


Gaming & Mythology

by Brian N. Young

A CUP O' GROGNARD

As the World Turns
by Stephen Chenault



**PLUS:
The Angry Gamer
On Hit Points
To Know or Not to Know
The Bulette
and More!**





CRUSADER

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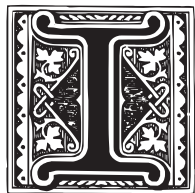
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ALEA IACTA EST



"The Die is Cast" – An Editorial by Stephen Chenault

AS THE WORLD TURNS



I've always loved that phrase. As the world turns. It says so much with so few words. It was scooped up by a Soap Opera way back

in the way back ago days when Marx toys were ever-present on every kid's shelves. But it still holds its own in the great phrases of the phrasemakers of the world. As the world turns. It speaks of change, the world is turning, there's always something different coming. But it also carries the echo of uniformity, the comfort that comes with the familiar. We've been here before. We've been here before and everything is changing but it's going to be okay. As the world turns so does TLG. The company changes, but it stays the same. For 14 years the same people have been in the Dens, laboring away, and it all seems so familiar, but rare is the day that something new does not crop up. Some new approach, some growth, setback, some adversity or some unlooked for windfall. TLG is the same, but it's not. Castles & Crusades too, it's changed, but it's the same game as it was in its inception. And that's the rub, that's the glory of that phrase. The world turns, but at its core, it's still the world. The same can be said for TLG and her golden-haired offspring, Castles & Crusades.

In case you missed it, TLG just released the full color version of the Monsters & Treasure book. This follows the release of the Players Handbook (sixth printing) and both are printed on a heavy stock, gloss paper that holds the color brilliantly. They are something to behold and as one hardcore gamer at Gamehole Con mentioned to me, "They hold their own on the shelves against any other RPG out there." And that they do. It's been a long time coming, bringing the game out in full

color and it's something we are more than happy with. All restraints were removed from Peter Bradley (chief artist at large) in layout, page count was not an issue any longer and space and readability the order of the day. He did a brilliant job.

This represents a huge step for the game. It's left behind its origins. It's no longer a black and white game in an age of color. It has changed, molded, adapted to the new and stands on its own. No longer on the sidelines. The whole game is moving in that direction. The color model is expensive, but worth it in the end, and though we are not completely there, it is a goal, long or short remains to be seen. In the transition something is lost for sure, somewhere between black and white and color the game changes. It seems more modern, sleek, somehow. It is now coated, glossy almost, when before it was raw, like weathered hide. But at its core, no matter which way you turn it, it is still Castles & Crusades. It plays the same. It is the same. Now it's armored.

In many ways this is a coming of age for C&C. Though the game has stood its own in a rapidly changing market and carried all of us through many games for many years, unfailing, it's now, somehow, standing taller. It's emerged from the shadows.

This emergence has opened wide vistas for C&C. The Aihnde Kickstarter demonstrates just how wide. For there, we would like to see the world unfold, literally. Not only has the Andanuth, the mythology of the world, joined us in paperback form but we are able to take advantage of avenues previously closed to us. Now we've set about to cut the giant map of the Lands of Ursal in two, presenting both the east and west on giant 39 by 27 inch wide maps. What's



more, we've worked hard to give the real map aficionados the opportunity to scoop it up mounted on spring rollers, allowing you to pull either map out or roll them back up for ease of use. This spring rolled map assembly is presented on a frame that attaches to your ceiling or, not wanting to chop up your sheet-rock, on a tripod. These are the kinds of the things that we can do to enhance your gaming experience.

It wasn't like that in the beginning.

Back in 2000 we released three little adventures with their own game, Swords and Sorcery, in the back and a world setting, the world of Aihnde, with a map called the After Winter's Dark Campaign Setting. We debuted at Gencon with little fanfare. D20 was exploding around us. The D&D PHB Third Edition had just been released and that and the OGL and d20 license were the talk of the town. We had very purposely designed the game to mimic what we had heard of the d20 game so people found it a perfect fit. Our sales at the show were fair, but not enough to give us a head start. We were too small, too out of the way. But that changed Sunday afternoon.

James Mishlar was working for ACD Distribution at the time. He was one of their buyers. Late on Sunday he wandered by the table, looked through stuff and he and I struck up a conversation and very quick-



ly hit it off. He placed orders for 72 copies of each of the books and maps, right there on the spot. We opened up an account with ACD Distribution and began a long and profitable relationship (one that continues to this day). The company was alive. When we returned we built a website, set up emails and created a company infrastructure. This took far longer than we ever thought, mainly because we all had full time jobs and had little or no experience in layout and design, much less the software required for it.

But the ACD angle led to work with Wizard's Attic (a consolidator) who brought us all into the distribution channels. Suddenly we were being picked up by dozens of distribution houses (though we kept our relationship with ACD separate for years, as we trolls are nothing if not loyal). In 2000 and 2001, distribution was the key to success. There was little in the order of direct sales, trust in the online market was very low and the avenues were not yet in place. Direct to retail was the rainbow's pot of gold that no one seemed able to find. So if you were selling you wanted in distribution. The first year we had full sales was 2001, and distribution counted for right at 79% of our sales. The bulk of the rest came from convention sales (Gencon and Origins) but also from Amazon. Back in 2000, we signed up for a small company's small press program that allowed us access to their networks. We also set up an account with a small company called Paypal, creating a merchant account with them (but who on earth would use an online bank to move money around...Madness!).

Distribution reigned. Pre-orders were the order of the day. Not only were they the bulk of our sales but the buyers set the tone for the release schedules. By looking at the pre-orders placed on titles, a publisher could determine what might succeed in the market and what might fail. Only a few distributors were able to return product they ordered, so you could gauge a product by the order the buyer put in. Interestingly this put pressure on the buyer to actively sale the title in question, because they bought it and if they couldn't sell it they would be stuck with it. They pre-ordered what they thought they could move and they ordered deep as new stores sprang up everywhere to meet the exploding demand. Publishers like TLG upped their print runs to meet



these demands. Distributors began to order almost anything thrown their way. Buyers pushed everything that was sent to them, because there was such a huge demand for all things d20.

So this led to interesting relationships. One courted the distributor, especially your buyer. You had to pitch to him or her the game in question and convince them to pick it up. It was done largely by email and phone, but also at trade shows and through personal relationships. It wasn't hard as demand for all things d20 was very high. It was a good system overall, but with a major check: the distributors owned you. They could stop buying your product and kill you. They chose what to sell. They dictated to you what they wanted and what you should do. I had to listen to one idiot rail at me for half an hour about how publishing Gary Gygax was the death knell of TLG. We might as well throw in the towel as we were finished (I stood there listening to him for quite awhile, stunned into that state that lies between humor and horror).

When d20 exploded in 2001/2002 it became even more of an estranged relationship. There was so much money, so much demand that distribution houses hired new sales staff (who knew games but not how to sell them). They pushed anything new, reinforcing the whole pre-order system and inadvertently creating a market bubble. But early on, an insidious problem developed. Orders for back stock began to decline and decline rapidly. Distributors couldn't risk missing the next hot thing so they went light on old and deep on new. But old wasn't very old at all. Money hard spent on creating deep runs of books

went to waste as the initial 90-day period became the norm. Your first 30 days were 60% of your sales, the next 30 days, 20%, the next 30, 10%. After that, for the distributors, the product died.. It was infuriating. For a publisher new product is always good, but old product, tried and true, bought and paid for, was (and remains) gold.

This led us, early on, to seek that pot of gold at the retailer rainbow. If we could establish deep roots with retail shops, we could connect with the gamer and find out at the source what they wanted. We'd knock the distributor out of the top post, create a new market, have control of it, widen our margins, and connect with the gamer at the end of the cycle. All the arguments over production, the dickering over returns, the frustration over sales and back stock would not be a problem. We could respond to stores directly. Address their needs and fill them. Moving away from (but not leaving) distribution would strengthen the company.

And on a personal note, this would be a huge welcome relief for me, as I had had some gigantic, very ugly arguments with several distributors over the years ...

For years we struggled with the direct to retail market. It was harder than imagined. It required someone to be on staff full time simply dealing with that. Accounts set up could vanish overnight as retail shops have a huge turn over (they are crazy risky, so be sure to thank you local shop owner when next you see them). Retailers would order a book, stock it well and some would sell it and others would not. On the other side, the connection with the retailer was almost always pleas-



ant. Conversations about how to display in a store, what to put there, how much and at what time of the year led to friendships that have lasted to this day (Marcus King, Scott Thorne, Ed Evans and so on). It was good and became a growing part of TLG's model.

Almost unnoticed was the growth in direct sales. Paypal took on (who would have guessed?) and people became comfortable ordering online, so much so that we had to overhaul the webpage in 2003 or 04 and put in paypal buttons everywhere (I did this in Trellix).

Then the d20 market collapsed.

When the bottom fell out of the d20 market, it was fast and hard. Retailers found themselves with abundance of stock and an exhausted 3rd edition fan base. Sales began to drop and many stores, built around the RPG boom began to tumble. Orders to distributors went unpaid, were canceled or unfilled. This left distributors with a growing abundance of stock as publishers had already printed deep and were flooding the warehouses with the titles. Orders were cut suddenly and drastically, often by 50% or more. Already committed to many titles and deep runs, publishers found their revenue streams dried up and they crumbled left and right.

Mountains of stock were deeply discounted and even more was sent to the dumpster as storage space became a premium. It was a murderous bout.

What made it worse was the direct to retail market went with it. Retailers dried up left and right, hundreds closing. Others tightened their belt and pulled back. Where before a retail shop might order 24 of a title, now it was 3.

TLG survived the slaughter because of the continued demand of the Gygaxian Fantasy World Series, written and edited by Gary Gygax. It gave us enough breathing room to build the game long in the works for us: Castles and Crusades.

C&C came out in the middle of the collapse or just at the tail end of it. It was warmly received but strangely for us, far more warmly by direct sales. The game had a great deal of buzz on the net and the paypal system in the store proved an invaluable resource as more people began to use it. Direct orders were strong. C&C


joined the Gygaxian material and gave the company a second leg to stand upon.

What followed was a long hard struggle. The RPG market continued to contract, but C&C and GFW continued to grow. TLG had been diversifying for some time by investing money in a print shop, some board games, PDF sales, launching three conventions and other sundries. The print shop proved invaluable and gave the company a third prop. Not only did it bring in revenue, but allowed us a much tighter command of expenses and inventory control. We also saw the growth of a direct sales market, both in the Amazon account (which never stopped generating sales) and the growing online market. We invested in a larger, more elaborate store front (built by Brian Kowalski) and revamped the website to accommodate the new market.


Gary Gygax's passing in 2008 was a heavy blow to the company in and of itself, but when the licenses were pulled, it bit deep. But we drove on.

Despite the growing online market, it never created a system that equaled the early pre-orders, where we could gauge a product's desirability by orders placed by an experienced sales staff. Nor did the revenue from direct sales match the revenue generated by distribution. Direct to retail remained a dead end as retailers reduced their RPG footprint even more. This was the good fight. C&C kept selling and growing. All markets were strong, if not sterling. When one dipped another seemed to pick up. Thus it stood for a good four years. Our staff was reduced at times, down to a skeleton crew, but we persevered, everyone taking the hit. From artists like Jason Walton and Peter Bradley to writers like Casey Christofferson and Mike Stewart.

Strangely, through it all, one product remained steady: the world of Aihrde. Originally published (as noted) in 2000 and one of our first four releases, the After Winter's



MAZING DVENTURES



PULP SIEGE, THE NEWEST CORE GAME POWERED BY TROLL LORD GAMES' CELEBRATED SIEGE ENGINE, ALLOWS YOU TO CREATE ANY TYPE OF PULP ADVENTURE HERO YOU WANT, AND CUSTOMIZE THEM AS YOU LIKE! BE IT ARCANE SCHOLARS, MENTALISTS, TOMB-RAIDING ARCHAEOLOGISTS, ASIAN MARTIAL ARTS MASTERS, OR GANGSTERS AND G-MEN, THIS GAME HAS YOU COVERED. AND BEST OF ALL, IF YOU'RE A FAN OF CASTLES & CRUSADES, YOU CAN PICK THIS GAME UP AND GET PLAYING IN A MATTER OF MINUTES!

**THREE AMAZING BOOKS
ONE AMAZING GAME!**

COMING SOON!

Dark Campaign Setting remained a steadfast part of the line. The three little adventures within became part of TLG canon but the setting took on a life of its own. One of the earliest books to be nominated for an Ennie Award, it sold much better than its compatriots. The After Winter's Dark came out as a small 24-page booklet with a hand drawn map by Davis Chenault. Its production was low but interest in it was high. I suspect that it harkened back to another similar setting from the early days of the hobby. The AWD played a part in the foundation of the relationship with Gary Gygax (but that's another story), as it was expanded to meet the interest shown in it. Eventually, in 2001, the Codex of Aihrde was released. It included an adventure by Gary Gygax and was sent to the printers with his own Gygaxian Fantasy Worlds: The Canting Crew. The Codex was huge, 250+ pages, but it lacked a new, more detailed map. We stuck with Davis' original hand drawn map. The large interest in the Codex allowed us to order deep and we did.

The Codex sold through it all. The d20 collapse didn't affect it. The shift to C&C gave it a boost. It weathered it all. When supplies ran short of the Codex, we launched the After Winter's Dark Campaign Folio. Designed after the Greyhawk folio of the 1970s it contained an abbreviated version of the Codex in two books, a jumble of maps, redrawn now by Peter Bradley and other odds





their own games. The direct sale market had been growing for some time, but reaching people still proved tough. The message board were supplanted by facebook which offered a solid platform, then twitter opened up, instagram, pinterest snuck in on the side, google + leapt up to bat and probably half a dozen more I'm not remembering. But none of these offered a good central location to promote any product or game; they were each like a spoke in a wheel. It was spread thin and any discussion was often lost to the noise of whatever the manically run and utterly headless monster that the news media was babbling about. Kickstarter changed that, it offered publishers, and TLG was no exception, a central hub for all the social media. Here is what we are working on, here is what it looks like, here is where you can learn more about it. With that hub the spokes fell into place. People who enjoyed the twitterverse could learn of it and go see what was going on as easily as people on facebook. It was more than that,

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it was a marketplace. One could hear of a project, read about it, but remain on Kickstarter shopping for others. What's more, you could shop for anything as Kickstarter goes far beyond the game world.

In addition, the Kickstarter model gave immediate access to retailers as well. Those comfortable with the platform flocked there, buying up products and games outside the regular channels to stock on shelves in their stores. The relative success of a Kickstarter gave some indication what the game might do in after market, which gave them a level of comfort they had not enjoyed for a long while.

For TLG the world had turned full circle. The pre-order system that we valued so much, but was a little more than a memory, returned, replaced with something stronger. Even more, Kickstarter evolved into a market place to shop ideas (its real intent, and what it remains). It allowed us to do things we only dreamed of, particularly in the realm of merchandising. It gave us a new avenue to communicate with the gamers as well as the retail shops.

