolled out of bed, releasing the pillow and leaving the monster choking on feathers. I fumbled with the door to the stand up closet, then got it opened, and reached for my sword, only to find it gone.

Something hit me in the back of my head and knocked me sprawling into the closet, and I nearly passed out. But I knew that to give up would mean death. Gasping, I got to my feet. The monster was just above the bed and it sounded like it was having quite a time with the pillow. When she got it out of her mouth, I knew she would try again. I saw the crimson eyes again, and they were staring at me malevolently. Slowly they weaved back and forth, and I rued the day that I had declined Sir Tristan's offer to teach me how to fight blindfolded. It would have made this a little easier, but at least the eyes (not to mention the amazingly strong glow of evil) helped me focus. In the darkness of my apartment, I could even see what appeared to be a black glow.

All I had was my dagger. No armor, no shield, no lance, no sword... just a dagger. And judging from the blow that nearly felled me, Marla had something else at her disposal.¹² What was I to do? Then it came back to me: your words at my ordination, that no matter how desperate the struggle, no matter how naked and afraid one might be, and despite a lack of strength or weapons, the paladin's greatest asset was his mind and his ability to think, reason, and-if necessary-outwit the forces of evil. So I thought, reasoned, and came up with a plan.

"Come, you twisted bit of nothingness and taste my blade!" I cried. Cackling horribly, the monster hissed and made right for my face. Just before it got there, I fell straight to the ground, and the back of the wardrobe resounded with a satisfying crack. I reached up quickly and slammed the closet door shut, and thrust my dagger between the two handles, effectively locking the creature in the wardrobe.

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Oh, what a thumping and pounding she caused! I thought that she would shake the wardrobe to pieces and for a moment I doubted that the dagger would hold, so I fled with the crashing on the thick oaken wardrobe walls ringing in my ears.

I found a lantern and looked for my missing equipment. It was in a barn stall along with Truscott, my noble steed, and Brandy, Squint's mare. Neither looked like they had suffered from whatever this evil creature was, but then I remembered: Squint had left, according to Marla, so what was Brandy doing here?

Taking the lantern, I went back to the small apartment where my squire had been housed and opened the door carefully. Squint was still there all right, sprawled in his bed, dead white, with two puncture wounds in his neck, right where the "mosquito bites" were on mine.¹³ I had seen death before, but never had one so close been lost to such a foul monster, and I burst out in wracking, heaving sobs. Why had I not seen through this foul thing's guise?

It took me at least an hour to gather myself, and by then the dim glow of dawn was lighting the horizon. I felt exhausted, but I knew that I had to drive myself to see what other horrors were lurking in the abbey. All of the brothers' cells were empty, and the chapel was in reasonably good order, although it had not been cleaned in some days. But in the basement I found them. Each and every one of the peaceable brothers of St. Marlowe were dead, killed in the same way as Squint, and they had been stacked in the wine cellar like so much cordwood.¹⁴

By now, I had precious little energy left and it was good to find the Abbey's healing room. I took two of the brothers' potions and immediately felt the pain recede from the back of my head, where the monster's tail or whatever it was had struck me. But I still felt far weaker than I should have, and a third potion did not help at all.

Weak or not, I still had to confront the monster and put this matter to rest. So I took my sword and went back to my room. At first, I was shocked when I saw the wardrobe laying on its side, but then saw that the dagger holding it in place was still in place. I thumped it on the side and immediately it began to bump and shake again. For a moment I considered leaving the creature there and riding for the Castle to get your aid, but then I had visions of Squint riding by my side and telling me stories (for the 37th time) of my father's glorious quests before he had gotten married and had a daughter. My eyes misted over, knowing that I would never see Squint again, and that decided it for me. I did what my father would have done.

"Be still, evil one, I will let you free," I said, "and know you that it will be a short freedom, for today I shall destroy you."

With that, I reached down, removed the dagger, and jumped back, sword in one hand, dagger in the other. The doors immediately banged open and out she came.

Never, my Lord, have I seen a more despicable, unholy sight. It was indeed Marla, but only her head attached to a slimy, tapered, black appendage that was a little longer than my sword. Two of Marla's front teeth were incredibly long, much like the fangs of a snake, and she hissed and gurgled as she flew about. I swung at her, and the creature easily and quickly backed away, chuckling wetly.

But its laughter was short-lived because as soon as she retreated, she flew right into the sun's early morning rays coming in the apartment's window. And as soon as that happened, Marla gave a sharp gasp and the entire fell creature, head, tail, and all, fell to the ground with a thump and did not move.¹⁵

This was truly amazing, and I was immediately suspicious and thus approached cautiously. This was too easy, yet it just lay there quite still, although still making damp gurgling sounds. Even when I pricked the thing's black tail with my sword, it did nothing. So, I thought, you don't like light, do you? Well, let's get you nice and warm. And so I sunk my sword into the black tail, picked it up, and took it outside in the yard, leaving a blood trail all the way out.

Now its muttered curses grew louder, and if it could have squirmed away, I'm sure it would have done so. But it just spluttered away with curses I supposed, for I could not understand any of its warbly speech.

But then, yes, I could make out that it seemed to be calling my name. So I pinned the black part to the ground, and knelt by Marla's face, dagger ready to thrust right into her eye if she made so much as one move. Incredibly, there was a fresh slash just above the left eye from my first dagger cut, but there was not even one drop of blood showing from this wound. Yet on the tail, there was still bright red blood flowing from where my sword had pierced it. This was truly a horribly mystifying monster.¹⁶

"Rebecca," it croaked, in such a horrible way that I barely understood the words, "come here, I would talk to you."¹⁶

"What is it, you fiend? A plea for mercy, perhaps? You will surely be disappointed," I replied, waving the dagger right in front of her eye.

Marla seemed to gulp and then smiled, "Ah, you don't understand, milady. Soon you will be with me in sisterhood, just like me. Nothing can stop it. I have tasted your blood, and it is just a matter of time. It is inevitable. You will drink blood just as I have, and you will enjoy the taste forever. Now, please, let me go back to my body."

"Rubbish!" I cried. "Never, do you hear? I am a knight, a paladin of the Order of

Storm! Nothing could ever make me like you!" I gave the head a solid kick, but that did not silence her. She laughed a horrible, gurgling laugh.

"Little one. You don't know what you are saying. There are powers greater than you. Shout all you want, but it will happen. Feel your neck."

So I did, and in spite of all the curing, I could still feel the marks and I could sense within myself the brutal truth. I had been healing myself for days, and I had drunk enough potions to bring huge Sir Bertram back from the dead, but my strength and health had not returned. In fact, all had gotten steadily worse. There could be only one answer: I was infected with evil — paladin powers notwithstanding—and now I was apparently doomed to the worst of fates: being like the drooling thing at my feet, an undead feasting on the helpless whom I was sworn to defend.

The rest of my tale, Lord Thornwood, is as brief as my remaining days among the living. I did a thorough search of the rest of the abbey grounds and in a shed of gardening tools I found Marla's headless body. I could even look down into the body cavity and seen that her organs were all dried and withered. And I took this body, that of Squint, and those of the priests and stacked them all atop Marla's head. I confess that it took most of my remaining energy to do this, and I had to rest for a good hour before I could muster a little strength to douse the pile with oil and set it ablaze. Marla shrieked and cried pitifully, but I cared not.

Although Truscott and Brandy did not look like they had been harmed by Marla, I did not want to take any chances if I were to become like her, and so I set them free. I then burned the rest of the abbey as well. No doubt it was somehow infected with the same evil as I was, and only the purifying cleanliness of fire could assure anyone that the grounds were free of Marla's curse.

As for myself, my Lord, I regret that I fell prey to such a horrible fate, but I cannot run the risk that I would return to become an avenging evil spirit among my brothers. I will therefore make my way as far from Castle Midgard as I can, but if any of the members of our Order should meet me, they should know, from the account of this letter, what I am and how to go about destroying me.

In the meantime, this peasant is waiting for me to finish this letter, and I must be off. Please have the chaplain pray for my soul, and if Marla's prophecy is true, seek me out soon before I unleash myself.

—Rebecca of Kryptgarden

Lord Thornwood sighed, then shook his head. "Sir Kaye!" he bellowed.

"Sire!" answered a hard-looking knight.

"Get you to the Beastmaster and tell him to ready our griffons with two days' rations!"

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"All of them, my lord?"

"Yes. Now hurry!" Lord Thornwood replied tersely. As Sir Kaye trotted off, he called out again. "Sir Tersted!"

"Sire!" Another knight stepped from the shadows into the light of the Grand Master's dais.

"Go down to the chapel and disturb Father Belding's prayers. Give him my apologies, but then advise him that he is going to take a griffon ride with Sir Bertram, Malerius, and me, as soon as he can get ready... which means in 15 minutes, no complaints, no excuses!"

Sir Tersted nodded and headed quickly for another hallway.

"Sir Tersted, one more thing!" called Lord Thornwood.

"Milord?" The other knight stopped and turned around.

"Tell Father Belding that if he does not have a dispel evil spell quick at hand, he had better come up with it before we leave or he will have to take along one of his precious scrolls!"

"Aye, milord!" Sir Tersted returned to his errand, running off down the corridor.

"Sir Bertram!"

"Yes, Lord Thornwood?" replied a huge, bearded man with an unusually large battleaxe at his side.

"Old friend, go on up to Malerius' tower and tell, er ask, him to join us, and if he wouldn't mind, he needs to bring along that crystal ball of his if we have any chance of finding her."

"Finding her? Finding who, milord?"

"Bertram," Lord Thornwood whispered, "a fellow paladin, our only sister, is in trouble, and we are going to save her soul."

Sir Bertram nodded solemnly. As quickly as he could, he lumbered away to find the mage and his crystal ball. Ω

FOOTNOTES

1. While in human form, the penanggalan exudes the alignment it had in its previous life. Thus Lady Rebecca's *detect evil* ability did not work. Had Rebecca been a wizard or cleric casting a *know alignment* spell, she would have learned the alignment it had in its previous life, but that is all. The same applies for the clerical *true seeing* spell. Note that had Marla had an evil alignment in her pre-penanggalan days, Rebecca's ability might have worked if Marla had been strongly aligned and intent upon evil actions previously. About the only spell that works reliably with these creatures is the wizard spell, *detect undead*.
2. A creature of the Nine Hells, a penangalan is incapable of showing feeling or articulating love in any form. Yet it is intelligent enough to realize that love is something that should be experienced and desired. Being incapable of love in any form, a penanggalan becomes furious if she witnesses any intimate act,

however innocent, between a couple. From that moment on, the female of the couple will be singled out for the vampiress' attention, even ahead of a female of a higher charisma. The male will also be targeted for a later attack, and the monster will not rest until both have been death with.

3. The penanggalan will always prefer a female with high Charisma as its victim above all other females (except one who has shown affection to a man). Hence a female paladin is the victim of choice due to her high Charisma and her strong lawful good alignment. Although the paladin's protection from evil aura and +2 bonus to saves makes such a conquest risky, the penanggalan will go to great lengths to make her an undead sister.
4. Victims of a penanggalan are always attacked while asleep. If they fail their saving throw (with a -3 penalty), they are effectively hypnotized and acquiesce to the monster's draining attacks without awakening. Nothing is remembered from the experience, but victims often have horrible dreams of blood, corpses, and other ominous images.
5. Another subtle clue that one is dealing with a penanggalan is her complexion. Prior to feeding, it is rather pale. Up to ten hours after draining a victim, however, her complexion is rosy and flushed. This is even noticeable with penanggalans of all but the darkest skins.
6. Although weak and dizzy, a penangalan's victim always awakens with a tremendous hunger and thirst. And although satisfying the body's appetites is an attempt to recover the lost hp, Strength, and Constitution, once the process starts, it is inevitable.
7. Animals are generally good at knowing when something is not right. They usually flee at the sight of undead, and although they won't do so when in the presence of a penanggalan in human form, they will slink or fly away just on their instinct that it is not a friendly person. No matter how hard a penanggalan tries, it cannot attract an animal to come to it.
8. Although lost hit points due to "non-penanggalan wounds" can be restored by magical curing spells, potions, and abilities, the hit points, Strength, and Constitution drained by this horrible vampiress can only be restored after a *dispel evil* spell has been cast upon the victim.
9. After the first attack, future attempts on a victim entitle her to another saving throw, but with an additional -2 penalty (hence the second night's attack is at -5, the third at -7, etc). Note that the paladin's +2 bonus on saving throws still applies against these penalties.
10. If a penanggalan leaves a victim alone one night, the cumulating -2 penalty

from consecutive attacks no longer applies, and the victim's saving roll is subject only to the initial -3 penalty from a first night's attack.

11. When the head is detached from the body, the penanggalan's strong evil alignment is quickly revealed by any *detect evil* or *know alignment* spells. Note that a victim awakening from a penanggalan feeding is almost completely unheard of: only someone very strongly aligned with good has any chance of doing so.
12. The black "tail" of the penanggalan's head has a strength of 19 and is used as a whip to snag and choke victims, causing 1-4 hp damage (+7 for the 19 Strength) each round. In total darkness it glows with an eerie black luminescence.
13. While the penanggalan will slowly drain a female victim over a period of several evenings, she will kill a male victim outright in one night's feeding.
14. A penanggalan typically inhabits desolate, deserted places, such as abandoned buildings and graveyards. Yet if she can get away with it, she will take up residence in an inhabited area, such as a wayside inn or monastery, to wreak havoc and feed for several nights running.
15. The greatest weakness of this undead monster is its absolute vulnerability to sunlight, for once that strikes the penanggalan while in "head" form, it falls to the ground paralyzed and helpless.
16. The tail of the penanggalan is a reservoir for blood that it has taken from its victims. It serves the same function as a camel's hump, although it can also serve as a whip-like club with a strength of 19. No other part of the penanggalan will ever bleed, even when in human form. This is another way to find out if one is dealing with one of these creatures, but such a method has obvious risks, particularly if the object of the experiment is *not* a penanggalan!
17. While in "head form," the penanggalan speaks in a gurgling manner that is barely recognizable as Common. A listener who makes an Intelligence check can understand the speech, but the monster's conversation is about impending doom of the listener or the joys of being undead.

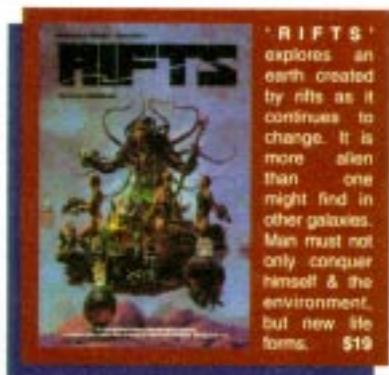
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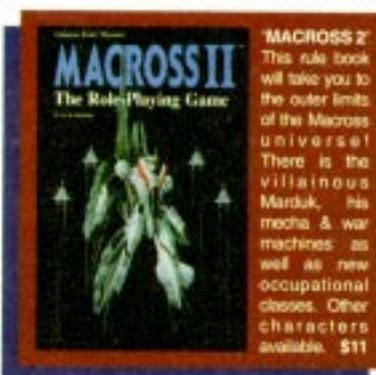
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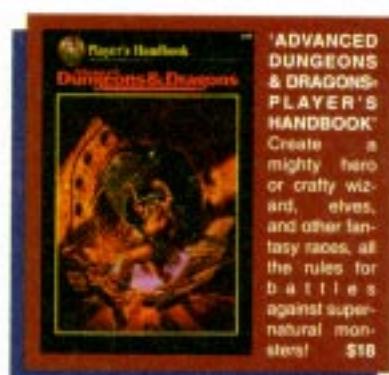
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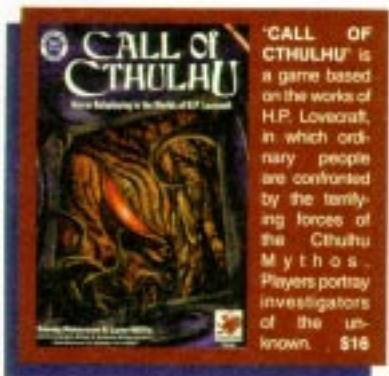
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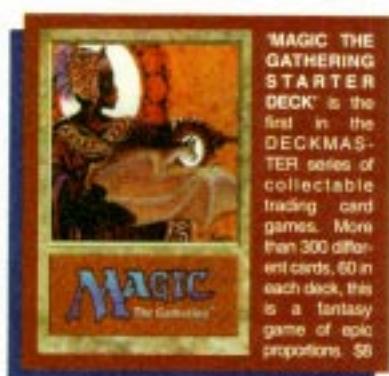
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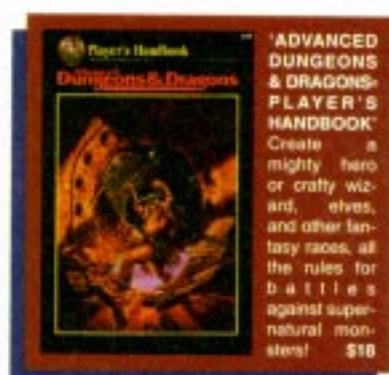
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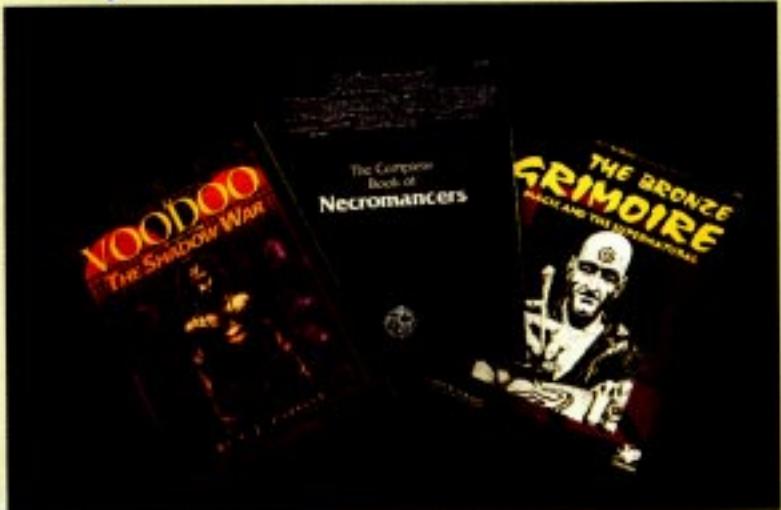
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Role-Playing Reviews



That old black magic: fantasy supplements from the dark side

Photography by Charles Kohl

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In 1899, Charles H. Duell, the director of the United States Patent Office, said the time had come to abolish his agency, because, he claimed, "everything that can be invented has been invented." In 1990, I felt the same way about magic spells. I'd just spent a month beating my brains out, struggling to come up with my share of the entries for the *Tome of Magic*, a collection of more than 200 spells for the AD&D® game. After completing the assignment, I was convinced the *Tome* would be the last word on this particular subject. It had to be, because there weren't any more spells. Every one that could be invented had been invented.



I was wrong, of course, big time. Subsequent publication of the *Earthdawn**, *Mage: The Ascension**, and *Aria** games, as well as dozens — hun-

dreds?—of supplements and magazine articles brought an onslaught of new spells. And they never stop coming. Gamers, it seems, have an insatiable appetite for spells, which designers are only too happy to indulge. If spells were lollipops, we'd all be hyperglycemic.

Even though we want 'em, that's not to say we *need* 'em. Most spells are forgettable, unimaginative variants on existing effects that add little to a campaign or the designer's reputation. One of my favorite offenders in the last couple of years is White Wolf's *Wizard's Grimoire* for the *Ars Magica** game, which gave us hairless hound (an animal's fur falls out) and lips of the sky (your lips turn blue). *Fisherman's wooden island* creates a rowboat. Why not *fisherman's wooden shoes* to conjure up durable footwear or *fisherman's wooden mount* to make rocking horses for the kids? Hey, I could do this all day. (And I did. In the *Tome of Magic*, I whipped up a batch of warding spells that were more or less minor variations of the same thing; one kept away bad weather, another kept away undead, another kept away fire; you get the picture.)

I've learned the hard way that if you want interesting spells, you start with interesting casters. If you're designing spells for lifeless nobodies, you tend to come up with deadwood like *hairless hound* and *undead ward*. But if you begin with, say, the maniacal, tormented shapeshifters in White Wolf's *Werewolf: The Apocalypse** game, you come up with dazzlers like *crawling hand* (the caster's hand detaches and scoots across the floor) and *gluttony* (the caster swallows his opponents whole).

In fact, dark fantasy in general seems to be a fertile ground for memorable magic. In a sense, all spellcasters, even the good guys, have a dark side; there's something inherently creepy about anyone who can read minds and spray fireballs from his fingertips. If your campaign has too many *hairless hounds* and not enough *crawling hands*, check out this month's products, all of which explore the seamier side of the arcane arts. They prove once again how wrong we Duells of the world can be.

GURPS Voodoo: The Shadow War

GURPS* game supplement
128-page softcover book
Steve Jackson Games
Design: C.J. Carella
Editing: Susan Pinsonneault
Illustrations: Shea Ryan
Cover: Tim Bradstreet



Let's start with a quick quiz. Which of the following products pits supernatural PCs of questionable morality against malevolent forces of infinite power in a gritty contemporary setting?

- A. White Wolf's Vampire: The Masquerade' game.
- B. White Wolf's Werewolf: The Apocalypse.
- C. Steve Jackson Games' GURPS Voodoo.
- D. All of the above.

The answer is D. But before you accuse Jackson and company of chasing a train that's already left the station, consider that they've been down this track before. A couple of years back, they published GURPS versions of Vampire and Werewolf, jettisoning White Wolf's ponderous language and the pretentious aspirations that made some players (like yours truly) cringe. GURPS Voodoo mines the same territory, fraught with spooky atmosphere and metaphysical murk. It's more sedate than White Wolf's angst fests. But it also takes fewer risks. Call it White Wolf Lite.

For a zombie-come-lately, however, GURPS Voodoo has a lot going for it, due mostly to the smarts of designer C.J. Carella. Not only does Carella know GURPS like Bill Gates knows computer code—Carella wrote the excellent GURPS Martial Arts and GURPS Imperial Rome—he has a knack for blending diverse source material into a seamless whole. It's hard to tell where fact ends and fantasy begins, which adds to *Voodoo*'s unsettling tone. I found myself wondering how much of these grisly events actually happened somewhere.

Carella's take on voodoo has little to do with pin-pierced dolls and dead chickens. Rather, his interpretation draws on real-world antecedents, ranging from the Haitian voudoun cults to the obeah practitioners of the British West Indies and the macumbe of Brazil. He explains the significance of syncretism, where Christian and African traditions combine to spawn new religions, and Gnosticism, a mystic movement from the second century promoting the superiority of the spirit world. Elsewhere, he discusses the development of voodoo temples (called hounfors), the European conquest of the Caribbean, and the links between religion and racism in the Spanish and French colonies. Those turned off by anthropology may find it all a bit dreary. But scholarly players should be impressed.

On this historical foundation, Carella constructs an elaborate "Shadow War," an epic conflict between voodoo believers called Initiates (the player characters, in a typical campaign) and the Lodges, a secret cadre of European magicians with enormous political and economic influence. The Lodges' cruel lust for power has resulted in rampant drug addiction, chronic Third World poverty, the Cold War, even the assassination of JFK. As in real life, the big shots pull the strings, and the rest of us suffer the consequences.

In this case, the strings are attached to homicidal ghosts and zombies; imagine a cross between the Call of Cthulhu* and Illuminati* games, and you've got the idea.

Carella devotes a hefty chunk of the text to the Lodges, tracing their rise from the Middle Ages through a shake-up in World War II that resulted in a profusion of splinter groups, each with their own diabolical agenda. Along the way, the Lodges gained control of the U.S. Congress, the Italian Mafia, and a sizable portion of the world's armed forces. The Lodges seem so powerful, so all-consuming, that in a by-the-book campaign, I don't see how a party of lowly Initiates can persevere. But maybe that's the idea.

In theory, GURPS Voodoo PCs can be anything from ordinary folks to grotesque shapeshifters called In-Betweeners (bird people, cat people, and snake people). In practice, most will be magic-enhanced humans who commune with the spirit world. Archetypes include Journalists, Magicians, and Parapsychologists; PCs with a penchant for mischief can be Cultists and Gang Members. Among the new advantages and skills are Reawakened (vivid memories of previous existences), Karmic Ties (knowledge carried over from past lives), and Vever Drawing (the art of sketching voodoo symbols), all clearly explained and fun to use. I'd avoid the Ghost advantage, however, as it reads better than it plays; ghostly characters, though enjoying the benefits of intangibility, suffer from short life spans and chronic exhaustion.

The magic system combines psychic and spiritual elements derived from African-based cosmologies. Voodoo gods, neither strictly good nor strictly evil, grant special abilities to anyone, providing they're attuned to the supernatural, proficient in the dark arts, and respectful. A ceremonial casting involves five steps—preparation, invocation, wish, offering, and dismissal—which gives access to the Paths of Dream, Health, Luck, Protection, and Spirit. Castings also require consecrated grounds (ancient ruins, a room with vever drawings, a blessed temple) and material components (occult badges, life-sized mannequins, a set of sacred robes).

Each path gives access to a host of spells. The Path of Health includes *evil eye* (enabling the caster to kill with a glance) and *dose* (which causes disease). The Path of Luck has *money maker* (generating an unexpected fortune) and *rainmaker* (which changes the weather). The intricate rituals give the magic system a real-world feel, as if the caster were following the directions for baking a cake or building a house of cards. But realism comes at a price. Unlike the European-based spells of most fantasy games, African spells have few flashy effects; no magic missiles here. And they take time. A typical ritual requires hours of chanting and dancing. A high-powered ritual may eat up several days. And Carella doesn't provide nearly enough spells; the Paths of Dreams, Health, and Protection have a mere five each.

Carella may have skimped on the spells,

but he soars when discussing their ramifications. He points out, for instance, that the death penalty won't deter crime in a magic-drenched society; an executed criminal will probably be born again, ready to resume his evil ways. Psychiatry is futile; how can you analyze somebody who's lived a dozen times?

An essay on the "Electronic Crossroads" explores the connection between witchcraft and netrunning, a concept worth a supplement of its own (GURPS Cybergod). The Campaign Themes section offers some strong adventure hooks, along with suggestions for combining Voodoo with other GURPS products (among them a promising hybrid with GURPS Psionics and a not-too-convincing merger with GURPS Werewolf). The Entities chapter profiles Zarabanda, the cannibal god, and Mbua, a depraved spirit who appears as a Great White Hunter with a posse of serial killers.

Evaluation: Plopping us "in the middle of a cosmic struggle," GURPS Voodoo uses the entire world-make that the entire universe-as a canvas. But this cosmic stuff is getting old. We've endured similar struggles in Werewolf and Vampire; now here comes GURPS Voodoo, trotting along behind, squealing, "Me too! Me too!" White Wolf Lite, indeed.

GURPS Voodoo needs less sprawl and more focus. I wish Carella would've confined the game to a small, self-contained area, like Haiti. It would've been easier to manage, and a lot more frightening; imagine being trapped on a tiny island teeming with spirits, clawing through steaming jungles while snarling zombies staggered from the brush. A claustrophobic setting such as this would've really turned up the tension. And better yet, it would've made the game seem a lot less derivative.

Still, an ambitious referee ought to be able to beat GURPS Voodoo into submission. Familiarity with the GURPS system is helpful, but not mandatory; Carella soft-pedals the statistics, so the material can be adapted to other game systems. And it's worth the trouble. The rich characters, eerie atmosphere, and slow-burn spirituality add up to a riveting experience—assuming, of course, you're willing to take on the cosmos one more time.

The Complete Book of Necromancers

AD&D® game supplement
128-page softcover book

TSR, Inc.

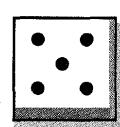
\$18

Design: Steve Kurtz

Editing: Matt Forbeck

Illustrations: Karl Waller, Brom,

Jeff Easley, John & Laura
Lakey, and Robb Ruppel



TSR has given us *Complete* books for all the core classes, all the races, the barbarians, the gladiators, even the spacefarers. So why not the wizard specialists? The necromancer is a good place to start, as he's arguably the most interesting of the

bunch, and unquestionably the guy with the most marquee value. *The Complete Book of Abjurers* doesn't quite have the same pizzazz.

This volume pretty much follows the format of the previous *Complete* books, covering character creation, kits, proficiencies, and gizmos. Kurtz's literate, no-nonsense style makes this one of the most readable entries in the series. He employs, however, a pair of premises that may not sit well with everyone, especially those who like their AD&D in-your-face and unconditional.

First, unlike most *Complete* books, which speak to players as much as Dungeon Masters, the *Complete Necromancer* aims squarely at DMs. "These rules," says Kurtz in the introduction, "must be kept strictly hidden from the players, even if they are adamant about portraying a necromancer." Thus, PCs may not partake of *augmented hit points, food corruption*, and the other exotic powers discussed in the Dark Gifts chapter ("They are definitely *not* intended for player characters."). Nor may they become necromantic priests, as outlined in the fascinating Death Priests chapter, who commune with nightmare entities like the God of the Dead and the Goddess of Murder ("... it is strongly suggested that death priests ... remain NPCs for the campaign, where they can serve as unusual advisors, employers, and evil arch-villains").

Grudgingly, Kurtz allows everyone access to his new priest spells ("... a carefully selected minority [of spells] may be available to PC clerics."). Still, whenever I'm tempted to load up a PC with *life drain* and *cause insanity*, I half-expect Kurtz to whack my wrist with a ruler.

Kurtz has good reasons for being so strict. Because of the dubious morality of necromantic magic, he argues, most practitioners are evil, and evil PCs should be discouraged. Further, high-level PC necromancers threaten the balance of the game, particularly if they learn to *animate dead*. "Half the adventure will be reduced to the necromancer sending minions into the dungeon. Zombie, open that door! Zombie, open that chest! Zombie, walk into that room!"

He's right, but most DMs, myself included, never let common sense interfere with a good campaign. I've had more than a few evil PCs, and sure, they're annoying, but handled with care, they can spice up an otherwise bland party of do-gooders. And if I had a PC who abused *animate dead* to this extent, I'd drop a few boulders on his zombies until he got the message. I have other suggestions, but I'll keep them to myself—I don't want to get my wrist whacked.

Kurtz's second premise is a matter of tone. I've always envisioned the necromancer as a sociopath, one part lunatic, one part grave robber, who enjoys nothing more than lounging in a dingy crypt with decomposing cadavers. Kurtz, however, sees him as a scientist, cerebral, detached, and haughty, a medieval pathologist who

considers spiritual corruption as an unfortunate but inevitable cost of doing business.

The character kits, especially the Anatomist and Philosopher, are intriguing but tame. Even the Deathslayer, a selfless enemy of dangerous undead, comes off as a pussycat. And don't expect any mad scientist material, like essays on autopsy techniques or organ harvesting. Kurtz favors history (the differences between Roman and Celtic witches, how Eastern societies viewed death) and sociology (the cultural stigma of necromancy, how wizards deal with discrimination). None of this is bad; in fact, the serious tone gives necromancers an unexpected depth, certain to satisfy those who prefer *Masterpiece Theater* to *Beavis and Butt-head*. But players used to the unapologetic assault of Werewolf and Call of Cthulhu may find it all a little too, uh, nice.

If you buy the approach, however, you're in for a treat. Kurtz has packed the book with sharp insights and inspired mechanics. Not only can humans specialize in necromancy, but so can drow, dragons, githyanki, even undead; mummy necromancers safeguard tombs and temples, and their vampiric counterparts can change into bats and cast spells like *brainkill*. The Allies chapter provides workable rules for apprentices, henchmen, and familiars (necromancers recruit weasels and imps). The death gods are masterful inventions; the Queen of the Noose rules as the patron of premeditated killing, and followers of the God of Pestilence foster disease by harvesting slime from corpses. Rounding out the book are a set of ready-to-play NPCs (one per character kit) and a fully developed campaign base called Sahu, Isle of the Necromancer Kings.

Kurtz also provides an elegant analysis of the relationship between spells and alignments. He sorts spells into three color categories, each linked to a particular ethos. Black necromancy, encompassing spells like *disintegrate* and *chain lightning* that bring physical injury or spiritual annihilation, is associated with evil practitioners. Gray necromancy, to which the majority of necromantic spells belong, are appropriate for neutral wizards. Good wizards are drawn to white necromancy, with spells like *reincarnation* and *delay death* that restore life and fortify living bodies. Kurtz encourages necromancers to stick with their own color categories and suggests punishing violators; for instance, a good necromancer who uses *disintegrate* might get a visit from an extraplanar entity in a bad mood.

Finally, Kurtz augments the skimpy list of necromancy effects in the *Player's Handbook* with 15 pages of new spells. Among the winners are *embalm* (prevents corpse decay and strengthens golems), *bone blight* (dissolves the bones of a living creature), and *graft flesh* (replaces lost arms and legs with limbs from cadavers).

Evaluation: If you're a DM who runs an ordered campaign, and you're in the market for necromancer NPCs, this is the book for you. But if you're a player interested in ruling a kingdom of zombies or sewing tentacles to your chest, keep looking. Reserved and brainy, *The Complete Book of Necromancers* is the role-playing equivalent of a college text, an erudite collection of provocative ideas. Just don't expect it give you the creeps.

The Bronze Grimoire

Elric* game supplement
80-page softcover book

Chaosium, Inc. \$13

Design: Ross A. Isaacs with Lynn Willis
and Mark Morrison

Editing: Lynn Willis

Illustrations: Ben Monroe

Cover: Charlie Krank

Fantasy doesn't get much darker than the *Stormbringer** game, a 1981 RPG based on the novels of Michael Moorcock. Using the war between Law and Chaos as a backdrop, *Stormbringer* features bloodthirsty cultists, diseased beggars, and brutal slave lords-about as far away from amiable wizards and adorable elves as you can get. The game also boasts a terrific magic system, substituting power ranks for ability levels, and replacing long lists of spells with nasty entities who grant magical powers. As casters acquire higher ranks, they can call on entities of increasing strength; first-rank sorcerers can summon lesser elementals, second-rank sorcerers can call on lesser demons.

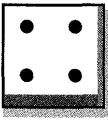
Enchanted weapons, such as the sword *Stormbringer*, derive their magic from the evil spirits who inhabit them.

Elric, a sequel to *Stormbringer*, also uses Moorcock's Young Kingdoms as a setting, along with a similar magic system. As in *Stormbringer*, magic remains a province of Chaos, meaning that casters of Chaotic alignment have an advantage over their law-abiding counterparts. *Elric* magic is less potent, addressing a flaw in *Stormbringer* (high-level casters in *Stormbringer* wreak havoc on play balance). *Elric* adds more information on invocations, provides step-by-step instructions for learning magic, and describes dozens of evil spirit abilities (such as *exsanguinate*, which drains hit points, and the self-explanatory *vomit acid*). What it doesn't have, however, is much in the way of specific effects for player characters.