For the first time in a good long while I feel like the market place where we all make and buy games has adjusted to the new technology of the age. When distribution was king few felt comfortable ordering online. When distribution collapsed people had begun to break through that trepidation. It took time, but in a few years people were buying online at an ever-growing rate. The TLG mailroom underwent several expansions. Where before we shipped direct to the distributor from the printer, we now shipped multiples of small packages. The growth was substantial but slow. We even tried to mimic the Kickstarter pre-order platform, but it failed, for some reason the community of gamers flocked to Kickstarter (comfort, accessibility with Amazon payments, etc) so that that venue became huge. It took off early last year, and brought the whole online community together, in a single market place where one could shop ideas on the one hand, and on the other, scoop up those ideas that proved the mettle.

Kickstarter adds to our direct market, pdf sales, Amazon Advantage (still a main-

stay), distributor sales, and all the other myriad areas we move Castles & Crusades in, but it, and it alone, has allowed us to push the envelope and grow the game. Not only are we able to showcase the game in front of hosts of new gamers, but we can dream big.

And the world keeps turning. After all these years we are at last set to re-release the Codex of Aihilde (previously Erde). This time though, there's going to be items we've always wanted. The Kickstarter, scheduled to launch on December 5, 2014 contains not only the book with a full 4 color poster map inside it, but the two large maps depicting the Lands of Ursal, a spring-loaded map assemble you can attach to your ceiling or a tripod and maybe even a globe. If the interest is high enough, the world setting we release will be as good as it ever was, but fully supported with materials the likes of which no game setting has seen before. And this is a precursor to so much more: Codex Germania, Victorious, Abyss Walker, Brimstone, the Adventurer's Backpack, fiction and so much more.

Will Kickstarter last as the market place for games? It's hard to say. The market changes constantly but the avenues with them. It seems, at least for now, to be a place where everyone is comfortable. The online community can shop around for games (and other stuff) they are interested in. People can take their time learning about a game like C&C or a supplement. Ordering it at any number of levels gives people the satisfaction of getting everything they want and maybe even more than they expected. Publishers have a place to showcase games and the ideas behind them, and fund those ideas. But more importantly than all that, gamers and publishers now have a direct line of communication between each other, they become a family, all sharing the table together. And that makes the world turn.





The World of Ahrûe

ON
KICKSTARTER

DECEMBER 5
2014



CRUSADER 7

ON HIT POINTS

By Kim Hartsfield



Let us imagine Bjorn, a 1st level ranger, just out of Ranger Academy (aka the woods). He just strapped on his newly purchased scale mail and slid his oiled-up long sword into a fresh scabbard. He girds up his loins and walks north from the city of Sherwood, intent on finding the goblins that killed a farmer and his family a few days back. Goodness sings in his heart and coppers alone jingle in his pouch.

Just as he finds a trail of the foul little beasts, one steps from behind a tree. Bjorn draws his blade, still pleased with the sound it makes coming forth from the scabbard. The goblin holds only a crude club with some kind of spike shoved through the top. They circle a moment before the goblin lunges. Bjorn is young, but not dumb, and deftly evades the swing, quickly using his blade as a stabbing weapon, aiming for the creature's mid-section. The goblin, too, is no stranger to battle and side steps the blow. Bjorn is momentarily tripped up, but attempts to gain his feet. Alas, a small misstep is all the goblin needs. He grabs his club with both hands and brings it down quickly on the ranger's helmetless noggin. One sickening crunch later, and Bjorn is snuffed out. The goblin, however, now has a new sword and scabbard. One that makes a really nice sound when you draw it forth.

In this example, let us say the CK rolling for the goblin got a natural 20 on his to-hit roll. We all have house rules for such an occasion, but in this CK's game, the natural 20 imparts double damage. The CK rolls 1d6 for the club and, as luck would have it, gets a 6, doubled for 12. Bjorn the Hapless had 8 hit points and is dead. (Well, -4, but he'll be dead in less than ten minutes since he was alone). Now, on to example number two.

Jarrold, Lord of Light, Defender of the Weak and Speaker for the Meek hears of a goblin raid on a farmer's land a few miles north of the town of Sherwood. He decides to go see if he can help. Now, Jarrold



is a veteran of many campaigns and has even ventured to the outer planes and fought demons on their own turf. This quick diversion should prove little difficulty for the able paladin. As he walks past the farm, he spots a lone goblin in the distance. He draws his Holy Avenger (he has named it 'Shirley' after his mother) and quickens his pace. The goblin, trying to make a name for himself in the hierarchy of goblinhood (and completely unaware of Jarrold's prowess), smiles and walks toward the paladin.

Again, as with Bjorn, the goblin lunges, is denied a hit and is swung upon. Jarrold

attacks, but fumbles badly and drops his blade. The goblin, seeing a wonderful opportunity, one exactly like he saw a few days ago when another human in armor came to this farm, grabs his new long sword in both hands and swings with all his might into the skull of the human.

Merely an abrasion, good goblin. 'Tis but a scratch.

Jarrold recovers Shirley and swings on the amazed goblin, cleaving it in twain. Afterwards, he picks up a shiny new sword that goes "shhning!" when unsheathed.



Now, we all know that the 1d8 damage, even maxed out and doubled, is barely enough to hurt a 10th level paladin. He probably has 60-70 hit points and the blade did, at best, 16. Easily enough to kill any 1st level character but barely a bruise for high level characters. Same blow, same place on the body, same everything.

Why?

I've always played that hit points weren't actually how much damage you could take, but your ability, learned from adventuring, to turn a death blow into something less fatal. In our example, Bjorn blindly fell forward, placed his hands in front to soften the blow, and forgot, even for a split second, of the threat behind him. Jarrod, however, focused first on the threat, even as he pitched forward, he lifted his back while twisting at the waist slightly, turning a deathly blow to the base of the skull into in painful, but overall insubstantial, blow to the upper back. So while they both took about 15 points of damage, Jarrod, though his experience, was able to shrug it off while Bjorn could not. I think, and I hope I'm not overstepping my bounds, this is how most of us adjudicate this situation.

But I have played with CKs (and have even been guilty myself) of a few things that fly in the face of this. First, brutal descriptions for all attacks. A 10th level fighter that takes 10 points of damage at the very start of combat doesn't have his chain mail slice open and begin bleeding profusely. A 12th level cleric, hit by a

crossbow bolt from across the room, for 7 points doesn't have it lodged in his shoulder. Heck, it probably barely scratched his armor as it flew past (because he, though experience, knew to move down and slightly back when he heard the tell-tale sound of a crossbow letting go a bolt). Remember, a bolt buried into your flesh hurts, and does as much damage to, a 0 level milkmaid as it does a 13th level barbarian. A sword that buries itself an inch into your neck is as life threatening to a 12th level fighter as it is to Ozzy the innkeeper at the Two Toads & A Pig Inn. Bloody, gory, intestine-letting, brain-splattering, leg-severing combat must all be the same. When a player's character has taken enough damage so that the blows coming at him are potentially fatal, only then should combat get messy. Before that, it is dodges and feints and parries (all the while taking and inflicting hit point damage).

And secondly, the recovery of these hit point. Let's go back to example number two from above. Jarrod takes 16 damage from the goblin. Sure, he had 70 so 16 isn't that bad, but it is noticeable. He has already used his *lay on hands* ability for the day and is currently without a cleric, so his hit points will stay at 54 hit point (70 minus 16) until healed. But, as we've already discussed, this isn't real damage. It was a minor blow to the back. If he never again uses his *lay on hands* and never finds a healer, Jarrod will walk around at 54 hit points forever (if he continues adventuring and doesn't stop to rest). If we agree that dam-

age only becomes critical when you are at low hit points, shouldn't those hit points come back fairly quickly? Shouldn't Jarrod be able to shrug off a blow from a goblin with relative ease and be again ready to slay demons and their ilk within a few hours, maybe even minutes?

In my games, I rarely let lost hit points linger too long. The party has healing potions and phylacteries and an able-minded cleric nearby most of the time. Healing potions are not always miraculous brews that cause gaping, bleeding wounds to close up or broken bones to suddenly mend (though they can). Sometimes, they are a quick energy drink one quaffs to regain lost stamina and let the recipient again focus on the task at hand: killing stuff and taking their treasure. A *cure light wounds* cast upon Jarrod after his encounter with the goblin does not sew up some deep laceration along the base of his skull, it makes his back feel a little less stiff.

I assume we could discuss this matter at length if we were to ever meet. And I'm sure many of you would have opinions different than mine and would give me pause. (My regular game in which I am a player and not the CK is tonight and I assume my CK would disagree with me!). That being said, I have rolled these dice since before my daughter was born (and she is making me a grandfather soon), so I have a bit of experience myself. I look forward, however, to hearing your views.

Until then.



LISTEN...

... JUST
BEYOND
THIS DOOR.
A
CASTLE KEEPERS
GUIDE
NOW IN
FULL COLOR



CRUSADER 9

A CUP OF OL' GROGNARD

By Casey W. Christofferson



Three boars were roasting on the spit in the common room. Bull sniffed deeply of the slow roasting meat as he leaned contemplatively against the bar and surveyed the customers. It was the typical motley assortment of fringe folk, common this time of year. The evening brought in the big game hunters looking for exotic furs, meat, and the odd bits commonly sought by the wizards of the cities. At a group of tables sat a clan of Ugashtan, the hill men who were headed south to trade wool, cheese, and furs. Sprinkled in the crowd were solitary rangers and treasure seekers low in their cups but deep in their thoughts. He had long since sent all the girls save Holly to bed.

Holly busied herself taking the orders of a band of treasure seekers that was engaged in the study of a map of the Crater of Umeshti. They were certain that their expedition would lead them to great riches and fame. Having caught his own glimpse of their map, Bull was certain he would never see them again.

Near the door Foog the hafrhuk sat with his broad chin bowed to his chest, half asleep. Bull grinned under his bristles and took a long pull of the Swordsinger's Stout. Bull contemplated throwing a mug at the hafrhuk's head, but thought of his drowsy patrons and decided better of it. It was near time for him to make the rounds of the palisade and the inner grounds as it was and he hoped his kinsmen on the wall were doing a better job of staying awake than Foog was.

Just then a swarthy duo walked into the common chamber from the yard. They were dressed in finely made traveling gear. The clink of mail was evident beneath their cloaks of wool and harness of leather. Their swords were southern made, and battle ready. With their swarthy complexions, pointed goatees, and oiled moustaches he made them immediately for Rhodensians.

The duo made way to the bar as Bull nodded his acknowledgement while Foog sputtered himself awake and spilled his

half mug of ale upon his lap. Bull let out a low chuckle and turned his attention fully to the guests who approached his bar.

"You there, innkeeper, we would like lodging, board, and ale to slake our thirst," said one of the men, a gold tooth flashed in his mouth and Bull noted a tattoo upon the man's forearm that he had seen within the previous year upon the arm of another, but kept the matter to himself.

Bull hooked a thumb at the signboard behind the bar that detailed the Roadhouse's bill of fare.

"Pick what you want, as long as your coin is good and you don't start any trouble, you'll be well served," he said.

The second southerner's brows furrowed a bit, and he scratched at his manicured beard. "Northman?" he asked.

Bull nodded his acknowledgement. "Aye, I hail from the Icy Wastes near the Crown of the World and what of it?"

The taller man shrugged. "Nothing, strange I guess. It is rare to see one of your kind so landlocked..." he stopped short on further comment as his companion shot him a sharp glance.

Bull shrugged and began filling a pair of tall mugs with a frothy amber ale from one of the several tapped ale barrels behind the bar. "Maybe so. Our folk are travelers. I suppose it is natural that wanderlust goes hand in hand with harrowing cold, and sunless nights, Bowbe."

The men scowled a bit but their faces relaxed instantly as he set the mugs before them. They drank deeply as they looked over the board's menu of foodstuffs.

"The boar is roasting on the low coals. Gather a plate if you like and I will set out apples and bread for you Bowbes if you like," Bull offered.

"Perhaps in a while," the shortest of the pair offered as he and his traveling partner drank deeply of their ale. "I am Veriazio, and this is my associate Marro."

Marro inclined his head slightly, still too

arrogant to show respect to any save a pure blooded Rhodensian. He too drank deeply of his mug of amber ale and had half of it finished within a few breaths.

"Say there landlord," Veriazio asked, "we are looking for an old associate of our who was working the frontier on an Imperial Bounty..."

Bull slid a mug to Veriazio, and another to his partner Marro before they could continue their line of inquiry.

"The Rhodensian Empire has no sway here, nor from what I hear in its own imperial strongholds, Bowbe," Bull said. "In fact, the last I knew there were none among the princes who could rightly make the claim to the Imperial throne."

He paused as Veriazio's face flushed angrily and Marro's jaw clenched noticeably. "Not to worry Bowbes, for the Duke of Karbosk holds little sway in the Highlands, save what he contracts with me and my associates for bounties taken in the frontier," Bull added with a grin.

The pair, though still tense, greedily grabbed for their mugs and drank them down.

Bull readily slid them another. "Tell me Bowbes," he asked. "Of this missing friend of yours."

This time it was Marro who spoke. "Ulroth was his name. He had come north in search of a very lucrative bounty, but never returned. We thought perhaps he had been detained. You would surely have recognized him, as he was a northman like yourself."

"Half northman," Veriazio interrupted. "Before setting out we hired an augurer. She told us that he had disappeared somewhere in these Haunted Highlands. Ulroth was long of limb and light of hair, his father was a northerner, though his mother hailed from the Empire."

"Ahh," Bull said sagely, "tall Bowbe, light brown hair, got it. So he looks like every other Karboskian? Anything else?" He noticed as he asked that the hearty ale was starting to have its effect.

Veriazio pulled up his sleeve to show his



tattoo and Marro pointed to his as well. Each bore the mark of a sword bound in a chain and shackles, though each of the men had a different number of links to his chain. Bull tilted his head and grinned slightly in apparent appreciation. "Nice ink Bowbes," he said. His thoughts raced. The shackles were the mark of Kharzarn the God of slavers, and the sword was like-ly the emblem of some southern mercenary guild. Bull had heard of men such as these who often hunted for those who had escaped the Rhodensian slave colonies upon the southern continent. The tattoo, on the other hand, he knew quite well indeed.

"I see," Bull said with mock awe. "You are important hunters indeed to have come so far on your quest. Important men such as yourselves deserve a cup of our private stock, and with it, I shall tell you where to seek for your missing friend. "

The duo looked at each other and drained their mugs as Bull went into the back room. They loosed their blades ever so subtly in their sheaths and smiled at one another slyly. The ale filled them with its bravery and they felt for certain that the mystery of Ul-routh's disappearance was soon at an end.

The broad shouldered northman re-turned from the back with two small cups filled near to the rim with a thick almost purplish colored liquid.

"It is a special blend Bowbe, for 'tis a mixture of the famous Dwarven Blue lightning and some of my own seasonings." Bull said. "As you may know the crafters of Blue Lightning are secretive in the methods and manufacture of their whisky, and the dwarves of the Fander Mountains rarely trade with the other folk of the lands anymore."

The two men nodded as they took their cups, and sniffed the liquor. It had a rich and earthy scent, with a hint of metal and rich wood, not uncommon to dwarven distillers. As Marro and Veriazio lifted the mugs to their lips, Bull raised a thick hand to caution them.