The Bronze Grimoire fills the gap with a cornucopia of new spells, along with lengthy sections on runes and necromancy. A bonus chapter discusses 13 magical tomes found in the Young Kingdoms, detailing their formulas, locations, and booby traps. (Look for *Vengir's Black Tome*, a necromancy text bound in human flesh, in the court of King Juku of Argimiliar. But watch out for the teeth—this book literally bites. Isaacs writes with precision and clarity, sprinkling tables,

lists, and sidebars throughout the book to enhance its value as a reference.

Rune magic is the *Grimoire*'s best feature. Shapes and inscriptions imbued with mystic energy, runes function as supernatural time bombs. Triggering a rune requires neither the caster's presence nor even his physical existence—a drop of rain, a muttered word, or a beam of moonlight can activate a rune long after the caster's death. Isaacs presents nearly 40 examples, complete with illustrations, which induce hallucinations, drain magic points, imprison, disorient, and incinerate. Rune placement adheres to an intricate set of rules; you can inscribe a rune on a hollow sphere, but not on a solid one (that violates the laws of shadow topography), you can attach a rune to the inside of a crate, so long as you leave the lid open (close the crate, and the rune evaporates), and so on.



As in *The Complete Book of Necromancers*, *The Bronze Grimoire* views necromantic magic as distasteful, unnerving, and dangerous. But because alignment distinctions aren't as rigid in Elric as they are in AD&D, necromancers are more accepted in the morally disordered Young Kingdoms than in the FORGOTTEN REALMS® setting. Isaacs allows any sorcerer to employ necromancy, presuming he has a strong-enough stomach. If an *animate skeleton* or *create abomination* goes awry, the summoned creature might pull its own head off. Or it might explode, spraying the caster in noxious sludge.

The new spells, some 50 in all, delineate a generous number of effects, both Chaotic and Lawful. They're not particularly destructive-surprising, considering the Young Kingdoms' violent heritage—but they're devious. *Dreams of poisonous love* induces nightmares that depress and debilitate. *Lassa's embrace* suspends the victim thousands of feet above the ground. *Candle stripling*, the oddest spell in the book, foretells if a youth will grow up to achieve anything of substance; it helps the caster decide which kids to befriend and which to ignore.

Evaluation: For Elric buffs, *The Bronze Grimoire* is essential, as it not only expands the number of spells but clarifies some of the game's murkier concepts. It reads, however, like a collection of excerpts from the rule book rather than a self-contained supplement; don't look for staging tips, setting notes, or a unifying theme. Note, too, that Isaacs presumes you're familiar with the source material. A sample from the rune magic section: "When Elric summons Arioach for the first time, he covers the walls and floor of his room with runes. Yyrkoon uses runes to place Cymoril into a trance-like sleep, before he carries her off top Dhoz-Kam. He does it again when Elric returns for the Sack of Imrryr." It's possible to adapt

this material to other games, but not without effort—a lot of effort. If you've never read a Moorcock novel, you may find yourself joining Cymoril in her trance-like sleep.

Short and sweet

The SPELLFIRE™ Card Game Reference Guide, by Bruce Nesmith and Tim Beach. TSR, Inc., \$13. *The INWO Book*, by Steve Jackson. Steve Jackson Games, \$17.

These guidebooks reveal everything you want to know about the SPELLFIRE and Illuminati: New World Order* card games, and then some. Both feature illustrations of every card from the initial publication cycles. Both include informative strategy tips and clever optional rules. The SPELLFIRE Guide has two good solitaire variants and some jaw-dropping dirty tricks (I recommend Beach's Unstoppable Monster and Nesmith's Catch-22 Champion). *The INWO Book* reprints Steve Jackson's production reports, covering planning sessions ("As somebody who was actually offered the chance to invest in the original Magic: The Gathering* game—and turned it down—I know when to say 'Whoops.'") and sales assessments ("The pre-sales for the Limited Edition alone were more than 10 times as much as for any game we'd done before.") The Jackson book is the more revealing read, but TSR offers a better bargain; the *SPELLFIRE* Guide clocks in at 384 pages, compared with INWO's meager 152.

The Dancing Nut of Baba Yaga, by Lisa Smedman. TSR, Inc., \$10.

The dancing hut remains of one TSR's most durable villains, having boogaloored through a 1976 DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® game supplement (*Eldritch Wizardry*), the AD&D Book of Artifacts, and a couple of DRAGON® Magazine articles. After spelling out the hut's powers and immunities, Smedman serves up an adventure with an avalanche of adversaries and what seems like an infinite number of rooms. Sure, it's a glorified dungeon crawl, but it's a dungeon crawl of transcendent proportions—how many dungeons do you know that lead to Alternate Reality Tokyo?

*Towers In Time** game, by Mike Sager. Thunder Castle Games, \$7 (54-card starter deck), \$1.45 (8-card booster pack).

Mighty wizards face off in a bizarre fantasy realm, competing for spells, allies, and terrain in a duel to the death. Sound like a variant of the Magic: The Gathering game? Well, sort of, but give Towers In Time credit for finding its own niche. Players deploy their cards in columns, called towers, with the top cards representing magical shields. An elemental force, such as air or water, supports each shield, which in turn protects up to three creatures or artifacts. By accumulating temper, the magical energy inherent in all things, players can activate spells and allies to attack enemy shields. Whoever is

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the first to eliminate all of the enemy shields is the winner.

Building a tower requires thoughtful, sophisticated tactics; a reckless player will soon find himself on the wrong end of a Sword of Swiftness. Though essentially a game of combat, Tower's languid pace and charming imagery-serene forests, luminous sail boats, even a smiling wolverine-give it a fairy tale ambience. As for the cards, their soothing pastels make them as cuddly as Muppets. No fireworks here, but plenty of low-key fun. (Information: Thunder Castle Games, PO Box 11529, Kansas City, MO 64138-0029.)

Horrors, by Robin D. Laws, Teeuwynn Woodruff, Greg Gorden, Sam Witt, Allen Varney, Chris McCubbin, Caroline Spector, and Fraser Cain. FASA Corporation, \$18.00.

Yep, it's another collection of fantasy monsters, which we need about as badly as Donald Trump needs another credit card. But because the Earthdawn* game contained plenty of hints but few hard facts about the mysterious Horrors, this sourcebook is overdue. Excerpts from the *Eurydon Document* explain how to erase the mark of Aazhvat Many-Eyes (hint: you need a sharp dagger). An apprentice from the Great Library of Throal describes the elusive Bone Crown the Usurper ("... a thousand tongues, all gibbering; a thousand teeth, all gnashing."). The writing is

strong throughout, though many of the illustrations are muddy and indistinct. Which, considering the stomach-churning physiognomy of some of these guys, may be a good thing.

Steam Age, by Paul A. Lidberg, Mike Pondsmith, Mark Schumann, Barrie Rosen, Chris Williams, Derek Quintanar, and David Ackerman. R. Talsorian Games, Inc., \$14.

This supplement for the Castle Falkenstein* game describes a warehouse of inventions steeped in Victorian Age science-fiction. Among the entries are steam zeppelins, clockwork servants (who wash windows and change diapers), and a primitive submarine called the Submersible. Of marginal utility-I, for one, can get along fine without a steam-powered unicycle-it's nonetheless delightful, a goofy addendum to one of the decade's most inventive RPGs.

Ruins of Zhentil Keep, by Kevin Melka and John Terra, with David "Zeb" Cook and Ed Greenwood. TSR, Inc., \$25.

Dungeon Masters stuck with stalled campaigns can do no better than this, a lavish boxed set so stuffed with ideas that the lid practically bulges. The Campaign Book covers Zhentil Keep's people, locales, and creatures in delirious detail. The Adventure Book offers a trio of whirlwind adventures, each staged in a differ-

ent era. Good stuff: a cast of sinister NPCs (like Manshoon of the Zhentarim, inventor of the *stasis clone* spell) and vicious monsters (like the render, a food-holic that can digest anything). Not-so-good stuff: the random event tables, which are underdeveloped to the point of irrelevancy (so what if a gang of trolls suddenly shows up? What the heck do they do?) and the l-o-n-g historical summaries. But considering the sheer volume of material-over 200 pages worth, plus all manner of data tucked away on card sheets and poster maps-the misfires are easy to overlook.

Wilderness, by Shane Lacy Hensley. West End Games, \$18.

The World of Bloodshadows, the wildest realm in West End's anything-goes Masterbook* series, was made for urban adventures. After all, it was inspired by the Mickey Spillane school of private eyes, and Spillane isn't exactly the kind of guy you find on a nature hike. But this collection of wilderness scenarios works surprisingly well, thanks to Hensley's knack for breathless pacing and wacky encounters. The party can roam Larvae Valley and the Bone Mound in search of acid moss, blood men, and skeetharks, the latter an obnoxious strain of mountain-dwelling imp who use trespassers as toilets (don't ask). Absurd? Absolutely. Engaging? You bet. Next time, though, let's get *Bloodshadows* back in the city-where it belongs. Ω

Rick Swan's recent design work includes In the Cage: A Guide to Sigil for the PLANESCAPE™ setting. You can write to him at 2620 30th Street, Des Moines, IA 50310. Enclose a self-addressed, stamped envelope if you'd like a reply.

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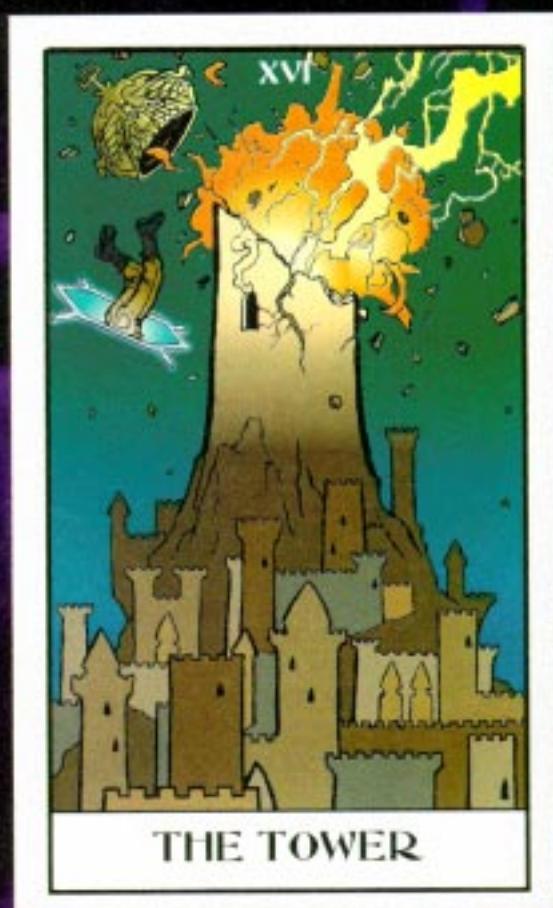


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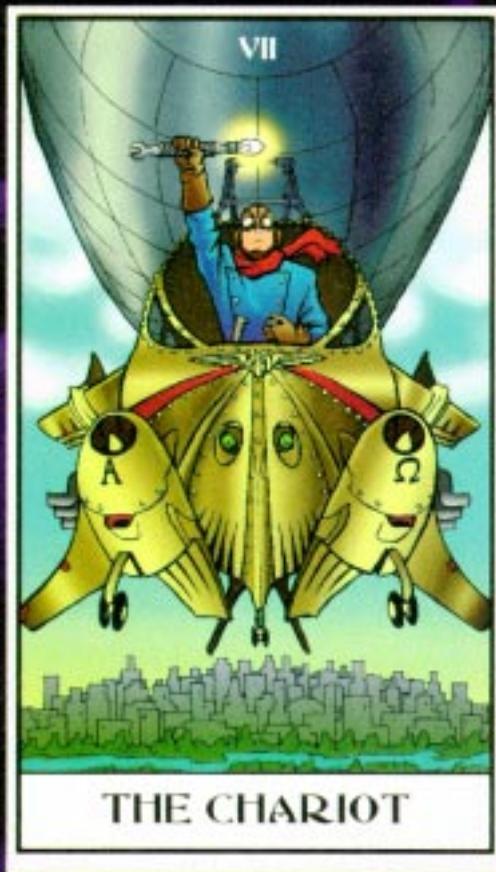
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Mage: The Ascension Join the battle for reality.

Sage Advice

by Skip Williams

This month, the sage armors up and takes a crack at question about the new *PLAYER'S OPTION™: Combat and Tactics* book. All page references are for the *Combat and Tactics* book (*C&T*).

The various attack options listed in Chapter 2 don't allow penalties or bonuses based upon the sizes of the combatants. Is it really as easy to block the club of a halfling as it is to block a giant's club? Could a pixie character disarm an ogre? Given the emphasis C&T has placed upon size, this rather surprised me. Shouldn't the opposed roll of the attacker be penalized/increased by +4 or so per size difference? Say a human fighter is attempting to block an attack from another human fighter, the former must make an attack roll against AC 4. Say this same fighter attempts to block the attack of an ogre, shouldn't this be penalized, say to roll against AC 0? Against a giant, perhaps against AC -4? Why were such penalties applied toward overbearing and tripping but not the rest?

The attack options you seem to be asking about (block, disarm, grab, and trap) are more a matter of skill and timing than brute strength. If you don't like the idea of a pixie blocking a giant's weapon, apply a -2 modifier to the acting character's roll for each size difference. For example, a pixie trying to disarm a giant would have to win an opposed roll against AC 0 with a penalty of -8 while the giant rolls to hit armor class 4 with no modifier.

What are the statistics for shield punches and shield rushes? They seem to be missing from Chapter 7.

They are missing from Chapter 7. Here is the missing material:

Shield Punch

| Shield | Size | Speed | Melee | Damage | Knockdown |
|--------|------|--------|-------|--------|-----------|
| | | | Reach | | |
| Small | S | Fa (2) | 1 | 1d3 | d6 |
| Medium | M | Av (6) | 1 | 1d4 | d8 |
| Large | L | S1 (8) | 1 | 1d6 | d10 |

Shield Rush

| Shield | Size | Speed | Melee | Damage | Knockdown** |
|--------|------|-------|-------|--------|-------------|
| | | | Reach | | |
| Small | S | Base* | 1 | 1d3 | 0 |
| Medium | M | Base* | 1 | 1d4 | +1 |
| Large | L | Base* | 1 | 1d6 | +3 |

* A shield rush is performed in the attacker's base initiative phase.

** The bonus is used during the opposed Strength check that takes place if the attack hits (see Chapter 2, page 46). If the character's Strength check succeeds, add the listed number to the roll before the two rolls are compared. For example, Rikard uses his large shield to rush Jon. Rikard's Strength score is 16 and Jon's is 17. If Rikard hits, there is an opposed Strength roll to see if a knockdown occurs. Rikard rolls an 8, a success; Jon rolls a 10, also a success. Normally Jon would win the roll because he succeeded with a roll higher than his opponents. Rikard's large shield, however, gives him a +3 to his check, so his roll is effectively an 11, which is high enough to win. Note that if Rikard had rolled a 16, he still would have succeeded with his Strength check and his effective score would be a 19 for purposes of resolving the opposed Strength check. If Rikard had rolled a 17 or higher, he would have failed his Strength check and would have fallen down himself.

Shouldn't the light and medium lances inflict double damage if used from a charging mount? What happens if a rider scores a critical hit when charging with a lance?

Yes, footnote "m" (page 133) applies to all the lances listed on the master weapons table in Chapter 7. The rider must be using stirrups to get the extra damage.

In all cases where a weapon that is inflicting multiplied damage (a lance from a charging mount, a thief's backstab, a "slayer" sword, etc.), add only one extra damage die (or group of damage dice) if the weapon's base damage is more than one die). For example, a warrior charging a giant with a light lance inflicts 3d8 hp damage on a critical hit, not 4d8. Note that if the critical is severe enough (triple damage), two dice are added.

Don't lanterns weigh more than 1/10th of a pound?

Yes. A lantern weighs two or three pounds depending on the type. A lantern should be marked with footnote "d" instead of an asterisk.

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Shouldn't the staff sling be size L?
No. The staff portion of the sling is pretty short.

Is there a natural armor class below which a creature becomes immune to damage from whips? The whip entry on page 145 doesn't list one.

A whip can make almost any creature smart if it hits a soft spot, and not all creatures that have great armor classes are thick skinned. A good house rule might be to say that whips don't damage creatures with natural armor classes of 2 or better if the creature actually has a carapace or a thick skin. It's reasonable to say that a dragon turtle can shrug off stings from whips, but a will-o'-the-wisp that gets tagged with a whip should suffer damage. The DM will have to decide which creatures are immune on a case-by-case basis.

Isn't the direct fire example on page 161 wrong? To agree with the text, the yellow area and some of the markings need to be moved on the diagram. The text says the cannon's area of effect strikes the umber hulk, but the yellow area of effect doesn't include the umber hulk.

Look again more carefully. The umber hulk is in the area of effect. Cannon shots have little "tails" that represent the cannonball bouncing around. (The place

where the area effect overlaps the figure is marked with a little cross.). The text and the diagram don't exactly match however, because the text says a medium cannon is firing and the diagram shows a light's area of effect.

On page 131, the weapon table doesn't list any damage for a gaff/hook.

In the *Complete Fighter's Handbook* the damage is listed as 1d4 (Sm-Med)1d3 (large), which should work fine in a C&T game.

I have two character kits from the Complete Book of Elves and the Complete Book of Dwarves that have been completely befouled by the new Combat and Tactics book. The elven archer fires at a rate of 5/2 moving or 3/1 standing still. Since the new specialization rules came out, how is the archer to be modified to reflect the rules change (since bow specialists now get an increased rate of fire?) Also, the dwarven sharpshooter used to have an improved rate of fire and extra damage due to training and custom equipment. What are the new damage and rate of fire ratings for crossbows fired by the sharpshooter? Is any of this going to be cleared up in the Skills and Powers book?

The *Skills and Powers* book won't solve

this one for you. Its approach to kits is very different from the one in the soft-backed rule books.

You have two choices when trying to fit elven archers and dwarven sharpshooters into a game that uses the *PLAYER'S OPTION* combat system. You can ignore the C&T rules and use the rules that go with the kit instead (which is a pretty bad deal for the sharpshooter) or you can drop the kit rules in favor of the C&T rules. If you choose the latter, assume that both characters start out as specialists with their chosen weapons and then spend their proficiency slots (or character points) on weapon mastery. In both cases, adhering to the kit restrictions is a good way to justify acquiring advanced levels of mastery. Remember that becoming a grand master takes some special effort.

Do any of the kits in any of the books automatically start with any mastery above specialist? (The elven bladesinger maybe?) Would bard blades be allowed to become experts automatically?

Specialization is the highest level of mastery anyone gets for free, and then only single classed fighters get it. Elven bladesingers and bard blades receive no free levels of mastery. If you're going to use the *PLAYER'S OPTION* rules in your campaign, you should stick to the kits presented in the *Skills and*

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Powers book. If you're using the character point system from the *Skills and Powers* book, both blades and bladesingers could achieve mastery in their chosen weapons. They should however, also have to pay a hefty character point cost for their kits; the DM should set a cost based on the special abilities presented in *S&P*'s character creation chapter.

What's going on with the initiative system? Under the rules in Chapter 1, a giant is always going to lose initiative against man-sized characters.

Hey, what's going on here? Chapter 1 says a character with a dagger always strikes before a character with a long sword.

Both of these statements are false. First, everyone rolls initiative normally, and the side with the lowest roll wins. It is possible, however, to win initiative and still not strike first. For example, a hill giant armed with a club has a base initiative of slow and has a weapon speed of fast. Any creature's attack, however, comes during its base phase or its weapon's phase, whichever is *worse*. So, will a giant always strike after a human, whose base initiative is fast? Not necessarily. A human armed with a fast weapon, such as a dagger, usually will strike before a giant. The human also would go first if armed with an average weapon, such as a long sword. If the human has a slow weapon, however, such as a two-handed sword, he is as slow as the giant, and the initiative roll determines who goes first when two opponents act in the same phase. Even if the human has a fast or average weapon, the giant still won't always strike second. Its superior reach allows it to guard or charge and automatically strike first, no matter what its initiative roll is. If the human gets in nice and close so the giant can't guard or charge, the giant can always overrun the human (and maybe half the human's party in the process) and move off somewhere where it can guard or charge the next round.

A human armed with a dagger usually will strike before a human armed with a long sword (a fast character with a fast weapon strikes before a fast character with an average weapon) unless the character armed with a long sword is charging or guarding. Before you decide that daggers are the weapon of choice, take another look at the weapons' damage ratings and knockdown numbers and at the critical hit rules. The swordsman is going to win over the long run. Note that if you interpret the rules strictly, a character armed with a dagger always strikes first when charging or guarding against a character of the same size armed with a long sword, because both weapons have the same melee reach. Use some common sense and let the swordsman go first.

In discussing this last point with *C&T* co-author Rich Baker, we came up the fol-

lowing general rule, which we both agreed should have been in the book in the first place: In a situation where a character is charging or guarding against an opponent with a weapon that has the same reach, the figure with the large weapon (or the larger creature) goes first. For example, a human swordsman guarding against a human attacker armed with a dagger goes first. A troll guarding against a human attacker with a dagger also goes first because it is a large creature guarding against a small weapon.

What's the deal with guarding? A big giant with a club has a reach of 3. Does this mean that if the giant guards it will get three attacks of opportunity before a human charging in with a long sword can make an attack?

No. The giant gets one attack when the human first enters the group of squares the giant threatens. This is the giant's normal attack, not an attack of opportunity. If the human bores straight in and swings at the giant, the giant doesn't get any more attacks. If however, the human changes course and leaves the area the giant threatens, or turns his back on the giant, the giant would get an attack of opportunity.

So how come psionic creatures have to wait until their base initiative phase before using their abilities?

One of the general premises of the *Combat and Tactics* book is that creatures have certain characteristics derived from their size. Smaller creatures generally are quicker to react than bigger ones are, even when what they're doing is purely mental. Besides, if a baku really gets annoyed with a brain mole that keeps beating him to the punch, the baku can always overrun the brain mole and stomp it into the dirt. Note that many psionic abilities don't happen until a round's resolution phase. If a power has a preparation time of a round or more, it's among the last things to take effect. If you don't want to stick psionicists with acting on their base initiative phase all the time, you can make psionic powers with preparation times of fast or very fast. Or, you can roll 1d10 to determine the power's base phase. This reflects the ever changing state of the psionicist's mind and helps keep the players guessing about what's going to happen from phase to phase.

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TSR welcomes two new staff members! **Anthony J. Bryant** has taken over as editor of this fine publication and **Pierce Watters** is our editor-in-chief of periodicals. Tony has been a gamer longer than he cares to admit. Before he joined us here in Lake Geneva, he lived in the San Francisco Bay area and was the associate editor of *Integrated System Design* magazine. And even before that, Tony made his home in Japan where he was the features editor for the *Mainichi Daily News* and the editor of the *Tokyo Journal*. Pierce has worked for

Warner Books and Taylor Publishing. He was the founding editor of *Internal Arts Magazine* and the owner of WCS, a company that exported computer peripherals to Japan. Pierce likes to dance and grow herbs, and always carries a small jar of ground habanero peppers with him.

Interplay, the company producing the computer game version of **DRAGON DICE™** and the **DESCENT TO UNDERMOUNTAIN™** game has formed an internal division to create computer games for TSR. Interplay owns the exclusive license to produce electronic games for AD&D® campaign worlds, including **PLANESCAPE™** and **FORGOTTEN REALMS®**. Mark O'Green will lead the new division of over 50 artists, designers, and programmers in creating computer, home video, and coin-operated games based on the AD&D game. More info on **Interplay** and its products is

available through the company's worldwide web site at <http://www.interplay.com>.

DRAGON DICE for PCs is due out this month. **DESCENT TO UNDERMOUNTAIN** will be available in early 1996.

Capcom Entertainment, Inc. will bring the popular coin-operated **DUNGEONS & DRAGONS®: TOWER OF DOOM™** game to the Sony PlayStation and Sega Saturn before the end of the year. The game allows two players to play simultaneously, while they assume the roles of player characters trying to restore peace to the Republic of Darokin. Players control the outcome of the game through interactive decisions and new players can join even after game play has started.

The **Illuminati: New World Order*** data base program is now available from Geekware Inc. It can be ordered directly from Geekware at 5023 W. 120th Ave., Suite 126, Broomfield, CO 80020, or e-mail: sales@geekware.com.

Fans of **INWO*** can check out Steve Jackson Games on the World Wide Web. The site has over 100 pages with info on **GURPS***, **Car Wars***, and **Pyramid Magazine**. Also of interest is the Daily Illuminator, a news page updated daily with the latest info on SJ Games. Check it out at <http://www.io.com/sjgames>.

Acclaim Comics will publish the graphic novel, **Magic: The Gathering—Homelands** this month with one of three randomly inserted, rare Homelands cards. The graphic novel, based on the expansion set for **M:tG***, is written by D.H. Chichester and painted by Rebecca Guay with cover art by Tim and Greg Hildebrandt. Acclaim has also entered into a distribution agreement with Diamond Comic Distributors, Inc. Diamond distributes DC, Image, and Dark Horse Comics.

World Builder Publishing will release a new role-playing game in 1996 called **Lords of Fantasy***. The game uses a point building system for creating characters, allowing players to create the exact character they want to play and even allows them to flesh out their characters as the game progresses. A preview of the game is available directly from World Builder Publishing. Ω

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Wizards
OF THE COAST

Roaming the Realms:

The Green Elves
of Faerûn

by Belinda G. Ashley

Artwork by Terry Dykstra

As a ranger, I have wandered nearly all my life across the great expanses of Faerûn, met many people, and seen many strange and wonderful sights. I was born a moon elf in Everska and believed I knew everything there was to know about my people. But I have since had an eye-opening experience among our forest brethren, the green elves. I spent two years touring the tribes and another year deciphering a jumble of notes for my book, *Living with the Green Elf*. Below are a few excerpts from the book. I hope these notes will help shed some light on this elusive elf.

The green elves, despite the common belief, are quite jovial and are practical jesters among themselves. Only in the company of strangers are they reserved, morose, sometimes even hostile. They are never pretentious and hold no regard for the petty bickering of society. A green elf sees the world with amazing clarity and is often considered by outsiders to be blunt, rude, and brutally honest.

Green elves are known by many names. Sy-Tel'Qessir is the elven name, others are forest, wood, or wild elf. "Wood" is a derogatory name (as in "wood-headed") used by elves, particularly moon elves. "Wild," used by most non-elves, is quickly becoming demeaning as well. It seems many people associate "wild" with smelly, unintelligent heathens. I assure you, the green elves are neither.

The green elves live throughout the forests of Faerûn, with the highest concentrations in the Western Heartlands and the Savage North. The tribes I visited had members numbering anywhere from 50-400, with the larger tribes breaking into smaller clans. Outside of Evermeet, the tribes are ruled by the Speaker and the Circle; the latter an informal but powerful group. The Speaker, often of royal descent, is the figurehead of the tribe, the arbitrator, and the person who handles outsiders. The Circle rules over personal matters, daily affairs, and justice. Both are chosen by the tribe, however, the Speaker's position is for life while members of the Circle are free to withdraw their positions at their, or the tribe's, choosing.

Despite their distrust and dislike of outsiders, most green elves have a secret passion for trade and sometimes arrange for their goods to be sold by other elves during autumn trade fairs. They make a number of goods, from hemp ropes and baskets to leather jerkins and shields. The only items they will never sell or trade are their bows and arrows. Considering the quality workmanship of these items, I can readily understand why they wouldn't want them to fall into the wrong hands.

Other than making goods, the elves spend their time worshipping, hunting, and harvesting. Most of the harvest comes from the wilds, though a few plants are cultivated: mushrooms, berries, and shrobee plants (found in forests all over Faerûn). They also grow herbs and spices,

not only for cooking but for fabric dyes, liqueurs, and healing. Many an adventuring elf owes his life to the superb medicinal remedies brewed by the green elves.

Much has been said about the fighting tactics of the green elves (for that's how most people encounter them), yet I have discovered a few new strategies. Though all elves are proficient with magic, the green elves have modified their magic to reflect their beliefs and respect for nature. As an example, I had noticed the lack of fire magic and asked about this omission. The Circle informed me that casting fire spells is strictly forbidden. All too often these spells cause substantial damage to the forest—the very thing they are trying to protect. Even starting a campfire with magic is taboo; any green elf can build a fire, and it is a point of pride to do so without aid. Magic has other useful purposes, however. *Magic mouths* are placed on trees to warn intruders away, camps are encircled with magically enhanced traps and snares, and valuables, like caches of arrows, are strategically hidden in invisible holes. When expecting an attack, the green elves often set up illusory camps, lacing the area heavily with traps. Few intruders can pass through a green elves' forest without their knowledge or their approval.

For the most part, I found the green elves quite agreeable to me and to other like-minded individuals. Only a few tribes were openly hostile at my intrusion, and even those became somewhat amicable by the time of (or maybe because of) my departure. I have here listed a few of the more unusual tribes.

The High Forest

Until recently, I had not realized the large numbers of green elves living in this old wood. Taekar Greenbow, the Speaker of the tribe, seemed anxious at our meeting and gave me a hurried tour of the area. I soon learned that the elves had been under sporadic, but heavy, attacks by orcs and, more recently, drow. Taekar suspects there is an opening to the Underdark somewhere in the Star Mounts and the two enemies are working together. The treants to the north refuse to get involved and the druids are split as to whether they should help. Do they send for outside help or not? Their fear is that if they let other elves, humans, or (the gods forbid) dwarves into the woods, the forest will be destroyed by their axes, swords, and spells of fire. I pointed out that the orcs and drow were already doing this. My comment was huffed at, and I drew several angry stares.

Taekar and I had long discussions about the future of the tribe. He told me that many of this tribe have left for Evermeet and the few that remain (about 500) are too small in number to battle the dark elves and their allies. If he cannot convince the Circle to ask for outside help, he is afraid that soon there will be one less tribe of green elves in the North.

The Misty Forest

With the recent battles at Dragonspear, the green elves have become quite famous and, through some shrewd business ventures, are cashing in on their status. Eamond Blackmantle is the very charismatic and outspoken Speaker of this tribe, and he has worked hard to establish his people as a major influence in the area. Eamond told me that the tribe had lost a significant number of people from battles in the last five years, and he has been scurrying to lure other green elves from nearby forests into this tribe. His boldness and unusual tactics have met with success. Their numbers have risen by almost a hundred in the last two years, and now it has close to 300 members, making them the highest concentration of green elves this side of the Sea of Fallen Stars.

Eamond hails originally from the High Forest and comes from one of the oldest royal families known to exist. He came to the Misty Forest five years ago at the end of the Battle of Daggerford and helped the tribe rebuild their elaborate tree homes and way of life. In our discussions, Eamond said he would like to see the tribe increase to around 400 and he wants to establish a company of 100 crack archers.

Now that their homes are in order and the Way Inn rebuilt, the tribe is re-establishing trade with merchants passing through the area. The green elves keep bees and make an excellent honey mead and wine. They do a brisk business selling or trading the liquors by the urn-full in exchange for items they cannot make themselves. Unlike other tribes, the green elves of the Misty Forest are not adverse in dealing with non-elves and have learned to drive a hard bargain with the merchants.

This is one of the most unusual tribes I have encountered. They are more cultured, adventurous, and open-minded than any other group; several elves have even gone on into the world to become adventurers. Eamond and the Circle encourage independent thinking among their kin and believe the tribe can only benefit from the brisk trade without sacrificing their love and devotion to nature. They have dug their heels in with spirit and are determined there will continue to be green elves living in the Misty Forest for centuries to come.

The Laughing Hollow

This tribe of green elves was nearly destroyed during the battles of Dragonspear and Daggerford and, like the elves of the Misty Forest, have had to rebuild; however, they have not gained the numbers of the former group had. Unlike Eamond, who is actively recruiting, Prince Florfindyn, the Speaker and hero from the battles, is allowing the population to grow at its own pace. Green elves have trickled in from all across the Savage North and many have even come from the Misty

Forest (not all green elves abide by Speaker Eamond's unusual practices). The tribe now numbers just over 100.

Prince Florfindyn was a gracious host and we spent many evenings enjoying long talks by the fire. Since his capture by the cornugon Vesarius, he has become more reflective and deeply religious. Several beautiful shrines have been built to Rillifane Rallathil, Solonor Thelandira, and others. I counted nine shrines throughout the tribe; very many for such a small community.

Not all is somber and serious, though. Most of the tribe's members are in their prime of youth and are somewhat reckless and aggressive. A small group of green elves and pixies have taken to heckling travelers passing through the area, and they are fond of frightening the well-to-do and over-pompous clerics on their way south from Waterdeep. Though no one has been harmed (aside from injured pride), I fear a visit will be paid by the High Guards of Waterdeep, for rich travelers often influence matters of justice. Prince Florfindyn is unconcerned, saying that the group is just having fun and no harm has been done.

The Wood of the Sharp Teeth

Recently, a small group of green elves (about 50) has broken off from the tribe in the Misty Forest and headed into the Wood of Sharp Teeth near Baldur's Gate. It seems there was an argument between Speaker Eamond and Derdryl, an older and much sterner elf, about courting the favors of humans. The last report from the Derdryl's group said that they had made a temporary pact with a tribe of satyrs and were continuing to forage deep into the woods. Derdryl, it seems, is obsessed in finding the ancient elven empire of Anauria. He has used the argument between himself and Eamond to gather a group to explore the unknown reaches of the Sharp Teeth. What he expects to find is up to speculation. The ruins of that fabled empire are old even by elven standards, and it would appear that Derdryl is leading his group on a wild, and very dangerous, goose chase.

Chondalwood

The Tribe of Chondalwood (approximately 400 members) certainly holds the record as being the most sullen bunch of green elves in all of Faerûn. They are a strange, moody lot, full of dark humor, odd rituals, and mysterious music. Their dislike of outsiders borders on hatred, and though I spent nearly three months with them, I was barely tolerated. Fortunately, I befriended one of the Circle members and had at least one elf in the tribe who could help me understand their ways.

Their Speaker, an aloof female named Tyriana, is said to be older than the rotted heart of Chondalwood. She is a religious fanatic, and possibly the meanest elven

druidess I have ever met. She maintains the frenzied drive behind this tribe's religious practices, and she creates their many dramatic and colorful rituals. I experienced a few ceremonies; they were wild affairs, filled with exotic dances and songs and flutes that permeated the forest with the haunting sounds of dissonant harmonies.