"Careful Bowbes, for the 'Ol Grogard" is a strong brew," he said. The men paused and gingerly sipped at the cups, feeling the burn on their lips, and the smooth notes of honey, cinnamon, rich oak, peat, and something else that they couldn't quite make even with their sophisticated south-

ern palates. It was something earthy and strong and familiar but unknown to them.

"This is a fine treat, landlord," said Mar-ro, his voice thicker now as he sipped a dram from the cup.

"Indeed," added Veriazio. "Tis some of the finest spirit my tongue has ever tasted. Tell us now ...Bowbe is it? Tell us of our missing friend and we may reward you in kind for the hospitality you have shown us this night.

Bull pushed back his blond locks from his eyes and fixed them both with his piercing blue-grey stare as he took a sip from his own horn.

"Well my Bowbes, it was about a year ago." Bull said.

Bull pulled the Wagon short and sniffed at the air. It stank of blood and shit and death.

The cart trail he rode along was practically non-existent, but a map given him by the old Dwarf Forgutt had got him along the little used path that Dwarven traders once used to skirt the Crater and bring their goods to the Duchy. Forgutt had warned him that the trail was now used mostly by bandits hiding from the Duke's law, or treasure seekers hoping to plunder a long forgotten ruin of the Umeshti civilization.

The horses were skittish, and he spoke softly to them "Gently Bowbes, nothing to harm your hides here" he said. Loosing the sword in the scabbard across his back he hopped down from the wagon and stepped into the thick brush along the side of the path where a cloud of flies buzzed with the voice of cursed Navolka.

A nearly fresh corpse lay on its face covered in maggots. Deep rents tore the brown, blood stained mail upon the corpses back and the blade of a sword was broken off at the victim's ribcage. Through the crawling mass of flies and worms Bull could make out a single red and grey braid growing from the back of what was once a bald head. The victim's left arm was outstretched and ended in three two fingers and a thumb. Not a new wound that one, as Bull frowned and sighed slightly. Sadness and anger filled the pit of his gut as he rolled the corpse over. Not a single wound pierced the body's front.

"Oldan Half-Hand," Bull breathed beneath is breath. "What happened to your old friend?"

Bull thought for a moment as he said a prayer to Bowbe angrily and punched the earth. Olhan had hired himself out as a guide to a fellow with a northman's name, but southern gear about a week ago. The man had commissioned some other local sell-swords of low repute to form a sort of posse as the man felt his quarry was somewhere in the highlands, perhaps in the vicinity of the Grove of the Green man, or north of Long Loc. Before he had left with the fellow Oldan had told Bull that he was certain the man was a bounty hunter searching for the Swordsinger. Bull had paid Oldan some extra coin to make sure that he wouldn't find the half-elf's whereabouts anytime soon. How this had translated into Oldan being stabbed in the back made no sense. Bull searched the corpse and found Oldan's sword, knife, and coin-purse missing as well.

Searching further he found the hilt of the sword broken off in his back among the roots of a nearby gum tree. Bull picked up the hilt and recognized it as southern steel. Far inferior to the metal of the Ugashtan guide who lay at Bull's feet.

Another twenty steps into the woods Bull found another pair of corpses. These were slain with hack marks to the front. He recognized one as a known bandit, with a bounty of twenty gold offered by the Sherrieff of Karbosk. His weapons lay about him and his eyes were eaten away by maggots but he was otherwise recognizable. Bull cut his head off and took it with him. The other was obviously one of his associates, though coyotes and vultures had left his corpse unrecognizable.

Bull busied himself that morning burying his friend beneath the gum tree and continued his journey to the Dwarven tradesmen on the lower spur of the Fander range. The journey northwest took him four more days and after conducting his business it was another week on the road before his tired horses and heavily laden wagon had made it within spitting distance of the Roadhouse again. Night was falling and he caught sight of a single camp-fire lit within the woods ahead. Possibly Ugashtan tribesmen out hunting beyond the Roadhouse, but it was always wise to



be careful. Ruhks from the East had been known to raid even this far west, and horrors from the Crater were of constant concern. Out of caution he stopped his wagon and crept upon the campsite with practiced grace. A canvas one pole lean-to was set in a small clearing among the trees and a horse was staked just at the edge of the circle of light cast by the fire. A solitary man sat roasting rabbits along the edge of the flame.

Bull stepped into the ring of light and made his presence known. "Traveler, I saw your fire from the path," he said. "Too large a fire for one man. It casts too much light Bowbe, and may attract the attention of bandits, trolls, or much worse."

The man at the fire stood quickly, his hand dropping to the hilt of a sword at his belt. "Are you suggesting you are worse, stranger?" the man asked.

"Not at all Bowbe," Bull said calmly. "Dirty Bowbe's Roadhouse is about a half day south of here, maybe less. I know the area well. There are bad folk who would take advantage of a solitary traveler who doesn't know the paths, or enough to heat some stones before nightfall and use them for warmth through the night. Some creatures in these lands see campfires as a signal for an easy meal."

Bull stood well enough from the fire and fixed his eyes on the fringes, allowing himself a close look at the stranger while remaining hidden mostly in shadow himself. He noted a familiar pommel protruding from the stranger's fist.

"My wagon is near, and it is stocked with fine whisky for yonder Roadhouse. Shall we sample some on this cool evening?" he asked.

The stranger smiled a bit. "I would have some whisky, stranger," the man said relaxing slightly.

"I have a flask here," Bull offered as he stepped into the light. He tossed the flask to the man who caught it and unscrewed the cap, taking a deep draft.

"That sword you bear. I've seen it before have I not?" asked as he let his cloak slide to the ground.

"I don't think so," the stranger said, as he stopped his draught suddenly and corked the flask.

"No, I am sure of it," Bull said. "That is Oldan Half-hand's blade. You left yours in his back about 40 miles north of here. Tell me, what did he do to deserve being stabbed in the back?"

The stranger swore and drew the Umeshti blade from its scabbard as Bull stood resolute and unarmed in the glow of the fire.

"He lied to me." The man said. "He was supposed to help me track the Swordsinger to Aymon Jymoon. Unfortunately for him the sellswords I hired came to me privately and informed me that my "guide" was leading us on a wild goose chase and wasting my time and money. I ordered them to kill him on the trail so that we could make our way back to civilization and find a new, honest guide. Things went wrong and he suspected the trap. I hand it to Oldan. For a wild man missing half his fingers, he was a formidable warrior and slew my sellswords with ease. While he cleaned his blade upon their cloaks I crept upon him and ended him before he had a chance to do the same to me. I know you stranger. You are the one who owns the Roadhouse called Dirty Bowbe's. I too am of the northern blood and I know your game. I will not let you take me."

"I am he who is known as the Bull, son of Wroth, Son of Skel, son of the Bulvieg, son of Hyjelar who bore the sacred horn," said Bull through his beard. He flexed his hands and shoulders though his sword remained sheathed across his back. "Oldan was a good man, and a brave warrior. You will not put his blade in my back as you put your weak southern sword in his. I will have his sword however and his steel will be returned to his sons. Have at me Bowbe if you have the stone."

The stranger quavered a moment upon hearing the lineage of Hyjelar but set his jaw and waived the Umeshti blade before him. The sword glowed a strange green shot with orange in the firelight. "I am Ulrouth, son of Jagen Ice Tongue. Your friend should not have betrayed me. You can tell him that when you see him in Hell."

With that Ulrouth charged forward swinging the light weight Umeshti steel blade as he came. Bull sidestepped the attack and turned drawing his own blade in one smooth motion. He flicked the long, heavy blade outward nicking Ulrouth's

ear as the bounty hunter strove past. The combatants turned facing one another at ten paces. Bull held his blade in both hands, and flexed his arms as he held the blade forward pointing it at his foe. Ulrouth put a hand to his ear and pulled it back, seeing the crimson of his blood growled in rage and lifted his stolen blade.

I'll have your head, bartender! He howled and rushed forward again. Bull snarled and rushed forward too, their blades clanged in the darkness casting a shower of sparks. Bull initially parried Ulrouth's first swing, then ducked under the bounty hunters blade. Crouching low he came upwards and forwards with the might of his sword, catching Ulrouth beneath the ribs and through the lungs with the tip of his blade as he stood, lifting Ulrouth off the ground. Muscles in his thighs knotted as Ulrouth gasped and blood bubbled from his lips. Ulrouth's weight slid down the blade as he stared into Bull's cold blue grey eyes while the light escaped his own. Bull grunted and turned, dumping Ulrouth's weight to the ground. Breathing heavily he wrenched his blade from his opponents carcass. He wiped the blade upon Ulrouth's clothes and gathered his flask.

He made his way back to the wagon. From the road he could see torches moving along the road, maybe four miles away. He had less than an hour before riders would arrive. As he figured, Ulrouth's fire had brought unwanted attention. He drove the wagon to Ulrouth's camp and thought of what to do. Place Ulrouth in the tent? There would be a smell of blood in the air, and worse. Then he came on a plan. He quickly stripped Ulrouth of his clothes and doused them with whiskey from one of the large dwarven kegs. They took Ulrouth's clothes and dumped them on the fire, the flammable liquor instantly igniting the Bounty Hunter's belongings. He stashed Oldan Half Hand's blade on his wagon and unhitched his horses to mix Ulrouth's.

When the sheriffs' patrol arrived to investigate the fire, there was no sign of Ulrouth anywhere. Just Bull the Northman from the Roadhouse returning from a trip to collect some Blue Lightning.

"So Bowbes," Bull asked with a grin as he finished his tale. "How's your cup of Ol' Grogard?"



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CRUSADER 13

GAMING AND MYTHOLOGY: A CONTINUITY FROM THE PAST

Brian N. Young MA

MY STORY IN IT ALL: A SHORT DISCOVERY OF BOTH

I discovered my interest in role-playing games and mythology around the same time and age, so the two were already destined to be fused together from the onset whether I knew it or not. My introduction to both were on separate paths unrelated when I was just on the verge of becoming a teenager. This was a fortuitous time in history for a couple of reasons. Firstly, it was the early 80s, and the greatest movies in the Fantasy genre were to be released, namely; *Conan the Barbarian*, *Dragonslayer*, *Legend*, *The Dark Crystal*, *The Black Cauldron* and many others that played on the theme of myth. I grew up eagerly seeking these stories, mostly not knowing their origins, as any kid my age, only wanting more of it, soaking it up happily.

Secondly, I acquired the, now rare and prized books, *The Fiend Folio*, *Monster Manual*, *Deities & Demi-Gods*, not knowing what they really were. For at the time, I was just loving the artwork and ideas inside; trying to get more of the artwork. I read the descriptions about the beings and beasts and it broadened my world a little, helping me seek out the sources to where these various creatures and entities derived. One by one I tried to find the sources at the local library, and I did slowly. I also went to the local hobby store and was dazzled by the display of the plethora of miniatures they had in the showcase. My world was growing larger by the month. It was becoming amazing more and more.

Finally one day I saw the movie *Excalibur* at the cinema and it blew me away. I mentally, as a twelve year old in a small town in the early 80s, realized that these miniatures and random gaming books

were all connected in some way I couldn't yet understand. Its hidden genius was becoming apparent to me a little. I also was into Medieval Metal music at the time, with its songs about knights and castles, my artwork was reflecting this and I *knew* my calling! Even though I wasn't yet a gamer, or even into the hobby as yet I was already feeding on the outer edges of it. The next time I went to the library I found the books on the medieval era and it became my obsession for the next... well thirty-two years trying to find this guy named 'Arthur'.

Of course Arthur wasn't in these medieval books on knights and castles anywhere. He was missing completely. It was frustrating. I searched over every book for him and could only find his mention in places, but only where his later medieval tales were hinted at by Geoffrey of Monmouth, Sir Thomas Mallory or Chrétien de Troy. I then found a massive book, *The Age of Arthur*, by John Morris, it was my Holy Grail. This book put me in my place for it covered the breadth and scope of the realistic and plausible Arthur that might have existed following Rome's departure from Britain after 410 C.E. In this tome was Gaelic, Welsh, Latin and Cornish, languages that were hitherto unknown to me, as were the Celts. I realized that for me to understand anything, I need to learn these languages and about the cultures or not at all. My own ancestry was too for the most part a mystery. I had taken it all for granted that my family came from Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and had Dutch, Swedish and some German background as well. I was young (no pun intended...), I didn't really grasp those things in my teens yet.

Luckily for me however I discovered a local gaming group called *The World Masters Club*, and jumped right in by the mid-80s and ran the only complete game system I owned at the time - MERP. From the very beginning I was a GM, and developed my own stories rather than using others' own

prewritten tales, even though I would plunder their various elements in my own. It was appropriate that this gaming club met every Saturday afternoon at our local public library, so I could gather my books as well. It was a nerd's dream, back when being one was *not* popular. I immersed myself in this wholeheartedly and everything to do with it. It was my outlet for my imagination and research, and still is to this day. The 80s was also teeming with great informal programs too, I grew up on BBC shows even though I was born in Oklahoma in a small town. One show that helped to spark my interest and direct me was *The Celts*. The music was by a, then little known singer, Enya, or Eithne Ní Bhraonáin, and was six episodes that covered the scope of this wondrous civilization. The beginnings of my future were starting to take shape even though I wasn't yet able to see it.

In my fictional readings I was flying through the works of Robert E. Howard, H.P. Lovecraft and all other related authors from the Pulp Era, with of course Tolkien. It was a very profuse time of self-discovery. I was collecting role-playing games as well, buying them off the shelves, running them and exploring them but finding that the ones that I identified best with were those that clung to the old myths. The game that struck a chord with my group, and still is a mainstay at our table over twenty-five years or more later, is the old classic *Arcanum* or 'Atlantis' setting that was initially released by Bard Games in the late 80s. Suddenly we were able to recreate the Sword & Sorcery style fiction that Robert E. Howard brought into the world through his writings and it was a dream come true. I found the soundtrack, played it at our table in the background and it was pure magic. Now gaming was taken to a newer place not had before. I could mix mythological ideas and experiment with them while creating wondrous plots, epic in scope, as my players try to survive and figure out what to do next. I *never* sprang from the same gaming origins



as most where dungeons were the norm. Mine were the stuff of settings one would find in *Weird Tales* and old myths, thus the reasons why my adventure modules are so different in character. The open seas, mountains, dramatic landscapes of High Fantasy were where my imagination went to, not the dank dungeons that most game-designers seem to travel.

By the 90s I was becoming more knowledgeable in both my studies and gaming, although not yet in college, but finally beginning to design my own worlds and systems and getting involved in others' game design projects as a play-tester. It wasn't until the mid-90s that I was starting to learn the Celtic languages finally. It wasn't easy and very humbling. In school I was horrible at learning other languages. I dropped out of French in the first semester because I was too intimidated for example. I had a roughed up book on Irish Gaelic which didn't help, but finally acquired a course in Scottish Gaelic. Six months later I had a decent grasp of the language, then I moved on to the Cornish Celtic language which I mastered faster thanks to the internet being now available. I joined the Language Revival scene and helped the group *Agan Tavas* ('Our Language').

The true epiphany that role-playing games today are just an advanced form of ancient storytelling with rules came to me in this time. Unfortunately, the rest of the world doesn't realize that fact is a shame. Even worse though, most gaming isn't that splendid of an event either and is rife with problems, but when it is brilliant, it is perfect and radiant. That we are taking the myths of old, and retelling them at the tables for others in a new direction is amazing to me. When I was done with my Bachelor's in History in 2002 and became a Professor in Humanities at a local Community College I was able to regroup my efforts and game even more. Gaming was even stronger in my town oddly, we had game shops again too.

In 2004, I entered into the Masters of Arthurian Studies program at the University of Wales at Llanbedr-Pont-Steffan. I had then realized that my years of gaming and research of myths came full circle in a way, because it was nearly twenty years earlier that I was first discovering both *and* that this degree is the ultimate gam-



er nerdy degree! For what better subject is there to symbolize our hobby than the tales of King Arthur? Over a thousand years ago, really more if you consider the original Celtic tales before the medieval variations, there were the countless tales of bold quests of heroic warriors, enchanted items, terrible monsters, strange lands, and endless adventure. Everything you find in basic fantasy gaming is first in the Arthurian tales or the 'Matter of Britain' as we often call it. It is *all* there already. I had noticed that my gaming and game-designing was completely bound by myth. Why create a completely fictional universe up when you have the most imaginative settings already envisioned by our ancestors? The problem is, gaming has

rarely ever done this right in places, or the cultures therein that are represented sadly.

Many years of endless game-designing never went anywhere for me. My play-test groups, and there were many, played for almost two decades loyally what became the now popular *Codex Celtarum*. It went through six or more drafts but was never final, and its parent rule system was now absent, so it was on its own. Due to a lack of data I at first took out the Celtic data of Gaul, Celtiberia and Galatia, now to my regret I still have that missing from the final version, but I do have plans to restore it. After being, apparently, the world's first and only graduate of the Masters of Arthurian Studies from the University of Wales





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Lampeter in 2007 strangely, the University had a crisis and had to close a year later. Unknown to me at the time was this crisis as I was preparing to gear up for my PhD in Celtic Studies a few years after, something I am doing now so many years later instead. To me, in my world, gaming and academics are inextricably bound together. They were from the very beginning.

My hope is that the Codices and the many adventure modules can attest to the perfect marriage of how gaming and myth can be fused together seamlessly after decades of trial and error. Each time these are used at the table, I feel the various mythic elements are being retold again in its own way with a new cast. That makes me proud and if the ancient storytellers knew and understood, they would be awfully pleased as well!

THE STORYTELLER & THE CASTLE KEEPER

When the storyteller sat to tell his or her tale or saga, the room went silent. Excitement was there and people chimed

in their input when a reference was made to another tale or character they understood. We do that after we acquire a body of work or a campaign. The storyteller had a rhythm to their talking. Study how a Gaelic *seanchaí* did their craft. They had a rhyme and a flow to their every word as they spoke. As the CK or GM speaks it isn't quite the same but everyone has their own style, often it is loose and informal. Each group has their own ritual or habits to begin the game, just as the night of epic storytelling had as well.

The Welsh storyteller was called a *cywyddwr* and filled the same function as the Irish *seanchaí*. Detailed plots, vivid colors and a very large repertoire of other stories and characters to draw upon were expected by the audience. This was a society in which there was no television, internet or radio, so the tales they told embodied everything the people saw as entertainment night after night. These story-tellers were honored. Today of course we have so much to compete with at the gaming table. Gaming has had its decline in the last few decades due to other media but it has seen

revival too in turn. The GM or CK has a tough role to fill in keeping their players happy often, or competing with other forms of distraction. You as the CK are the modern *seanchaí/cywyddwr*!

As with the traditional storyteller, the CK/GM's word was final once the flow of speech began. Even if the variant of the story or in our case rule dictation is changed, their word is considered almost sacred. In the end, the memory is what matters when the participant leaves. My players all have memories of our countless games/stories that go back decades that only we all share that no one else can understand. Other people can never understand, or ever will if they tried, just as those many audiences who sat around the storytellers in early times to hear the tales of great heroes. Rationalists try to ponder 'What does this matter?' 'How does this help anyone?' The same question can be turned back towards them as they sit in the theater watching their favorite movie or play. Has that experience helped anyone else or just them? I live in a bitter and cynical town. People here have always



been hostile towards this hobby. They were the first in line during the Witch-hunts against role-playing games in the 80s and guess who they targeted? Yes, me, not exclusively but I was among those in their sights. Oddly it wasn't until the early 90s that many sought to demonize me or recently due to local corrupt politics.

People love stories and myths but most never being raised or brought up to appreciate them, forgo and fail to understand them. Role-playing games to them only appear as 'games' and nothing else. Just nerds playing with dice around a table talking about intelligent things that most fail to understand. Most people would rather sit mindlessly and gaze at Reality TV instead or barhop. Role-playing games saved me from a terrible empty life and I know it may have thousands of others and I applaud it daily. Every time we sit together we generate a new tale. Even if the story is one that might be deemed poor or shabby in the eyes of the grandmasters of old of storytelling, we are at least trying. When you take part in a game at a table, you are carrying on, in a small way, an ancient way the continuation of storytellers that spun myths. Whether your character or NPCs are making it happen, the story is coming alive at the table, so be proud.

One thing I notice is that people who do without that element of the myth and story in their lives are usually unhappy. They are sour and foul tempered and never understand our hobby. The world is filled with volumes of myths, taken from cultures and lost civilizations around the globe. Fascinating ideas that can be used and adapted by any gamer willing to re-invent them with a new spin. I have run the Atlantis campaign now since 1987, delving deep into the world's myths, never running dry now for twenty-seven years! Just when my players think we have done everything, I come back with a new campaign that changes everything again. Take our world's myths, make them your own and create your own with them as well. See, there is no reason to be unhappy. The world is filled with stories that have gone silent. You have just to find them and make them speak again.

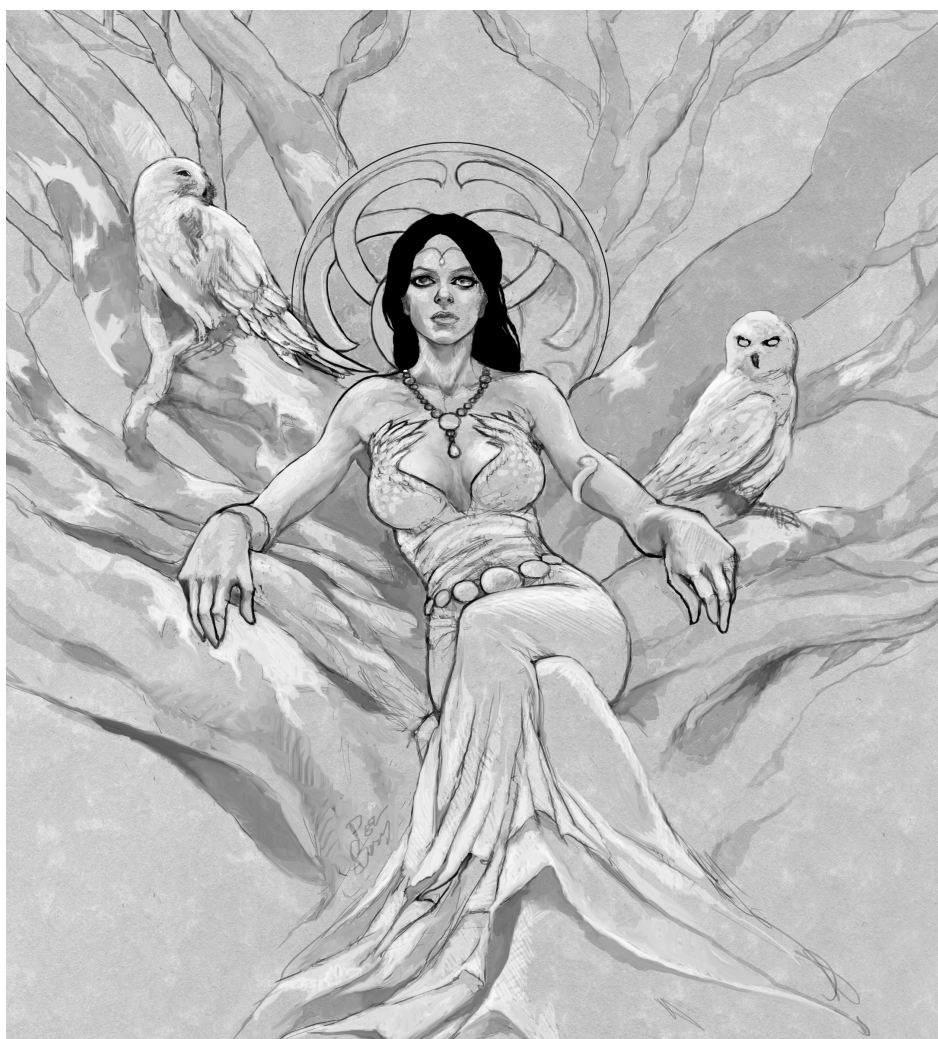
If you do enough research amid the popular fiction or even gaming fiction, you will find where ancient mythology has been

borrowed from by modern authors. Old ideas were altered, readapted and lines crossed in a new way, or simply kept the same. Modern audiences generally don't seem to be as well-read in the ancient myths as one would expect, and so many authors can plunder them readily knowing that they can get away with being considered 'original'. As rational and logical as we try to be, even robotic, it is Human Nature to include myths in our lives. Not necessarily to believe in them, but to tell and listen to them and to have them as a part of our world. The majority of our time as Hominids spent on this planet has been huddled around warm fires with company being told stories to comfort us. It is only natural to want more of it.

People obviously still seek these stories, for the Fantasy genre is still as popular as ever, and being a 'nerd' today is suddenly considered mainstream. I remember when it wasn't and how we were marginalized and paradoxically counted as being 'dumb' for being smart or intelligent by the rest.

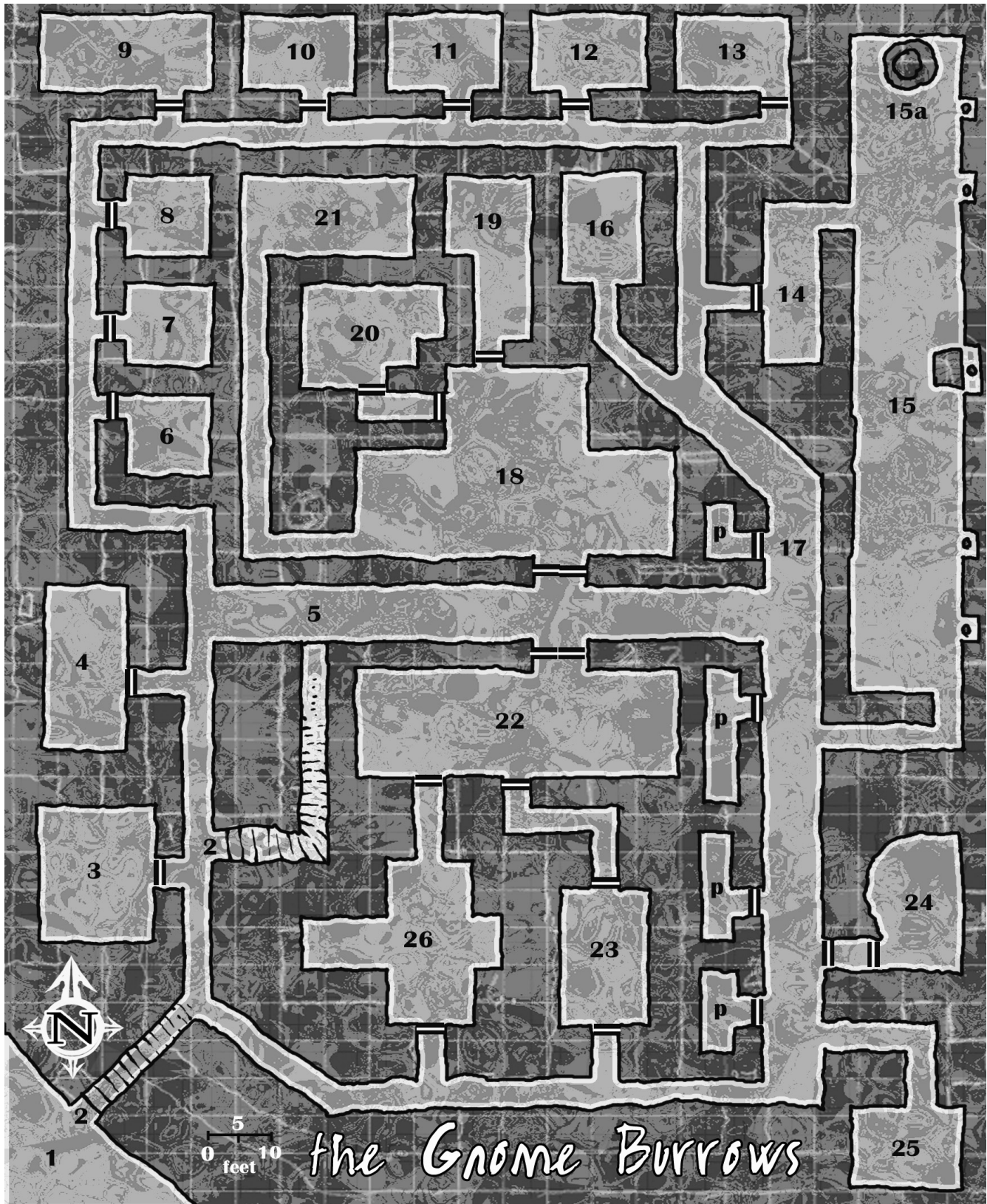
That undercurrent still exists today by a crowd that takes part in the same hobby that we do, they just don't know it when they watch the same movies or think they are nerds by watching *The Big Bang Theory* and 'getting' some of the jokes.

When we game I make it worth the effort. A long week's hard work for some, this is the reward. Life is too short for a bad game, or an awful gaming experience. Make the game brilliant. Be larger than life and over the top. Tell the story grand and its NPCs as real as you can, or monstrous. The idea is to get away from this world and be in another for a time, just like the storytellers were seeking to do when they told us their tales. The only difference is that we have dice and rules and we participate as an audience. So, make that involvement worth the time and the myth you are creating epic. Not everyone can be Arthur, Cúchulain or Boudica or do deeds always as mighty, but when you do, make them memorable.



Maps on the Fly

by Jason Walton



AMAZING ADVENTURES

AMAZING ADVENTURES COMPANION PREVIEW

by Jason Vey



The forthcoming *Amazing Adventures Companion* will feature a number of new rules, subsystems, guidelines and toys to blow the doors off of your campaign. Whether you want to adventure in the Wild (or Weird) West, have a Victorian Steampunk campaign, portray modern gangsters facing off against vampires in a seedy Mexican bar, run stories set in World War I or II, or even pull out street level superhero games, the Companion will give you what you need.

The goal with the Companion is to make *Amazing Adventures* your go-to game for any sort of modern campaign you wish to run using the SIEGE Engine. To this end, we thought it would be fun to give you all a sneak peek at what's to come by including here one of our new character classes: The Gunslinger.