During my visit, I had the (mis)fortune to witness the tribe's particular form of justice. Unlike other tribes, this group seldom calls the Circle into session when outsiders are involved. Justice before the Circle is normally reserved for members of the tribe or visiting elves. Tyriana explained that it is her responsibility to deal with outsiders so that the tribe may pray undisturbed and not be soiled by their ways. The unlucky group of adventurers was tried, sentenced, and found guilty of destroying woodlands (the camping area was trampled), entering the forest without permission (not that they would have been given it anyway), stripping branches from live trees for firewood, and killing mistletoe (pulled down with the branches; I don't believe the group knew what mistletoe was). As punishment, their axes were taken away, they were stripped of their clothing, chased through camp at spearpoint, covered in poccah mud, and finally run out of the woods. (Poccah mud is an obnoxious mixture of poccah berries, roots, and mud. It stinks, stings, and itches, and it lasts for days. Once dry, it's next to impossible to get off.) Though their methods are rough, I doubt that group will pass this way again.

For all their gruffness, they have an excellent rapport with many of the woodland creatures (particularly the centaurs) and a healthy respect for the druids of Chondalwood, though the druids were often targets of the elves and centaurs' practical jokes. There is even a bit of trade between the three groups. Despite their indifference to me and other outsiders, I felt that the three groups held a mutual respect for one another and worked together to protect their woodlands.

Rawlinswood of the Great Dale

I must admit that I have never heard so many rumors about such elves as the green elves of Rawlinswood. In passing through Uthmere near the Great Dale, I came across at least a dozen rumors regarding the infamous elves and the powerful mage of the Dale, Nentyarch.

Needless to say, my curiosity was aroused by the time I arrived at the tribe's camp. I was greeted by the outlandish Speaker of the tribe, Princess Rheáma Talltree. She was clad in an almost sheer, flowing dress of bright greens and golds, and she bore the green facial tattoos of a tribal mage. Copper-colored hair flowed over her shoulders in tiny braids, sparkling with the dust of diamonds and gold. Brass bells dangled from the ends of the braids and tinkled with every graceful movement. She

greeted me with a radiant smile as she approached, and her scent... aaahhh. Where was I? Oh, yes. After meeting Rheána, I was given a brief rundown of the tribe and its 300-plus members, and I settled in for a two-month visit.

While celebrating the festival of Springrite, I stumbled across the source of the rumors; the green elves plant the gossip themselves! They believe the rumors deter would-be trouble-makers from entering the forest, but I am not so sure that the opposite is not actually the truth. Whatever the case, there is plenty of talk in nearby taverns. One rumor I overheard was that forest spirits had captured Nentyarch's soul and bound it within a magical cage of wood. Another rumor was that Nentyarch practiced necromancy and commanded an undead army of wild elves. Both the spirits and the undead were blamed for the many disappearances within the woods. There were several variants on these rumors, as well as other equally outlandish tales. It seems the green elves have a penchant for mischievous humor and greatly enjoy confusing and scaring the locals. Even they aren't safe from their own gossip; there is a very *quiet* rumor among the tribe that Rheána is having an affair with Nentyarch. Interesting, but I could never prove or disprove it.

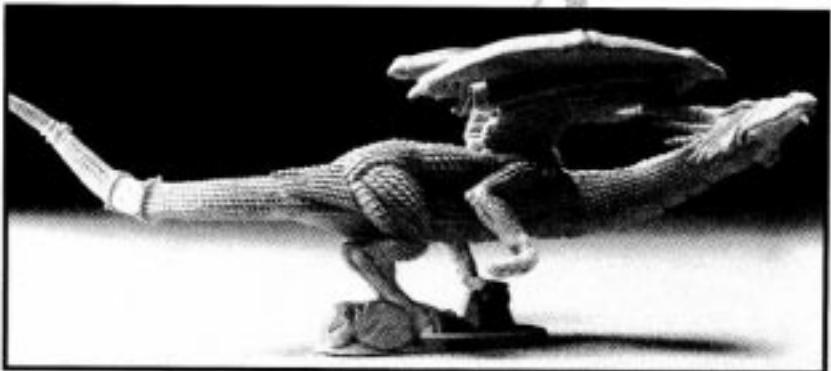
During my visit, I discovered that the elves and Nentyarch have a close working relationship. (An odd union if ever there was one.) The mage wants privacy, and both parties want to protect the forest, so they have come to an agreement. All unannounced visitors are quickly and quietly ushered by the green elves to Nentyarch's castle where he disposes of the intruders. In return the mage grants Rheána an occasional new spell or two. At first I was alarmed at the "disposal" of intruders, but then, through persistent prying, I learned that the intruders were, as they put it, simply "misplaced"-all over Faerûn. I'm glad my arrival was by invitation.

The tribe heavily patrols the perimeter of the forest and is seldom seen outside its boundaries; however, occasionally, Rheána or a lesser mage will wander to nearby villages in disguise and scout out buyers for their goods or check on the development of the newest rumor. The elves make a number of high quality goods such as rugs, hemp ropes, and intricately carved wooden goblets. They also make a number of magical pouches, boots, and staves; but Rheána insists the tribe trade magic for magic.

With their access to high magic, this tribe is extremely secure and quite powerful. I noticed a high percentage of tribe members who were mages, as well as a good number of clerics. Despite their low numbers in relation to the size of their forest, an enemy would be hard-pressed to defeat this gutsy band of elves. Ω

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he common room smelled, but not of spilled wine or drunken men. I sniffed suspiciously. No, I thought, it wasn't perfume, exactly, but something else light and sweet. More than anything it reminded me of wildflowers.

Such a scent didn't belong in a dive like Slab's Tavern, I ought to know. I, Ulander Rasym, owner of Slab's, took great pride in nurturing my bar's less-than-savory reputation.

Surreptitiously I glanced around at the evening crowd. Pirates dressed in brightly hued silks and bedecked with glittering jewels lounged in secluded booths along the back wall, haggling with merchant-princes over the disposition of ill-gotten cargoes. Since the Great Lord of Zelloque declared his city a free port, pirates became common here. To my left, against the far wall, a dozen Coranian slavers in hooded gray cloaks threw eight-sided dice while stamping their feet and shouting with bravado. Meanwhile, at the bar, a motley assortment of thieves and cutthroats engaged in a boisterous game—Queen's Ransom, I realized as their tankards slammed together in the Heroes' Toast. Even the solitary few, nursing cups of wine at tables in the center of the room, looked ready for a fight.

No, of all the lowlifes who patronized Slab's, none would reek of such a dainty scent. Nor were there any new women about, just my usual crew of barmaids and serving girls, and out of self preservation none of *them* would dare perfume themselves—they were black and blue already from too many unwanted pinches, pokes, and outright grabs from customers.

That only left one other possible source for the sweet offending smell: Slab Vethiq himself, the founder of my ignoble drinking establishment. Slab had died nearly a decade before, but that hadn't stopped him from taking an active interest in the bar; his ghost had caused more than a bit of trouble over the years.

Perhaps, I mused, things had been too quiet in recent weeks. Of course the bar had its usual nightly show of spirits—earlier this evening the severed heads of two dead sailors appeared over the bar singing bawdy songs until one of the barmaids chased them away with a broom—but there hadn't been any real trouble in more than a month. It was about time for Slab to put in an unwanted appearance to stir things up.

Nodding and smiling to patrons as if I hadn't a concern in the world, I strolled toward the back of the tavern, where I kept my private booth. If Slab had indeed returned to interfere in my affairs again, I'd let him think his game didn't concern me. Then perhaps he'd grow bored, show himself, and make his latest demands so I could get on with my business.

Sure enough, as I slipped through the curtain into my booth, a ghostly hand appeared before me holding a bottle of my best wine. It seemed proof enough that I'd done right in feigning a lack of concern; Slab seldom appeared so quickly when he wanted something.

Next a ghostly goblet appeared, and Slab poured me a generous drink. The floral scent grew stronger.

On the Scent at Slab's

by John Gregory Betancourt

Artwork by Terry Dykstra

"What do you want this time?" I asked him.

"A toast to your good health, Ulander!" said his gravelly voice.

"That's one thing I'll always drink to." I took a hesitant sip. As I'd half expected, the wine tasted like warm blood; it took all my strength of will to swallow rather than spray it out across the table. I wouldn't give Slab the satisfaction of knowing he'd begun to bother me this time.

As I smacked my lips with pretend satisfaction, the rest of Slab materialized: the piercing gray eyes, the jagged dueling scar on his left cheek, the bearded chin, the one gold earring. As always, he wore splendid clothes: tonight, red silk breeches and shirt, with huge ruby rings on his fingers. As he conjured another goblet and poured himself a drink, the flowery smell grew cloying. I had to cover my nose with a handkerchief.

"Slab," I said, "you're going to ruin business with this stench."

He leaned forward, elbows on the table. "I have come for your good advice," he said, "friend Ulander."

Slab never called me "friend" even when he was alive and I was his loyal right-hand man. More than anything else he'd said or done tonight, that worried me. And he'd never bothered to ask-let alone take-my counsel in the nearly twenty-five years I'd known him.

"Advice?" I asked. I could only give him a blank, bewildered stare.

He smiled. I'd always found his smiles dangerous in the past, but this one looked merely silly. And just as suddenly I knew what had happened.

'You're in love,' I whispered, awed in spite of myself.

"She's a most wonderful creature," he said softly.

"What should I do?"

"Tell her, by all means," I said quickly. This could be the answer to my prayers, I thought. It was hard to imagine Slab finding a friend, let alone a lover, but I would be the last to dampen the flames of such a romance. If some spectral woman would have him, then have him she would. Perhaps this was all he needed. Perhaps he would now content himself to move on to the underworld and leave me and my tavern alone.

"Tell her," he mused. "What a marvelous idea. You will arrange it, of course."

I stopped short. "You don't mean-she's among the living?"

"Of course."

"How—" I began, at a loss for words. "Who—"

"She is called," he said with the softest of sighs, "Deana Caltonos qua Salian Ri."

A chill ran through me as he spoke her name.

"I must talk with her, Ulander," he continued, more forcefully now. It sounded almost a threat. "Bring her here. Tomorrow."

"But she's—" I began.

He shook his head in warning. Then he faded away.

I pressed my eyes shut and took another sip from my goblet, which Slab had had the good sense to leave behind. Its contents tasted a lot more like wine now, and I certainly felt the need to get drunk.

Deana Ri. Of course I knew of her; she was the

Great Lord of Zelloque's younger sister, and after him, the last of the Ri bloodline, since the Great Lord had yet to marry and produce an heir. Should anything happen to His Eminence Narmon Ri, Deana would ascend the emerald throne to rule Zelloque.

Slab might as well have asked me to bring the Great Lord himself. Besides, I thought, struggling to recall what little court gossip I knew, wasn't she already betrothed to a Coranian prince? What interest could she possibly have in the ghost of a dead barkeeper?

No, Slab had once again demanded the impossible. Only I knew he'd make me suffer if I didn't at least try to carry out his whims. What could I possibly do?

I had to find out more about the Coranian prince, I thought.

I parted the curtain to my booth and gestured to Lur, my bodyguard and doorman. He lumbered over, all seven feet of him, and bent his bald head to hear what I wanted.

"Have any of the Coranian slavers finished with their game?" I asked. I couldn't tell if any of them had joined the crowd at the bar.

Lur grunted once, which I took to mean no.

"I want to talk to one of them. Bring their leader here when he's done."

When Lur nodded, I closed the curtain to a slit, through which I continued to watch. Lur turned at once and strode toward the dice game. I sighed. He was without a doubt the best bouncer and bodyguard I'd ever had, but his reasoning abilities left something to be desired. I should have realized my instructions would be too complicated for him; he'd get one of the slavers for me now.

I watched Lur look over the men, select one-the tallest, of course-then bend and whisper a few words into the man's ear. The slaver glanced toward my booth and frowned, but nodded. Passing the dice, he scooped up a few coins, tucked them into his pouch, and headed toward me with a swagger.

I leaned back and waited until he swept the curtain aside. "Please, join me," I said, and when he did, I asked, "Wine?"

He nodded solemnly, and I gestured to one of the serving girls. When she'd set a goblet before him, I pulled the curtain closed again.

"You are, of course," I said, "familiar with the upcoming marriage between one of your Coranian princes and Deana Caltonos qua Salian Ri, the sister of our beloved Great Lord."

"Prince Destabo na Laoles of the noble House of Kempon," he said off-handedly. "What of it?"

"Then the wedding is still to be held?"

He regarded me strangely. "The wedding is in thirty-five days."

"What?" I cried. "Where?"

"Here, you idiot!" He drained his goblet and slammed it down. "Don't you listen to news-criers? Have you heard none of your own Great Lord's proclamations? A month of festivities begins next week in honor of the wedding."

"Ah," I said. I chewed my lip, recognizing now that

Slab's sudden interest in Deana Ri came at a curiously inopportune time. Normally I would have known about the upcoming festivities-by habit as well as preference I kept myself well versed in the city's affairs-but as Slab surely knew, I'd faced one dire emergency after another for the last few weeks, capped by a pestilence of giant flesh-eating rats in the cellars (and serving girls who refused to fetch wine unless accompanied by well-armed escorts). As a result, I'd barely stirred from my tavern in all that time.

"A little more than a month away," I mused. "Then Prince Destabo will have already left Coran."

"I'm not privy to the prince's schedule. But yes, I would imagine his ship sailed last week."

I nodded to the slaver. "Thank you for your help. Your next bottle of wine is on the house."

He grinned with sudden goodwill. "My thanks, sir, and may the great god Derethigon bring fortune to you." He slipped from my booth.

"And to you," I murmured, but my thoughts were already far away.

I suddenly knew with an amazing certainty that Prince Destabo was dead. Perhaps his ship had been attacked by pirates; perhaps it had fallen victim to a whirlpool or a sea monster; perhaps some storm or plague or other natural disaster had overtaken him. It didn't matter. Somehow he had perished on his journey to Zelloque. For Slab to have developed such a sudden interest in Deana Ri, I knew he must have spoken to the dead prince's spirit. Being dead himself gave him a certain advantage in that area.

But why would he want to meet with Deana Ri? Why this whole charade of being in love? For now I knew it must be a charade. Had Slab gone to such lengths merely to annoy me-always a possibility-or did he have more devious motives? Or could he really have fallen in love with Deana Ri based on the dead prince's description of her?

At that moment I realized I made a singular mistake. Slab never actually *said* he was in love. I assumed it from the way he was acting. And once I made that assumption, he never bothered to deny it. When would I learn never to trust my former employer? He could be a master of deception and subterfuge when he chose.

He probably had a message for Deana Ri from her betrothed, and he undoubtedly hoped to use that message in some way for his personal gain. Now, if I could only find a way to turn it to my advantage rather than his... and get that awful flowery smell out of my tavern in the bargain...

Later, in the small hours of the morning after I'd seen the last drunk rousted and the tavern's doors securely barred for the night, I ventured forth to see my good friend Captain Lastoq, who was in charge of the city guard. I always kept my bribes to him paid up, and he owed me at least one favor for certain magical potions of a highly illegal-and highly amorous—nature that I had procured for him at great personal expense. If not that debt, then the pouch of gold royals I carried and Lur's hulking presence beside me guaranteed that Lastoq would see me at once.

As Lur and I strolled through the darkened streets, I noticed great changes happening throughout the city. These had to be preparations for Deana Ri's wedding, I thought. Despite the lateness of the hour, the city bustled with activity. Thrice we passed long lines of creaking wooden drays pulled by six-legged xylopoths. Their reptilian heads and shaggy, doglike bodies strained with sinewy strength, and every so often their broad nostrils flared as they caught scent of the sides of salted meats, bushels of grain, and other foodstuffs they hauled. Still more impressive than that, the streets had been swept, the paving stones scrubbed, and decades of grime seemingly stripped away from the buildings so that everything gleamed in the starlight as though newly built. The air itself smelled sweet-almost a miracle, considering it was a warm summer night in June. Truly, the Great Lord had spared no expense in preparing for his sister's wedding.

Captain Lastoq lived in one of the better sections of the city, but his twenty-room house seemed almost modest in comparison to the walled estates of the merchant princes around him. A single downy-checked guard, his silver breastplate and helmet gleaming with a mirrorlike polish, stood late duty at Lastoq's front gate. As I approached, the young man snapped to attention, throwing out his chest and smacking the butt of his silver-tipped spear on the pavement in challenge.

"Who goes there?" he demanded.

I heard Lur grunt and sensed him reaching for his mace, but I calmed him with a gesture.

"I have come on urgent business to see your captain," I said. I pressed a gold half royal coin into the young man's hand. It was undoubtedly more than he expected or even required, but I felt the need for haste, which an extravagant bribe would certainly elicit.

"Your name?" he asked more cordially.

"Ulander Rasym. It is a matter of utmost importance."

"Wait here, sir."

He slipped through the gate. I shifted uneasily from foot to foot, studying a fourth line of drays now passing, then watching Lur finger the handle of his mace as though he longed to use it, then gazing up at the stars in the nighttime sky.

At last the young guard returned. "Captain Lastoq says for you to come back after the noon hour. He has just retired from a long day's honest labor and will see nobody."

"Did you tell him my name?" I demanded.

"Yes."

"Tell him," I said in a soft, dangerous voice, "that I bear news of the gravest import, if he doesn't see me now, I will go over his head to one of the Great Lord's ministers, and he'll probably be executed as a result."

"He told me you would say something to that effect, and that if I let you in I would be patrolling the docks to the last minute of the last hour of the last day of my service. You may not pass."

"Did he also warn you about Lur?"

"What's a lur?"

I turned to my bodyguard. "Show him."

The mace rose and fell with astonishing speed. The

guard crumpled, a new dent in his shiny silver helm. I bent to make certain he was merely unconscious—luckily, he was then pushed the gate open and entered the courtyard. Lur stooped, then followed, dragging the young man along by his heel. Once we were inside, I shut the gate with a soft clang, then recovered my coin from his pouch. There was no sense in rewarding stupidity and incompetence, after all.

By the light of the lone torch that burned by the front door, I noted that Captain Lastoq had redone the garden since I had last visited. Pale, night-blooming flowers sweetened the air, their scent quite delicious compared to the cloying reek in my tavern. Sniffing happily, I strolled up the pebble walkway toward the front door.

"Attacking a city guardsman," said a soft voice from the shadows to my left, "is still a crime, even in these degenerate days in this degenerate city."

"So is the possession of certain magical love potions," I said. "Besides, that pup slipped on a paving stone and hit his head. We were merely helping him inside."

"Of course you were." Tayn Lastoq stepped from the shadows. He wore a loose black robe rather than his uniform and carried no weapons that I could see. 'You have done me a favor, actually,' he said. "Young Barsil there is from a wealthy family with close ties to the Great Lord. He parents will doubtlessly buy many promotions for him over the next few years, and I expect he will rapidly become one of my most influential officers. Despite that, he shows promise. I needed to know how unquestioning his loyalty to me would be, and he passed the test admirably. He could easily have taken you to see one of the Great Lord's advisors."

"He did seem promising," I allowed. "I am pleased to have rendered you yet another service."

Laughing, he turned and entered the house through a side door, and I followed. Lur, still dragging young Barsil, brought up the rear. We went straight to Captain Lastoq's study, where a tray of sweetmeats and goblets of fruit nectar had already been set out for us. We sat and sampled them.

"Now," he said, after the required few minutes of polite conversation, "what is it that brings you out of your tavern to see me at such an hour, Ulander?"

"Bad news, I'm afraid." I told him of all Slab had done, then gave voice to my suspicion that Prince Destabo had died in passage to Zelloque.

Lastoq sipped his nectar thoughtfully for a second. "You have no actual proof," he said slowly. "Nothing you have told me would convince the Great Lord's counselors to permit Deana Ri to visit your tavern—let alone halt preparations for the wedding. But if we could get proof of some kind, surely it would be worth a lot for both of us."

"True," I admitted. "I believe Slab can be tricked into giving us the proof we need."

"How is this possible?"

"From years of experience, I have come to believe that Slab is somehow bound to my tavern. He sees all that happens within, yet remains blissfully ignorant of all that happens without. In cases such as this one, when he has given me explicit instructions, he must

rely on me to do as told—and I have always followed such instructions in the past. He will believe me if I tell him Deana Ri is coming to my tavern to see him."

"But she must come in disguise," he said, catching on. "No one must know she has visited a place such as Slab's"

"Veils and concealing robes will do the trick," I said.

"And I will have the tavern surrounded by half a hundred men," he said. "Security is as important as secrecy."

I gestured grandly. "It must appear that she is there with all due precautions. Make it a hundred men!"

"But who will play the part of Deana Ri?" he wondered.

At that moment young Barsil groaned and stirred. Captain Lastoq and I glanced at him and then at each other. Then we both smiled.

It took another hour to finalize our plans, then we shook hands in agreement. Dawn had just begun to color the east with pale fingers of pink and yellow when I made it home. Of course, I could not afford a grand estate like Captain Lastoq, who collected bribes from half the merchants in Zelloque and extorted protection money from the rest. I lived in a modest three-story house near the city's west gate, with only two servants and Lur to keep things in order.

I knew it would take many hours for someone to arrange even a clandestine visit from Deana Ri, and I intended to spend those hours sleeping, as did Captain Lastoq. I normally opened my tavern's doors around three o'clock in the afternoon, but today we would open late. Lastoq and I had agreed upon a twilight visit, and only after we had wrung whatever news we could from Slab would the tavern be opened as usual to customers. I went at once to my bedroom and shuttered the windows; already the first sounds of traffic had begun to rise from the street. Far off, a crier proclaimed the morning's news, but I could not make out the words. No doubt it had something to do with Deana Ri's wedding celebration, I thought.

Exhaustion claimed me. As soon as I had changed into my night clothes, I climbed into my large canopied bed, snuggled into the down-filled mattress, and slept a deep and dreamless sleep.

Marina, my elderly housekeeper, awakened me at one o'clock in the afternoon by throwing open the shutters, as usual. Mumbling and groaning, I sat up and squinted at her. She wore her ash colored hair in a tight bun, in the style of Pavonian matriarchs, and bustled about the room with efficient speed. She laid out my clothes, poured fresh water into a basin by the window, and then returned to the kitchens to prepare my breakfast, all without a word.

I rose, splashed lime-scented water on my face from the basin, and studied my reflection in a looking glass. Slab had aged me, I thought. Dark circles lined my eyes; new wrinkles had appeared around my eyes and mouth. If I didn't get rid of him, I knew I'd be an old man long before my time.

Quickly I dressed and descended to the dining

room. Marina served a light meal of toasted oat cakes in honey, and I ate in silence, wondering if I had done the right thing. Slab could be vengeful. If anything went wrong and he discovered our plot, I might well come to regret it. But what else could I do?

No, I had made the right decision, of that I was sure. I would have to rely on my own wits and skills to make sure everything turned out as anticipated.

Finishing my oat cakes, I dipped my fingers in a rinsing bowl, wiped them clean on a soft white cloth, felt for my pouch to make sure I hadn't forgotten it, and bellowed, "Lur!" It was time to get going. All else would depend on Captain Lastoq, I knew.

Lur ducked through the doorway into the dining room. "Master?" he said in his low, rumble voice. He already held his mace.

"It's time," I told him.

The walk to my tavern took a little more than fifteen minutes, primarily because I chose the longer route through Storyteller's Square. Here preparations for Deana Ri's wedding continued at a great pace. We passed piles of lumber intended for platforms and food booths, groups of jugglers and tumblers practicing their arts, and more lines of xylopod drays heading for the Great Lord's warehouses. Old women were busy scrubbing down the flagstones; younger boys and girls painted fresh coats of whitewash on walls facing the square. The whole city had taken on a festive gleam.

Little had changed in the dockside section of Zelloque, however. The drab stone and brick buildings, the ships bobbing slowly at the piers, the fishy reek hanging over it all. Yes, I thought, you'd never know preparations for the wedding of a lifetime had begun a few blocks away, judging from this section of the city.

My tavern sat one block in from the docks, on Serpent's Row. Several Coranian smugglers I recognized as loyal patrons lounged on the wooden bench by my door; they struggled to their feet and threw back their gray hoods as I approached.

"We're closed this afternoon," I called.

"Preparations for the wedding."

They groaned. "Just a few drinks, Ulander," Old Sherton called, squinting at me with his one good eye. "Fer ol' times."

"Not today. Try Slaughter's." I nodded across the street at my competitor, who had already opened.

Grumbling, they meandered away. I didn't blame them. When you find a tavern like Slab's, it's hard to settle for second best. Sarri Slaughter watered his drinks too much, or so I'd heard, and he employed some of the ugliest barmaids this side of Pavonia.

I sat on the bench they had vacated. Lur stood beside me, one hand resting on the handle of his mace. In silence, we waited.

Several times I heard odd thumps from within the tavern, and once came the sound of a wine bottle shattering on the floor. I winced, hoping it was just the giant flesh-eating rats at play. But I had the strangest feeling Slab and his ghostly friends were hard at work in preparation for Deana Ri's visit.

Finally, from up the street I heard the sounds of marching boots, and seconds later a squad of city guardsmen, three abreast, turned the corner. Captain Lastoq, looking splendid in his gold and red dress uniform with a plentitude of medals pinned on his chest, rode at their head on a magnificent black stallion.

Lastoq stopped in front of me and dismounted, giving the horse's reins to one of his men. Then he clapped his hands, and his guards broke ranks and surrounded my tavern. They drew their short, slightly curved swords and assumed a watchful stance, facing outward.

Sarri Slaughter wandered from his tavern to look everything over. He smiled, showing cracked yellow teeth, then scratched at the fleas nesting in his long, scraggly red hair.

"Trouble, Ulander?" he called. He probably thought the Great Lord had sent Captain Lastoq to arrest me.

"A few rats in the cellar," I called back. "The city guard is going to exterminate them for me."

"Oh," he said, looking disappointed. Then he ducked back inside his own establishment.

Except for the guards, the street had become completely deserted. The Great Lord's guardsmen often had that effect when they arrived in large numbers.

Lastoq said, "Shall we wait inside?"

"Everything's ready?" I asked him.

"Yes. Her ladyship will be here any time now."

"Good." I turned and rapped twice on the door. "It's Ulander Rasym," I called. "Open up."

I heard the patter of bare feet as the boy I kept to watch the place at night hurried to obey. He shifted the heavy bar out of position, then I heard it thud to the floor. I pushed the door open.

Young Kel—he was about nine or ten years old, with a tangle of unruly blond hair and a mischievous grin—tried to dart past me. I grabbed his tunic and hauled him back. He started to kick, so I passed him to Lur, who held him upside down by the ankle in front of me.

"What's wrong in there?" I demanded. "Why were you trying to run away?"

"G-ghosts!" he said. "Everywhere! Hundreds of 'em!"

I peered in. "I don't see anything unusual."

"They've went away," he said a little apologetically.

"If they went away, they can't hurt you."

He thought that over for a second. "Maybe."

"Let him go," I said to Lur, who immediately released him. Kel tumbled head over heels and bobbed to his feet with catlike grace. "Kel," I told him, "go home and see your poor widowed mother. Be back by nightfall. We'll take care of the ghosts."

"Thank you, Ulander!" he said and dashed away up the street.

Shaking my head, I turned to Lastoq. "After you."

He gave a nervous laugh, glanced at his men, then ducked through the doorway. I followed.

The place had changed. All the furniture had been moved around to clear a straight path to my private booth. At least the ghosts had done some good, I thought; the floor had been swept and the tables scrubbed. Although the scent of wildflowers lingered

in the air, it had become a subtle, almost appealing smell. Everything seemed altogether too perfect, I decided.

"Slab?" I asked.

I heard nothing, not a whisper, not a creak from the floorboards, not a rustle from the rats in the cellar. The bar seemed completely deserted. I hesitated, my stomach feeling jumpy and nervous. More than ever, it felt like a trap.

Lastoq called to four of his men. They ran inside, swords drawn, and saluted smartly.

"Check the wine cellar," he told them.

"There's a lantern by the door," I called. "Watch out for the rats!"

They gave me puzzled glances but kept their swords out. One of them lit the lantern, and then they proceeded down the steps with exaggerated caution.

Shaking my head, I led Lastoq to the bar and pulled a bottle of Coranian brandy from my private store. I poured us both large drinks.

Then, as if from a great distance, I heard Slab's voice call, "Ulander."

I glanced at Lastoq, who had abruptly paled. He had heard it, too. Quickly he downed his drink.

With a sigh, I went into my private booth and pulled the curtain. Instantly Slab was there. I stared at the magnificent gold-and-emerald robe he wore, the ornately carved emerald rings on his fingers, the sparkling emerald pendant around his neck. He was dressed like a prince... a Coranian prince, I thought.

"Well?" he demanded, leaning forward and putting his elbows on the table.

"She will be here," I promised. "It cost me a fortune--"

"What do I care of money now?"

"It keeps the roof fixed," I pointed out, "and the cellars stocked."

"Bah. This is *love*, Ulander. When will she be here?"

"Twilight. A lady of her standing cannot parade through the streets like a common barmaid. And especially not in this section of the city. She is coming in disguise."

"What of the guards?"

I gave a dismissive wave. "The Great Lord's councilors insisted. Slab... I had to tell them a lie to get her here."

"What lie?" he demanded, eyes narrowing suspiciously.

"That the ghost of her mother had appeared to me and asked for her. It's well known my tavern is haunted; why shouldn't Deana Ri's mother come here, too? It was the only thing I could think of at the time. And it worked."

"Twilight..." he said softly. Then he smiled. And then he slowly faded from view.

Lastoq joined me in my private booth, and for the next few hours we drank and waited together in silence. Several times we heard cries of pain from the wine cellar, followed by cursing and the clank of swords on stone. I could imagine his men fighting off hordes of

giant flesh-eating rats, but it could just as easily have been some of Slab's ghostly friends playing tricks.

Eventually the four guardsmen clambered up the steps and marched over to Lastoq. They had what looked like numerous bite marks on their hands and faces, and blood smeared their uniforms.

"The rats," announced the one on the left, "are all dead."

"Excellent," I said, rubbing my hands together. They had saved me a lot of aggravation. "Then we will all be safe tonight."

Lastoq nodded. "Help yourself to a few bottles from behind the counter," he said to his men. "When you're done, return to barracks and have the company physician dress your wounds. The wine will ease your pains tonight."

I gave him a mildly displeased look because it was expected of me, but said nothing. His men had rid me of my rat problem, and a few bottles of wine were a small enough price to pay.

His men took their leave with happy grins, cheerful salutes, and six bottles of my finest Merindian wine. It was no wonder, I thought, that Captain Lastoq remained so popular among his troops.

The barmaids and other serving girls arrived as expected. I set some of them to cleaning up the mess in the wine cellar and dispatched others outside with cool lime-scented water for Lastoq's men. There followed calls of thanks from outside.

At last, twilight began to fall, so I sent all my servants outside to wait. In case anything unfortunate happened, I didn't want anything to happen to them. Good help is hard to find.

Right on schedule, I heard horses' hooves and the rattle of carriage wheels drawing to a stop in front of my tavern.

"This is it," Lastoq muttered unnecessarily, rising and hurrying to the door.

I followed. We got there in time to see young Barsil step down from the carriage. He was dressed in a noblewoman's rich concealing robes, with a veil of purple silk hiding all but his eyes and his freshly-and quite neatly-plucked eyebrows. He hesitated for a second, looking at Lastoq and me, then stepped forward with slow, mincing steps.

Captain Lastoq bowed to him, and I bowed too. That's what we would have done with the real Deana Ri, after all.

Barsil waved us back up with casual indifference. He had taken his role to heart, I could tell.

"This way, Great Lady," Lastoq said, escorting Barsil inside. They headed toward my private booth.

"Your mother will be joining us shortly," I said. "May I offer you any refreshments? Wine, perhaps?"

Slowly Barsil shook his head. He was trying not to speak, I realized. I decided not to ask him any more direct questions. Slab might get suspicious if he discovered our so-called Deana Ri spoke with a male voice.

The room's temperature dropped abruptly. Giant phantom rats appeared, scurrying over the walls, and then Slab himself materialized before us... and beside

Slab stood another ghost, this one dressed in tattered silks, with strings of seaweed draped from his shoulders and a gaping wound in his left cheek. I swallowed. This had to be Prince Destabo.

"I see you have not failed us, Ulander," Slab said in a booming voice that shook the walls. He turned to the prince. "All is as I promised," he said.

"Truly," Destabo whispered, his voice a horrible gurgle. He took a step toward young Barsil, raising one hand. The flesh had come off it, leaving bare bones, but I could see a huge diamond ring upon one white knuckle. "Come, my love..."

Barsil shrank back in fear. I didn't blame him.

"Slab!" I cried, "you can't do this!"

"It's worth it, Ulander," he told me.

"But the Great Lord—"

Slab laughed. "He's welcome to join us!"

Lastoq drew his sword. "Begone, foul creature!" he said to the thing that had been Prince Destabo. "You have no claim upon the living!"

Destabo raised his fleshless hand. "By this ring, she gave herself to me... and I will have her!"

"Then behold your betrothed!" I cried, snatching away young Barsil's veil.

Barsil understood and quickly ripped away his concealing purple robes, letting them fall to the floor. Standing there in nothing but a white loincloth, with a fierce, determined look on his face, he was unmistakably a man.

Prince Destabo howled in anger and frustration. I thought he was going to strike Barsil, but instead he whirled to face Slab.

"What—" Slab began. "But—" For the first time in my life, I saw him speechless. For once, I had outsmarted him, I thought with some satisfaction. It felt good.

Destabo didn't give Slab a chance to explain. "Liar!" he cried. "You betrayed me!"

Seizing Slab around the neck, Prince Destabo threw him to the floor. The two began to roll around, screaming, cursing, trying to best each other. Unfortunately they were both already dead, so they couldn't do any real harm, not even when Slab ripped off one of Destabo's arms and began to bludgeon him with it. The moment he let go, the arm reattached itself.

The phantom rats were all squealing and circling the battle.

"Help me!" I cried to Barsil and Lastoq.

I ran to the windows and began throwing open the shutters. The last dying rays of the sun streamed in, and where the light touched the ghosts, they grew pale and insubstantial as mist. The giant phantom rats, hissing and gnashing their teeth, slunk away to the corners.

At last the two figures broke apart. I could barely see them now. Destabo continued to glare at Slab.

"Be warned," he said in his horrible, gurgling voice, "you have made an enemy this day. I will not rest until I see you destroyed!"

"Make no threats you cannot fulfill," Slab said.

He gave a quick nod, and that seemed to be the signal the rats had been waiting for. Dozens of them swarmed onto Prince Destabo, fixing their ghostly

teeth and nails into him. He shrieked and tried to flee—but they dug in their feet and began to drag him away, toward the wine cellar.