THE GUNSLINGER

Billy the Kid, Doc Holliday, Annie Oakley, and Wild Bill Hickok are classic examples of the gunslinger, the lawman or desperado who makes his way in the world by force of arms, his best friend -- his trusty handgun. Gunslingers come from all walks of life; some are staunch defenders of law, life, and liberty; others are desperate rogues out to take what they can at the expense of others. The only thing that all have in common is that their unique skills set tends to set them outside of normal society. Most gunslingers surround themselves with similar folk—gamblers, desperadoes, other lawmen. They can be mob enforcers or bodyguards to the rich and famous.

There are ways, however, for gunslingers to make their way in the world honestly—their fast-draw, shoot from the hip, and deadeye shot abilities make them perfectly suited for the exhibition shooter circuit, and gunslingers can be found amongst Olympic athletes and at Wild West and

firearms exhibitions shows all over the world. Indeed, the Gunslinger need not even be confined to the Old West. Many of the Hong Kong action films of John Woo feature modern gunslinging cops and outlaws. The utility of this class is limited only by your imagination!



GUNSLINGER ABILITIES

FAST DRAW (Dex): The Gunslinger may add his Dexterity bonus to an initiative roll when he draws a weapon as part of initiative. At 5th level, he adds an additional +1 to his initiative roll, and at 10th level, he adds +2.

DEADEYE SHOT: Even when he’s not engaged in duels at high noon, a gunslinger can make a living with his pistoleering skills; one never knows when a shot that takes out a chandelier can save the day. At 2nd level, Gunslingers gain a +1 to hit with a handgun at ranges of less than 30 feet. At 4th level, the Gunslinger reduces all range penalties for hitting with a handgun by half. At 7th level, when using a handgun, the Gunslinger ignores any cover bonuses the target gains to AC. At 10th level, the Gunslinger gains an extra shot per round with a handgun. This is in addition to his Shoot from the Hip ability. At 12th level and every three levels thereafter, the Gunslinger may fire one extra (cumulative) bullet at a single target with one attack roll, which may not be combined with the extra shot granted at 10th level.

SHOOT FROM THE HIP (Dex): At 3rd Level, the Gunslinger may make a snap shot as his first attack in a combat. This shot must be taken against a target that has not yet acted, and gains no bonuses (not even the gunslinger’s BtH bonus, nor the weapon’s Accuracy bonus), but is in addition to any normal attacks in a round. Thus, if a gunslinger’s weapon has a Rate of Fire of 2, he may use Shoot from the Hip as his first shot in a battle, provided his intended target has not yet acted. He then may take his two additional shots as normal. At 5th level, the Gunslinger may add the weapon’s accuracy bonus to this shot. At 10th level, the Gunslinger may add half his BtH bonus to this shot.

TWO-FISTED (Dex): At 3rd level, Gunslingers can fight with a weapon in each hand, so long as each weapon can be wielded in one hand; this includes handguns and melee weapons. This ability allows the character to make an extra attack each round with the “off-hand” weapon. Characters with this ability suffer a -3 penalty with each hand at 3rd level rather than -3/-6 (per AA, p.154). At 7th level, this penalty decreases to -2. At 10th level it decreases to -1. At 15th level, the

character has no penalty for two-weapon combat. This ability cannot be used with perform Deadeye Shot or Shoot from the Hip (though one could shoot from the hip and draw a second firearm next round).

FAVORED WEAPON: At 4th level, the Gunslinger chooses one firearm and gives it a name (“Betsy,” “Vera,” etc.) With this weapon he gains a +1 bonus to hit and damage. At 6th level, this bonus increases to +2. At 10th level, the bonus is +3.

At 12th level, the Gunslinger may name a second gun, gaining +3 to hit and damage with that weapon.

Note: This ability applies to a *specific gun*, not a type or make. When using a weapon of the same make as their favored weapon, (any Colt Peacemaker, for example, as opposed to Brenda, the Gunslinger’s Peacemaker), the Gunslinger still has an advantage, but not quite as much of one—Favored weapon bonuses when using the same make of weapons as the Gunslinger’s favored weapon are at half normal (round up). Thus, a 5th-level gunslinger that has a favored Peacemaker gains +2 to hit and damage when using that revolver; using any other Colt Peacemaker will see him at +1. While he knows all Peacemakers front to back, not all are Brenda.

ADVERSARY: At 6th level, the Gunslinger has gained enough of a reputation to draw the ire of an organization whose affiliates he has plagued too often. However, this works to the Gunslinger’s advantage, as he becomes intimately familiar with their signs, tactics, and operations. When

combating or dealing with the organization, the Gunslinger gains a +2 bonus to all checks, including to hit rolls in combat, and to his AC against their agents. The organization should be specific, but need not be world-spanning or infamous. For example, Wyatt Earp could have “The Clantons, a local gang operating in the Arizona Territory,” while a veteran of the Indian Wars might have, “The Sioux Nation.” Game Masters should ensure the Adversary is appropriate to both the character and the campaign.

THE GUNSLINGER

Prime Attribute: Dexterity

Hit Die: d6

Weapons Allowed: One-handed melee weapons, pistols, rifles.

Abilities: Adversary, Deadeye Shot, Fast Draw, Favored Weapon, Shoot from the Hip, Two-Fisted

Level	HD	BtH	EPP
1	6hp	0	0
2	d6	+1	1,001
3	d6	+1	2,501
4	d6	+2	7,001
5	d6	+2	14,501
6	d6	+3	29,001
7	d6	+3	58,001
8	d6	+4	115,001
9	d6	+4	230,001
10	d6	+5	460,001
11	+3	+5	690,001
12	+3	+6	920,001
+1	+3	+1/2	+ 230,001



KNIGHTS...MADE TO ORDER

Gerald L. Buldak

PART 1: IN A SERIES OF RUMINATIONS ON APPROACHING THE CHARACTER CLASSES

Given its importance in the *Fields of Battle* boxed set in particular, the inclusion of the Knight as one of the core character classes in *Castles & Crusades* allows players a multitude of interesting options that can make such a character totally unique from all the other classes that specialize in melee combat. Often times, when one thinks of a knight, it usually isn't as a loner. The knight is more frequently part of some type of order. Going back to the earliest FRPG campaign settings, one doesn't have to look very hard to find knightly orders. Similarly, one can also go back through historical accounts to find knightly orders in our own world. So that presents us with an obvious question: how can we as gamers make our own unique knightly orders, either for our own homebrew campaign settings, or to personalize our favorite published setting? Following are some guidelines I have used in the creation of knightly orders of my own. My creation process is a multi-step one that answers a variety of questions about the order and those who populate it.

- **Step 1:** Determine whom or what the knights serve
- **Step 2:** Determine the general role of the knights to their master
- **Step 3:** Determine whether or not a race predominates within the order
- **Step 4:** Determine what type of mount the order favors
- **Step 5:** Determine specialized equipment and prerequisites (if any)
- **Step 6:** Establish the code of conduct for the order

STEP 1: WHOM DO YOU SERVE?

The choices for this question are myriad. Do you serve some minor noble in a lawless border territory, or do you serve the king himself? Do you serve your race against an ancient foe? Perhaps you serve

some deity, but don't have the blessing of the deity itself to be a paladin. You may be the hired muscle of a powerful NPC who, for whatever reason, is not a part of the nobility. You may be a free agent, so to speak as well. You might have left your order for whatever reason, or were kicked out but you still live your life by the code. They took away your title, but couldn't take away your knowledge.

Whoever your master, your mission is clear. You are trained in the intricacies of mounted combat. Therefore, you're going to ultimately be the means of your master to project force rapidly either for expansionist motives, or to defend against a threat. As such, your training and requirements to remain a viable fighting force are different (and, coincidentally, much more expensive than the common fighter or foot soldier).

STEP 2: WHAT'S YOUR ROLE IN THE ORDER?

Once the master/employer has been determined, the next consideration that needs to be made is the role of the order to the master. Are they simply well paid soldiers who specialize in mounted combat? Are they specially tasked (and equipped) against one particular type of foe? Whatever the case, an employer does not an order make. Consider the following:

SERVICE OF A NOBLE (OR IGNOBLE) NPC OR STATE

In the service of some lord, whether it's a lowly baron, a strange wizard or an all-powerful demi-god of an emperor, service can fall into two general categories: defensive vs. offensive. If you're a defensive knight, you may find yourself leading the foot soldiers that defend a keep or a region or even a road. The knights may be the personal bodyguards of the lord himself, or they may serve to protect various diplomats from other sovereign states. Whatever the case, there is a tangible object or ideal that they serve to protect.

Knights tasked to offensive purposes, on the other hand, serve as an extension of the liege's hand. Perhaps their role is to destroy a specific type of enemy. The table provided within the description of the

+3 Bane weapons in M&T (p. 103, 3rd printing) provides a good starting point for this. The enemy may be a particular race; it may be a specific class of NPCs, i.e. spellcasters. It could also exist to discourage outsiders from entering an area. Their role isn't so much to lead defenders, but to eliminate a problem before it ever sees dismounted defenders.

SERVICE OF A RELIGION OR DEITY

Knights in service of a particular deity or religion aren't unheard of by any stretch of the imagination. In a fantasy RPG setting, one might be tempted to ask why not simply use paladins for this task. Thinking about this problem from an historical context (gaming, not real-life history, that is), the paladin class was traditionally the most difficult one to play in terms of prerequisites and the restrictions placed on the class. This idea could lead one to think of a sort of hierarchy in a religious army in which the clerics serve as the generals, commanding whole armies; the paladins act as colonels and majors, commanding regiments within the armies; the knights would serve as both captains within the regiments as well as, possibly even the rank-and-file soldiers. Higher-level knights would act as captains, while the lower-level knights would serve as the soldiers. Fighting in the name of a deity, after all, begs armies of a higher social standing than the common rabble that might be found defending any old keep. The knight's mounted combat abilities lend themselves well for these purposes, especially in terms of being able to rapidly move from point to point in the name of converting the nonbelievers.

If knights are to be used for defensive purposes for a religion, there are a variety of things that can be the objects of the knights' protection. Perhaps a holy site or high temple of a religion would be worthy of such protection. Think about the Swiss Guard that protects Vatican City and the Pope. Protection of a holy relic is another task; consider accounts of the Knights Templar and the Holy Grail. Perhaps the relic is in a specific location and the knights protect the site. Conversely, the relic can be lost and the purpose of



the order is to retrieve it. They can also serve as bodyguards for the clergy as well.

STEP 3: WHO'S IN THE ORDER?

Is the knightly order one that is exclusive to a specific race, or is it racially integrated to one extent or another? The ability to answer this question depends on how you handled steps one and two. If the purpose of the order is service to a specific race, then the likelihood of inclusion of other races will be relatively low. An order of elven knights tasked to defend its stronghold against hobgoblins would not be too inclined to allow dwarves or halflings into the order, except on the rare honorary basis. An order of knights that, on the other hand, exists to defend the border territories of a kingdom against a neighboring state may be made up of primarily humans (assuming that the kingdom is a human one), but may also allow membership of other races that it deems useful to the purpose of the order.

STEP 4: WHAT'S YOUR RIDE?

The hallmark of the knight is the ability to fight while mounted. In many ways, this is where the process of order creation becomes really fun. Most orders will likely use some type of warhorse, but they don't necessarily have to. Halfling knights might favor some war-dogs or perhaps domesticated boars. Aquatic elves may prefer some type of large, domesticated fish or other environment-specific creature. Gray elves, high in their mountainous societies, could prefer gryffons, hippogriffs or even pegasi as their mounts of choice. Obviously, if such a novel type of mount is chosen (as well it should be), the mounted combat class abilities of the knight need to be adjusted accordingly. Those adjustments are the fodder of another article.

STEP 5: THE TOOLS OF THE TRADE

While most knights starting out in the game would simply have some type of mundane armor or weapon, there's no reason why an enterprising player and CK can't come up with some novel tools of the trade to make that order memorable. The use of the above-referenced Bane weapons comprise but one simple way of accomplishing this. If an order has a specific enemy, providing that order with weapons specifically tasked to combating such foes is a no-brainer. Sim-

ilarly, providing an order with something defensive to combat a specific foe also makes sense. If you are crafting an order of knights tasked to fight spellcasters, a suit of Armor of Spell Resistance would make sense.

Of course, if such unique items should come into play, then it's totally acceptable to impose prerequisites for membership, as well as some measure of hierarchy on the order, such that 1st - and 2nd - level knights, or squires, must first prove themselves to the order using whatever meager equipment they can either piece together on their own or as provided by the order. Upon reaching 3rd-level, they attain the title of knight and, as rewards, are provided with the items that symbolize membership.

Similarly, it's entirely acceptable to provide restrictions on items that can be used by members of the order. If an order provides its members with specialized equipment, it is within its rights to limit members to only use issued equipment. In the early stages, this could provide great incentive for the knight to join the order. As the knight progresses, however, especially in Monty Haul-type campaigns, the limitation of the order becomes evident when that character isn't allowed to use the cool items picked up in the course of adventuring. Imagine the disappointment at not being able to wield that neat-looking vorpal sword.

STEP 6: HOW TO CONDUCT ONESELF

The final step in general order creation involves the determination of the order's code of conduct. The *Players Handbook* contains an extensive list (p. 29, 4th printing) of the typical code of conduct. Not all knightly orders have the same sets of values. A knight of an evil order may not be particularly inclined toward the virtues of Humility or Honor, for example. To add flavor to a knightly order, I typically pick only a few of these and focus on them for role playing purposes. I choose around 4 to 8, or create some of my own, and emphasize them. Paring the list of

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essential virtues to a few, while relegating the others from the list to a secondary (or non-existent) role, generally makes role playing the character a less daunting task and also makes those characters generally far more interesting than trying to play a generic knight that adheres to all of the virtues in the list in the PHB.

DENOUEMENT: BACKGROUND AND HISTORY OF THE ORDER

Once these steps have been completed, one can start thinking about the history and background of the order. This part becomes a bit more complicated, but can be quite rewarding. Understand that this step isn't necessary in the creation of a new order, but will help as far as integrating the order into the world. It may provide inspiration for new adventures, in addition to interesting NPCs and, eventually PCs, into a game. For the CK crafting a homebrew campaign setting, or even working from a published setting, the creation of new orders of knighthood can serve as inspiration for either new players joining the game, or veterans who need to replace fallen characters. Following are some examples of orders that I use in my homebrew setting, as well as one that is tailored to Aihrde.

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ORDER OF THE BLAZING FORGE

Predominant Race	Human
Preferred Mount	Warhorse, heavy
Order Equipment	+2 Flaming axe
Prerequisites	AL: LG or LN; STR 16; CON 14; Religion: Hephaestus
Order Enemies	Titans
	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Death is always preferable to dishonor.2. In all things, honesty must always prevail, no matter the cost to the knight.
Code of Conduct	<ol style="list-style-type: none">3. A knight is responsible for maintaining his or her armor and weapons.4. Obedience to one's superiors, the Paladins and Clerics of Hephaestus, must always be shown.5. Titans are to be attacked on sight, without fear of one's own mortality.