Lastoq, Barsil, and I stood well back, watching with mingled horror and revulsion. The rats bore Prince Destabo into the darkness. I thought I heard him scream, then came a drawn-out cry of "No-o-o-o-o---"

I shuddered. The rats, I realized, must have been under Slab's control all along. They must have carried Prince Destabo to the underworld, from which no ghost could ever return.

Slab turned and glared. "Ulander—you've cost me a fortune!" he snarled. "He agreed to give me half the treasure aboard his sunken ship!"

"But you've made a fortune for me," I told him. "Captain Lastoq and I have successfully foiled a murder attempt against Deana Ri, for which the Great Lord will doubtless shower riches upon us, and we can also report that Prince Destabo na Laoles of the noble House of Kempon is dead, for which we can expect similar rewards."

"A fortune indeed..." he mused.

"My fortune," I pointed out.

"Half of a fortune," Captain Lastoq said to both of us.

"I am of a generous nature," Slab said. "A third of a fortune will suit me. Just throw it into the cellar when it arrives, Ulander, and I'll take care of the rest. And you can thank me for being such a forgiving fellow..."

He slowly faded from view.

I looked at Lastoq. "Don't expect any of his share to come from my half," the Captain of the Guard said. "I have my own expenses to take care of."

"Such as...?" I prompted.

"Young Barsil here... he needs to be rewarded, and promotions are expensive. And then there's the matter of the men who rid you of those rats. And all the other men we borrowed for this little adventure. And the carriage rental, and the robes that Barsil tore in his haste to reveal himself..."

"I see," I said, frowning. "Very well. Part of a fortune is still better than nothing."

"Just take care," he whispered, leaning close so only I could hear him, "that Slab doesn't end up with it all."

I forced a laugh. "I have no intention of letting that happen."

He nodded, turned, and strode out the front door, calling to his men. In quick order he had them back in formation and marching off toward their barracks.

Sighing, I turned and looked over my tavern.

"Well," I said to my barmaids as they ventured back inside, "let's get this place back to normal. It's business as usual tonight."

I noticed one of the barmaids had a handkerchief over her nose. That's when I thought to sniff the air—really sniff it. The flowery smell was gone. But now, replacing it, was a stench like that of rotting meat... and it seemed to be coming from the wine cellar.

"Slab?" I said. "Slab?"

Far off, I heard a ghostly chuckle. And I knew, suddenly, that it would cost the rest of that fortune to get rid of the phantom stench of rotting meat. Ω



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Dragon® interviews Steven Brust

*"I write stuff that I think is cool."
"I think everyone who stops changing is evil."
"Vlad was my alter ego, who you didn't necessarily like, but had to respect."*

Steven Brust's work ranges from the strange and evocative *The Sun, the Moon, and the Stars* to the daring epic *To Reign in Hell*, and from his science fiction adventure *Cowboy Feng's Space Bar and Grille* to the moody vampire novel *Agyar*. Among gamers, Brust is most famous for his Vlad Taltos novels, including *Jhereg*, *Yendi*, *Taltos*, *Teckla*, *Phoenix*, *Athyra*, and the upcoming *Orca*. (See DRAGON® Magazine issue #213 for Vlad's AD&D® game statistics.) More recently, he has written about the history of Vlad's world in the novels *The Phoenix Guard* and *Five Hundred Years After*, written in homage of Alexander Dumas' *The Three Musketeers* and *Twenty Years After*.

We met Steven Brust at the Fourth Street Fantasy Convention in Minneapolis, where we hoped he could start off by answering a common rumor about his most popular books.

Are the Vlad books based on your gaming experiences?

Yeah, definitely. Adrian Charles Morgan created a world called Piara, and a whole lot of what became Dragaera was simply lifted from that. Adrian did a really good job. A lot of what he did involved turning us loose in an undeveloped world and saying, "Here's your piece of it. Go make it up."

What sort of character did you play?

I was Vlad.

Were there Dragaerans and the rest in Piara?

No, it was different. It was a game, and games don't translate to fiction.

Why not?

Because games are built around plot, and fiction around characters.

Why do you like immortal characters, like the long-lived Dragaerans?

I hadn't actually noticed. I'd noticed it about Roger [Zelazny], but never about me. I remember somebody asked Roger that, and he said, "Well, because then the guys have hung around long enough to be interesting."

I thought that was kind of cool. For me, I'd never thought about it.

But I don't know that I do that. Vlad certainly isn't immortal. He's surrounded by long-lived people, and even they're not immortal. And that's just because it's fun to play with the psychology of someone who's going to do whatever he's going to do in his life in a big hurry compared to everyone around him.

I think the difference between being long-lived and being immortal is actually really huge. You're going to die at a certain point. I mean, you know that. But then psychologically I don't think there's that much difference unless you have something to compare it to.

As far as the Dragaerans are concerned, they are immortal.

Is that why you introduced Morganti daggers, to give your near-immortals something to fear?

No, that wasn't it. A lot of what I'm doing is playing off of and undercutting fantasy

conventions. So what you've got is Moorcock obviously, with Stormbringer, and it goes further back than that, with Norse mythology you have the sword that drinks souls. It's become kind of a cliché of fantasy. So I said, "Okay, if they've become generic, we'll make a generic term for them." It was a kind of playing [with the fantasy convention].

Take the line in *Jhereg*, in which Vlad has to cast a spell. He says, "I pulled out an enchanted dagger. It was a cheap, over-the-counter enchanted dagger." It's that same kind of taking the fantasy convention and undercutting it.

During a panel this afternoon, you said you'd like sometime to start a novel by pandering to the audience and then switching gears to tell an important story, when someone in the audience said that's exactly what you've already done.

I hadn't realized that I'd done that, but it's true. It didn't start as pandering. *[Jhereg]* started out as straight wish-fulfillment fantasy, and that's okay. But it got old real fast, so it developed. It became more intense. I was keeping myself interested, because I liked the character. I've been fascinated with the character all along.

Some think that Vlad has more than a little of Steven Brust in him.

How do I put this?

Most people are either liked or respected by their peers. Not that many achieve both. Most people get at least one. At a certain formative period of my life, I was liked but not respected. Therefore, what was important to me, of course, was to be respected. Who cares about being liked? The one you want is always the one you don't have.

So Vlad was my alter ego, who you didn't necessarily like, but had to respect. He inspired respect. He inspired fear. He was tough. He was all of the things I'm not.

That's a good way to start, but you can't just leave a character there or he's going to get boring fast.

Do you think Vlad started out as an evil character?

I think he would have been evil if he hadn't changed. In a certain sense I think he's still evil if he doesn't change, because I think everyone who stops changing is evil.

You have to keep growing. Stasis is bad. Degeneration is bad. Only progress is good.

What's important is your ability to do something, to make something that makes the world better.

Vlad began to change at the first Fourth Street convention, nine years ago. I put the convention together in order to answer my own questions about writing. So I got all

these people together to get my questions answered. Among the things I thought about coming out of that convention was what I was doing with that character. I had a character who was a hit man.

I had a friend who was killed by a hitman long before I wrote *Jhereg*. But I'd never really connected it until that time. I said, "Whoa, time to take a look at what you're doing, Bucko." And that was when Vlad started to change. He would have changed anyway, though how he would have changed I can't say. He would have either changed or stopped. I couldn't have written him past *Yendi* if he hadn't changed.

In a lot of ways, I never should have written *Yendi*. There's no growth in it. It's a repetition of *Jhereg*. It's got a slightly different plot and hints of interesting things, but it doesn't go anywhere, like *Jhereg* did. I think it's my weakest book.

What's your strongest?

The new one, *Orca*.

I'm very pleased with *Phoenix*. There are a lot of things about that I like. I'm really happy with *Taltos* in a lot of ways, because structurally it did some cool things and got away with them.

Orca is the book I wanted *Yendi* to be. It's a really plot-driven book with a neat story and some interesting character development and some revelations. It's just a straight-up, kick-your-heels-back, good-time yarn. I don't mind those. I like those. I approve of doing them. And I was trying to with *Yendi*, and I failed. Because there just wasn't enough to it.

What of the fans who love *Yendi*?

I'm glad [they like it]. I know what I had in mind, what I wanted to do. They only know what I did. The goal of getting better, the reason you keep working on your craft is so that when you're having an off day and you're not turning out your best work and things aren't coming together, you're still good enough to pull it off. If they like it, it means that when I wasn't doing my best work, it was still good enough to please people. That's excellent. That's what I want.

You do most of your experimenting outside of the *Taltos* books.

Except for *Taltos*, *Taltos*, and *Yendi* in a certain way. *Yendi* was an experiment. I was trying to learn how to draw characters quickly. That's one of the reasons there are too many characters in it. I was trying to train myself to be able to just quickly and precisely sketch different people and make them distinctive and memorable. I didn't completely succeed in that book, but I learned a lot.

If I have a new character, he's going to say something. What he says tells me who he is, and I won't know until that point.

I'm very heavily influenced by dialogue. To me, that's what drives a book.

Are you more influenced by dialogue in the Phoenix Guard books than in the Vlad series?

No. Because there, and in the Vlad books, too, the narration is part of the dialogue. So maybe the answer is yes. Voice is important both in the Vlad books and the Phoenix Guard books, the Khaavren Romances. That's maybe a question of definition. If you include voice as a part of dialogue, then yes.

Isn't there a big difference between Vlad as a narrator, since he's also the protagonist, and Parfi of Roundwood, who doesn't actually appear in the story he narrates?

But Parfi is still a major character in the books. That's whose eyes you're seeing it through. That's who's interpretation you're getting. He's the one lying to you about all the history.

Vlad and Khaavren are both distinctive characters. How are they different?

To me they are more different than similar. Khaavren is nicer.

Yet he regularly kills people for what we'd consider trivial reasons.

Hmm. Okay.

Khaavren does not go out looking for people to kill, if you know what I mean. He isn't cold about it. Vlad is cold about it.

Khaavren's a young, brash kid, at least in the first book. He's very much d'Artagnan. Consciously. Deliberately. With malice of forethought—that's who he is. Through the strainer of my imagination.

In fact, he came from friends who'd sit around with me and we'd talk about mutual acquaintances. Among ourselves, we'd assign people to Dragaeran houses based on their personalities. At one point someone said, "So-and-so is a lyorn." At this point, I knew very well what the lyorns were, but none of the others did, because I'd deliberately misrepresented them so I could come back later and smack 'em.

The Vlad books are from Vlad's ideal, and Vlad has a very distorted view. He's said things in these books which are just dead wrong because he just doesn't know any better. Other things he's said are wrong because he's seen them from his viewpoint, and that's skewed.

So when I explained the houses to my friends, I said, "The perfect example of a lyorn is Athos, from *The Three Musketeers*. Come to think of it, Porthos is a Dzur. Aramis is the classic Yendi. And d'Artagnan is a Tiassa." And then I thought, "Hey, that's kinda cool."

I've always adored Dumas's style and have been sorry that people don't write that way anymore. So I thought, "I can write that way. I can do my own *Three Musketeers*." I didn't expect it [*The Phoenix Guard*] to sell. That was a book written to entertain myself.

You once said you liked to write about cloaks and swords because they are cool. Is that why you write fantasy adventures?

What I do is write stuff that I think is cool, which is what every good writer does. A hack will write what he thinks will sell. A good writer will write stuff that he thinks is cool, to the best of his ability. There are a lot of things I think are cool. And cloaks and swords-rapiers in particular-are definitely on the list. That doesn't mean every book has them, but that's what I gravitate toward.

Also, really clever word play is cool. An elegantly turned metaphor is cool. A neat form, a shape to the novel, where things wrap in on themselves in just the right way, is cool. It's a lot of different things.

Other than your two series, your novels are all very different from each other. What are your favorites? And are there any you consider not to be successes?

I mentioned *Yendi*. The other failure is *Cowboy Feng*. My favorite book is probably *Phoenix Guard* or *Five Hundred Years After*, probably the latter. My best book is *Agyar*. I was attempting something difficult and pulled it off to my satisfaction. It came out the way I wanted it to, and it wasn't easy.

But you made it look easy.

That was part of the goal. If it looks forced, it fails. That was one of the problems with *Cowboy Feng*. It doesn't look easy enough. There are a lot of problems with *Cowboy Feng*.

If you're going to shoot for a surprise ending, there are two things you want to accomplish. One, you don't want people to have seen it all along. Two, you want people to think, when it hits, "Oh yeah, he did plant the clues for that." The reaction I got was that people saw it coming all along and yet I hadn't set it up right, it wasn't justified. That was one problem.

The main problem is that I was trying to explore some things that are important to me, some serious things, and simultaneously tell a light, flip, and amusing tale and make it seamless. And I didn't. Those things clashed. And the goal of the book was to make those things happen as part of the same movement.

It's another one that a lot of people like anyway, and I'm delighted. If I do something that isn't up to what I want it to be and it still pleases people, that's all you can ask for.

Ω

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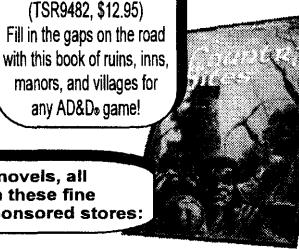
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Convention Calendar

Convention Calendar Policies

This column is a service to our readers worldwide. Anyone may place a free listing for a game convention here, but the following guidelines must be observed.

In order to ensure that all convention listings contain accurate and timely information, all material should be either typed double-spaced or printed legibly on standard manuscript paper. The contents of each listing must be short and succinct.

The information given in the listing **must** include the following, in this order:

1. Convention title and dates held;
2. Site and location
3. Guests of honor (if applicable)
4. Special events offered
5. Registration fees or attendance requirements; and,
6. Address where additional information and confirmation can be obtained.

Convention flyers, newsletters, and other mass-mailed announcements will not be considered for use in this column; we prefer to see a cover letter with the announcement as well. No call-in listings are accepted. Unless stated otherwise, all dollar values given for U.S. and Canadian conventions are in U.S. currency.

WARNING: We are not responsible for incorrect information sent to us by convention staff members. Please check your convention listing carefully! Our wide circulation ensures that over a quarter of a million readers worldwide see each issue. Accurate information is your responsibility.

Copy deadlines are the first Monday of each month, three months prior to the onsale date of an issue. Thus, the copy deadline for the December issue is the first Monday of October. Announcements for North American and Pacific conventions must be mailed to: Convention Calendar, DRAGON® Magazine, 201 Sheridan Springs Rd., Lake Geneva WI 53147, U.S.A. Announcements for Europe must be posted an additional month before the deadline to: Convention Calendar, DRAGON Magazine, TSR Limited, 120 Church End, Cherry Hinton, Cambridge CB1 3LB, United Kingdom.

If a convention listing must be changed because the convention has been cancelled, the dates have changed, or incorrect information has been printed, please contact us immediately. Most questions or changes should be directed to the magazine editors at TSR, Inc., (414) 248-3625 (U.S.A.). Questions or changes concerning European conventions should be directed to TSR Limited, (0223) 212517 (U.K.).

- ❖ indicates an Australian convention
- * indicates a Canadian convention
- indicates a European convention

Important: DRAGON® Magazine does not publish phone numbers for conventions. Publishing incorrect numbers is always possible and is a nuisance to both the caller and those receiving the misdirected call. Be certain that any address given is complete and correct.

To ensure that your convention listing makes it into our files, enclose a self-addressed stamped postcard with your first convention notice; we will return the card to show that your notice was received. You also might send a second notice one week after mailing the first. Mail your listing as early as possible, and always keep us informed of any changes. Please avoid sending convention notices by fax, as this method has not proved to be reliable.

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ANDCON '95, Sept. 28 - Oct. 1 OH

This convention will be held at The Seagate Convention Center in the Radison Hotel in Toledo, Ohio. Guests include Scott Douglas, Frank Metzer, and Robin Wood. Events include role-playing, board, card, and miniatures games. Other activities include an auction, computer gaming, and interactive events. Registration: \$24.95 Write to: ANDCON '95, P.O. Box 1740, Renton WA 98057 or e-mail: Andon@aol.com.

CON OF THE LIVING DEAD, Sept. 29 - Oct. 1 TN

This convention will be held at the Best Western Airport Hotel in Memphis, Tenn. Events include role-playing, board, card, and miniatures games. Other activities include tournaments and dealers. Registration: \$20 preregistered, \$25 on site. Write to: Chris Maddox, Memphis Games & Hobbies, 3939 Summer Ave., Memphis TN 38122.

NECRONOMICON '95, Sept. 29 - Oct. 1

This convention will be held at the Newton High School of the Performing Arts in Sydney, Australia. Events include role-playing and card games. Write to: NECRONOMICON '95, 12 Mason St., Parramatta NSW, Australia 2150.

SILVERCON 4, Sept. 29 - Oct. 1 NV

This convention will be held at the Best Western Mardi Gras Inn, Las Vegas, Nev. Guests include Bob Tucker. Events include role-playing, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include an auction, dealers, films, and a banquet. Registration: \$20 preregistered, \$25 on site. Write to: SILVERCON 4, c/o Aileen Forman, P.O. Box 95941, Las Vegas NV 89193.

KETTERING GAME CON XIII, Sept. 30 - Oct. 1 OH

This convention will be held at the Charles I. Lathrem Senior Center in Kettering, Ohio. Events include role-playing, card, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include tournaments and an auction. Registration: \$2/day. Write to: Bob Von Gruenigen, 804 Willowdale Ave., Kettering OH 45429.

DIRE CONSEQUENCES III, Oct. 6-8

CT

This convention will be held at the Sheraton in Waterbury, Conn. Events include role-playing, board, card, and miniatures games. Other activities include RPGA® Network events and tournaments. Registration: \$20. Write to: DC III, P.O. Box 251, Bristol CT 06011.

GAMIN' THE VALLEY '95, Oct. 6-8

PA

This convention will be held at the West Side Mall in Edwardsville, Penn. Events include role-playing, board, card, and miniatures games. Other activities include tournaments, comic book, SF, and sports card shows. Registration: \$10. Write to: GAMIN' THE VALLEY, P.O. Box 2017, Wilkes-Barre PA 18702, or e-mail: jauftin@aaent.microserve.com.

HEXAGON '95, Oct. 6-8

NC

This convention will be held at the Holiday Inn Market Square in High Point, N.C. Guests include Tim Olsen, Tony DiTerlizzi, and Zeb Cook. Events include role-playing, board, card, and miniatures games. Other activities include RPGA® Network events, and tournaments. Registration: \$15 pre-registered, \$20 on site. Write to: HEXACON, PO. Box 4 EUC UNCG, Greensboro NC 27412.

QUAD CON '95, Oct. 6-8

IA

This convention will be held at the Palmer Alumni Auditorium in Davenport, Iowa. Events include role-playing, board, card, and miniatures games. Other activities include tournaments, dealers, a miniatures painting contest, and an auction. Registration: \$15 preregistered, \$20 on site. Write to: QUAD CON '95, The Game Emporium, 3213 23rd Ave., Moline IL 61265.

THE SON OF UNICON, Oct. 6-8 AK

This convention will be held at the UAA Student Center in Anchorage, Alaska. Events include role-playing, card, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include tournaments, anime, and dealers. Write to: SON OF UNICON, 832 W. 75th St. #4, Anchorage AK 99518.

BAY GAMES '95, Oct. 13-15

MD

This convention will be held at the Best Western Maryland Inn in Laurel, Maryland. Guests include Bryon Wackwitz and John Staton. Events include role-playing, board, card, and miniatures games. Other activities include tournaments. Registration: \$17 preregistered, \$25 on site. Write to: BAY GAMES '95, P.O. 883, College Park MD 20741, or e-mail: avatar@wam.umd.edu.

CONTACT 13, Oct. 13-15

IN

This convention will be held at the Holiday Inn Airport in Evansville, Ind. Special guests include Dr. Bill Breuer and Naomi Fisher. Events include role-playing, board, card, and miniatures games. Other activities include dealers, an auction panels, and a masquerade ball. Registration: \$17 preregistered, \$22 on site. Write to: CONTACT 13, P.O. Box 3894, Evansville IN 47737.

INTERCON '95, Oct. 13-15 *

This convention will be held at the Kamloops Exhibition Complex in Kamloops, British Columbia, Canada. Events include role-playing, board, card, and miniatures games. Other activities include tournaments, movies, and a masquerade ball. Write to: INTERCON '95, 1021 McGill Road, Kamloops, BC, Canada, V2C 6H4.

**NECRONOMICON '95,
Oct. 13-15 FL**

This convention will be held at the Westshore Hotel in Tampa, Florida. Events include role-playing, board, card, and miniatures games. Other activities include dealers, a masquerade, and an art show. Registration: \$18 preregistered, \$25 on site. Write to: NECRONOMICON '95, P.O. Box 2076, Riverview FL 33569, or e-mail: (CompuServe) 74273,1607.

**TOTALLY TUBULAR CON III,
Oct. 13-15 CA**

This convention will be held at the Days Inn in Fullerton, Calif. Events include role-playing, board, card, and miniatures games. Other activities include RPGA® Network events. Registration: \$25 preregistered, \$30 on site. Write to: TOTALLY TUBULAR, P.O. Box 18791, Anaheim CA 92871, or e-mail: PartDragon@aol.com.

**THE WESTERN CHALLENGE '95,
Oct. 13-15 ***

This convention will be held at the University of Saskatchewan campus in Saskatoon, Canada. Events include role-playing, board, card, and miniatures games. Other activities include dealers and an auction. Registration: \$3 per event. Write to: WESTERN CHALLENGE, Apt 318-1311, Temperance Street, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada, S7N 0P5.

**ADVENTURE GAMEFEST '95,
Oct. 20-22 OR**

This convention will be held at the Oregon Convention Center in Portland, Ore. Events include role-playing, board, card, and miniatures games. Other activities include an auction and a miniatures painting contest. Registration: \$18/weekend; \$10/day. Write to: Adventure Games Northwest, LLC, 6517 NE Alberta, Portland OR 97218, or e-mail: DCBS85D@prodigy.com.

HORRORCON IV Oct. 20-22 TX

This convention will be held at the Seven Oaks Resort in San Antonio, Tex. Events include role-playing, card, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include RPGA Network events, demos, tournaments, and dealers. Write to: HORRORCON IV, 8722 Cinnamon Creek #1123, San Antonio TX 78240.

LEX I CON XIV, Oct. 27-28 KY

This convention will be held at the University of Kentucky's Student Center in Lexington, Ken. Events include role-playing, card, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include anime, a movie marathon, tournaments, and a costume contest. Write to: Miskatonic Student Union, 1328 Nancy Hanks Rd. #5, Lexington KY 40504.

**NORMAN CONQUEST VII,
Oct. 27-29 OK**

This convention will be held in Dale Hall on the University of Oklahoma campus in Norman, Okla. Guests include Dennis McDonald, Peter Bradley, John Russell, Mitch Bentley, and Ric and Angela Lowry. Events include role-playing, card, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include RPGA® Network events and tournaments. Write to: NORMAN CONQUEST VII, 215-A OMU Box 304, 900 Asp Ave., Norman OK 73109.

SIBCON 95, Oct. 28 PA

This convention will be held at the Days Inn Conference Center in Butler, Penn. Events include role-playing, board, card, and miniatures games. Other activities include RPGA® Network events, dealers, and demos. Registration: \$5 pre-registered, \$7 on site. Write to: Circle of Swords, P.O. Box 2126, Butler PA 16003.

IMPENDING DOOM, Nov. 3-5 *

This convention will be held at the Queen Elizabeth Community Centre in St. Catherine's, Ontario, Canada. Events include role-playing, card, board, and miniatures games. Activities include RPGA® Network events. Registration: \$8/day or \$15/weekend (Canadian \$1. Write to: Impending Doom, 222 The Esplande, Suite 431, Toronto, Ontario M5A 4M8, Canada.

RUDICON 11, Nov. 3-5 NY

This convention will be held on the campus of the Rochester Institute of Technology in Rochester, N.Y. Guests include Mike Symanski and Dave Frank. Events include role-playing, card, board, and miniatures games. Write to: RUDICON 11, c/o Student Government, RIT, 1 Lomb Memorial Dr., Rochester NY 14623, or e-mail: rudicon@rit.edu.

SHAUNCON XI, Nov. 3-5 MO

This convention will be held at the Park Place Hotel in Kansas City, Missouri. Events include role-playing, card, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include an art show, dealers, tournaments, and the 1995 Midwest Region Feature Finals. Write to: SHAUNCON XI, P.O. Box 7457, Kansas City MO 64114, or e-mail: ShaunCon@aol.com.

GOLD CON, Nov. 4 NJ

This convention will be held at the American Legion Hall in Clark, N.J. Events include role-playing, card, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include tournaments and RPGA® Network events. Registration: \$8 preregistered, \$10 on site. Write to: A.U. Games, P.O. Box 493, Budd Lake NJ 07828.

SALVO '95, Nov. 5 *

This convention will be held at the Highwoods Recreation and Sports Centre in Colchester, Essex, England. Events include role-playing, board, and miniatures games. Write to: Phil Kitching, 88, Braiswick, Colchester, Essex CO4 5AY England.

SCI-CON 17, Nov. 10-12 VA

This convention will be held at the Sheraton Oceanfront Inn in Virginia Beach, Va. Guests

include Mark Poole and Larry Bond. Events include role-playing, card, board, and miniatures games. Write to: HaRoSFA, Box 9434, Hampton VA 23670, or e-mail: schaffer@me.udel; michaela@pinn.net or on the Web: http://www.pinn.net/~michaela/.

PENTACON XI, Nov. 10-12 IN

This convention will be held at the Grand Wayne Center in Fort Wayne, Ind. Events include role-playing, card, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include dealers, a flea market, and computer games. Write to: Steve & Linda Smith, 836 Himes St., Huntington, IN 46750.

**CON ON THE RIVER II,
Nov. 11-12 MN**

This convention will be held in the Kryzsko Commons on the Winona State University campus in Winona, Minn. Events include role-playing, card, board, and miniatures games. Registration: \$10/weekend, \$15 on site. Write to: CON ON THE RIVER, PO. Box 751, Winona MN 55987.

DEFCON X, Nov. 17-19 NJ

This convention will be held at the Ramada Inn in Hazlet, N.J. Events include role-playing, card, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include an auction. Registration: \$15 preregistered, \$20 on site. Write to: DEFCON, 16 Grove Street, Somerset NJ 08873.

ELLIS CON VII, Nov. 18 CT

This convention will be held in the cafeteria of H.H. Ellis Tech School in Danielson, Conn. Events include role-playing, card, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include dealers. Registration: \$5 on site. Write to: ELLIS CON, 613 Upper Maple St., Danielson CT 06239.

**ADVENTURE FEST 95.2,
Nov. 19 NY**

This convention will be held at the Polish Falcons Hall in Depew, N.Y. Events include role-playing, card, board, and miniatures games. Registration: \$3 plus event fees. Write to: Phil Simonds, 387 Niagara St., North Tonawanda NY 14120.

**SOUTH HANTS GAME CON '95,
Nov. 19 ***

This convention will be held at the Buckland Community Centre in Portsmouth, England. Events include role-playing, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include tournaments, a painting contest, and a raffle. Write to: Lost Childhoods, 17 Kingscote Road, Cowplain, Waterlooville PO8 SQS, England.

**EVENT HORIZON '95,
Dec. 29-31 MD**

This convention will be held at the Columbia Inn Hotel in Columbia, Maryland. Guests include Hal Clement and Sandy Peterson. Events include role-playing, card, board, and miniatures games. Other activities include an auction, a blood drive, and a masquerade ball. Registration: \$25 preregistered. Write to: EVENT HORIZON '95, Attn. Registration, P.O. Box 1438, Sterling VA 20164.

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Few elements of the AD&D® game are more difficult to referee than illusions, particularly the "pure" illusions typified by the *phantasmal force* spell. Unlike other spells, the effectiveness of an illusion is highly subjective, and rarely, if ever, do the rules quantify the potency of a spell in simple game terms.

A common offensive spell like *cone of cold* inflicts a set number of dice of damage, while spells such as *hold person* affect a clearly stated number of creatures. In each case, the effects of the spell can be negated wholly or in part with a saving throw which has been adjusted according to a set of fairly standard modifiers.

Illusions, on the other hand, present a stark contrast to such generally accepted conventions because their effectiveness depends on the eye of the beholder (or DM, if you will). Not only are the actual illusions themselves limited only by the imagination of the caster, illusions can appear in an infinite variety of situations. The circumstances surrounding the use of an illusion spell are often as important to the success of the casting as the form of the illusion itself.

The AD&D game defines the power of illusions; unfortunately, with such a vast array of options and potential situations, it is not surprising that the *Player's Handbook* (PHB) and the *DUNGEON MASTER® Guide* (DMG) offer only the most basic suggestions for handling illusion magic. The uncertainty and "gray areas" that remain too often result in player/DM bickering. On more than one occasion, I replaced the illusory monsters or spells in a published game module with the real thing rather than risk having to deal with the more arbitrary aspects of illusion magic. But a clear need still exists for a less subjective method of deciding the game effects of illusions in their various forms. This is especially true with regard to adjudication of spells such as *phantasmal force*, *audible glamer*, *improved phantasmal force*, *spectral force*, *advanced illusion*, *permanent illusion*, and *programmed illusion*, all of which create free-standing illusions and employ disbelief as a means to a saving throw.

Though this article is directed primarily toward resolving the effects of these spells, the methodology is entirely consistent with any of the spells belonging to the illusion/phantasm school of magic.

A Question of Disbelief

Possibly the greatest complicating factor where illusions are involved is the nature of the saving throw. Illusion spells such as *phantasmal force* do not have the simple you-made-it-or-not save required by most spell effects. The player must instead state an intent to disbelieve, an action that takes up an entire round. No other type of spell or magical attack requires such a sacrifice. A character surviving a *lightning bolt* spell can still attack, flee, etc., regardless of the

success of the saving throw, while the poor PC confronting a suspected illusion must stand quietly and hope for the best.

Adding insult to injury, the rules state that if the PC attempts to disbelieve a real spell or monster, the spell or attack automatically succeeds regardless of Armor Class or saving throws. Even if the player is fairly certain that his PC is about to be "incinerated" by illusory dragon breath, his best bet is to treat the attack as if it were real, which allows his character a chance to reduce the damage by half with a successful save.

An attempt to disbelieve merely gains the PC a different saving throw (which would probably be more difficult to make in this example, given the probable bonuses for magical armor or Dexterity). This comes at the cost of forgoing any attack or defensive action, and the PC will suffer full damage if the attack turns out to be real. That seems like a steep price just to avoid an attack that can only result in unconsciousness, at worst.

The other major problem with disbelief is that a fair DM has to give the players a clue as to when they should suspect an illusion is at play. Only a novice gamer will fail to recognize what has happened when the DM announces "the attacking ogre makes no noise." Granted, such a statement suffers from an exaggerated lack of subtlety, but as soon as any DM begins to make statements regarding an unusual lack of sound, odor, or heat, he has no business being surprised by the sudden chorus of "I disbelieve" that is certain to follow.

Consider, too, the difficulty in having to determine whether an NPC should attempt to disbelieve an illusion cast by a PC. Since, in all likelihood, the DM is already aware that the NPC is facing an illusion spell, how can the DM fairly decide if the NPC knows enough to disbelieve the effect? Players will rightfully feel they are at a disadvantage if every opponent attempts to disbelieve their illusions. Conversely, the DM cannot allow his villains to dumbly accept every absurd illusion thrown at them by the PCs. The DM is forced to make a tricky judgment call on a case-by-case basis. The prospect of making judgment calls should certainly not frighten any DM who is worth his weight in dice, but isn't there some way to provide a slightly more objective framework for the DM?

Simply ignoring the rule that calls for a disbelieving character to forfeit any defense versus an actual attack fails to improve the situation; it would only encourage illusion-wary players constantly to disbelieve everything that they encounter. Instead, let's examine the following argument: Illusions are, by AD&D definition, spells (or spell effects). The game already provides a saving throw versus spell. Therefore, illusions should be saved against like any other spell.

Eliminating the idiosyncratic and unworkable disbelief rule neatly solves these difficulties. The player no longer has to announce an intent to avoid an attack, an intent that is assumed versus virtually every other kind of attack. The DM doesn't have to worry about how he will manage to alert his players to the odd silence of an encountered ogre without instantly tipping them off to the presence of an illusion. It likewise eliminates any argument as to whether an NPC would attempt to disbelieve on his own or if DM bias was involved in the decision to grant a saving throw. Unfortunately, there is a major disadvantage to ignoring categorically the disbelief requirement. The original basis for employing disbelief before a save arose from the varying degrees by which the different illusion spells could imitate reality. The least powerful illusions, audible *glamer* and *phantasmal force*, produce only audial or visual effects. The missing components are gradually added as the spell level increases. The 2nd-level spell *improved phantasmal force* combines audial and visual effects, while the 3rd-level spell *spectral force* adds heat. A complete illusion possessing audial, visual, thermal, and olfactory components can be produced only by the 5th-level spell *advanced illusion*. If the same save vs. spell is employed for all illusions without using the disbelief rule, the 1st-level *phantasmal force* becomes just as powerful as the 5th-level *advanced illusion*. This quite obviously is not the intent of the rules; the save vs. spell needs modifiers applied based on the completeness and relative power of the encountered illusion.

Doubt Is a Two-Edged Sword

Consider a creature or object that should be making some noise but isn't, or odd noises emanating from an unexpected or unusual source. Although such a situation should quickly arouse the suspicion of most humans or demihumans, there is no reason to assume that the character will automatically associate these unusual events with the presence of an illusion.

There are many equally plausible explanations, especially in the AD&D world. Is that plate-armored warrior running toward your mage silent because he is an illusion, or has he had a *silence 15' radius* spell cast upon him? Are those disembodied voices the result of an *audible glamer*, or is there actually an invisible or camouflaged creature present? Given these possibilities, an incomplete illusion shouldn't automatically fail, but it does make for an easier save vs. spell.

The fact that most creatures tend to rely heavily on one or two primary senses adds a further complication. For instance, is an illusion of a silent red dragon more or less believable than one that creates noise but whose fiery breath weapon fails to produce a scorching blast of heat? How

important is odor when creating an illusory otyugh? And what about creatures with particularly good or poor senses of vision or smell? How do such abilities affect their chances to detect an illusion?

This system attempts to answer these questions by classifying the sensory components of an illusion, from a human perspective at least, as primary (sound and vision), secondary (extreme odor or temperature), or minor (normal odor or temperature). These are then used in conjunction with an Intelligence check by the subject. The effectiveness of the illusion then becomes a matter of which components are missing, how easily these defects are detected, and how likely the subject is to fully understand the significance of these sensory clues. Hopefully, such a system will be far less subjective and easier to implement than the old disbelief rule.

An Intelligence check is used because Intelligence represents the creature's mental acuity and capacity for reason; both are important factors in the ability to assimilate meaningfully the sensory information provided by an encountered illusion. Characters with very high Intelligence scores are automatically immune to certain illusions, so it does not seem inappropriate to allow characters with lesser Intelligence scores a bonus to their save vs. spell if they notice inconsistencies in the presentation of an illusion. This also means that unintelligent or just plain stupid creatures will be less likely to question the presence of an illusion and will be easier to fool even if the illusion is incomplete in some way.

The Building Blocks of Illusion

It is no accident that vision and hearing are the first senses affected in the hierarchy of illusion spells. Sight and sound are usually the most convincing components of any illusion and the lack of either component should be easy to detect. When encountering an illusion that lacks one or more of these primary components, the target should be granted an Intelligence check. Success on this roll means that the target has correctly observed the missing visual or audial cues and can therefore be granted a +4 bonus to the save vs. spell.

This assumes that the illusion created is one that can be reasonably expected to have sight or sound. An illusory wall isn't going to be expected to make any noise, and an *audible glamer* can be cast in an area that the victim cannot see clearly. In these cases, no Intelligence check or saving throw bonus is applicable. Targets that fail the Intelligence check either do not notice the missing component or assume that some other factor (such as magical silence or invisibility) is in play. An exceptionally striking visual effect may even overwhelm observers to the extent that they swear they not only *saw* the illusory

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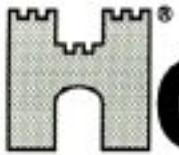
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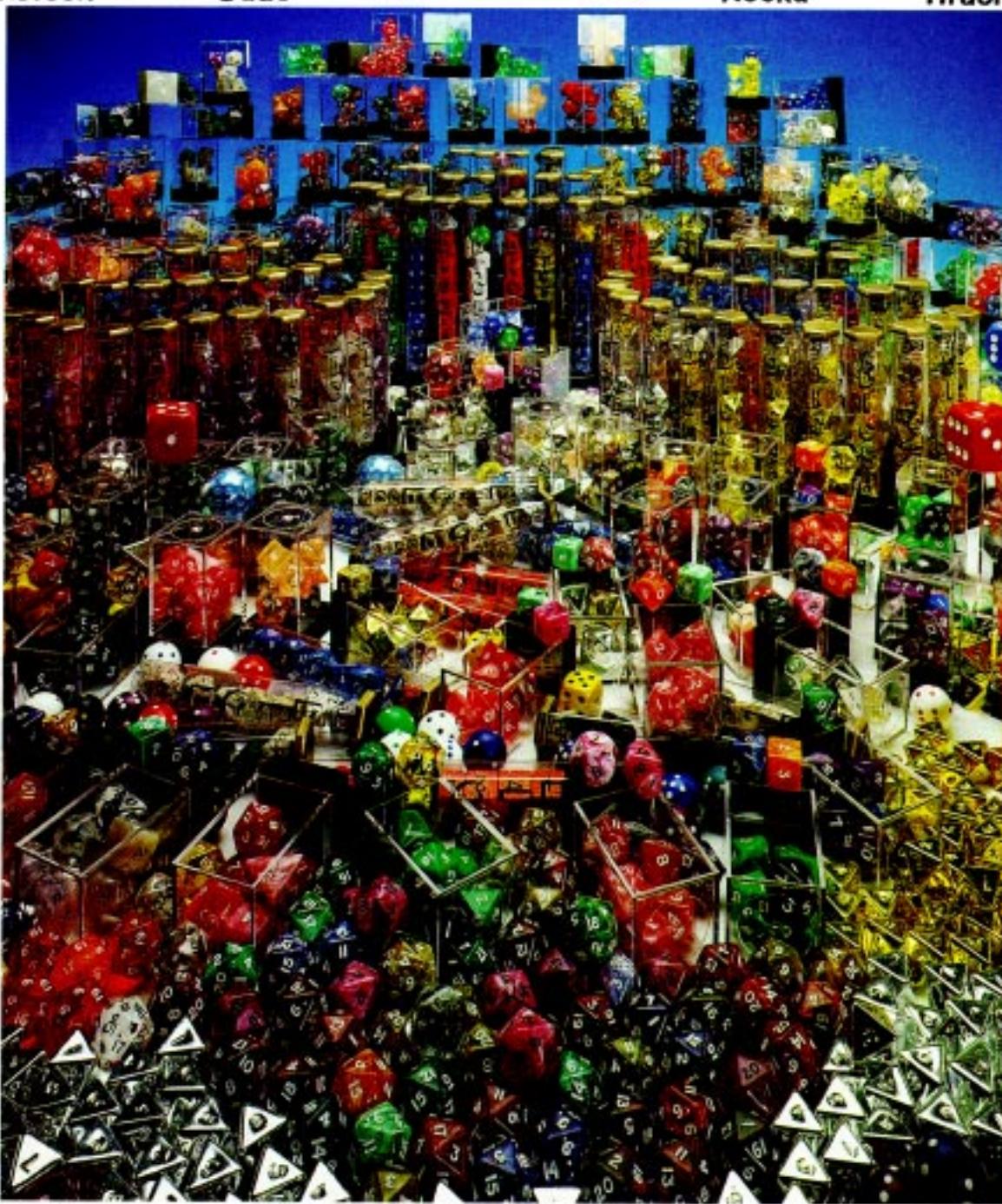
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ogre, but they also heard it crunching through the leaves, even if it was actually silent.

Odor and heat are details that make minor contributions to the overall effectiveness of an illusion. They become important only in situations where the desired effect has a strong thermal or olfactory component. But even in those cases, odor and heat are secondary to sound and vision in the attempt to convince the target that the illusion is real. In cases where olfactory or thermal components are important to the overall effect (for example, an illusory troglodyte or bonfire) but are missing, the subject can roll an Intelligence check at a -4 penalty (Intelligence -4). If the check is successful, the subject receives a +2 bonus to his saving throw to see through the illusion. The bonus is reduced and the Intelligence check made more difficult because the components are secondary to the primary visual and audial cues, even in more drastic cases.

Note that even if the optional infravision rule is used, infravision does not automatically detect the presence of an illusion. Infravision is simply a variant of ordinary sight and will be affected just as surely as normal vision. A character or monster cannot test for the presence of an illusion simply by looking at the suspect object in the dark and checking for the absence of heat (or cold).

Under normal circumstances, however, thermal or olfactory effects will not be vital to the success of the illusion. Indeed, it will take a sharp eye (or nose) and some quick thinking to be able to pick out these subtle inconsistencies. If the DM decides that the targeted creature has some means of detecting a lack of temperature or odor (meaning that the illusion-caster is probably going to have to get pretty close), it gains a +1 saving throw bonus if it succeeds at an Int -8 check.

A good example of this is an illusory dungeon wall made by a *phantasmal force* spell. Someone touching the illusory wall may discover that it is room temperature while the other walls in the dungeon are quite cool to the touch. If the character picks up on this clue (in other words, succeeds at the Intelligence -8 check), he would receive the +1 bonus to the save needed to see through the spell.

The Intelligence check should be made as soon as the DM deems that the subject creature has interacted sufficiently with the illusion to require a save vs. spell. Static effects such as illusory walls or doors might be investigated for several rounds or even longer before any Intelligence checks or saving throws are needed. However, an instantaneous effect like an *illusory fireball* is going to require an immediate ability check and save.

Note that the same d20 roll is used to determine the success of the various Intelligence checks, though there could be

up to three components (primary, secondary, minor) missing from the illusion. Thus, a hero with an Intelligence of 15 needs a roll of 15 or less on his Intelligence check to detect the lack of a primary component, a roll of 11 (Intelligence -4) to detect the lack of a primary and secondary component, and a roll of 7 (Intelligence -8) or better to detect the lack of all three types. (This assumes that the illusion *lacks* that many components, of course.)

In other words, a character who is so intent on attacking an illusory ghast that he fails to notice its odd silence (a fairly obvious primary component) will not notice that the ghast also lacks an odor (a more subtle secondary component).

These bonuses are cumulative, but a character can receive only one +4 bonus for a missing primary component, one +2 bonus for a missing secondary component, and one +1 bonus for a missing minor component, for a maximum save bonus of +7. Though this may seem like a lot of bonuses, few illusions will be so poorly conceived that they lack all three components, and only characters with a fairly high Intelligence score have a realistic chance of noting the minor inconsistencies. In any case, once the DM determines how effectively the illusion has fooled the target, he can attempt the save vs. spell.

Illusions vs. Monsters and Animals

The modifiers and the relative importance of sight, sound, odor, and temperature have thus far been given from the human and demihuman perspective. The MONSTROUS MANUAL™ specifically describes some animals and monsters as having exceptionally good or poor senses. The DM should take these factors into account by increasing or decreasing the importance and ease of detection of the various sensory phenomena.

For example, a rhinoceros possesses poor vision but has an excellent sense of smell; thus, odor should be considered the primary component, and vision becomes the minor one. Since most ordinary animals have Intelligence scores of 5 or less, it may seem too harsh to require an Intelligence check even if their improved senses are taken into account. But remember, animals tend to rely on instinct, not reason. A guard dog does not stop to think about why an illusory intruder doesn't have any scent—it simply howls or attacks as trained.

At the other end of the scale are creatures such as dragons which have average or better Intelligence scores and enhanced senses of sight, hearing, and smell. Such creatures are exceptions to the rule that requires a single Intelligence check for all of the missing components. They receive an unmodified Intelligence check for each

missing component, gaining a +4 to the save for one successful check, +6 for two successes, and +7 for three successful checks (assuming that many components are lacking). With their high Intelligence scores and relatively easy saving throws vs. spell, dragons will be quite difficult to fool with all but the most powerful illusion magic.

Similarly, if the DM feels that a particular monster or animal possesses two or more excellent senses, he should grant the monster the appropriate number of Intelligence checks and reward each success with the above saving throw modifiers. However, don't adjust a monster's Intelligence score to reflect its superior senses; stupid is as stupid does.

For example, the fighter Gronk is chasing a thieving half-elf wizard down an alley when the tiring wizard creates the illusion of a wall with a *spectral force* spell. The illusory wall lacks no primary, secondary, or minor components, and walls have no distinctive odor (the only component not provided by the spell). Gronk must make an unmodified save vs. spell to detect the illusion.

Here's another example: Tamara, a priestess with an Intelligence score of 18, is attacked by an illusory troglodyte created with a *phantasmal force* spell. She must roll an 18 or less on her Intelligence check to notice the missing primary component (sound) and a 14 or less (Int -4) to notice the missing secondary component (smell). Tamara rolls a 12, thus succeeding at both checks. She gains a +6 bonus to her saving throw vs. spell.

In a third example, the wizard Portnoy casts *audible glamer*, hoping to distract a guard dog (Intelligence 2) with the sound of a cat meowing in some nearby foliage. The missing visual component is unimportant (since the dog cannot see the source of the sound anyway), and the lack of heat is likewise unimportant. The dog can be considered to have a superior sense of smell, however, allowing it the chance to detect a missing primary component: the scent of the alleged feline. In the unlikely event that the dog makes its Intelligence check, it gains a +4 to its saving throw vs. spell.

One last modifier can be added to the saving throw. Illusions that inexplicably spring from out of nowhere should give the target a +1 bonus to its save with no Intelligence check being necessary. Though spellcasters in the AD&D game certainly have the ability to bring forth walls of stone or fire or cause monsters to appear out of thin air, actually witnessing such an effect is enough to make most viewers wary (hence the +1 modifier). This bonus is cumulative with the adjustments for missing components, which means that the save vs. spell can have a maximum bonus of +8.

Note that this bonus does not apply to illusions that are in place before a charac-

ter encounters them; the bonus relies on the obviously magical, and therefore suspect, appearance of the illusion. A party that turns a corner in a castle courtyard and encounters an illusory wall would not receive a bonus to their save unless they somehow witnessed the casting of the spell that created the wall. However, the DM may allow the +1 bonus if a detect magic successfully reveals the magical nature of an illusory object.

After the Saving Throw

PCs or monsters that successfully save vs. an illusion recognize it for what it is. They can see only a fuzzy, transparent outline of whatever object the caster attempted to depict. The illusion may not hinder, distract, or harm the subject unless the illusion is quasi-real (in other words, formed by *shadow magic*, *shadow monsters*, etc.).

A creature that fails its save is completely fooled by the magic for the duration of the spell. The subject must react to the illusion as if it were a real object or monster. Even if the illusion behaves in an unexpected or improbable manner, the affected creature will rationalize some explanation other than the presence of an illusion. The subject believes the illusory object to be real and absolutely cannot be convinced otherwise, even if he should witness some physical impossibility such as an unaffected companion walking through an illusory wall. To the affected character, his companion must have turned invisible, been teleported or disintegrated, or suffered some similar fate.

A PC who has already encountered an illusion and failed his saving throw cannot gain a second saving throw or improve on his original attempt by being informed of the nature of the illusion by another character. In such cases, the PC is certain that he is the one in the right—the other party members must be mistaken! The +4 bonus mentioned in the *DMG* should be granted only if the target has been warned in *advance* of encountering the illusion. Naturally, PCs who fail their saving throws vs. a particular illusion cannot grant their companions this +4 bonus, since the PC

believes the illusion to be real.

As noted in the *PHB* and *DMG*, all damage directly caused by the illusion is imagined by the victim and is not real, though the loss of all remaining hit points via these imaginary attacks results in unconsciousness for 10-30 minutes. Illusory damage should be restored after a like period. Indirect damage is still possible when an illusion is used to disguise real dangers such as a pit trap or monster.

Lastly, divination spells such as detect evil or know alignment, which rely on the inspection of an aura, do not usually provide any accurate information when used to view an illusion. The caster of the divination sees only what the caster of the illusion wants him to see. The *true seeing* spell will show an illusion for what it is, and a *detect magic* unerringly reveals its magical nature. When cast by a wizard, *detect magic* also has the potential to identify the magic as illusion/phasm.

The Illusionist's Bag of Tricks

While the deceptive power of an illusion depends largely on the perspective of the target, the skill of the caster definitely plays an important role as well. The scope of illusory effects should be more clearly defined to reflect this role. Illusory effects can be grouped into three broad categories: monsters, spell effects, and inanimate objects.

Illusory Creatures

A very traditional and common technique is to create illusory monsters or companions using one of the illusion spells. Not surprisingly, it is probably the most abused technique as well. The optional guidelines given in the *PHB* are helpful here: The caster should not be allowed to create more hit dice of illusory monsters than he has experience levels, and the types of monsters created should be restricted to creatures that the caster has personally observed. The caster must concentrate on guiding the actions of his creations in an appropriate and believable manner, which is nearly impossible if he generates an absurdly large number of monsters or

creatures that he has never seen.

The DM should pay attention to the areas of effect of the various illusion spells. They are quite large and, if the limit on hit dice is not heeded, a 1st-level wizard could conceivably fill his *phantasmal force* area of effect with 20 or more ogres or even a great red wyrm (thus creating a significant problem with game balance). Illusory creatures must remain in the area of effect designated at the time of the casting; attempts to move them out of that area do dispel the image immediately.

Illusory creatures move and fight at the whim of the caster. Therefore, they should attack using the caster's THAC0, not the THAC0 of the actual creature. The damage resulting from successful attacks is standard, though it is not permanent, as already noted. Creatures with special attacks like breath weapons, gaze attacks, or energy draining abilities can be mimicked with the illusion, but, as with normal attacks, any effects are temporary and should be regained within three turns or so. Of course, PCs subjected to these special attacks do not actually turn to stone or lose an experience level, though they absolutely believe this to be so and behave accordingly by freezing in place or fighting less ably.

Lastly, illusory monsters that are battled by PCs or other monsters disappear on a successful hit or physical spell attack *unless* the illusion reacts appropriately; casters who are concentrating on maintaining the illusion can cause "appropriate responses" automatically, if desired. The illusory creatures wink out of existence as soon as the caster ceases to maintain his concentration and the illusion is struck by a physical attack, however.

For combat with illusory opponents, assume that they have the maximum number of hit points. When the illusory creature runs out of hit points, the caster can allow it to "die" or may let it keep fighting. If he chooses to keep the creature "alive," the attackers have cause to suspect something is amiss. They get to roll an Intelligence check with a cumulative -1 bonus for every round in which the undying adversary absorbs damage but does not fall.

Attackers who succeed in this Intelligence check gain a second saving throw vs. the illusion with any bonuses for missing components, just as if they were encountering the illusion for the first time. More saving throws are possible as long as the creature continues to fight and take damage and the attacker has not yet succeeded in his save vs. spell.

Illusory Spells

Casters may use illusions to duplicate the effect of any spell of a level that they can cast. A 5th-level wizard can therefore try to duplicate wizard or priest spells of 3rd level or less. The caster does not have to know the spell that he is trying to dupli-

Saving Throw Modifiers for Illusions

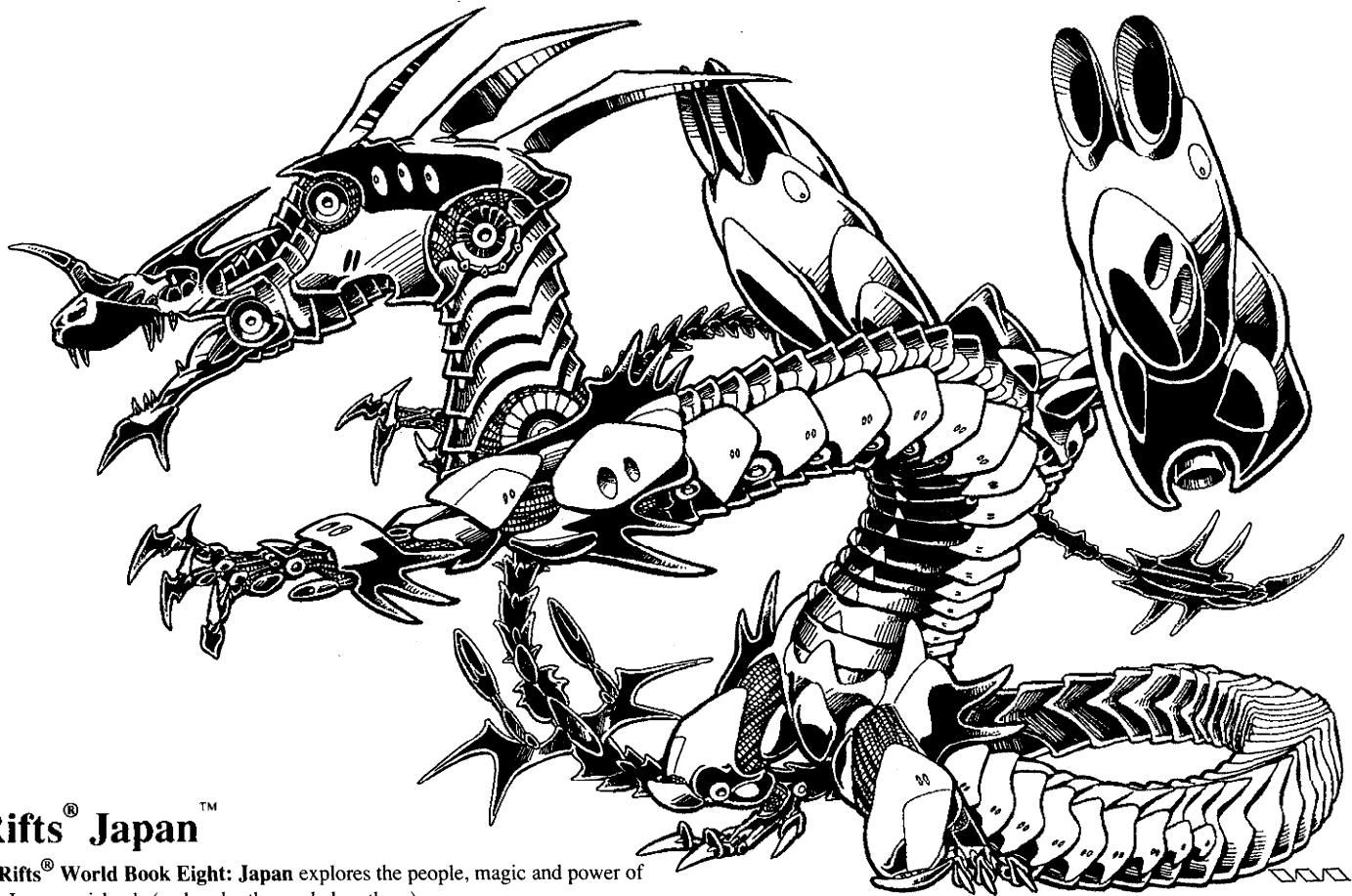
| Condition | Saving Throw Modifier† | Ability Check |
|---------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------|
| Missing primary* component | + 4 | Intelligence |
| Missing primary** component | + 2 | Intelligence -4 |
| Missing minor† component | + 1 | Intelligence -8 |
| Target witnessed casting | + 1 | automatic |
| Received forewarning | + 4 | automatic |
| Caster attempts "unknown" spell | + 2 | automatic |

*Primary components include sound or vision or strong odors for creatures with a superior sense of smell.

**Secondary components are strong odors or extreme temperatures or normal odors for creatures with a superior sense of smell.

†Minor components are normal odors or temperatures or sight or sound for creatures with poor vision or hearing.

‡All modifiers are cumulative, but only one of each type is applicable per spell.



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cate, but attempts to copy an unknown spell are convincing and the targets should be granted an automatic +2 bonus to their saving throw vs. spells.

Illusory spell effects can be detected as illusions in the manner already described.

Targets failing their saving throws suffer the effects of the illusory spell just as if they had been subjected to the actual spell. The mimicked spell performs at the ability level of the caster. An illusory fireball results in the target having to save for full or half damage and could even result in the need for item saving throws. The items do not suffer any actual harm, of course, but an unfortunate PC certainly might be fooled into believing that his sword has melted.

Illusions can only duplicate spells with a physical manifestation. Spells such as *hold person* or *sleep* cannot be sensed until its targets are already affected. Such spells could not be duplicated by an illusion; they create nothing that can be seen, heard, or felt. If a target cannot sense an illusion, it cannot be affected by it. (Note that this last stipulation does not apply to many innate magical attacks used by monsters. For example, a basilisk's gaze weapon and a vampire's *charm* attack are fairly well-known abilities and can easily be imagined by their victims without an obvious physical prompt.)

No illusion spell can duplicate another. Regardless of the level of the caster, it is pointless to attempt to fake an *improved phantasmal force* spell with a *phantasmal force*. The audial component does not exist.

Illusory Objects

The last category covers inanimate objects such as illusory walls, pits, or bridges. Though these applications are not as spectacular as illusory monsters or spells, they are the most difficult to detect and possibly the most effective. Even the lowly *phantasmal force* spell can create a more than adequate illusion of a pit or wall to deter pursuit by one's foes. The caster is limited only by his imagination and the area of effect of the spell.

However, casters should not be allowed to create more than one object per spell. *Phantasmal force* does not allow a caster to change the appearance of every object in the area of effect, although he could use the illusion of a collapsed doorway to hide the room's contents from view. Illusions can only cover or disguise an object, not make it invisible.

By logical extension, this is also true of the audial or olfactory properties of an object. A backpack created by a *phantasmal force* spell does nothing to mask the crackle and smoky odor of a campfire, but an *advanced illusion* of a growling and malodorous otyugh could do so. It is generally assumed that the size, sound, and smell of an illusion must be equal to or greater than the real object being hidden for the illusion to be effective.

Although the nature of an object might be disguised, its physical properties have not been changed. Most notably, the *invisibility* spell description establishes that an invisible light source continues to emit visible light. Not only is this true of any light source disguised with an illusion, it is also applicable in the case of heat, a form of light. In the backpack and campfire example, the heat of the flames could be felt by anyone that approached closely enough. If the illusory backpack was created with a spell that allows for thermal effects, the backpack itself could be made to feel cool to the touch, but the warmth radiated into space by the campfire would remain unaffected.

Conversely, the *Spectral force* of a campfire would be hot to the touch without actually radiating any heat or light. Such clues allow subjects to gain bonuses to their saving throws as previously detailed. Regardless of the results or method, any PC who picks up a campfire disguised with an illusion of a backpack is going to get burned!

Quick Review

The following procedure summarizes the steps a DM should take when the target of an illusion does something that requires the illusion to react. For example, the target may attack an illusory creature or walk toward a pit concealed with an illusory rug.

1. Determine if any components (primary, secondary, or minor) are missing from the illusion and if any such discrepancy might be noted by the target.
2. Let each observer or target roll a single d20. Use the result to resolve Intelligence checks made for any missing components (up to three).
3. Modify the target's saving throw vs. spell (maximum bonus of +7) for any successful Int checks.
4. Apply any situational modifiers (the target witnessed the casting, received forewarning, etc.).
5. Let each observer or target roll a saving throw vs. spell using the appropriate modifiers.

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Spell Notes

Phantasmal force: This is not a terribly effective combat spell unless the target is very stupid or the caster avoids creating illusions that require sound or heat. It is best used to simulate inanimate objects such as walls, doors, spike-filled pits, and piles of coins.

Audible glamer: This is useful mainly as a distraction, though it can be used to increase the effectiveness of a *phantasmal force* spell. It can also simulate sound-based spells such as *shout* or *music of the spheres*.

Improved phantasmal force: This is fairly

effective at creating believable illusions of ordinary creatures and any spell that does not rely on heat or odor. It is less effective if used against a target with a keen sense of smell. Djinn and efreeti have illusion powers of this type. This is also the most powerful effect that can be created with a *wand of illusion*.

Invisibility: Treat this spell as a visual illusion lacking the other components, but one that allows a save only if the invisible creature is making noise or has a distinctive odor. A successful save indicates that the general location of the creature has been established, though the creature still has all of the benefits of invisibility. PCs and monsters of sufficiently high Intelligence scores and level or hit dice receive a save as described in the *PHB*. Success means that the target can actually see a colorless outline of the invisible being and can attack without penalty. Unlike most illusions, multiple saves could be required if the observing creature loses track of the invisible creature for any length of time.

Spectral force and *programmed illusion*: These illusions are very difficult to detect unless the caster foolishly attempts to create an object with a strong odor, the only component not produced by these spells. Powerful evocations such as *fireball*, *lightning bolt*, and *ice storm* can be accurately duplicated.

Shadow monsters and *demishadow monsters*: The illusory monsters produced have no missing components. If the target of the attack manages to save, he is still subject to some actual damage as noted in the *PHB*. Even if a target fails its save, actual damage cannot exceed this amount.

Shadow magic and *demishadowmagic*: No adjustments need be made to the save for missing components, and it does not matter whether the caster is familiar with the evocation to be duplicated. Regardless of the success or failure of the saving throw, only a portion of the inflicted damage is real.

Advanced illusion: This is the complete illusion. Illusions created with this spell are virtually undetectable from the real thing. Creatures with innate illusion-generating capabilities (such as aboleth, baatezu, and leprechauns) create this type of illusion.

Note that many illusion/phantasm spells (for example, *spook* and *hypnotism*) already employ a straight save vs. spell. This fact adds further validity to the recommendation that the disbelief rule be discarded. Other spells such as *deafness*, *wraithform*, and *hallucinatory terrain* do not allow a saving throw and are not subject to the guidelines for detection given here. A few spells, like *phantasmal killer*, use a special saving throw that requires consultation of the spell description for resolution.

«the eye was rimmed with fire...
and the black slit of its pupil opened
on a pit, a window into nothing.»

-the Lord of the Rings



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Adding Substance to Psionic Combat

A new psionics system has been introduced for the AD&D® game.

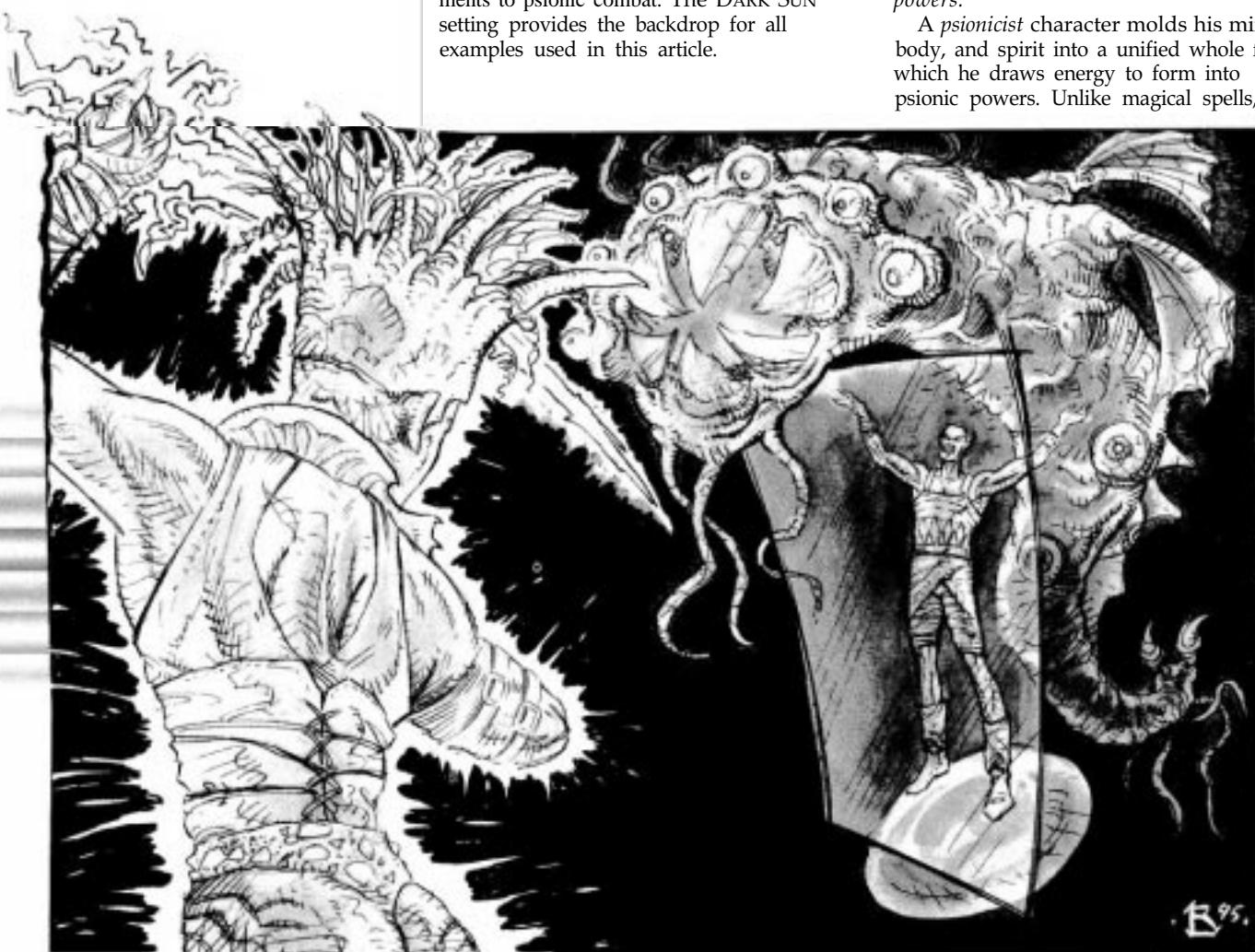
It appears first in the PLAYER'S OPTION™: Skills & Powers book and then in the new DARK SUN® campaign boxed set (shipping in October of 1995). For most AD&D® campaigns, this new system is optional. It's designed to be faster, easier to use, and less complicated than the system presented in *The Complete Psionics Handbook*. For DARK SUN players, it becomes the line's core psionic system.

Whichever rule system you use in your campaign, however, psionics—like all rules designed to add a quantitative element to role-playing—should be more than a series of cold, hard dice rolls. The mechanics provide a system that tests skill level and adds an element of randomness. Players and Dungeon Masters must provide the imagination that makes the mechanics become part of the story. The next few pages offer suggestions to help you add substance and role-playing elements to psionic combat. The DARK SUN setting provides the backdrop for all examples used in this article.

Psionics

Certain characters in some campaign worlds have powers and abilities that aren't related to priestly or wizardly magic. These characters have access to the internal power of their own minds—a power source called *psionics*. Psionic energy is present in every living thing (and many unliving ones), though only a few can access and shape the energy at will. When this energy is tapped and used for a specific purpose, it manifests as *psionic powers*.

A *psionicist* character molds his mind, body, and spirit into a unified whole from which he draws energy to form into psionic powers. Unlike magical spells, the



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energy for these powers comes from the psionicist himself and not some extraplantar energy reserve. Note that the psionicist is a specific character class like a warrior, wizard, priest, or rogue.

Some schools of psionics, such as those in DARK SUN campaigns, have given special terms to core psionic concepts. The inner reserve of energy is called *the Nexus*, the innate ability to use psionics is called *the Will*, and the process of study that makes a character a master psionicist is called *the Way*. On Athas, the world of the dark sun, every living creature has the Will, but few develop the Way to use it effectively.

A character whose natural psionic potential has manifested as just one or two psionic powers is known as a *wild talent*. He can belong to any class other than psionicist. A wild talent cannot learn any other powers but *can* make good use of the natural ability he possesses.

Nonpsionic characters (those who aren't psionicists or wild talents) have natural mental defenses, but no way to draw consciously upon their psionic energy. These mental defenses are measured in the new psionics system as *mental armor class*, or MAC. As with regular Armor Class, the lower the number, the better the protection. This natural defense assures that those without psionic powers still have some measure of defense against those who would reach into their minds or otherwise mentally attack them.

Psionicists have access to psionic powers that are divided into five disciplines:

clairsentience, psychokinesis, psychometabolism, psychoporation, and telepathy. (The rules in *The Complete Psionics Handbook* give six different disciplines, but one—metapsionic powers—has been redistributed among the others.)

Clairsentient powers allow characters to perceive things beyond the natural range of their senses; psychokinetic powers move objects across a given space through the energy of the mind; psychometabolic powers affect a character's own body; psychoporative powers permit psionic travel; and telepathic powers allow the direct contact of two or more minds. For more information about psionics in the AD&D game, see *PLAYER'S OPTION: Skills & Powers*, the new DARK SUN campaign box, or *The Complete Psionics Handbook*.

The Mindscape

The minds of all living things form a different level of reality than that of the material world around us. This mental landscape, or *mindscape*, is a strange terrain of mental constructs, dreams, and ideas that most characters access in the normal way—through thought and concentration. Psionicists (and, to a lesser extent, wild talents) can enter this place at will in a manner that's more akin to everyday reality by creating psionic bodies and projecting them into the mindscape. Once their psionic bodies step into the mindscape, they can interact with the terrain and its occupants, manipulating and even

altering whatever they find there.