DESCRIPTION

Knights of Hephaestus are, first and foremost, expert blacksmiths. Their knowledge of working metal is second to none, and they are proud of it. Keeps of the Order of the Blazing Forge are renowned as places to bring items for repair that other smiths will not touch. The martial training areas are as large as the smithies in such keeps. When they are outside of their keeps, adventuring on behalf of the order, they occupy their time by volunteering in the shop of the local smith, foregoing any pay or compensation for their time. Such service is a mark of high regard for the smith, and has led to smiths around the world attempting repay the favor by acting as eyes and ears for the order. They will freely share requested information with any Knight of the Blazing Forge who identifies himself as such.

GAMEPLAY

Knights of the Order of the Blazing Forge are expert smiths. They gain +2 to all smithy checks (including armorer and weapon-smithing). They also gain +2 to any charisma-based checks dealing with any blacksmith outside of the order. When requesting specific information regarding individuals who have attracted the interest of the order, the smiths will automatically share such information. In combat, their preferred weapons are axes and hammers; they favor enchanted flaming weapons. As followers of Hephaestus, they also gain the +2 bonus to saving throws vs. fire and magical fire attacks.

For more information on benefits of service to Hephaestus, see *Of Gods & Monsters* (TLG 8017) pp. 89-90.

KNIGHTS OF THE ORDER OF THE MAGESLAYER

Predominant Race	Human
Preferred Mount	Warhorse, Heavy
Order Equipment	Expert full plate armor (true lead-infused) and shield, Spellcaster Bane Longsword +3, Spellcaster Bane Lance +3
Prerequisites	AL: Non-evil; STR 13; CHA 16
Order Enemies	Evil spellcasters (arcane and divine)
	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Death is always preferable to dishonor.2. Enemy spellcasters must be eliminated, regardless of the minions that protect them.3. The innocent must be protected.
Code of Conduct	<ol style="list-style-type: none">4. Tyrants must not be allowed to use the defenseless as shields.5. Natural deposits of true lead are more valuable than gold; they must be protected at all costs.6. Domesticated animals must not be mistreated nor allowed to be mistreated.7. Members of the Order are prohibited from using any arms or armor not provided by the order.8. Members must give 20% of any treasure they find to the order.

DESCRIPTION

In times past, a popular king was overthrown by a mad usurper, with the help of a cabal of evil spellcasters. The usurper thought that he had killed the king's entire family, but he missed a cousin who would become the leader of the resistance that would eventually reclaim the throne. The cousin's keep guarded a mine that was rich with true lead, an alchemical substance that absorbs magical energy. Knowing that he would eventually have to deal with the cabal of spellcasters, the resistance leader ordered his chief armorer to imbue the true lead into suits of full plate armor, as well as paint for shields. The substance gave the armor and shields a unique blue tint and, more importantly, protected its wearer from all spells cast at him. With the help of the resistance army to distract the foot soldiers of the usurper, the Mageslayer Knights were able to eliminate the cabal of spellcasters. When the usurper was overthrown, the new king decreed that the Order would persist, and has become the elite order of the kingdom.



GAMEPLAY

A Mageslayer knight is always on the hunt for evil spellcasters. His high charisma allows him to play off the popular distrust of spellcasters to get information on their activities. Members of the Order are issued a +3 Spellcaster-bane Longsword and Lance, a set of custom-made (expert) full-plate armor (+9 AC) and a great helm (+7 AC) that have both been made of true lead-infused steel and a large wooden shield (+1) painted with true lead-imbued paint. The armor effectively provides the wearer with immunity to all spells. The knight's warhorse is also provided with barding made from the same material as the knight's armor. These knights represent the elite servants of the crown, and enjoy a certain level of celebrity among the common folk of the kingdom. As a rule, their generosity with the commoners is among their most important tools for obtaining crucial information on their quarry. They are also, however, the object of disdain from those whose pride was wounded when they were deemed unacceptable for the Order. The high percentage contribution covers the cost of weapons and armor for the Order.

Thanks to Robert "Serleran" Doyel for providing alchemical inspiration.

KNIGHTS OF THE GRYFFON WING

Predominant Race Elves (High); Half-elf

Preferred Mount Gryffon (or Hippogriff)

Order Equipment Boots of Feather Fall, Elven Chain Armor, +3 Sylvan Blade

Prerequisites AL: Any non-evil; DEX 16; STR 13; CHA 13

Order Enemies Orcs; goblinoids

1. Death is preferable to dishonor.
2. A knight's mount is a noble creature with pride of its own; the knight shall not deny his mount an honorable kill.
3. A knight's mount is a physical extension of the knight himself; the knight shall make sure his mount is tended to before himself.
4. The defenseless are to be considered as sacred and should be protected as such.
5. The knight shall provide whatever assistance he is able when the impoverished seek alms.
6. The knight shall exemplify the highest moral conduct at all times.
7. Orcs, goblinoids and any other defilers of the world are to be attacked on sight, preferably from above to demoralize.

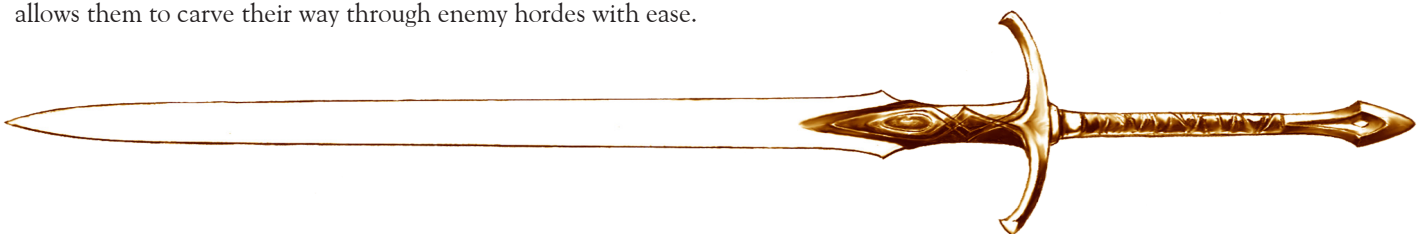
Code of Conduct

DESCRIPTION

The Knights of the Gryffon Wing are the chief defenders of an elven nation that has, in addition to verdant forests, high mountain peaks that sustain large populations of gryffons or hippogriffs. The inherent nobility of the elves has allowed them over the millennia to domesticate the flying creatures to the extent that they willingly serve as mounts. A favorite tactic of the knights, attacking from the air, is to allow their predator mounts to attack from a dive. The mount's shriek just before it attacks, strikes fear into the enemy. The knights will attack any orcs, goblins, hobgoblins, bugbears and kobolds for no better reason than simply what they are, for the misery they've wrought on the world. To not do so constitutes the highest dishonor of the knight, his Order and the kingdom. Such a thought is hateful to the knight.

GAMEPLAY

To be able to ride a flying mount, the knight must have outstanding dexterity as well as considerable strength. Where most other knights are able to manage land-borne mounts, the Knights of the Gryffon Wing cannot; their riding abilities are limited to their flying mount only. All Knights of the Gryffon Wing are equipped with Boots of Feather Fall on the odd chance they do fall off their mount while in flight. While falling is not considered dishonorable, it is certainly embarrassing, and should other knights find out about the fall, will subject the offender to merciless ribbing. The Elven Chain (total +10 AC) is light enough to provide minimal impact to the flying abilities of the mount, while still protecting the knight. The Sylvan Blade with which the knights are equipped allows them to carve their way through enemy hordes with ease.



ORDER OF THE JUSTICE MAKER

Predominant Race Human

Preferred Mount Warhorse, heavy

Order Equipment +2 Flaming spear; +2 Shield (Blinding)

Prerequisites AL: LG or LN; STR 14; CON 14; CHA 16; Religion: Corthain

Order Enemies Worshippers of Thorax

1. Death is preferable to dishonor always.
2. In all things, justice must always prevail, no matter the cost to the knight.
3. The law of the land in which the knight finds himself must be honored.
4. The word of Corthain must be advanced whenever possible.
5. Obedience to one's superiors, the Paladins and Clerics of Corthain, must always be shown.
6. The forces of Thorax are to be attacked on sight, without fear of one's own mortality.
7. The knight's very existence is in service to Corthain; this governs his actions, his sense of justice, and his fearlessness in the face of certain death.

Code of Conduct

DESCRIPTION

When the faithful of Corthain enter battle against the forces of Thorax, they don't do so with just any common rabble. In supreme tribute to their patron, the followers of Corthain insist that those who take up the blade in his name be the finest of specimens in all regards. In addition to being physical exemplars and members of the nobility, Knights of the Order of the Justice Maker are fanatical followers of Corthain. They are subservient to their Captains, the Paladins of Corthain, as well as the generals who command them, the Clerics, as they believe that Corthain exerts his influence through these holy individuals who must pass tests of faith to which the knights are not forced to submit. In times of peace, knights find themselves in the role of magistrate, constable, jailer, bailiff or the like. They are enforcers of the law and stewards of justice, as mandated by the law of Corthain. They may be found in the employ of a paladin or cleric of Corthain, or they may be an independent nobleman. However, when summoned, they always fall in under the command of a paladin, of which many paladins' units are commanded by clerics.

GAMEPLAY

Knights of the Order of the Justice Maker will not tolerate any iniquity. Their devotion to justice at all costs makes them generally respected, if not occasionally resented by those who feel cheated by the powers that be. While not bound by the same requirements of absolute truthfulness to which clerics and paladins must adhere, they do their utmost to live up to this code. They make up the front line of holy battle in Corthain's name. They are fierce combatants, entering with total valor and fighting to the death. When confronted by forces of Thorax, they rush to attack the enemy on sight. Knights lead with their blinding shields before they attack. While they may use enchanted swords and armor, they prefer using their enchanted spears, in honor of Corthain, whenever possible. The spears are used entirely as melee weapons, and are not allowed to be thrown. If they use enchanted swords, they favor Flaming Swords, as well as armor granting them resistance to fire. They make the standard knightly contribution to their order as per the Players Handbook.

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a 1st level adventure for Castles & Crusades

by Eric Piper

INTRODUCTION



his is an introductory adventure for players that may be new to the Castles & Crusades game system, or for those enterprising

Castle Keepers that wish to have a short two hour adventure to plug into their current campaign or run at a game convention. Written for 1st level characters, it should prove challenging to players in a number of areas. As any adventure should contain, there are obstacles of various natures, from intrigue to combat, and everything in between, with enough variety to spotlight the abilities of each character at the table.

THE CLASSIC ADVENTURE SYNOPSIS

The Blacktooth Ridge region has long been shadowed by those with evil intent, including all manner of men and monster. In this adventure, players investigate the mysterious abductions of young women from the local thorpe of Stonebrook; characters discover that this is the work of a cult of vile Ornduhl worshippers that have entrenched themselves in the area, hiding in a secret underground temple nearby. The cult is lead by a local cleric who by day pretends to be a good priest of Ore-tsar, but by night leads vile rituals in hopes to bring back the evil god Ornduhl into the world. Characters ultimately discover and infiltrate the cult's secret lair in an attempt to thwart a night of grisly sacrifice.

FROM HRUSET TO MALFORTEN

Initially, this adventure was written as a prequel or supplement to the adventure *The Rising Knight*, by Troll Lord Games, and offering more adventuring opportunity in that area. And just like the beginning of that adventure, the players were actually told that they were indeed heading off to Malforten from Hruset in response to the rumors of the Gnoll marauder Grishnak and his goblin band. Some even believed themselves to be playing the Rising Knight as the beginning



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introduction to this adventure was intentionally identical, to the extent of informing them that the gang is terrorizing and extorting the village of Malforten and the Empress has put a handsome bounty on Grishnak's head. Certainly, any band of adventurers out to make a name for themselves would do well to accept such an offer and ingratiate themselves to the Empress and local lords, not to mention the sizable coin that

would accompany success! So players head off on one adventure, and get sidetracked by something immediately more pressing, forcing a decision to go forward to Malforten or to handle the mysterious abductions of the young women from Stonebrook. Experienced players find this a pleasant and unexpected surprise, and when grafted onto the *Rising Knight* adventure, it lends a greater sandbox feel for the area.



An alternative beginning can be utilized if the CK would rather have the players discover this adventure on the return from Malforten, or perhaps prefers to use this material without the reference to Malforten and the Rising Knight adventure at all. In this case, the CK can create his or her own reasons the players are traveling the Western Way. It is the Blacktooth Ridge region after all and adventures abound!

ON THE ROAD

Despite the wild country, scattered thorpes and hamlets can be seen along the road, and occasionally, small roadside shrines and way temples. Of course, through the trees one can sometimes spot crumbling ruins, remnants of the ancient Aenochians.

STONEBROOK CHANTRY, TEMPLE OF ORE-TSAR

It isn't long before the party passes a Chantry of Ore-tsar, on the north side of the road. It rests upon a slight hill, encroached on all sides by the forest. They may well see priests tending the yard and wish to speak with them. Either way, the priests will take notice of them, and give a friendly wave and go back about their work.

The Chantry is run by Tobias, a cleric with an evil secret. Unknown to the other clergy, he is the master of a local cult to the dark chaos god Ornduhl. He wears an Amulet of Alignment Misdirection, so any spells, including the paladin's ability to detect evil, will not be accurate. A secret entrance in his personal study leads to the underground temple to Ornduhl.

This short adventure does not flesh out all of the priests that reside in the Chantry, and the CK is encouraged to do so.

THE VILLAGE OF STONEBROOK

The small hamlet has been cursed, so they say. A powerful blanket of fear and foreboding lies over it that the PC's can feel. The people bar their doors and shutters, looking fearfully at the PC's, and mothers glance worriedly as they usher their children indoors. In fact, barely a soul can be seen out and about. An uneasy silence hangs in the air. If the PC's attempt to explain who they are or attempt to quell the fears of the villagers, a short and stout man named Berl the Booter will reluc-

tantly tell the characters that the town is under the influence of some sort of curse. Berl's eyes are red and swollen from obvious crying, and he seems to bear the weight of tremendous loss.

"Twernt but a night agoe that we was attacked, ya see. Well, attacked ain't right exactly lords. No sirs. Twas more like a shadow came upon us in our sleep last night, and stole away our children and kinfolk. Not the first time either, but the second time it was. The second time in less than a month, as it were. Folks is mightily affrighted, you know, and a grievin' for their loved ones. Poor Beth and Ilost our daughter Egrette and we're mad with grief. Sorry if this wasn't the greeting you Lords were looking for."

If the players ask to speak to Beth or Berl about the abductions for more detail, they haven't much to add, other than the fact that two other girls from the hamlet have been taken in the night, and the time before last, only two had been taken, both young women. They can show the players the bedroom that their daughter Egrette slept in; her bedroom has a window near the foot of her bed.

DETECTIVE WORK!

1. If characters search the ground outside and make a tracking check, they will notice the grass pressed down and boot heel marks in the soil.
2. A second check at CL2 reveals that it was two individuals, and small heel marks strike the surface of the soil and are dragged back away from the window and abruptly disappear, while the boot prints sink deeper into the ground and exit into the wood line.
3. A Wisdom or Intelligence Siege Check will reveal claw marks across the sill where Egrette attempted to hold on.
4. If the characters search the wood line, they will find a small gold medallion with a strange symbol upon it, describing an embossed oval with a crescent above it, like horns rising from a head. (symbol of Ornduhl). The medallion hangs from a leather cord, snapped from the struggle.