The mindscape is a reflection of the material world, as though a mirror were hung across the sky to catch the mental images of the living minds below. But the mindscape has no physical dimensions or reflected images of the landscape of the material world. There are no sky-scraping mountain ranges, no weathered sea coasts, no deep canyons. No permanent features provide continuity or direction. If a mountain rises on the mindscape, it owes its existence to whatever mind created it—and once the mind stops imagining it, the mountain fades away. The mirror exists in a dark place; the only light is that provided by the reflected minds themselves. Picture a vast, black emptiness with occasional sparks of glowing light that represent the minds of living beings in the material world. These sparks go about the business of thinking and dreaming, without really being aware of the existence of the mindscape around them. Psionicists, however, are aware of the mindscape, and they make constant use of it when employing psionic powers.

When a psionicist enters the mindscape, he appears as a glowing, transparent representation of his physical form. It may be slightly exaggerated or improved, as the psionic form is often an idealized version of a physical self. More powerful psionicists can even change their psionic forms more substantially, either for visual effect or specific purpose.

When a psionicist's psionic body enters



the mindscape, it either floats freely on the mental winds of the black expanse, or it stands upon a glowing, transparent platform of light. This glowing platform can be disk-shaped or rectangular. Powerful psionicists can even form psionic scenery on the glowing platforms, reconstructing a real-world site from their memories or imaginations. (Note that wild talents never have this level of control. Their psionic platforms and bodies are crude constructs, showing an inherent lack of skill and knowledge in the use of the Way.)

In general, clairsentient powers make the most use of the mindscape, but it's as an arena for psionic combat that the mindscape takes on its most active, visual role.

Psionic Combat

The mechanics involved in engaging in psionic combat are detailed in the products mentioned earlier. Please refer to those rules while reading the rest of this article.

Psionic combat assaults closed minds in an effort to open them to further psionic contact. There are five psionic attack forms and five psionic defense forms available to use in psionic combat. Psionicists can eventually learn and employ all 10 psionic attacks and defenses, whereas wild talents can never learn to use more than three attacks and three defenses. Non-psionic minds (all characters who aren't psionicists or wild talents) must rely on

their natural mental armor class (MAC) to protect them.

The five psionic attack forms are *ego whip*, *id insinuation*, *mind thrust*, *psionic blast*, and *psychic crush*. The five psionic defense forms are *intellect fortress*, *mental barrier*, *mind blank*, *thought shield*, and *tower of iron will*. How these attacks and defenses manifest in the mindscape depends on the skill of the user.

When a psionicist enters the mindscape for the purposes of conducting psionic combat, a portion of his conscious mind remains aware of events happening in the material world. In effect, the psionicist is in two places at the same time. In the material world, the psionicist appears to concentrate or perhaps gets a faraway look in his eyes. Tension may play along the corner of his mouth, or a bead of sweat may slip down his brow. Otherwise, there is no visible sign that combat is occurring in the mindscape.

In the mindscape, glowing armor girds the psionic body. This is the mindscape manifestation of the psionicist's mental armor class. When the assault on the closed mind of the psionicist's opponent begins, other weapons and defenses are willed into existence for use in the battle. What direction such a psionic battle takes depends on the psionicist's opponent.

If the psionicist is launching an assault on a nonpsionic mind, he searches the mindscape for the dim glow of his oppo-

nent's psyche. The minds of nonpsionic characters aren't strong enough to create psionic versions of their physical forms. Instead, they appear in the mindscape as glowing balls of pulsing light or illuminated clouds of bright sparks floating in the black expanse. Using the five psionic attack forms, the psionicist batters the nonpsionic mind's mental armor until it collapses. The nonpsionic mind has no way to fight back and must rely on its natural defenses. When these defenses fall, other psionic powers can be used against the mind.

If the psionicist is fighting a wild talent, his opponent appears as a crude, unfinished psionic body. Whereas the psionicist's form is crisp and bright, a wild talent's psionic body is blocky, ill-defined, and less brilliant. The wild talent's glowing platform has the same characteristics as his psionic form. Knocking out the wild talent's defenses and opening his mind remains the psionicist's goal, though the wild talent can strike back.

The true scope of psionic combat is demonstrated when two psionicists go head-to-head. Such battles rock the mindscape and create a cacophony of vivid, psionic imagery. Athasian psionicists, for example, create attacks that take the form of charging mekillots, slashing swords, and battering boulders. Their defenses appear as glowing shields of light, tall, shimmering walls, and convoluted mazes of misdirection.

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The Role-Playing Dimension

Players can simply select psionic attacks and defenses and roll dice to determine the outcome of psionic combat involving their characters. DMs and players, however, will increase the fun of a game session by concentrating on role-playing. Picture the black expanse of the mindscape, the howling mental winds, and the distant glow of thoughts and memories.

Players should start by describing their character's psionic bodies, glowing platforms, and mental armor. Each should then select an attack and defense form (without rolling any dice). Then, in initiative order, the players should describe the imagined form that the psionic attacks and defenses take on.

All imagined attack and defense forms—forms that are very real in the mindscape—are called *harbingers* and *constructs*. Harbingers are the visual representations of the attack forms; constructs are those of the defense forms. Sample harbingers and constructs for the DARK SUN campaign are given below, though players and DMs are encouraged to add to these common forms to match particular psionicists and their personalities.

Sample Harbingers and Constructs

The following harbingers and constructs are the most common ones used by the psionicists of Athas. They add nothing to game mechanics, but they can add a wealth of entertainment to the role-playing aspects of psionic combat.

Harbingers (Psionic Attack Forms)

- *Ego Whip:* This psionic assault on a target's self-esteem can be visualized as a glowing whip, a belligerent templar, an arrogant noble, the terrifying Dragon, or the buffeting winds of a Tyr storm.
- *Id Insinuation:* This assault on the subconscious mind can take the shape of a glowing battering ram, a charging mekillot, a shimmering war hammer, or a deadly silk wyrm that slithers past defenses instead of smashing them.
- *Mind Thrust:* This piercing attack stabs at thoughts and memories, so it takes the form of piercing weapons. Glowing swords of light, swift and graceful chatkachas, flaming spears, and scorpion stingers all fall into this category.
- *Psychic Crush:* This is a mental weight that slowly crushes defenses. As such, it can be visualized as a huge boulder slowly rolling forward, the crushing tentacles of a silt horror (of a color of the psionicist's choice), the punishing rain of a Tyr storm, or the plodding, steady attack of a mountainous earth elemental.
- *Psionic Blast:* This attack sends a wave of mental energy racing toward the target. As such, most psionicists imagine it as lightning strikes from a Tyr storm, the swift, slashing claws of a kirre, the flaming

shafts of a rain of arrows, or a relentless, stampeding herd of carru.

Constructs (Psionic Defense Forms)

- *Intellect Fortress:* This defense encases the mind in a powerful keep of mental energy. It may take the form of a field of brambles, the chitinous, spiky shell of a cha'thrang, the rock-hard carapace of a giant beetle, or glowing suits of metal armor from the most ancient of days.
- *Mental Barrier:* This is a wall of thought that blocks psionic attacks. It appears as a wall of worked stone, light, or even metal, as a shimmering globe that surrounds the psionicist, or as a lightning-filled cloud that zaps incoming attacks before they reach the defender.
- *Mind Blank:* This defense hides the psionicist. It can appear as a thick fog, a raging sand storm, a featureless void, a dark forest, labyrinthine ruins, a vast desert, or a bottomless crevasse that lies between the attacker and defender.
- *Thought Shield:* This is a glowing shield that turns away psionic attacks. It can be visualized as a shield, armor, a mystic rune, or any monster that appears to protect the defender from attacks.
- *Tower of Iron Will:* This unassailable haven takes the form of a tall tower, a stout gate, an impossibly high cliff, or a jagged, lonely crag.

Psionic Combat as a Story Element

How does all of this work to enhance role-playing? Leaving the dice mechanics aside for the moment, let's observe a DM and a player tell the story of the battle of two psionicist characters. Lester, the player, runs the hero Drasik of Tyr, a psionicist of some experience and power. The DM runs the NPC villain, Salistar of the Dark Mind. The two characters spot each other across a crowded tavern, and the scene plays out as follows.

DM: "Drasik notices his old foe Salistar on the other side of the tavern's common room. As he spots her, she locks eyes with him."

Lester: "This is it. Drasik has been waiting to confront Salistar for a long time. Drasik concentrates, sending his psionic form into the mindscape in preparation for psionic combat."

DM: "Salistar does the same. To the crowd around them, though, nothing out of the ordinary can be detected."

Lester: "Drasik's psionic body forms atop a glowing platform of light in the blackness of the mindscape."

DM: "What does his form look like? And what about the platform?"

Lester: "Drasik looks much as he does in the physical world, though his psionic body glows brightly and is semitransparent. He's a tall, bald human with a thin, muscular build. Sparkling armor like the heart of a lightning storm covers his body,

and he stands on a glowing disk of light."

DM: "Cool. Well, Drasik sees Salistar appear a short distance away in the darkness. She, too, looks like a shimmering version of her physical self. Her semi-transparent form is shapely and strong, and her hair flows like spun lightning in the mental winds. Her disk of light is wide and thin, and a glowing skin of mental armor outlines her psionic body."

Lester: "Drasik chooses ego whip as his attack form and mental barrier as his defense form."

DM: "Okay, consider how those forms will manifest while I tell you what Salistar has planned. She's calling forth a psionic blast and using a thought shield".

Lester: "Drasik's ego whip attack appears as a fast-developing Tyr storm with glowing, swirling winds as strong and sharp as shards of obsidian. His mental barrier takes shape as the lightning-filled clouds that accompany the storm."

DM: "Salistar's psionic blast forms into a huge kirre with shimmering fur and claws that spark as they move through the air. Beside her, opposite the kirre, a ghostly braxat takes shape to act as her thought shield."

Lester: "The sharp winds of Drasik's ego whip rush across the black expanse to slice into Salistar."

DM: "Nice try, but the braxat leaps in front of Salistar. The cutting winds rip the braxat apart, but only a little damage actu-

ally makes it to Salistar. Her kirre shoots back toward Drasik, its claws sparking through the blackness as it blasts toward him. The lightning-filled mental barrier blocks the rushing psionic blast, and with a rumbling growl the kirre fades into nothingness.

In the tavern, Drasik remains calm and collected, sipping his kank nectar while keeping his gaze locked on Salistar. Salistar, meanwhile, lets out a barely audible cough, and a few beads of sweat begin to develop on her brow."

Lester: "How does Salistar look in the mindscape?"

DM: "Her personal armor isn't as bright as it was, but it still shimmers around her. Otherwise, she seems to be very angry that her kirre was destroyed before it could reach Drasik. On to the next round."

Lester: "Salistar's going to try something big this time, so Drasik reaches into his nexus to call forth a tower of iron will. As an attack, he starts to shape a mind thrust."

DM: "You're right, Salistar wants to finish this with a bang. She prepares a psychic crush attack and an intellect fortress defense. Immediately, a red silt horror rises out of the darkness near Drasik, its grasping tentacles reaching from beneath his glowing battle platform and wrapping around his tower of iron will."

Lester: "Uh, oh. Salistar certainly likes to create monsters. The tower of iron will takes the form of an impossibly tall crag. It

shoots up from my battle platform to rocket me out of the tentacles' reach."

DM: "That almost works, but the tentacles catch hold of Drasik and squeeze. Unbelievable pain shoots through Drasik's mind, but his mental armor remains intact. What about Drasik's mind thrust?"

Lester: "A glowing sword appears in Drasik's hands, and in the next instant his battle platform slides into Salistar's. He swings the sword, hoping to add to the damage he inflicted in the previous attack."

DM: "Her intellect fortress forms into a giant beetle with a carapace as black as the expanse of the mindscape and as solid as a half-giant's skull. It crawls in front of the psionicist to take the brunt of Drasik's mind thrust. His glowing sword clatters harmlessly off the beetle's carapace."

"In the tavern, Drasik swallows hard and momentarily closes his eyes to the crushing pain and failed attack. A slight smile creeps across Salistar's lips, and both psionicists prepare for a third round of psychic combat...."

Remember, when it comes to psionic combat, it's all in your mind. Add details, describe exciting visuals, and stretch your imagination to paint the psionic canvas of the mindscape. Then the role-playing will really come alive.

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Running Scared... and Really Fast!

Scaring Superheroes
Right Out of Their Tights

by Spike Y. Jones
(with thanks to Dale A. Donovan,
Lee Gold, Richard Bark, and Lisa Padol)

Artwork by Bob Lessl

Last October, my article on how to scare player characters in a fantasy setting—"Who's Afraid Of The Big, Bad Ghost?"—appeared in issue #210 of DRAGON® Magazine. The central point of the piece was that you can't scare the PCs unless you first scare the *players*. While a "scary" monster like a ghost is *supposed* to frighten a fantasy hero, most players aren't in the least frightened by them ("Okay, it's 10 hit dice, and humans get hit worst by its aging power, so you guys sit this one out. Cedric, you're above 7th level; try to turn it while we get the holy water out."). Atmosphere and matters of delivery are the key in that setting to making what's *supposed* to be scary *actually* scary.

In the superhero game genre, the desire to frighten the PCs comes up less frequently, and it is correspondingly more

difficult to do. Describing a "dark and stormy night" is too big a departure from the norm in a CHAMPIONS* or GURPS SUPERS* campaign for the GM to use such atmospheric techniques to sneak up on the players and the PCs. No matter what the build-up, if the end product is just another villain to pound, the PCs will proceed to pound him without stopping along the way to be frightened by him.

What if the GM wants to have a more intense gaming experience? What if, for reasons that range from a desire to shake up the complacency of the players to a simple Halloween theme, he wants actually to frighten the heroes, and as a necessary prerequisite, the players? Scaring superheroes (and superhero players) is possible, but it's a different task than scaring PCs in other role-playing genres.

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Who's Afraid of the Big, Bad Villain?

To get the same results that a spooky atmosphere engenders for fantasy games, a supers GM has to use entirely different methods. Superheroes aren't supposed to scare easily, and the traditional method of attempting it-producing bigger, better villains (How do you frighten a superhero who can lift an apartment building? With a supervillain who can lift a planet?)—just stiffens the resolve of the better sort of hero. Even if the player isn't as heroically fearless as his PC is supposed to be, he does have the advantage of knowing a few things about the superhero genre and the rules of most superhero RPGs that the PC doesn't. For instance, heroes are supposed to win in the end, and killing one (generally thought to be the only thing that will scare a player) is intentionally very hard to do (unlike the case in some other game genres).

As a result, the players are nearly fearless. Although the causality should have been the opposite (in other words, the player should be attempting to duplicate the fearlessness of a hero in the genre, instead of the hero PC being fearless because of player confidence in the rules), the PCs end up being equally fearless.

Facing a much stronger opponent may cause a superhero some consternation, but it's not likely actually to *frighten* him. Against a more powerful villain, a true hero just finds himself more determined to succeed. And a player running a superhero PC in a role-playing game feels much the same. He may wonder how his PC will defeat the villain, but knowing that it's all just a game, with his own entertainment and enjoyment as key goals, he won't have any doubt that he'll win in the end.

To make the villain something extraordinary, the GM can give him the trappings of the supernatural (a name and powers based on voodoo or vampirism, for instance), even if his powers are still pure supervillain. This is especially useful if the hero group has no "supernaturalists" in its roster, as supernatural menaces will thus be something out of the ordinary for them.

Next, modify his abilities so that they don't appear to follow the rules (although you shouldn't actually break them unless you know that the players would understand if they found out). Give him powers without obvious limitations (though they probably should have *hidden* limitations), or let him do things that seem impossible but simply rely on a heavy use of points or stretched interpretations of the rules.

Minor spooky special effects, like dimming all the lights (including the sun) in the vicinity of the villain or silencing all the noises within a certain radius around him, make a supernatural villain stranger. To keep such effects from being seen by the players as just more superpowers, they should have no direct impact on the abilities of the heroes and thus convey no

combat advantage to the villain. PC powers like sun bursts or sonic blasts should be unaffected by a villain's light and sound damping fields, but attempts specifically to counter the annoying special effect should be completely ineffective.

Players get suspicious of a villain if they can't figure out why his points weren't used as economically as were those of the PC heroes. "Does he have so many points that he can afford to waste them on frivolous effects?" players will wonder. "Do these special effects have some deeper meaning, such as a slow power drain field, that we haven't figured out yet? Are we missing something?"

In a similar vein, temporarily depriving the hero of some of his senses (and therefore, depriving the player of some of the input he's used to) can cause some unease. The simplest way of doing this (especially if the hero lacks extrasensory powers) is to turn out the lights; describing a fight in an alley solely in terms of sounds, smells, and transitory touches can confuse and frighten a hero who can normally handle almost any situation (which is why almost all of us are scared of the dark to some extent).

Other methods of establishing sensory deprivation include forcing the hero to conduct missions where common sense would require him to spend time recovering from attacks that blinded or deafened him, or having him face villains whose powers include sensory manipulation (a loss of trust in his sight to an illusion-crafter can be as effective as a villain who merely generates darkness). Finally, the GM can remove the hero to a location (such as an alien dimension) where our senses don't work quite as they do in our normal reality.

There are still a few ways for a villain to unsettle players simply by being exceedingly powerful. The first partakes of the "supernatural special effects" options mentioned above: if the villain is certifiably dead, and then returns to bedevil the PCs, it produces a certain amount of distress in the players' minds. Of course, for the distress to arise, the players have to be certain that something strange is going on, which means that they also have to be certain that the villain was definitely dead, perhaps seen by the heroes' own eyes (as opposed to the usual mysterious probable death of the "nobody could have survived that fall" sort).

The second method is for the villain to have no real interest in defeating the PC heroes because they're so far beneath his power level as to be inconsequential. If the villain has already defeated a team of much stronger superheroes, he may not even give the PCs a second thought because they're so badly outclassed that they can't possibly affect his plans. Thus, there's bound to be some trepidation when "the B team" (often made up of sidekicks, rejects, and has-been heroes in the comics) must face him anyway. Of course,

properly brave superheroes put on their best faces, and the average player still has faith that some miracle will occur to keep the PCs from suffering the defeat that would seem to be their fate, but it's a start.

A third way for a villain to scare a hero is by being insane. Superheroes (and players) expect to be able to outthink their opponents almost as often as they out-muscle them. At the very least, the hero expects that he'll be able to comprehend the villain's motives and understand his actions, however unlikely he is to agree with or allow them. An insane villain (or a monster that operates from entirely inhuman motivations) is scarier in some ways than a rational, predictable one. He can be harder to defeat, and what's more, there's something in all of us that's repulsed by the mentally ill—a fear that it could happen to us.

Collateral Damage

All in all, personal threats don't scare heroes. Of course, threats to others might work. But the possible harm to near-strangers isn't usually enough to worry the average player. In order to make the player actually *fear* the death or disfigurement of an NPC, you have to make the NPC's life *important* to the player character and the player in some way. There are two ways to do this: make him significant in game terms, or make him intrinsically significant as a person.

The most obvious game-significant NPCs are a hero's dependents in both his super and his secret identities: his wife, children, relatives, contacts, lawyer, co-workers, sidekick, and so on. A properly designed dependent NPC (or DNPC) is important to the player both because of the role-playing connections built up between the characters and because of the disadvantage points the DNPC represents. Other NPCs who don't have a direct connection to the PC can still be a significant part of his life by being important in the campaign world for other reasons. A threat to the mayor of the campaign city a congressman who sponsors a bill with implications for paranormals, or even the capture of another hero (PC or not) can cause an emotional response in a player, especially if the danger is made credible and immediate.

What if the threatened character is just a random innocent bystander? How is the GM supposed to make such a faceless NPC significant to the players? The key is the word "faceless." If you put a face to an otherwise minimally meaningful NPC, he suddenly means *more*. For example, if a fleeing criminal grabs a bystander and whirls around to face the pursuing heroes with a knife held to the innocent's throat, the players immediately convert to "hostage situation" mode. They attack the criminal with mental powers with little thought for the hostage, while the GM merely gauges

the speed of their attack against the crooks ruthlessness to determine the result.

But what if the GM gives the hostage a role in the encounter? Instead of immediately looking up the defensive bonus the villain gains for having a body in front of him, the GM could babble in the voice of the hostage ("Oh, God, oh, God! Please don't hurt me! I have children! I'll give you whatever you want! *Oh, God!*"), forcing the players to think of the victim as a person, instead of an impediment to a clear shot at the criminal.

The more difficult the GM makes the situation, the more "real" the NPCs become. When threats have personal meaning to the hero—even threats that aren't directed at him—he is more likely to feel fear at the thought of failure, and so is the player.

"But Even with All My Powers..."

What makes a superhero *super* is his panoply of powers. So what would happen in a situation where the hero's powers were *superfluous* instead of super? Or where they were the problem instead of the solution?

Super impotence is a hero's greatest fear, as it strikes directly at his entire *raison d'être*; without his powers, Captain Clean is just another silly looking guy in long white underwear. And there are a number of ways to pull off such powerlessness. The most obvious of these is the standard supervillain device that temporarily deprives the superhero of his abilities. When coupled with an important task that absolutely must be accomplished—such as saving a threatened NPC—any player or hero becomes concerned (to say the least). The player knows that the GM can't *permanently* deprive his PC of hundreds of points worth of powers (not without giving him new ones, anyway), so being forced to solve a problem without the benefit of his powers might be seen as a true challenge rather than a frustration.

A similar tactic to use on a superhero PC is to *change* his powers without the consent of his player. What makes a Lovecraftian monstrosity more frightening than a gigantic supervillain? Part of the difference is in the sort of extra powers the monstrosity has: mind control, the ability to cause unwanted changes to the character, and especially the possibility of driving the PC insane. A player would consider such potential harm at the tentacles of the monster to be in keeping with the game and genre rules; thus, he must face the real possibility that the GM will "muck up" his carefully crafted PC if he doesn't handle the menace just right. And it's that fear of the legitimate powers of the GM that makes such a monster more fearsome than a supervillain of the same power level (but with different powers).

A hero doesn't have to lose full control of his powers in order to harbor fears about them. What if powers that were normally kept in tight check suddenly became unpredictable or even uncontrollable? While the player might have had no qualms about giving his character powers that could destroy a city because he knew that he'd never *do* that, making him worry about the possibilities of "power surges" or "accidental discharges" can force him into a whole new style of play.

Another form of powerlessness is more insidious and effective. Leaving the hero's powers intact, the GM can confront him with menaces against which his powers are simply ineffective. While villains with special defenses are obvious examples of this principle, even more interesting are things that huge muscles, radar senses, and laser eyes were never designed to fight: the government, social policy, the laws of nature, and interpersonal relationships.

When such things go horribly wrong (for example, Congress passing a law to restrict the actions of paranormals), the heroes must depend on other abilities in order to find success. And when a law-abiding or officially sanctioned hero must choose between disobeying lawful authorities or allowing an evil deed (possibly on the part of a politician) to go unpunished, it can put him in a horrible fix.

If the player has put any effort into his character's creation and "life" beyond his superpowers, such areas can be targeted by the GM. Many heroes simply can't handle their love lives as well as they do their heroic careers, so the threat of a neglected wife DNPC asking for a divorce can be as difficult to solve as an interstellar invasion. The effect of this sort of threat is directly proportional to the care the player has put into crafting the DNPC. Secret identities, weaknesses, and other often-ignored disadvantages can all cause concern to both player and PC if threatened or exposed during an adventure. They represent things that the hero is specifically unable to affect and loom just as menacingly as a powerful supervillain.

Instead of merely being powerless in the face of a menace, what if the hero's powers actually made the problem worse? If the GM engineered events so that normal actions on the part of the hero had unexpected consequences, the hero might become unsure of himself, unable to predict which actions he should take in the future and what new spin the GM might put on them. In the past, many comic books have shown that the public (including the hero's DNPCs) can be made allergic to the presence of the superhero (as a natural reaction to his extraordinary body chemistry, as the result of a villain's scheme, or because of exposure to such super-staples as alien viruses and lingering extra-dimensional radiation to which the hero himself is immune). In such a case, the immediate solution to the problem

would be for the hero to remove himself from contact with human society, but such a course of action would seem unthinkable to the average superhero character.

In a more direct vein, if a villain feeds on the powers of a hero (whatever they may be), the character isn't quite *deprived* of his abilities—after all, he still has them at his fingertips—but their use could lead to disaster. What's more, the very existence of the hero could be as great a threat as the existence of the villain if the hero doesn't have to use his powers actively for the villain to benefit from them.

"I Didn't Do That!"

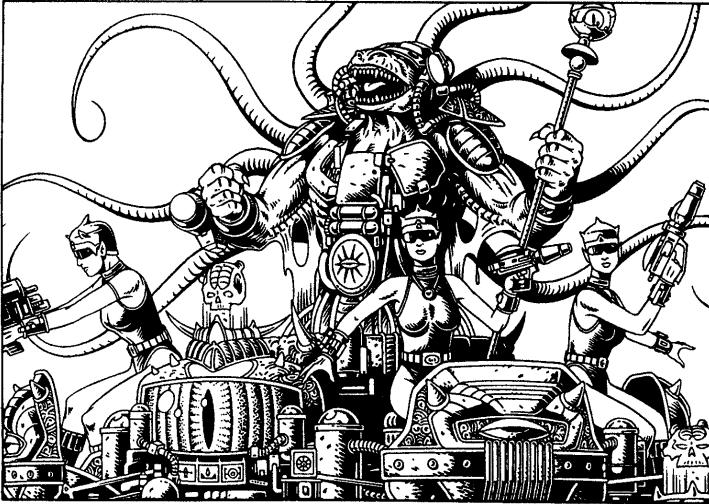
Similar to a loss of power, a loss of control on the part of a hero can be devastating. If he wakes up from a long, troubled sleep to see news reports claiming that he committed numerous crimes during the night, not only does the hero have to make amends for his supposed crimes, but he must also restore his reputation and track down the source of the spurious reports of his nighttime activities. And if he discovers that the reports are *true*, that he actually *did* rob banks, set fires, and threaten lives without any recollection of his actions, he'll wonder whether he's going insane, perhaps about to become the same sort of menace to society that he's always fought in the past.

But how does the GM convince the player that his PC is going uncontrollably insane? After all, since it's the player who decides what the PC will do, he'll certainly know what he did and did not sanction as his PC's actions. So, to make the player fear that his character is truly suffering from a loss of control, the GM should (temporarily) take away the player's control of the hero. At times, he can roll a few dice behind the GM's screen and then announce that the hero is performing a certain action, listening to no objections on the part of the player.

Even when the player ostensibly controls the hero's in-character actions, the GM can take away some of the player's control of the game by rolling combat or skill-use dice for the player. (This could be cumbersome in games where double-handfuls of dice are rolled to resolve a powerful attack, so just making attacks rolls and letting players roll the damage is a compromise.) The GM should still be scrupulously fair when it comes to making these rolls, but the frustration a player feels at being deprived of his dice-rolling abilities parallels what the hero feels at losing control of his superpowers.

If the scenario doesn't involve mind control or the like, the GM can deprive all the players of their dice to make them feel uneasy—a preliminary "softening up" technique in preparation for another feature of the session designed to make the

continued on page 116



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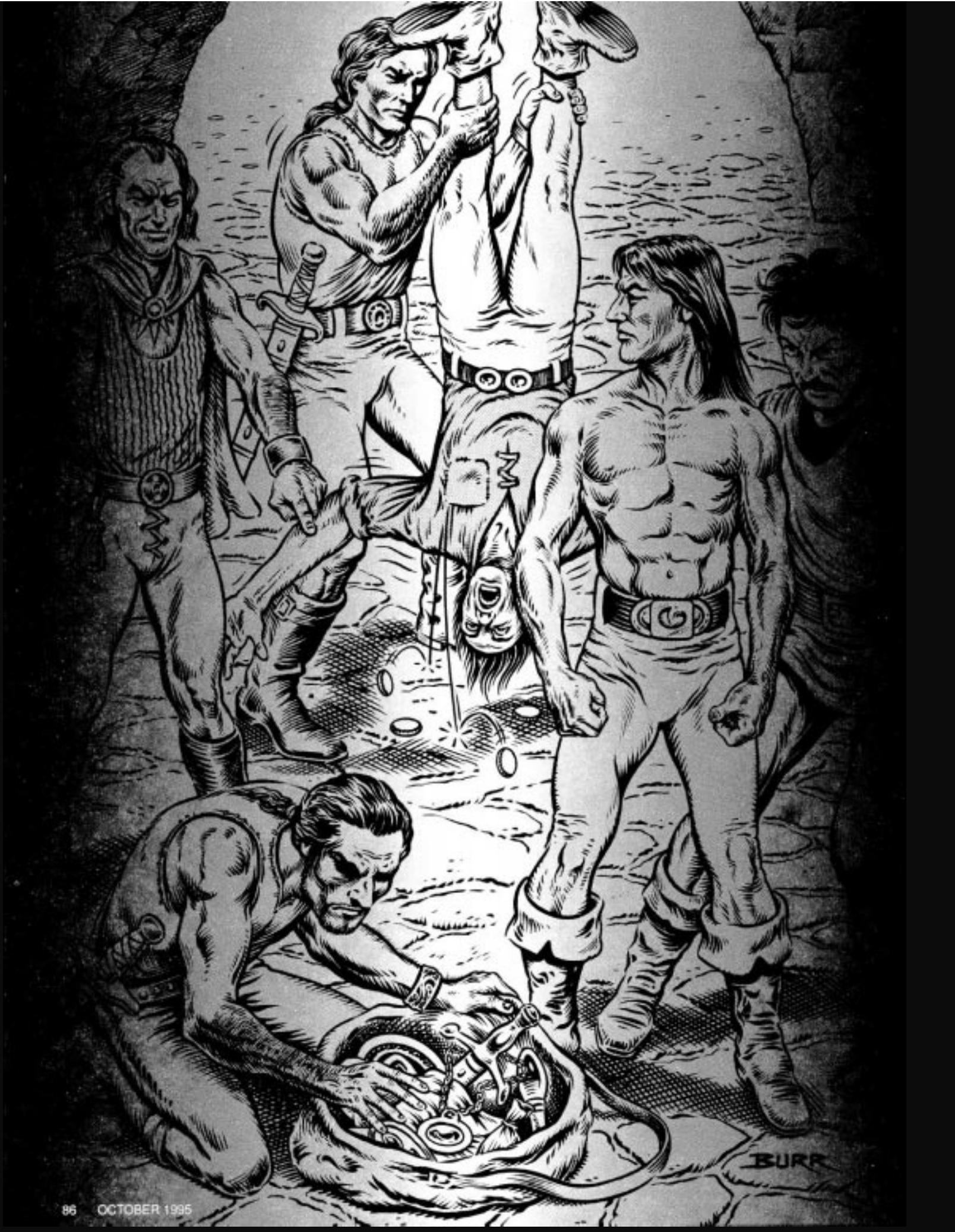
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Who Needs Hit Points When You Have Credit?

**The other extreme:
eight ways to give 0-level bad guys an edge over powerful PCs**

by Peter C. Zelinski

Artwork by Dan Burr

Recurring villains don't have to be high-level world-shakers with terrifying spells and magical items. Some are soft and pampered urbanites who wouldn't be a match for a kobold, let alone a party of heroic adventurers. Just like our own lives, the lives of our PCs can include adversaries who would be useless in combat, but who manage to land painful blows nonetheless by striking with weapons more subtle than those found on any equipment list.

In addition to whatever dark overlord opposes the player characters from adventure to adventure, the DM should also consider including at least one minor villain who is closer to the PCs' home base. This villain, too, wants to destroy one or more of the heroes, but for a much more personal reason. Jealousy could be his motive, or maybe he hopes to improve his station in life, believing that destroying the PCs will win him the favor of the dark overlord himself.

This "minor" villain can be a low-level character, but a 0-level villain is even better. To be effective, 0-level characters must move the conflict beyond the realm of attacks and hit points. In doing so, they force the players to flex noncombat,

role-playing muscles that often go unused in the dungeon.

Such low-level villains also make a good lesson for the PCs, demonstrating that physical power isn't everything. Often, just one instance of a 0-level character managing to disrupt their lives is enough to bring some much needed humility to heroes who had begun to feel invincible behind their magical swords and fireballs. Of course, the 0-level villain can't often resort to magical swords and fireballs himself. How, then, can the DM give such an opponent a fighting chance?

Eight suggestions follow. Though a few are mostly defensive (ways to protect the villain from harm when he gets the PCs angry) the others are potential sources of power and influence the villain can use against the characters directly. The DM is encouraged to combine these devices when creating his 0-level villain. To ensure that the villain is more than just a "one-trick" NPC who may grow stale after only two or three appearances, a minimum of two devices should be used. Because the devices don't conflict with one another, it's even possible to use all eight at once. The resulting villain would be formidable indeed—even if he does have only three hit points!

1. Alignment

This is not the villain's alignment, but that of the heroes. If the party is all or primarily good-aligned, then this alone may be enough to keep a 0-level villain alive—depending largely on the campaign's alignment philosophy. No matter how severe the offense, it may violate a good character's sense of fairness to fight a 0-level character, because it would effectively amount to slaughter.

Even so, a 0-level character may never commit an offense a good character would judge worthy of corporal punishment. Lacking serious combat ability, the 0-level character often "attacks" by humiliating the heroes, or by using his influence to confiscate their wealth or fabricate criminal charges against them. Unless the villain hires an assassin or gives the PCs' high-level enemies important information, he generally won't endanger the heroes, no matter how much he wishes he could. Therefore, the heroes won't be justified in slaying him. Lucky villain!

The heroes will have to find creative ways to keep the villain in check, if only to free themselves up for serious adventuring (which they can't do while stuck in jail on false charges). When alignment pre-

Evening the Odds, Part II:

vents the PCs from using force to stop the villain, the scoundrel always gets a reprieve, remaining alive and well to scheme against the heroes another day.

2. The Law

In the same way that a sense of fairness can prevent good characters from slaying a 0-level villain, the law can likewise constrain lawful characters. The mere threat of legal action may stop neutral and chaotic heroes, too. In many ways, the law is a more effective protection for a careful villain than the heroes' alignment.

Any organized settlement, even a chaotic one, will have laws, whether concrete and varied or vague and few in number. The consistency of enforcement varies with population density; in cities, the density makes dependable law enforcement a necessity for any semblance of peaceful living. Anyone living in a city can expect the law's protection, and this includes the villain. The law may be just, or-in a corrupt society-it may be skewed to favor one group (that of the villain) over another (that of the PCs, particularly if they are outsiders). To a lawful character, this won't matter. Rules are rules.

Anyone who flouts the law-regardless of alignment-will have to face the local law enforcement, and this may be enough to keep PCs in line. For example, say the villain hires an assassin who kills one of the heroes. Good characters might feel justified in avenging their comrade by slaying the villain, particularly if the assassin were still alive and under contract. But what if the heroes have no hard evidence of the villain's involvement? If they kill him anyway, they would be wanted for murder. Even if they could justify battling the city police, could they be certain that they'd win such a fight?

In the same example, what if the PCs do have proof? In an "enlightened" city, they still would have to stay out of the affair, trusting the duly sanctioned authorities to detain the villain and bring him to trial-all of which affords the villain ample opportunity to escape or bribe his way to acquittal.

3. Wealth

Whereas the first two devices were purely defensive, money is both a defense and an offense. In a fantasy world as much as in our own, money is perhaps *the great equalizer*. Whatever a wealthy villain lacks the ability to do, he can hire others to do for him. This includes pressing bodyguards and mercenaries into his private war against the PCs.

In a society that is in any way corrupt, the wealthy villain may also be something of a plutocrat, lining either government coffers or officials' pockets to promote the creation and enforcement of laws that are detrimental to the heroes.

Because it is such a versatile device, wealth tends to be the weapon of choice for DMs creating 0-level villains.

4. Political Office

Instead of bribing government officials to effect his will, the villain may be one of the officials himself. Because corrupt and highly placed NPCs tend to be wealthy, there is likely to be overlap between this device and "Wealth," above. However, even if the villain is not wealthy, his political standing may give him a similar degree of influence. Whereas a wealthy villain can hire an underling to do his bidding, for example, an official can order him into service or appeal to his sense of patriotism, "city security," or loyalty to the crown. A very powerful 0-level opponent might even be the crown itself.

Alternatively, the villain may be neither influential nor highly placed, but instead entrusted with just enough authority to make life miserable for the heroes. The villain may be a tax collector who uses an obscure "treasure tax" to confiscate a liberal share of the heroes' wealth, or he may be a mid-level officer of the city guard who is well within his authority to interrogate or detain the "suspicious" PCs.

Such characters should be adept at covering their own tracks to maintain a guise of innocence and impartiality. If the heroes stand up for themselves, they may find the law and the rest of the government turned against them. The PCs' awareness of this possibility may be enough to keep the villain unharmed (see "The Law," above).

5. Infiltration

If the villain has the means or influence to employ or command others, the DM shouldn't overlook the possibility that one of the villain's lackeys infiltrates the heroes' party. Though this trick is available to any villain, it is often ignored by the dark overlords of the world, who instead use scrying magic to gather information and high-hit-dice minions to strike at their enemies. For the 0-level villain lacking these resources, however, the infiltrator can make an excellent substitute.

The infiltrator can be a spy looking for information on the heroes' powers or weaknesses. More dangerous, however, is the professional saboteur, who bides his time until the PCs are vulnerable, then betrays them to make their problems much worse. The saboteur may barricade a door to trap the heroes in a dungeon, or he may pilfer an important magical item, leaving the PCs to discover the loss the next time the item is needed desperately.

The easiest way for the villain to place an infiltrator among the PCs is to have him pose as a hireling and be employed by the party. In this case, the infiltrator does his best to earn the trust of the PCs, possibly appearing to endanger himself in the process. His goal is to win "special" assignments from the heroes-tasks where he has only minimal supervision.

6. Wits

Instead of relying on levels or hit dice, the villain may be an intellectual mastermind who anticipates his enemies' moves and uses his limited resources creatively for devastating effects. When given its due, genius-like money-can be a powerful weapon in itself.

Though playing a genius-level villain doesn't require an 18 Intelligence, it does require the DM to consider each problem as the villain would. Not powerful enough to defeat or destroy the PCs and unable to find anyone else to do the job, the villain will search for a creative way to achieve the same end.

For example, if the villain wants to trick the PCs into destroying themselves, his line of analysis-as well as the DM's-might proceed as follows: What do the PCs want? How can this desire be used to trick them into endangering themselves? What are all of the ways the PCs might discover my treachery, and how can I foil each of these in advance? Most importantly, how can I conceal my own involvement or escape if the PCs pursue me? The villain's sinister plan will emerge from answers to questions such as these, and he won't act until all of his questions are answered.

Even if the villain is unable to attack the heroes through cunning and deceit, his intelligence alone may make him dangerous. If he is the smartest enemy the PCs have ever faced, he may be able to deduce a particular weakness of the heroes. He might research their backgrounds or the histories of their magical items, or he might win the trust of others who know the characters. As the sole possessor of such valuable information, he can use it to bargain with the heroes' high-level enemies-perhaps even the dark overlord himself.

If such a deal is struck, the heroes will find themselves with two new problems: a dark overlord who now knows much more about them, and a wily 0-level villain who probably got something very interesting in trade....

7. Magic

Perhaps the villain has a powerful magical item. He might have bargained for it with one of the PCs' enemies (including the dark overlord), he might have found it for sale, or he might have received it as a trust of his office. In any case, the villain has no doubt discovered the many possibilities of the item and uses it as a tool against the PCs.

Be warned, though, that the item must not be combat-related, or at the very least should have applications outside of combat. A 0-level villain brandishing a *vorpel sword* simply means that the heroes are about to acquire a *vorpel sword*. The same is true of defensive combat items, all of which can defend for only so long. For example, a *cube of force* will eventually run out charges, and the charm of the

continued on page 118

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SECRETS OF THE SUNLESS seas

by Wolfgang Baur

The release of the *Night Below* campaign expansion adds great depth to the existing source material on the Underdark, the great system of caverns and passages that serves as home to the drow, illithids, kuo-toans, svirfnebli—and savant aboleth, the new ruling class of the aboleth introduced in *Night Below*.

What Are Savant Glyphs?

As the rulers and stewards of the aboleth cities, the savant aboleth have evolved a complex symbolic glyph system they use for all written communication, tracking mundane matters such as slaves captured, sacrifices offered, and goods harvested from the sea. The same glyphs are used to

record arcane magical lore: the omens and portents of the underground seas, the divinations of entrails, or the results of powerful scryings or enchantments sent against the enemies of the aboleth. Over the course of long ages, this system itself was used to manipulate, harness, and bind magical forces for defensive purposes.

The aboleth's system of enchanted sym-

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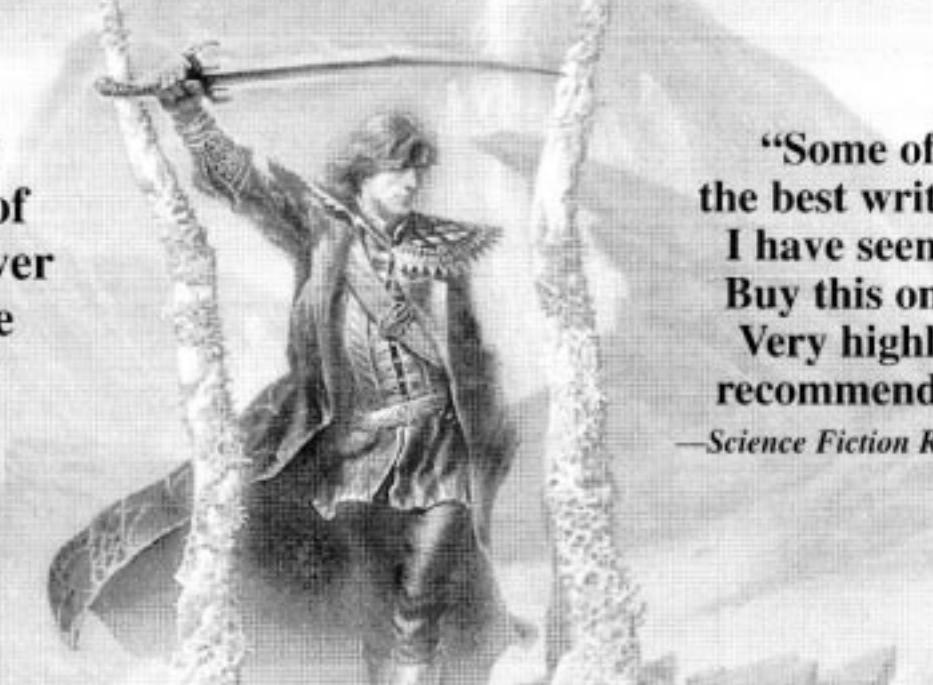
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bols is a large and highly-developed set of magical glyphs, much larger than the signs, seals, and sigils used to ward tomes and protect valuables in the surface world. These specialized protective glyphs are called *savant glyphs*; those few sages of the surface world who have been privileged enough to see such glyphs have determined that savant glyphs are, in fact, closely related to *glyphs of warding*. However, savant glyphs are a much more complex and elaborate form of magic; mastering it is a skill separate from normal spell-casting.

Among the dark waters of the aboleth cities, the ability to form savant glyphs is relatively common, and is a mark of status and power over lesser aboleths. Any savant aboleth that functions as a 7th-level or higher priest or wizard can create magical glyphs by psychokinetic force, one glyph per day. Casting time is two turns plus one turn per additional glyph element (see below), so casting glyphs is not likely during combat. A savant aboleth (or any other caster) can maintain no more than one glyph-element per point of Intelligence at any given time.

Savant glyphs come in four categories: *simple glyphs*, *complex glyphs*, *master glyphs*, and *complex master glyphs*. Simple glyphs are identical to *glyphs of warding*; only two new varieties are presented here. Complex glyphs are similar to *glyphs of warding*, but they combine the effects of two or three normal glyphs. For example, a complex glyph might inflict cold damage and also cause paralysis. Master glyphs each count as a three-element glyph for the purposes of the caster's glyph limit, and each master glyph has a unique effect, such as *enfeeblement* (per the ray of the same name), *extension* (which doubles the range of an aboleth's domination power), or *law* (which acts as a reversed *prayer*). Finally, the height of the aboleth's development of savant glyphs is the complex master glyph, which is discussed in greater detail below.

Who can use glyphs?

Savant glyphs are created by focussed mental energy; they can be cast by a wide range of creatures, including wizards, priests, and psionicists among the drow, illithids, and kuo-toans. Not all surface creatures can cast all glyphs, however; for example, any 5th-level priest can cast a simple *glyph of fire*, but certain more powerful glyphs (such as those that drain energy levels or slay instantly) require greater mastery to invoke. These caster requirements are indicated in the text; otherwise, treat all savant glyphs as 3rd-level spells or as 10 PSP disciplines (sciences for master glyphs).

New Glyphs

All savant glyphs have the basic character-

istics of a *glyph of warding* unless otherwise indicated in the glyph description. The glyphs must be touched to release their power, and they last until discharged.

Simple Glyphs

To cast the most basic savant glyphs, a caster need only be a 5th-level priest with access to the Guardian sphere. Alternatively, the caster may be a 7th-level wizard with access to the abjuration or evocation schools or a 7th-level psionicist with access to psychokinetic disciplines.

Glyph of Binding: Unless a saving throw vs. spells succeeds, this glyph summons magical tentacles that wrap the victim from head to toe, effectively paralyzing the victim for 1 hour per level of the caster. The victim has one chance to break free; a successful Bend Bars/Lift Gates roll shatters the magical bonds and ends the binding. However, regardless of armor or magical protections, the bonds are large, slimy tentacles that are wound around the victim's flesh and attached by octopuslike suckers; by breaking the bonds, the victim tears the suckers from his flesh. This inflicts 1d4 hp damage/level of the caster on the victim.

Glyph of True Darkness: Physically, this glyph manifests its effect just like a *darkness, 15(FM) radius* spell—a globe of darkness suddenly appears. However, the caster can see normally within the area of effect, and the glyph's magic blocks infravision and all divination spells as well as normal sight.

Complex Glyphs

To cast complex glyphs, a surface player character must be a 7th-level priest (or a 9th-level wizard or psionicist), with access as described above.

Glyph of Deep Dreams: This glyph combines the *glyph of enfeeblement* with a *glyph of sleep* (as per the *sleep* spell); the victim cannot be awakened except by physical damage, violent shaking, or extremely loud noise. This glyph is often used to prepare sacrifices or to immobilize powerful, single opponents.

Glyph of Killing Darkness: This glyph combines the *glyph of true darkness* with the effect of a *glyph of cold* (1d4 hp damage per level of the caster, save for half). If triggered underwater, the resulting cold creates a block of ice five feet in diameter; if the victim's saving throw fails, he is encased in ice.

Master Glyphs

To form master glyphs, a surface PC must be a 10th-level priest or a 12th-level wizard or psionicist.

Glyph of the Breath of Life: When activated, this glyph immediately devours life force from the creature touching it and transfers that energy to the caster. The effect removes 1d4 hp permanently from the victim and adds them to the caster's

total.

Glyph of Creeping Horror: This glyph induces paranoia, fear, and loathing in the victim, destroying one point of Intelligence and Wisdom each day and creating feelings of goodwill toward the caster; as a result, the creature feels compelled to stay near the caster (for safety from the nameless terrors that the spells conjures up in the victim's mind) and to defend the caster against all threats, both real and imagined. By the end of spell's duration, only the caster seems trustworthy in the victim's eyes; the victim dies when either ability score reaches zero. Savant aboleth use this glyph to create disposable (but completely loyal) bodyguards.

Glyph of Enslavement: This glyph has all the effects of an aboleth's *domination* ability, but at a distance (effects are identical to a *domination* spell). If the glyph is triggered and the victim fails the saving throw, he falls under the caster's control; if the saving throw succeeds, there is no effect.

Once a victim is dominated, the savant who created the glyph is immediately aware of its new slave and its rough direction and distance. The aboleth can immediately issue mental commands. Any telepathic instruction which is clearly suicidal allows the victims a fresh saving throw vs. spell without penalty.

Because savant aboleths are masters of enslavement, the saving throw for this particular glyph is at -2 when cast by a savant (in addition to the usual -1 for being a master glyph); for all other races it is normal.

Vapor Glyph: The *vapor glyph* acts as a permanent potion of *gaseous form*; the victim must make a saving throw vs. spells or be transformed into a cloud of misty vapors. This cloud can suffer damage from magical weapons and any spells that affect the air (*a gust of wind* inflicts damage equivalent to *fireball*). The spell can only be removed by *dispel magic*.

Unlike most savant glyphs, the *vapor glyph* is reversible as the solid glyph. In this form, the glyph turns a creature's skin to stone, often causing it to immediately sink into the unplumbed depths of an aboleth cavern. Unless the glyph is quickly removed, the victim drowns or (if a water-breather) is driven mad by its imprisonment in its own body.

Glyph of Watching: This glyph is used by the savants to spy on their enemies; for this reason, they are often cast at the outskirts of kuo-toan settlements or drow caverns. Only the aboleth savants know the glyph's true purpose is not death, but infiltration.

When a *glyph of watching* is triggered and the victim's saving throw fails, the caster may see through the victim's eyes at a range of a number of miles equal to the caster's level. The caster also hears whatever the victim hears. The victim is often relieved that no ill effect occurred, and

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may assume that the glyph simply failed. Once activated, the effect lasts for 1 hour per level of the caster.

Complex Master Glyphs

Great savant-aboleth of exceptional mastery (18 or higher Wisdom and Intelligence, 10th-level or above as both priests and wizards) can create complex master glyphs which add an extra element onto a master glyph (for example, a *glyph of enfeeblement* which also does cold damage or a *glyph of watching* that also enslaves the victim); these complex master glyphs still only count as three glyphs for the purpose of determining the limit, but they require a full hour to create.

Surface casters have had little success in recreating complex master glyphs. It is believed that a 15th-level priest or a 20th-level wizard or psionicist is required to form a complex master glyph; so far, all reports of success are unreliable.

Glyph of Devouring the Mind: Believed to be an expansion of the *glyph of the breath of life*, this glyph slowly takes all knowledge from the victim's mind and passes it telepathically to the glyph's caster; as a result, all spells the victim has memorized become accessible to the caster (or may be written into a spellbook). The victim loses one level per day until death occurs.

Glyph of a Thousand Tentacles: This glyph both paralyzes and constricts its tar-

get, then slowly flays its victim's flesh from his bones (1d4 hp damage/turn), resulting in complete liquification of the victim over several hours. When the glyph is triggered, a large swarm of predators often gathers nearby, drawn to the blood in the water. The glyph is most likely a combination of the *glyph of binding* with an unknown master glyph.

Oddly enough, the *glyph of a thousand tentacles* is almost never used for warding and protection. Its primary application is religious, for it is used in almost all aboleth sacrifices to the Blood Queen, the dark goddess they all revere. Because of the damage done to the victim, creatures slain in this manner cannot be *raised* from the dead, but must be *resurrected*.

Removing Glyphs

Savant glyphs of all kinds can be removed by a successful *dispel magic* cast against the highest level rating for the savant aboleth or other spellcaster who created them. Saving throws are permitted against the effects of all these glyphs, but saving throws against the effects of a master glyph are made with a -1 penalty; against complex master glyphs the penalty is -2. Only one saving throw is permitted against the whole battery of magical effects radiated by a complex glyph or a complex master glyph.

Finding Glyphs

Savant glyphs are among the most closely-held secrets of the savant aboleth, but they can be stolen, copied, and learned by other races: a few illithid, drow, and kuo-toan wizard/priests have learned some of the aboleth's secrets and use this power against their rivals. Player characters may do so as well. Any PC who sees or experiences the effect of a savant glyph may reproduce its effect by learning its make-up, researching its magical construction as if it were a normal 3rd-level spell. Each glyph seen or felt must be researched separately. Psionicists must learn a single discipline (for simple and complex glyphs) or science (for master glyphs). Once the general skill is learned, the psionicist must still learn each separate glyph (make an Intelligence check at -9 to master any glyph the psionicist has encountered). In any case, no creature may form more than a single glyph per day, no matter what its level of skill or mastery.

The easier way to master the savant glyphs is to read the petroglyphs and hidden writing kept in the strangely phosphorescent libraries said to exist in the underground dome-cities of the aboleth themselves. Gaining that hoarded knowledge, however, requires great skill, powerful magic, and a successful expedition into the black waters of the Underdark

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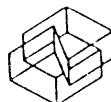
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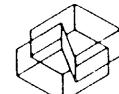
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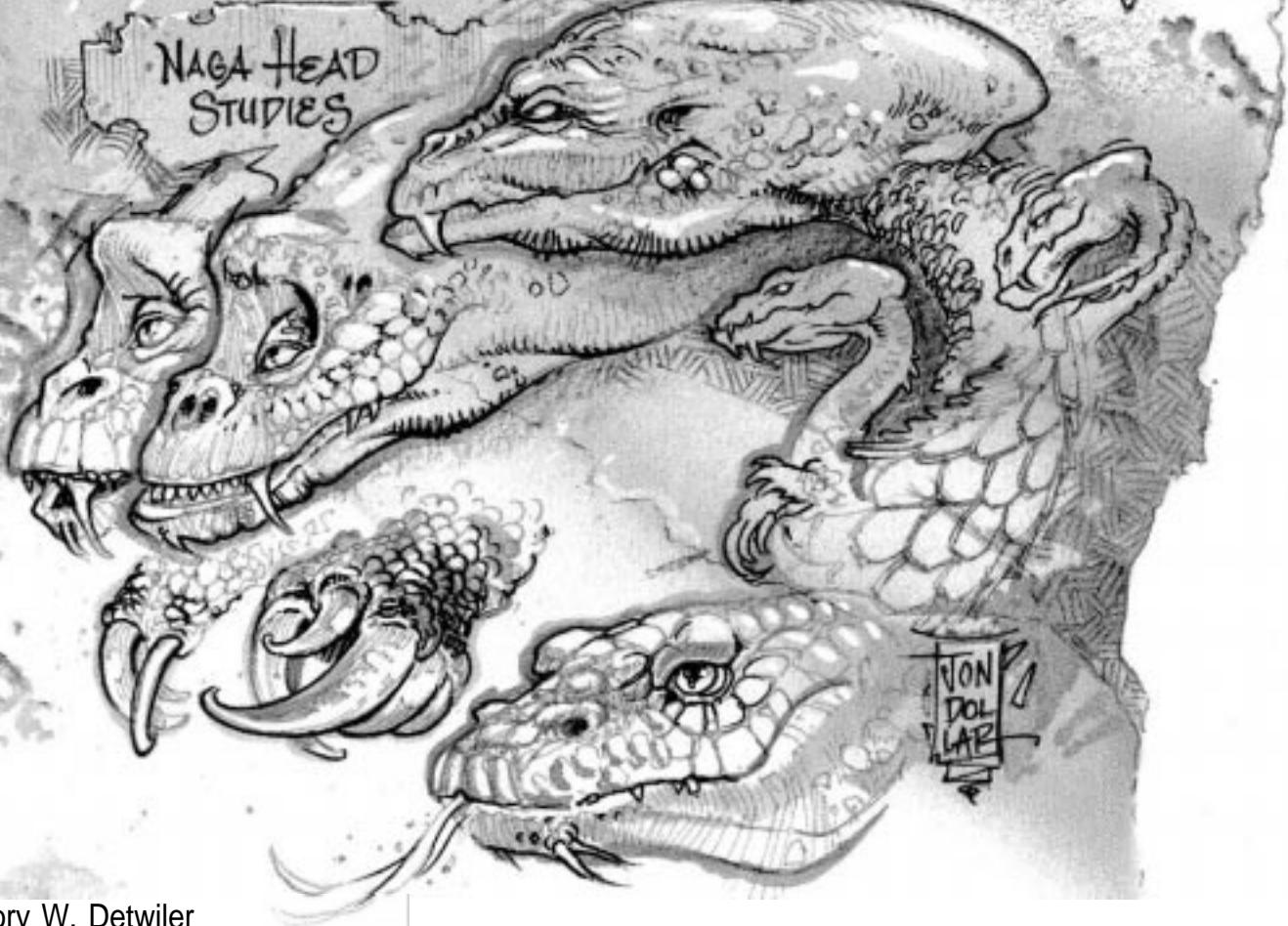
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A Slither in The Naga in the Cthulhu Mythos *the Dark*

September 9, 1885

Private Journal of Maj General Jared Pembroke-Smythe



by Gregory W. Detwiler
Artwork by John Dollar

From the private memoirs of Major General (Ret.) Jared Pembroke-Smythe:

The Burmese War of 1885 was a ghastly show all around, God knows. The swamps and fever, along with the crocodiles, pythons, leopards, and tigers our troops encountered were trouble enough, even without the human dacoits that were our nominal enemy. But the most hellish opposition our troops ever faced was what

we encountered in the very center of that damnable swamp country. I dared not reveal it to the world at large, or even my superiors, for fear of speedy placement in an insane asylum.

I was only a subaltern then, leading a squad of infantry on a routine patrol near the banks of the Irrawaddy, in search of fleeing bandits. Our battalion had just stormed one of their stockades the day before, with heavy casualties. As a result,

we were two men short and had to make do with nine men instead of 11. Not a pleasant prospect, especially since the tall marsh grass around us could hide anything from a horde of swordsmen to a war elephant with swivel-mounted cannons on its back.

Still, my men were all veterans, and Lance Corporal Tompkins, the only surviving non-commissioned officer, had spent years chasing lesser bandit bands before

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the war broke out. "Know the swamps like the back'o me 'and, I do," he said. I was glad *someone* did.

We had encountered nothing on our patrol, and were about to return to camp when we heard a loud thrashing several hundred feet away from us. We took up firing positions within a small grove of trees, anticipating an attack by one or more war elephants. But no attack came, nor were there any sounds that could definitely be ascribed to an elephant.

The noise coming from the tall grass sounded like a large animal thrashing about, but it could just as easily have been a water buffalo or a rhinoceros. However, we heard no sounds such as any of those animals commonly give voice to, or any other cries, for that matter. The noise finally died down, and after a hasty consultation with Tompkins, I decided to investigate.

You must understand that the swamp country along the Irrawaddy was totally without rock formations of any sort. There was only water-saturated soil beneath our feet. How, then, can anyone explain what we found? Next to a quarter-acre of ground in which the high grass was smashed flat there stood a tunnel or cavern of solid rock, its mouth gaping wide like a cellar door 10' across.

In the muddy ground beside that cave mouth lay a curious track, like that of an enormous serpent's belly, yet with small footprints right beside them. These prints were not unlike the hands and feet of a human being. It was as if a python had grown limbs with grotesquely elongated hands and feet. I shuddered inwardly at the thought.

With this mystery before us, there was, of course, no thought of turning back. We were able to find some branches and lengths of grass dry enough to burn, and we fashioned them into makeshift torches. Tompkins and I held them, of course, as our privates had to keep both hands free to use their rifles. Due to the constant possibility of ambush in the tall grass, their bayonets were already fixed. Once the torches were lit, we proceeded down the gently sloping tunnel that lay before us.

Inside, the rock construction of the tunnel was quite solid. Although it was surrounded by a swamp, not so much as one drop of water dripped from the roof. There was moisture on the floor, but this was obviously tracked in by whatever had entered a short time ago. There was a wretched musky odor that we all recognized as being similar to that of snakes, and this stench grew stronger the farther we progressed.

I was rather glad that I had drawn my sword, rather than the revolver, for my free hand. Such a weapon would be more useful if it came to fighting a writhing, coiling serpent in the semidarkness of the cavern. Tompkins was not so lucky, but then, he had already proven himself to be a better shot than I.

We must have gone at least 100' before we found the first object, barely glinting in the light of our torches. It was a short curved sword, or *dha*, such as the local natives used. Part of it seemed to be stained with something that proved to be dried blood, yet the odor it gave off was not familiar, not like that of a human being, or indeed, any ordinary animal.

As we advanced farther, we found more sword blades, as well as spearheads, daggers, and several badly corroded muskets. There were even several spiked helmets such as Burmese troops wear, but no uniforms or other clothing. Nor were there any bones or other remains of men or animals, and we had yet to find any other clues as to just what sort of creature had entered this impossible cavern.

We must have traveled over 1,000 yards down that single, sloping tunnel before we heard the sound. At first it sounded like the distant chant of a group of tribesmen at one of their heathen rituals, but the closer we got to the source, the less human it sounded. Indeed, the sound was not made by a human voice but seemed to be a type of *hissing* that occurred in rhythmic intervals like those of human chants.

As we made our way past more discarded equipment, one of the privates accidentally kicked a spiked helmet, sending it clattering off into the darkness ahead of us. Almost immediately, the rhythmic hissing stopped, with an abruptness that could only be described as sinister.

We stood still in shocked silence, not knowing whether to go on or retreat. Then we heard the scraping sound of claws on rock, and a rustling sound indicated that some heavy body was laboriously hitching its way up the tunnel in our direction. The tunnel was still wide enough for the men in my squad to form a double firing line-front rank kneeling, rear rank standing-so we took up our positions in haste. This done, we waited anxiously, peering vainly at the darkness beyond our little ring of torchlight.

When the thing finally appeared, it took all our self-control to avoid bolting for the cavern mouth; would that we had. It was a writhing, twisting, coiling mass over 20' in length, covered with rough gray scales. The great head, larger than that of a horse, was mostly serpentine in shape, but the elongated cranium in back was horribly like a distorted human skull. As it came nearer, we could see that it had hands and feet. There were no limbs per se, just a pair of long-fingered hands up front and equally misshapen feet behind, all growing directly from that snakelike torso. The creature regarded us with glittering yellow eyes for a moment, then gave voice to a hissing roar that was only partially drowned out when I gave the command for a volley.

Now, a Martini-Henry rifle fires a sizeable bullet of soft lead that is quite capable of tearing a man open, and we had eight of them firing at once, but this thing just seemed to shrug off the rounds.

Indeed, I hesitate to repeat this, but it seemed as though the creature actually took several wounds, but healed them up within moments. Then the thing was upon us, actually hurling itself on the bayonets set to receive it. I got in one good blow with my sabre before a lashing tail stroke sent me reeling back.

I landed hard, on my back, and by the time I was standing again, the battle was over. The men screamed in agony as they were slowly crushed or clawed to death. The cries of two of them ceased abruptly when the monster sank its fangs into them. Tompkins was the last to die, trying to use his torch to force the creature back far enough for him to squeeze past it. The beast simply snatched him up in its jaws and *swallowed him whole, torch and all!* I staggered to my feet, shaken by the annihilation of my entire command. My torch, now lying on the cavern floor, was about to go out. Taking advantage of its remaining light, I sheathed my sword, pointed myself toward the exit, and ran for my life. If I had lost my footing even once, it would have been my-end, for I could hear that

Naga: Serpentine Human Degenerates

| Character | Rolls | Averages |
|-----------|----------|----------|
| STR | 4d6 + 12 | 25 |
| CON | 3d6 | 11 |
| SIZ | 4d6+24 | 35 |
| INT | 1d6+12 | 10 |
| POW | 6d6 | 22 |
| DEX | 3d6+4 | 13 |

| Weapon | Chance | Damage |
|--------|--------|---------------------------------------|
| Bite | 70% | 3d6 + poison, equal to the naga's CON |
| Claw | 30% | 2d6+1d6 |
| Coils | 60% | 3d6+4 |
| Tail | 45% | 3d6+3 |

Move: 8

Hit Points: 23

Average Damage Bonus: +3d6

Armor: 3 points of scales, in addition to the naga's ability to regenerate 3 points of damage per round.

Spells: Some nagas know 1d3 spells, particularly Contact Chthonian, Contact Flying Polyp, Contact Formless Spawn of Tsathoggua, Call Nyogtha, Contact Tsathoggua, and Contact Yig. Most, however, have mentally degenerated too much to use conventional magic and are quite content with their formidable physical abilities in combat.

Sanity: It costs 1d10 Sanity points to see a naga (1d3 with a successful Sanity roll). This is because the clear degeneration of the human form is so horrible.

Anyone who fails a Sanity roll around a naga is a prime candidate for ophiophobia (fear of snakes).

ghastly rustling sound behind me all during my flight. At last I made it out, bending my head as I emerged to spare my eyes the worst of the tropical sunlight that greeted me so abruptly, and I ran for the edge of the trampled space.

On the very edge of the jungle, I stopped to catch my breath, drawing my revolver as I did so. And as I rested, the thing loomed up out of the darkness, framed in the very mouth of the cavern, blinking in the harsh sunlight. I raised my pistol, but instead of firing, I began to tremble.

Now that the thing was standing still in broad daylight as its eyes adjusted to the sun, I was able to study it in some detail. The scales did not greatly resemble those on pythons or other snakes, or on any of the many other reptiles I had seen in years of service in Asia and Australia. In fact, they reminded me of nothing so much as the scales I had seen on a type of opossum that lived in Australia. The implication, therefore, was that this great monster might not be a reptile, but rather a mammal.

My roving eyes discerned other details. The creature's hands and feet obviously provided little or no aid to movement, though the hands were furnished with great hooked claws for tearing prey. They looked so damnable like distorted human extremities that I looked away from them.

That was a mistake, for my attention was now centered on the monster's head. Its eyes narrowed to mere yellow slits as it peered at me in the sunlight. It was all too plainly displaying an intelligent interest in me, precisely as a hostile human opponent might have done. When my gaze centered on the shape of its skull again, it no longer seemed distorted; rather, its lengthening seemed to be the result of a natural process. My blood turned cold as I realized the truth: *the monster's ancestors had once been men!*

Whisperings from my subconscious seemed to echo in my ears, half-forgotten snippets of native lore I had overheard since coming to Burma. The savages spoke in hushed tones of the *naga*, half-man and half-serpent, a great being of powerful magic. My heart sank as I realized how accurate the old legends had been, the legends my brother officers and I had laughed off with the arrogant folly of which only civilized man is capable. Far beyond fear for myself was a deeper terror for the fate of my entire race. If man could fall so low from his high estate once, why may he not do so again, or sink even deeper in the future?

The gorged creature evidently decided that further pursuit of me would not be worth the trouble, and after regarding me with what can only be described as contempt, it gave a hissing wheeze and turned back into the darkness.

Thoroughly demoralized, I staggered back to camp. I was no longer able to hold in my heart any emotion but bleakest despair for the fate of the human race.

Naga: Lesser Independent Race

The nagas are the degenerate descendants of a humanoid race, possibly akin to the serpent people, who live in underground caverns ranging from Great Britain to the American West, and who are variously referred to as "fairies" "the people of the dark," and "the worms of the earth." These hideous folk were once surface-dwellers, but they retreated underground after losing a series of wars against more normal humans (Indians in America and Picts in Britain). The stunted folk dwelt in the narrowest caverns, the better to evade pursuit, and as the millennia went by, they evolved more and more in keeping with their chosen environment.

Living the life of a serpent, these descendants of the original refugees developed scaly skin and fangs to resist the rigors of the environment and help them catch prey. At first, they maintained a semblance of their old civilization underground. Some still do, but as time went by, more and more of them completely reverted to a purely animal way of life.

Shunned by their former kin, they competed with them for limited resources, gradually developing adaptations that gave them an advantage. Whereas their ancestors and competitors were small, they grew large. They eventually saw their limbs atrophy, with only the hands and feet remaining. Growing narrower so as to better fit in the slender tunnels, they took the form of true serpents at last. Now they inhabit cavern complexes the world over, though they are generally known only by their Asian name: *nagas*.

The size of the largest anaconda or python, a naga is a formidable opponent in combat. It has powerful jaws with great curving fangs, from which drip a lethal poison. Though its feet are more or less useless, its hands have developed huge hooked claws with which it can hold and tear prey. As a result of millennia of competition with its poisonous kin, it is now immune to all poisons. It can twine itself around an opponent and truly crush him to death—not merely suffocating him-in an instant, and its tail is a lethal whip.

As a final defense, it has modified the race's innate magic ability to give itself the power to regenerate all battle damage at the rate of three points per round. This includes damage from fire as well as normal weapons. However, electricity, magic, and acid all do normal damage, which must be healed at normal rates.

Although nagas have kept their eyes—no one knows why—they rely on other senses in darkness or underground. Having evolved a regular telepathic sense after living so long in the dark, they can unerringly find prey under any conditions. Darkness, fog, smoke, and even magical illusions are totally useless as protection from a naga on the hunt.

Because they are larger than their ancestors, nagas are more likely to travel

to the surface in search of food, and their rampages in Europe have given rise to legends of legless dragons such as the *guivre*. They are not restricted to areas where caverns lead to the earth's surface, for another innate magic ability enables a naga to construct its own tunnel of stone to the surface whenever it wishes to hunt in an area where no connecting caverns exist.

Depending on how long the naga wishes to hunt, such tunnels stay in place for anywhere from a single hour to a week. If a party of investigators follows a naga down a tunnel thus created, and the beast then dispels it (as it may well do to trap the party), they will be stranded in the caverns of the inner earth. They must either find a surface-leading passage or wait for a naga or other being to create a tunnel or other magical means of travel. Most likely, however, they will simply die.