It emanates evil, and a detect magic spell will reveal that it acts as an **Amulet of Protection against Good**. The players can make an Intelligence check at CL3 to recognize the symbol. Clerics gain a +5 to this check due to their religious training. If characters don't recognize the symbol, they may want to ask the priests at the Stonebrook Chantry down the road.

5. The tracks will head west, following the road but keeping just beyond the wood line, and lead directly to the ruins of an old Way Temple, remnants of ancient Aenochia.

THE WAY TEMPLE RUINS

Several hundred yards further east along the road, the characters will see the ruins of an ancient way shrine, broken and crumbling about twenty yards north of the road, nearly hidden within a copse of trees.

1. A tracking check (CL2) will indicate that human tracks go east and west following the road, through the woods and to the shrine ruins.
2. An additional track (CL4) will indicate several tracks have recently come from the road itself and to the shrine within the last few days.
3. Faded runic symbols decorate the temple structure, and a CL3 Intelligence check reveals that it had been dedicated to a goddess called Kora, protector of wayfarers in the ancient Aenochian pantheon.

The back wall, the only one fully intact, has a inset stone sill along the top, lined with statues of angelic and demonic beings in various states of combat. In what would have been the rear center of the shrine there is a square, white stone pedestal, 5x5 ft, and 3ft high. Upon it rests a broken statue of what may have once been a beautiful woman, but time has eroded it. Here, a gargoyle poses, enslaved by the cult to watch the entrance for intruders. **CK Note!** Be careful not to clue the players into the fact that the gargoyle is there. Players are intuitive and can tell by changes in your description and tone whether or not a danger lurks there. They will be wary of danger as they approach, so gloss over the details of the temple ruins as if it is unimportant.



If characters are wary, a CL10 check will reveal him; it remains still, watching the progress of the characters. It will wait until an opportune moment, most likely attacking when the players have begun to descend the ladder and send them falling to their death.

A Secret Door

Searching the pedestal may reveal a secret entrance. A wisdom siege check (CLO) reveals scraping along the stone to the front of the statue, and two grooves cut into the surface.

By simply pushing the back of the pedestal, the players will reveal a trap door with an inset brass ring in the center.

DOWN WE GO!

A ladder of iron rungs projects from the stone shaft, leading down into the darkness. The shaft is fifty feet deep, and eight feet wide. Once the characters begin descending, they will be attacked by the gargoyle. If the characters choose to do anything other than hold on to the ladder rungs, they must make a dexterity or strength (player's choice) siege check or fall. (Falling does 1d6 per 10 feet). Each time a character is struck for damage, they must make another check to avoid falling, with the CL equal to the damage received. (i.e. a character receiving 5 points of damage equates to a CL 5 siege check). Depending on the circumstances, the CK should allow the player to use dexterity, strength, or even constitution to avoid falling. In the case of constitution, the character is simply exhibiting high pain tolerance and the ability to withstand the blow.

1. **Foyer-** At the bottom, on a landing within a square 20x30 rough hewn chamber, there is an archway on the west wall, dimly lit with hanging oil lamps. There is a large decorative rug in the middle of the room disguising a wide pit trap. Any character crossing the rug area will fall into the ghoulish pits below unless a save vs. dexterity is made (CL2 due to the rug entangling the legs as the character drops). **CK Note!** It is imperative to keep a poker face when describing the room, especially the rug in the center. You have to intentionally gloss over the description, especially careful to not place any emphasis on

the rug description, or the players will immediately know it is a trap.

Players may or may not have the element of surprise. The battle with the gargoyle may have alerted one of the cultists that the party is present (1 on a d6). If the players actually fall to the bottom of the ladder, especially if in plate armor, the chance rises to a 1 or 2 on a d6. The fact that chance favors the characters is due to the fact that the majority of cultists are involved in a ritual sacrifice in the main temple room when the characters gain entry.

2. **Preparation Chamber-** Stone stairs descend to a preparation chamber, which has a fire-pit, a well, a large wooden tub for bathing, a wardrobe closet, and some plain furniture.
3. **Privy** - these two chambers are the lavatory for cult members. It does not smell pleasant.
4. **Acolyte Quarters-** for the initiated new priests of Ornduhl. These quarters are lavishly furnished with tapestries, decorative rugs, and décor. The beds are down mattresses and have silk sheets. There is a 1 in 6 chance a drugged young woman is tied or chained in the room. The CK should feel free to add minor items of value in the priests' personal chests, including journals or letters that may add intrigue and clues to future adventures as the characters seek out the cult's origin.
- 4b. **Net Trap!** Players roll a Dex Siege Check or get caught by a weighted net that drops from the ceiling.
5. **Kitchen-** The kitchen is well lit with hanging lanterns, and a giant cauldron is bubbling with a questionable soup. It is a rank vile odor, and checking it's contents reveals human body parts. A door leads to the meat storage locker.

5a. **Meatlocker-** this grisly scene will make the strongest characters grow weak with horror. Corpses hang, butchered like animals, with dismembered limbs lying on butcher blocks. This is part of the priests' evil rituals involving cannibalism. Characters must save vs. Charisma at a CL3 or go into a stupor of shock for 1d4 rounds.

A rank carcass is crawling with 2d4 strange swollen red maggots. These are actually **Blood Oozes (M&T of Aihrde)** that will detach from the cadaver and attack the players. It is advised that the CK read the entry on the Blood Ooze in order to run the encounter effectively.

6. **Wine Vault-** This pantry is stocked with expensive wines, most of them with distinctive purple glass bottles with a long stemmed rose etched exquisitely into the glass. An Intelligence check will reveal this is the signature bottle used by the Black Rose Vineyards, famous in Eichstadt (Augsburg). This can lead characters to investigate the roots of the cult, which do in fact have there strongest faction in Augsburg.
7. **Torture Chamber-** A small but effective area used to torment or kill prisoners. The standard stone table lies in the center, with an iron maiden on the far wall. A smaller wooden table with multiple torturing tools, including a large needle and spool of thread, used to stitch the eyes and mouths shut on many of their victims. A corridor branches from the main room and leads to the Ghoulish Pit.

Ghoulish Pits- This alcove has an eight foot wide black hole with a metal grate over it. Cultists occasionally throw some hapless soul down into the pit to feed the ghouls. When PC's reach the entrance to the torture chamber, they will hear the sounds of arguing coming from within. Two cultists are dragging a girl from her recent tortures and make their way toward the pit, which is now open and the grate against the wall.

"You see, brother? She no longer struggles against us. The hot iron's taught this strumpet well, did they not? See how her eyes roll back in her head? She knows who her master is now."

"Yes indeed. This trollop is not worthy of sacrifice to the Great Bull, for she is no longer a virgin, and so is of no more use to us. To the pit with her! She will be of use to the Children of the Lord of Chaos! Listen! Can you hear how they hunger?"



The ghouls are loud indeed and can be heard hissing down below. If the player's do not intervene, the girl will be thrown into the pit, and the sounds of her screams and the hideous howls of the ghouls will emanate from the hole. If the players use stealth, and attempt to sneak up behind the cultists, they may be able to attack them and save the girl without too much difficulty. However, if they are not attempting stealth, or alert them in some way (like shouting orders of surrender and so forth), the cultists will put a knife to her throat and attempt to control the players, ordering them into the pit, or they will kill her. If characters attempt to attack the cultists, they must win initiative, or they will in fact slash the girls throat and throw her into the pit.

8. **Prison Cells-** All of the prison cells are empty. The priests have just discovered that the insane spirit of one their deceased victims roams the prison cell area. They plan to rid themselves of this troublesome creature after the sacrificial ceremony is over.

When the characters investigate the prison cells, they find a whimpering figure of a dirty tattered girl in the corner, her back to them. As in any good horror story, the spirit turns on the closest character and attacks. It is an Allip (M&T), and while it is incapable of physical attack, it will attempt to destroy others by driving them insane. Dramatic license is given to add several special effects to the scene, including the spirit disappearing and reappearing, the prison cell doors shutting and locking the characters inside, and so forth.

9. **High Priest Chambers-** Tobias spends little time here in his personal chamber, save only for decadent purposes with captured prisoners or occasionally for planning and correspondence. In this particular instance, there is a young woman, naked and chained, with her eyes and mouth stitched shut and vile runes painted on her body. Unfortunately she died hours just before.
10. **The Temple-** the cultists are all gathered in zealous chanting, kneeling and

bowing before a raised dais. Upon the dais is a stone alter and Tobias raises his hands, holding a dagger in one of them. Behind him is the circular symbol of Ornduhl, with a crescent upon it's top, implying the head of a bull. The symbol is actually a secret door to a tunnel that leads to Stonebrook Chantry, which he will use to escape at the first sign of defeat.

Tobias will raise the dagger dramatically with both hands, eyes wide, ready to plunge it into the breast of the half naked Egrette, and will most definitely kill her in the next round if the players don't try to stop him.

Most likely the players will fight the cultists in an epic combat.!

Trap Door! If players state they rush to the alter, Tobias will throw a lever that drops the floor out from under the charging PC's. There is a one directly in front of the dais, and one on the left and right, with only a narrow portion safe to walk on toward the dais on either side.

If a player runs heedlessly toward Tobias and falls into the trap, allow a siege check to catch the ledge of the pit. If the player falls, they will land on soft mud and refuse in the ghoulish pits. Though they will not be damaged from the fall itself, 2d6 ghouls will surround the hapless character in 1d4 rounds and then attack.

***Cultists(x10):** AC:10 (*robes only*)
HP:2 HD:0 Dmg:1d4

Cult Elders (x3): AC:12 (*bracers, dexterity bonus*) HP:6 HD:1 Dmg:1d4
1st level Cleric Spells (CK choice)

Tobias, Cult Priest: Level 4 Cleric,
AC14, HP:22, Dmg: 1d4+1 Spells: (CK choice) Magic Items: *ring of protection +2, dagger +1, Amulet of Alignment Misdirection, and a potion of invisibility.*

*The CK should feel free to adjust the numbers of cultists up or down, depending on the strength of the party.

Tobias immediately pulls a lever that releases the giant bucentaur warrior (bull centaur) from his cell upon seeing the player characters. The stone door slides slowly upward, and takes 4 full rounds to

open. This should be played out with dramatic suspense as the creatures features are revealed. He drinks the invisibility potion immediately if he is wounded or sees the players surrounding him. He then escapes through the secret door behind him and back to the Stonebrook Chantry of Ore-tsar, ultimately fleeing to the dirty city of Magdeburg in Augsburg to report to his dark masters.

Release the Horned Guardian!

The guardian is a massive bucentaur warrior, mindlessly enslaved to the cult. He has the horns of a bull, the upper body of a hulking red skinned humanoid with yellow serpentine eyes, and his lower body that of a great black bull. He wields a huge flail.

Horned Guardian (Bucentaur): HD: 4
AC:16HP:31AT:2Hoof(1d6+1/1d6+1)
or by weapon (flail 2d6+1)

The CK should feel free to exclude this encounter if the party seems particularly overwhelmed.

- 10a. Tobias has a 10x10 room protected by a secret door, hidden in the engraved artwork of the wall. Pressing the eye of the Great Bull in the artwork will cause the door to open a crack, enough to get a finger-hold. Within the room is one chest in the center of the room. It is trapped with a poison gas; without disabling the trap, the door will snap shut and lock again, and begin seeping gas into the chamber. A failed save will cause 1d4 damage per round, and successful save still inflicts 1 point per round. The trap can be disarmed with a CL of the amount of damaged sustained that round. Stumped players can make an Int Check to figure out that the secret door can be unlocked through a special mechanism within the chest.

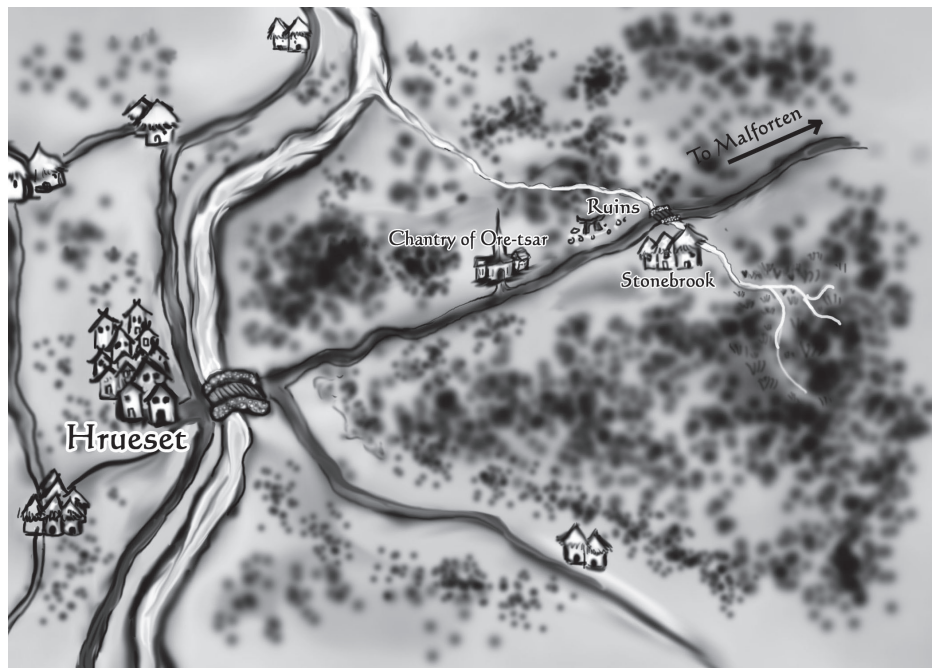
The chest contains 157 gp, and 300 sp. It also contains a short sword +1, a Wand of Magic Missiles (12 charges), one barbed arrow +3, and three wizard scrolls containing one spell each (CK's choice). An enterprising CK is encouraged to add a journal bound in human skin in which Tobias mentions his leaders, cryptic but with enough clues to lead players into future adventures.