Adventure Ideas

Despite its purely Asian name, the serpentine naga is found around world, and as such, can be a recurring menace for an investigating party that wishes to explore the darkest caverns of the earth. Many serpentine monsters of legend, such as the legless wyrms of Europe, the amphisbaenae of ancient Greece, and the arkaroo of Australia may all be explained by the presence of nagas.

As a candidate for a "monster on the rampage," a naga is better than most, as any investigators who pursue it down a tunnel of its own making may promptly find themselves cut off from the surface and all human aid. This, in turn, can lead to a fascinating adventure of cavern exploration, as the investigators try to reach the surface before they run out of food, ammunition, and other essentials.

If you like nagas but don't want them to be star performers, you can throw them at the party in a recurring role as lesser monsters. The investigators can constantly stumble upon them while exploring various underground regions such as blue-litten K'n-Yan and black-litten N'Kai beneath it, a possible underground temple dedicated to the likes of Nyogtha or Tsathoggua, or a passage leading to one of the last strongholds of the flying polyps.

New Spell

Contact Naga: This spell must be cast at the mouth of a cavern where one or more nagas live. The artificial tunnels created by the strange beings themselves are ideal (if they are still standing when the spell is cast). Due to the race's hatred of light, the spell must be used on an overcast day or (preferably) at night. One naga will come in response to the summons. The spell costs three magic points and 1d3 Sanity points to cast.

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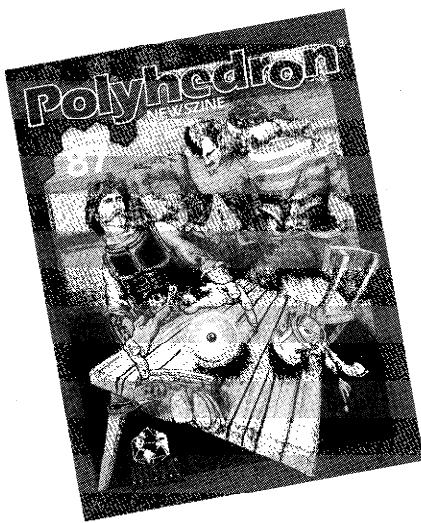
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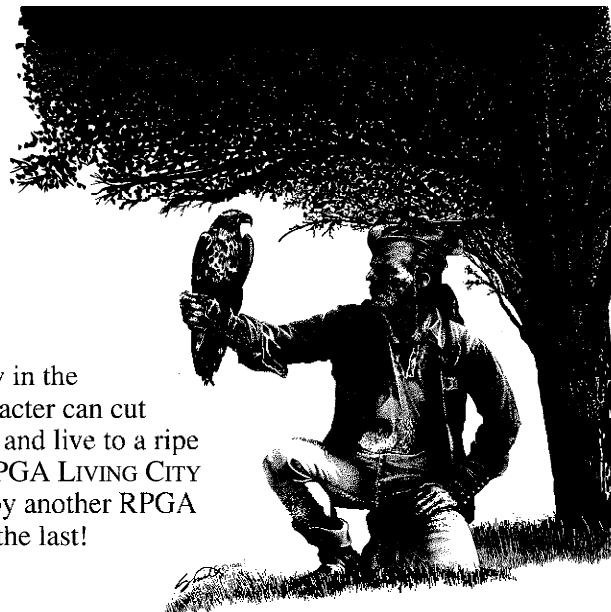


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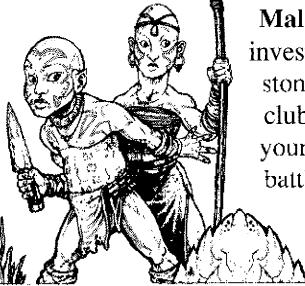
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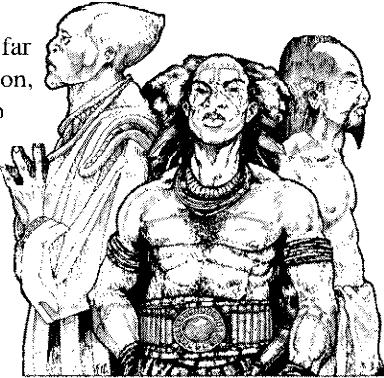


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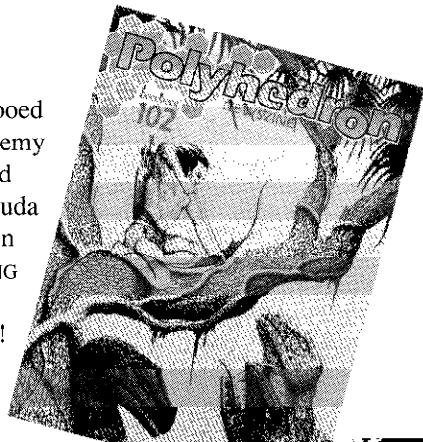
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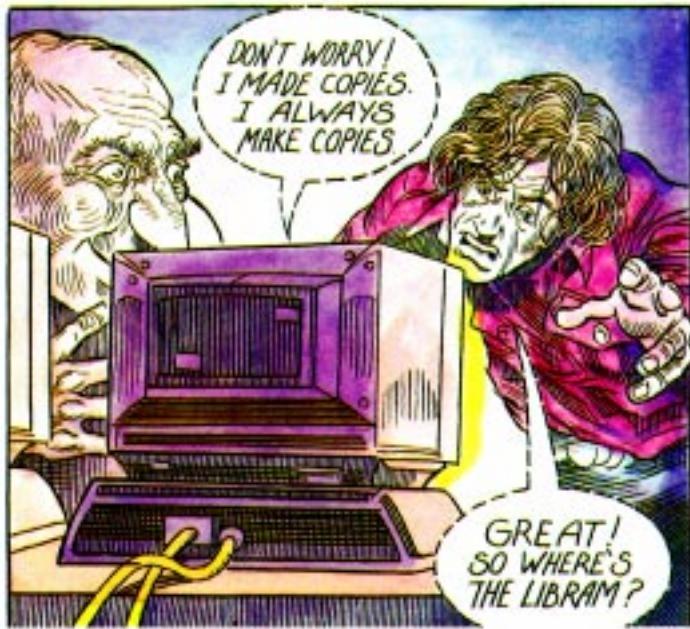
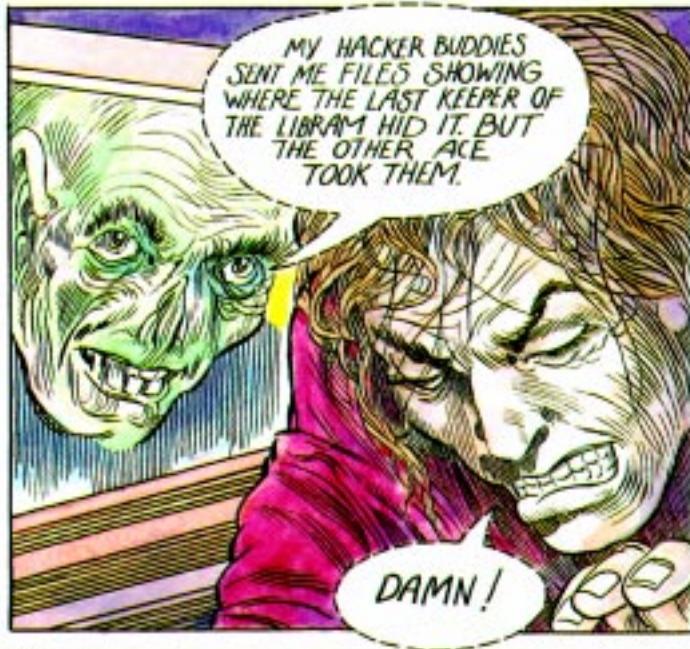
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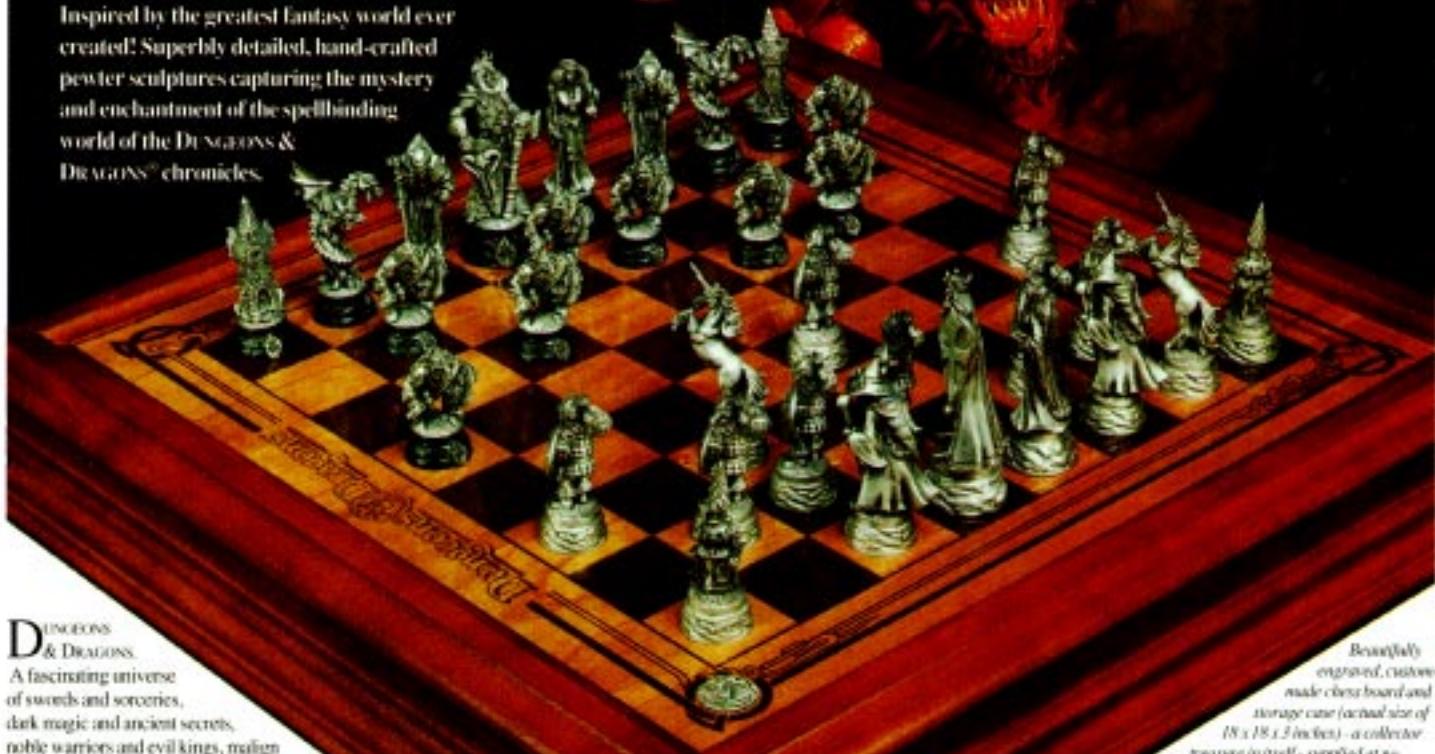
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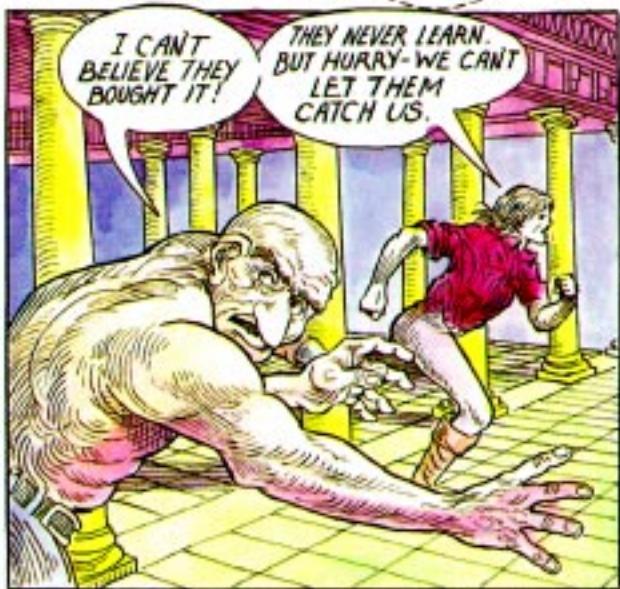
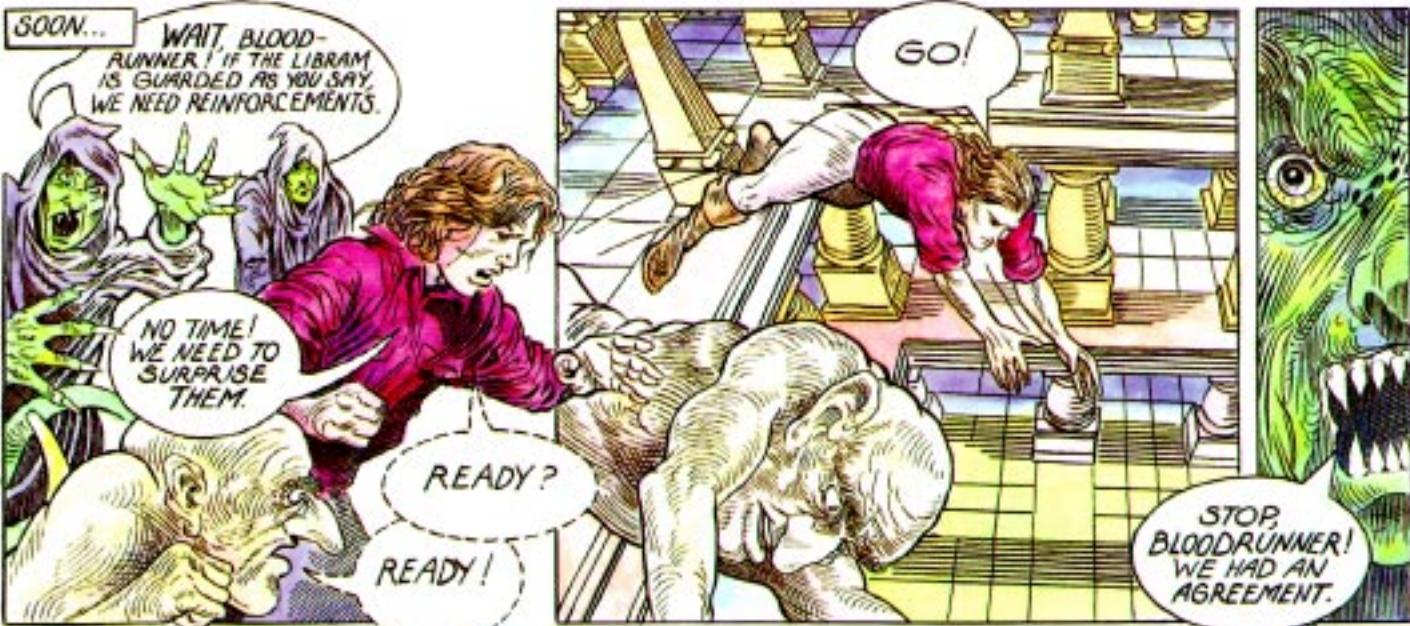
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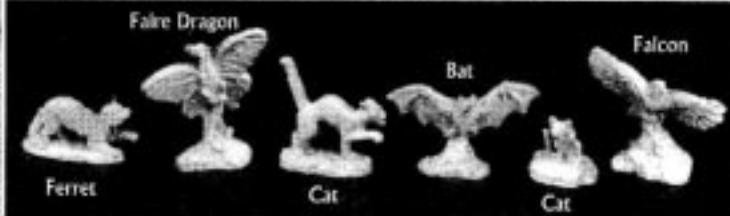
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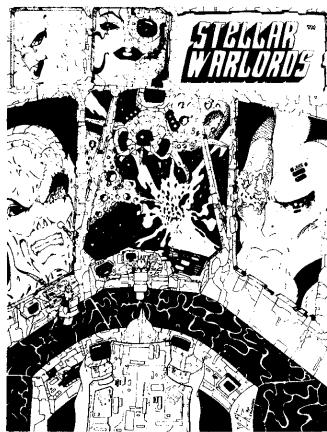
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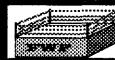
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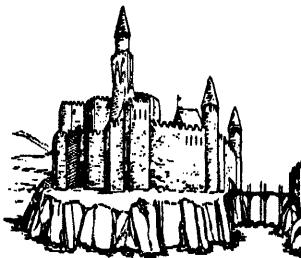
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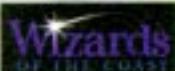
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By Mathew Guss

SWORDPLAY

YOU KNOW, LONI, IT
SEEMS LIKE ONLY
YESTERDAY YOU AND
I WERE RUNNING FOR
OUR LIVES FROM
THE FIRE
TROLLS.

THAT WAS
YESTERDAY.



Cynewulf has an unexpected brush with Death.

By Rhett Kennedy

I MEANT
THE FIRST
TIME.

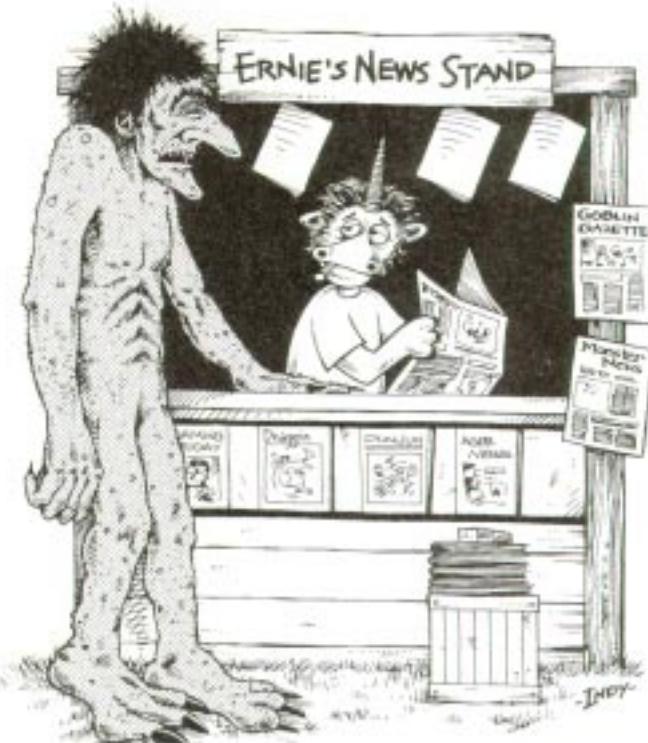
OH, OH YEAH.



Carter

As Thesus looked down on his ball of thread he wondered whether he should slay the minotaur or commend him on his fine knitting.

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By Bill Cavalier

"Hey, Ernie— Has the latest issue of *Playtroll* come in yet?"

*Back to back they stand,
eyeing their foes over
the gleam of sharpened steel...*

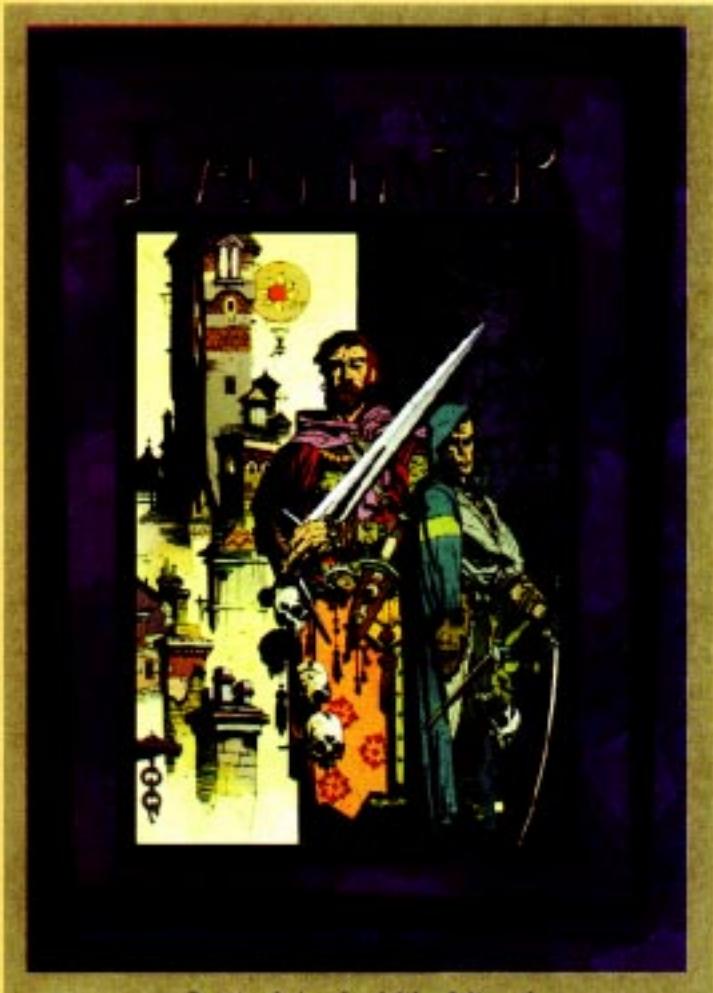
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Running Scared

Continued from page 84

players actually *afraid* of something.

Reversing the above scenario, how would the hero react if he woke up one morning to discover that the world had forgotten him? If the effect centered on just one person, even an NPC as important as the character's spouse or boss, it might be branded a villainous plot and countered by the tried-and-true method of finding the scoundrel responsible and beating him up. But what if absolutely everyone-his lover, his contacts, the media, the person he thought was his sidekick, even villains-claimed never to have heard of the hero? Or if they all swore that superheroes simply didn't exist (in which case the hero might contact his sidekick's secret identity, who'd have no recollection of ever having been a superhero)?

Amnesia this widespread could point to a number of frightening possibilities: A villain could have placed mind-control devices in orbit, the hero could have been transported to an alternate reality, or, scariest of all, the hero could really be suffering from delusions and might end up institutionalized if he doesn't tone down his "irrational" activities. The GM should carefully play up the confusion between these different possibilities, leading the hero to spend as much time desperately looking for another unaffected person to validate his memories as he does searching for a villain to punch out.

The shift from normal to abnormal doesn't have to be a sudden one. It could start with a few close friends or partners of the hero acting increasingly strange over the course of a week or two, and as the level of aberrant behavior increases, so too does the number of people exhibiting it. Absent-mindedness could give way to forgetfulness that requires the unaffected hero in the center of it all to try to make others remember, which could then advance into the full-fledged amnesia described above. In this scenario, the hero should be unable to slow the progress of the condition before it becomes nearly universal, leading to a desperate quest to find the cause of the amnesia before he becomes the last remaining "sane" person on the planet.

And Finally... Death

While a true hero is always willing to lay down his life if necessary, the average player is less willing to lay down the life of his PC. This is especially true in superhero gaming; death is much more rare and potentially permanent in a game featuring stun points and extra costs for lethal attack forms than in a typical fantasy campaign with pointy weapons aplenty and *resurrection* magic almost as common. Therefore, threats to the life of a PC

are much more frightening to players of this genre than in most others.

Unfortunately, it takes more than a powerful villain with a death ray to frighten superhero players. They know how difficult it is to kill heroes and the rarity of such events in the comic book genre. So how does a GM credibly threaten a PC superhero with death? The key is in the difference between "I'm gonna kill you" and "You are going to die." It's easy for a villain to make grandiose threats and just as easy for the heroes (and players) to disregard them. But a statement of the fact of the hero's impending demise, especially one coming from a neutral source, has a different effect. It actually seems like a possibility, and that upsets the player.

One possible way to give a player character a believable death sentence is with a medical examination that follows bouts of intense pain whenever the hero uses his powers. Of course, the prognosis is terminal. The progression of the incurable sickness ravaging the hero's body could be linked directly to the use of his powers; thus, he can extend his life by restricting their use (see "But Even With All My Powers..." above). The GM might then present scenarios that ask the hero to make full use of his abilities in a selfless sacrifice.

A more immediate (and thus, more intensely emotional) method of convincing the player of his PC's impending doom is to use a mystic premonition (from a seer, an inexplicable time warp, or a portentous dream) to present an image of the dead or dying hero. The vision doesn't have to be from a particularly reputable source to have an immediate impact, but if the source is reliable-a seer with a track record or even a dream (players seem to trust whatever comes out of their characters' head)-the horror is just that much more believable.

Beyond the sheer shock value of having a hero see his own death, the GM can increase the suspense with proper pacing. The simplest timing trick is to have the PC's death premonition occur at the end of one play session but delay the resolution of the adventure until the next session (in other words, "continued next issue!"). Thus, the player spends time brooding about the implications of the vision before he can actually do anything about it.

A more involved method requires taking the premonitions from the innocuous to the obvious. Escalating premonitions over the course of an adventure from "something's funny" to "something's wrong" to "something *very* bad is going to happen" to a full-fledged death vision can work better than the one-shot premonition. The repetition builds tension and prepares the player for an out-of-the-ordinary encounter-one he might laugh off in a more matter-of-fact presentation.

To make the strangeness more apparent, let the victim have the vision even if (or because) he has no mystic precognitive

powers. A helpful NPC mystic can point out that nonmystics sometimes develop such powers when in a strong presence of death. The strange nature of the premonition can be heightened with incidental events: cats, dogs, and police horses shy away from a doomed PC, people with mystic senses seem to see his dead image flicker across his face, and so on.

The hero doesn't actually have to die for the premonition to scare the player and the PC. But if the GM ever wants to use such a threat credibly in the future, letting a hero "off the hook" makes the next threat that much less impressive. On the other hand, if the GM *does* carry through with a death threat (killing one of the PCs after a build-up and some intense playing sessions), the players will have an idea of what to expect (correctly or not) the next time they sense the same sort of build-up taking place. They'll tend to psych themselves out trying to figure out which PC is doomed and what might be done to circumvent it, doing half of the GM's work for him. Of course, frightening adventures must be an uncommon occurrence for them really to work, and the death of a PC must be rare to avoid being seen as boring or unfair by the players.

A less personal (and thus, unfortunately, less intense) way to bring death to a game is to kill NPC heroes. This is safe enough if it stops at the NPC level, but it can also become a threat to the player characters if the NPC hero's death is only the start of a chain of violence leading to the PCs. For example, a powerful villain escapes from prison and promises to kill everyone who ever crossed him, including the PCs, other superheroes, and a long list of ordinary people: police, attorneys, judges, ex-girlfriends, and so on. The threat becomes even more disturbing if the dead NPC hero was ostensibly more powerful than the PC who finds himself next in line. And if the dead hero was the PC's idol or mentor, he was probably *also* quite important to the PC-more important than a generic NPC superhero created solely to be bumped off during an adventure.

A Bit of Bite

Just as the occasional light-hearted comedy adventure can relieve the tension of a relentlessly dark or serious superhero campaign, injecting a little fear into the lives of the players and characters in an otherwise carefree, four-color action campaign can give it just enough bite to make it seem real, in a bigger-than-life sort of way.

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GAMES WORKSHOP *

Credit

Continued from page 86

ring of human influence will eventually be broken. In both cases, the PCs will probably decide to wait it out.

Instead, the magical item should allow the villain to travel, acquire information, or commit mischief in a way he never could before, with no danger of ever entering combat. A *ring of invisibility* is an obvious possibility. Others may include: *eyes of the eagle*, a *hat of disguise*, a *helm of telepathy*, a *helm of teleportation*, a *medallion of ESP*, a *mirror of mental prowess*, a *ring of x-ray vision*, a *robe of blending*, a *rod of security*, or *oil of ethereality*. (Be extremely careful about giving the villain a *ring of multiple wishes*.)

The DM should feel free to improve the magical items to enhance their combat-avoidance value. The *eyes of the eagle*, for example, could have x-ray vision built in, so the villain need never get close enough to be spotted by the PCs. Alternatively, the *helm of teleportation* might operate automatically under certain conditions, whisking the villain to safety the instant any danger presents itself.

Whatever the choice, however, the villain should have only one magical item. Compensating for a lack of attacks and hit dice with an arsenal of magical items strains credibility, in addition to cheapening the items themselves. In every campaign magical items should tend to end up

in the possession of characters or monsters of an appropriate power level, if only because intelligent monsters and NPCs covet magic and see such items used by "weak" characters to be easy pickings. The 0-level villain may be able to keep one magical item a secret, but more than that would surely attract a swarm of magic-seekers.

8. Credit

This device is saved for last because it is potentially the most powerful of the eight. Here, one or more of the heroes is indebted to the villain, and the obligation itself—whether by law or honor—gives the villain his power.

With this device, the villain need never break the law, expend his own resources, or place himself in jeopardy in order to endanger the PCs. Instead, they do it to themselves, just to repay the debt. For example, if the heroes owe the villain a debt of service, he can send them on any impossible mission imaginable, including one that may take years to complete. If they owe him money, on the other hand, they'll have to go adventuring just to get the gold to pay him back—and they'd better hurry, because the interest is piling up.

DMs who wish to use this device may be able to create a situation wherein the PCs place themselves in the villain's debt. For example, the local temple may charge an exorbitant sum to cast *raise dead* on a fallen paladin, and there may be only one

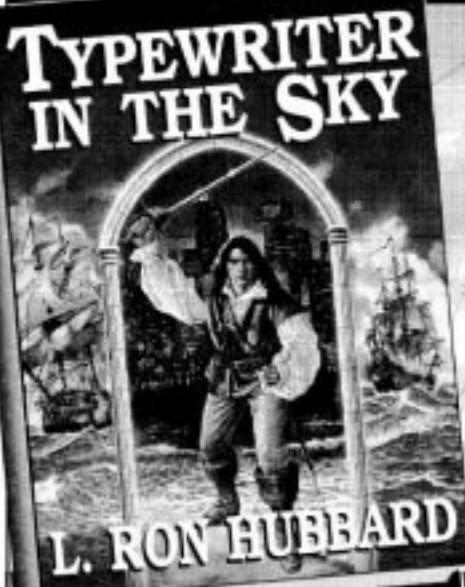
person in town who can loan the PCs that kind of money—take it or leave it.

Or perhaps one of the PCs inherits a debt from a dead relative who was not so conservative with his financial commitments. Debt inheritance may be the law of the land, or the character may follow a code that includes responsibility to and for the family.

From there, the debt becomes much like any other law (see "The Law," above). For lawful PCs, the mere existence of the debt should be enough to commit them to repaying it. However, if neutral or chaotic heroes feel justified in defaulting—particularly if they feel taken advantage of—the villain may alert the local constabulary. Depending on the letter of the law, the heroes may find themselves facing debtor's prison or enforced servitude. They may even watch their prized possessions confiscated as payment to the villain!

If the villain truly hates the PCs, he will revel in being their creditor. As a result, the heroes should be ready for him to pull desperate, underhanded maneuvers if they ever seem likely to repay the debt in full. For example, while on their way to deliver the final payment, the heroes may find themselves ambushed by a troop of armed men. The knaves may be bandits greedy for gold, but they're more likely the villain's hirelings, come to ensure that the debt isn't cleared. At least, not until the PCs go on one or two more life-threatening adventures for the villain.

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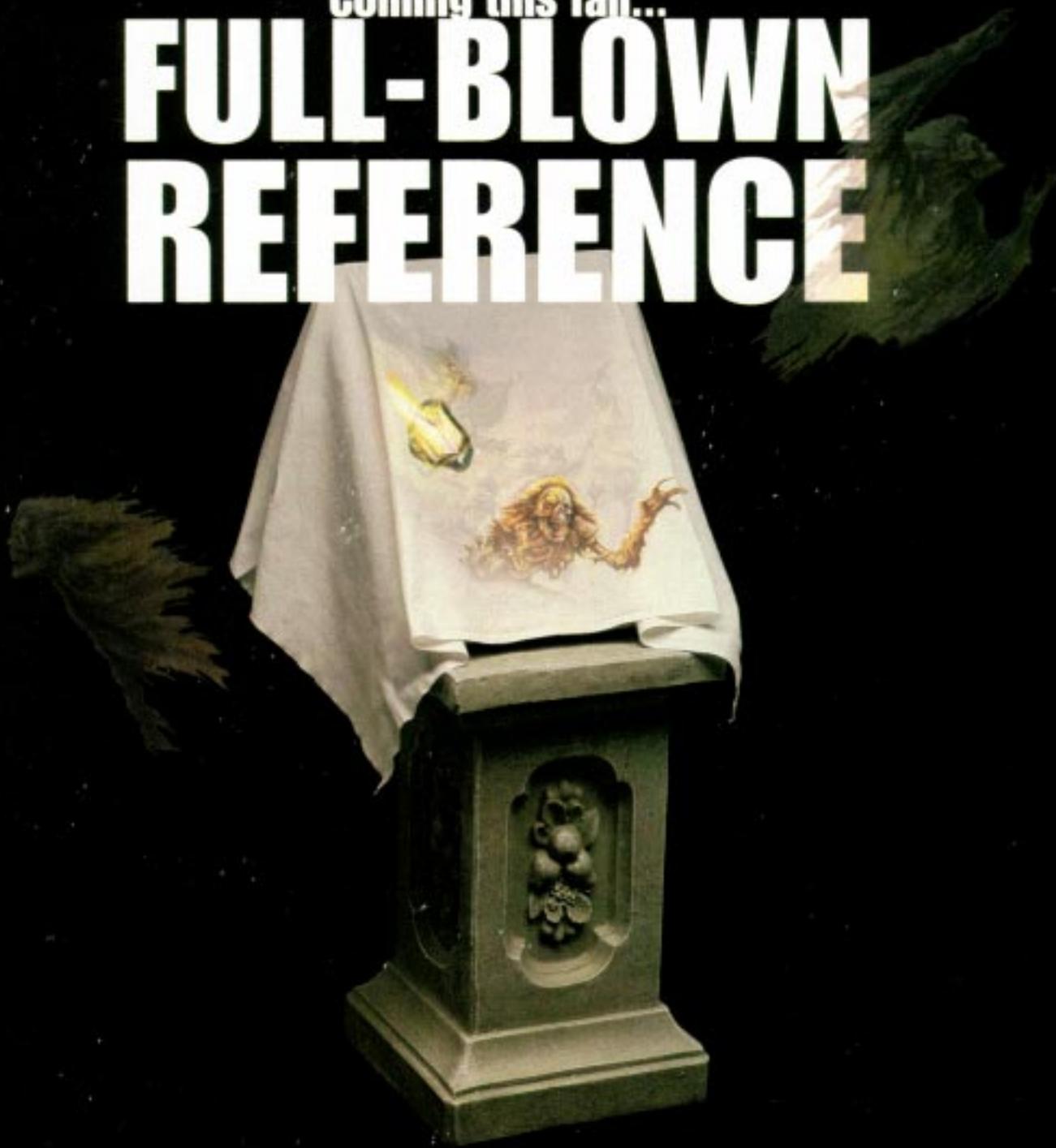


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