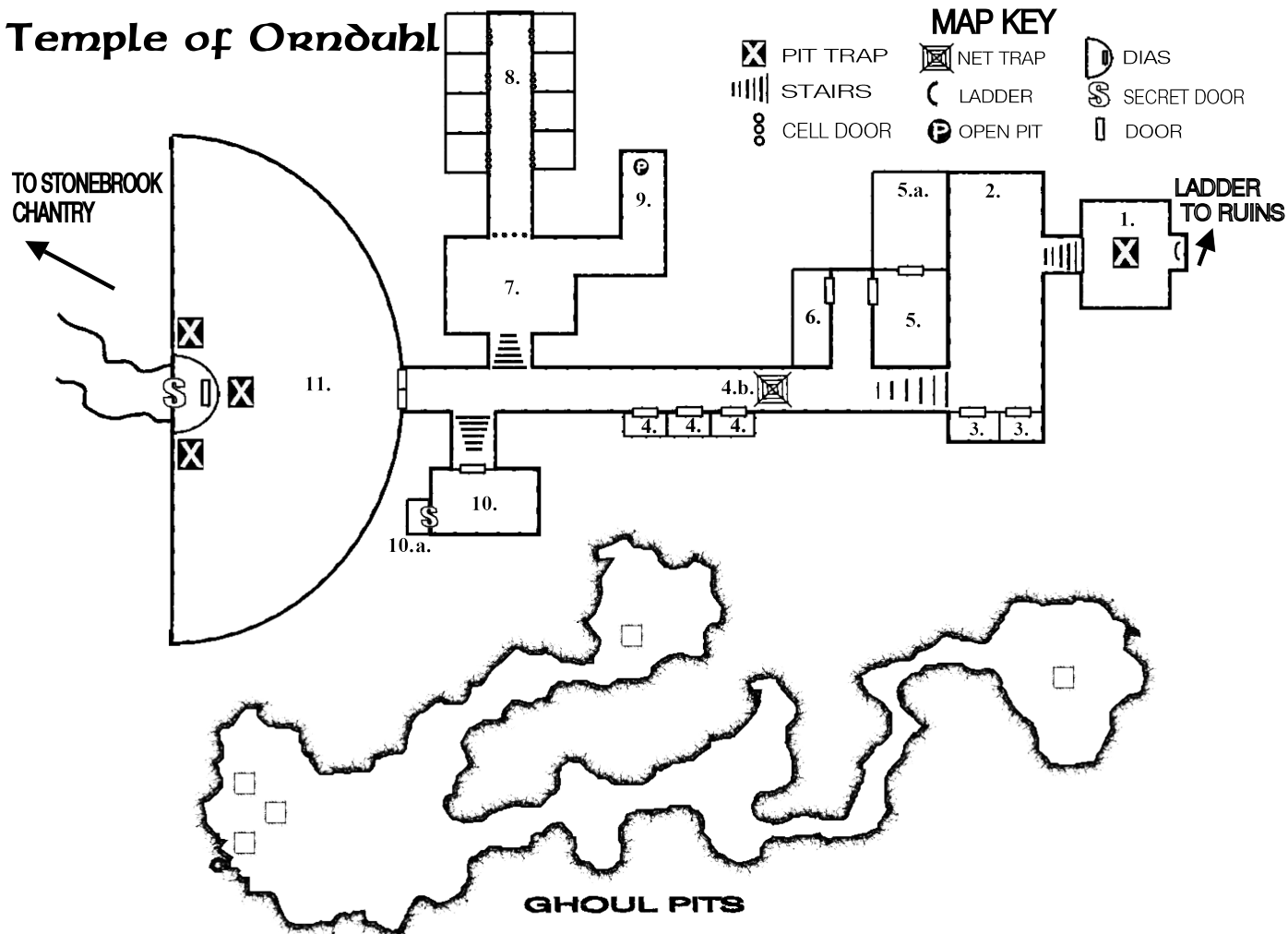
ADVENTURE CONCLUSION

The characters will want to see to it the rescued young women are healed, and taken back to Stonebrook or their respective villages.

The people of Stonebrook cannot express their gratitude enough, and although cannot offer rewards of gold, they hold a festival in the characters' honor, with dancing, feasting, and revelry. While this endears them forever in the hearts of the locals, the cult now has marked the characters for death, and it will hunt them until they track its infernal leaders down and deal with the threat once and for all, creating ample opportunity for the CK to expound upon the Ornduhl cult and it's growing menace.



Temple of Ornduhl



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NO-TUSKS

by Paul Genesse



he smell of roasted dog made Tezok's mouth water. The taste of meat had been denied the young orc for many days as he survived on bird eggs and a handful of mushrooms he'd scavenged in the freezing forest. His yellow eyes peered beyond the leaning trunks of dead oak trees to the source of the enticing smell, now tainted with the old sour blood scent of his own kind.

Fear of being alone in the forest—and a desperate hunger—drove him to creep toward the red-orange firelight and spy on the small war party of orcs. They were the first that he had seen since fleeing his own tribe. He knew that no matter how clever he might be, one small orc in the elf-infested forest near the Minok Vale during Winter would not see the Spring.

His mind made up, Tezok prayed silently to the Angry God Drunda, promising to make many blood offerings if these orcs would take him into their tribe. After urinating on himself to show a proper amount of fear, he crawled on all fours and whimpered as he entered the campsite. The lone guard grabbed him by his knotted mass of greasy black hair, dragged him into the center of their circle, and threw him down hard on the ground.

"Why is runt skulking into Kar-Pok's camp?" The largest orc, the Kar of the war party displayed his long yellow tusks as he sniffed the air. "Runt not much bigger than a whelp."

"Runt is food for march," the guard said, causing grins, which looked like an exaggeration of the orcs' already-large underbites.

"Not food. I slave. Let slave serve great Iron Spear tribe."

The Kar clicked his tusks against his sharp upper teeth, his surprise only half-hidden. "You know of Iron Spear tribe?"

"All of Drunda's spawn know Iron Spear tribe and ferocious leader, Kar-Pok, who is Elf-Killer and Cattle-Stealer."

The orcs laughed and Kar-Pok swelled up his chest, failing to realize that the young orc might have heard the war leader mention his tribe's name as he boasted of his prowess moments before.

"Kar-Pok!" The large orc slammed a fist against his muscled chest covered. Then his green-skinned hand—coated with dog's blood—wrapped around the young orc's throat. Kar-Pok pushed his small captive against a flat stone beside the fire where they'd butchered the dog.

"No. Not food." The whimpering orc's left tusk grated against the rock as Kar-Pok opened his free hand, motioning for a weapon. One of the warriors slapped the handle of a rusty hatchet into it.

"Not food. Good slave. I serve Kar-Pok." Overwhelming terror made Tezok squirm and fight. He cursed himself for entering the camp. It would have been better to die alone than end up as meat.

Kar-Pok raised the hatchet despite the whimpering and the sincere stream of urine that began to muddy the ground.

"We see if you good slave." Kar-Pok chopped downward, shattering Tezok's left tusk. After two more whacks he turned him over, pressing the squealing orc's square jaw against the rock. Kar-Pok held him still as he broke the other tusk with repeated blows, first with the sharp edge, then with the flat side of the hatchet head, each blow more excruciating than the last.

"*Ukluk! Ukluk!*" The orcs shouted as they howled into the night. "*Ukluk kech garga!*"

The blinding, throbbing pain from losing his tusks made Tezok's new name even worse. *Ukluk*, the humiliated and emasculated young orc thought bitterly as he swallowed the blood filling in his mouth. No female would ever mate with him if he didn't have tusks. It would have been better if he had been killed by the elves.

He curled into a ball as the warriors kicked him and prodded him with burning logs from the fire. As he endured the attacks, the pain and fear became a red-hot desire for vengeance. Let them call him whatever they wanted. He would bide his time,

and use the witch Valga's secret knowledge to get back at them. When the moment came, he would show them who he really was and have his revenge on Kar-Pok and entire Iron Spear tribe. Until then, he would be the lowliest wretch, and they would call him No-Tusks the Slave.

Ukluk sucked the worm from Kar-Pok's muddy foot, ignoring the stagnant swamp water latrine taste. With good pressure he could get the head of the worm to poke out of the surface, then he could nip it carefully with his lips and pull out its entire body. The war leader and now the chief of the Iron Spear tribe's feet did not taste as bad as some of the others, and Ukluk went about his duty with dogged determination. His strong effort quickly yielded a prize as a gelatinous, but gritty white worm came out with a pop. Ukluk chewed up the bitter morsel and swallowed, then found the entry point where another had burrowed into Kar-Pok's fungus-covered foot.

The raiding party of twelve orcs would soon depart, long before midnight if the war ceremony went well. They had a tough march ahead of them if they would find the herd of cattle Ukluk told Kar-Pok he had discovered a few days before when he scouted the plains of Beykla. The report of such a large herd thankfully distracted Kar-Pok enough that he did not ask what had kept Ukluk away for so long. The chief had no clue that three years of scheming and planning by his lowly slave were about to change the Iron Spear tribe forever. The pleasant thought made Ukluk stop sucking out a worm from the chief's heel, allowing the bloodsucking creature to slip back inside.

Kar-Pok had not been paying attention, but when the slave paused, the chief noticed the bee sting bulging like a red berry on the tip of Ukluk's pointed ear. The chief grabbed Ukluk's injured ear and painfully lifted him up, pinching the bee sting hard. "Slave cross swamp and find honey?"

"No," Ukluk lied. If they found out where he had been his plan could be ruined. All the bee hives in their territory had been raided and no orc in the tribe dared go to the forest on the other side of the swamp where Mungo, the red haired man-giant,



lived. If they knew Ukluk had been going onto the giant's land and pretending to be a messenger from Kar-Pok, the chief would kill Ukluk for certain.

"No-Tusks lies," Kar-Pok said, pinching the sting harder. "Where No-Tusks find hive?"

"On plains," Ukluk said, "near cattle herd, but humans take hive honey before No-Tusks find it. No-Tusks sorry he fail to gather honey for Kar-Pok."

The chief smashed Ukluk in the face with a knee, then stomped on the little orc's hands while he lay stunned on the ground. "Next time No-Tusks scout, he finds hive before humans and comes back sooner."

Ukluk nodded as he whimpered and licked the chief's feet, hoping Kar-Pok would not beat him too severely. Instead of hitting him, the chief lanced the bee sting on Ukluk's ear with the tip of a dagger, causing hoots of laughter from the warriors. It was a small injury, and nothing compared to the suffering he'd endured before. After each scouting trip the chief would beat Ukluk for being gone, though it was the Kar-Pok who had sent him away to search for food or plunder.

Despite the certain pain he would suffer when he returned, Ukluk found that scouting was his favorite task. Not only was he able to get away from the constant torment inflicted upon him by every orc in the tribe, Ukluk could gather the healing plants and poisonous mushrooms that the orc witch, Valga, had told him about. His time studying with her seemed like a lifetime ago. If only she had not angered the chief of their tribe, forcing her to flee for her life with her dumb and ugly blue-eyed whelp, Vlarcar. Ukluk would have stayed, and maybe someday he could have become the mouthpiece of the tribe, even if he was of the *garga* caste. Valga would have taught him the dark magic and tattooed his hide with the protections she had placed upon her son. It wasn't a likely outcome, he had to admit, but if he was the only one who knew the secret knowledge of the Angry God and was skilled in the ways of making Drunda's poisons, there might have been a chance.

In the Iron Spear tribe, he had no hope of being accepted as the equal of a warrior. Even if he revealed that he possessed Drun-

da's secret poison knowledge, Ukluk was the smallest and weakest male orc by far, only four and half feet tall. He could never be more than a slave. The males were huge, the females were all bigger and tougher than him, and even a few of the older whelps could look him evenly in his bloodshot eyes.

Ukluk finished with the chief's feet and rubbed lye all over them to kill the fungus and whatever else was growing. He immediately started on the second in command. Torgash's feet stunk like he had soaked them in a bog filled with dead skunks for an entire summer. Three of Torgash's toes were greenish black and the gangrenous stench made Ukluk wrinkle his snout. He took a moment to wipe some of the fresh cow dung he'd gathered from the herd into his nostrils, then began his task. At least the manure had a pleasant odor. Kar-Pok had thought so as well. The chief had demanded to taste and smell it when Ukluk had returned with a handful.

"This cow is well fed," Kar-Pok said as he sucked on the moist dung that he kept tucked inside his cheek. "Humans have fed them oats."

"How many cattle?" Torgash asked.

Ukluk thought for a long moment. He did not want to confuse, and thereby anger Torgash, who would not understand the man words, *one hundred*, which some orc tribes had come to use as their language lacked terms or gestures for such large numbers. "If every orc in Iron Spear tribe had three cows, that is how big herd is."

Torgash's mouth hung open, his rotten teeth and black tongue on display as he salivated.

"How many humans watch cattle?" Kar-Pok asked.

Ukluk held up three fingers on each hand. "Some whelps, others had too many winners. Few blooded warriors."

"What weapons they hold?" Kar-Pok asked.

"Bows, axes, knives. No swords. No armor," Ukluk said.

"We'll kill them all," Torgash said, his tusks jutting forward as he raised his large battle-axe.

The war party joked and boasted about how they would slaughter the humans as

Ukluk worked to complete his task. Once he was done with the war party's feet, he followed the chief's instructions and gave each of the warriors a single fire mushroom to use in the upcoming battle. The red mushrooms would make them even stronger and more resistant to pain. He also gave them a cup of bog wine to drink before they left, and an empty pouch to carry back battle trophies or loot.

All of the adult male orcs and some of the older whelps began to gather around the chief as the final preparations were made. They formed a circle and knelt down, the strongest closer to Kar-Pok in the center, while the whelps sat furthest away, and Ukluk even further—as befit his caste.

"While warriors go kill humans and steal cattle," Kar-Pok said, "Vrishnek is Kar."

"Kar-Vrishnek!" Vrishnek raised his one good arm. The other was still weak from the wound he'd suffered from a human farmer with an axe. The man had died defending his small tribe of whelps and women. It was Vrishnek who had killed the axe man and gained the right to be the first to taste his blood.

Two other wounded orcs, who had been hurt on a different raid, were in much worse shape. Meglarg had lost an eye and could barely walk as he was recovering from a wound to his thigh. Feglak had been pierced through the forehead by crossbow bolt and was half the warrior he had been before the injury. The large and ferocious orc had lost the ability to lift his war hammer over his head, or hold down even the smallest of the females.

As the tribe's only trained healer, Ukluk had deemed it best to saw off the protruding shaft and leave the rest of the bolt and the tip inside Feglak's brain. To protect him from further injury, Ukluk had screwed a small circular plate of iron into Feglak's skull. Only the Angry God knew if Feglak would recover his prowess, and since Feglak was the tribe's best gate-smasher, Kar-Pok had allowed him to live—for now.

Five whelps came bounding out of the cave. They had smeared their naked bodies with ash, ochre mud, and fresh blood. All of them were armed with clubs and a few had elf- or dwarf-skin drums. The slower whelps in the back beat the small-



er ones in the front with their drum-clubs and howled curses. They stopped their shouting when Kar-Pok's angry yellow eyes fell upon them.

"Iron Spear tribe stays near cave while warriors raiding," Kar-Pok's words fell like boulders. "Stay quiet while we are gone." He glared at the whelps. "Hide in cave. Kill any who enter cave with log trap, then barricade tribe inside. If Iron Spear have to flee, crawl out escape-holes. Take clan totem, females, and oldest whelps. Leave the squealing milk-suckers and Feglak behind as a distraction."

Feglak heard his name and turned around, trying to figure out who said it.

"Carry as much meat as tribe can if all must flee lair," the chief said. "Iron Spear tribe will gather on Leech Island in swamp. Meet there."

"Tribe won't hide or flee." Vrishnek wrinkled his snout and bit an oak branch in half, causing many of the orcs to laugh.

Kar-Pok punched him in the jaw, staggering the wounded orc. Vrishnek stood with a grin and punched Kar-Pok, not quite as hard, right in his stubby snout, which leaked a few drops of blood. The two orcs grinned, their tusks turned up at the moon as they shouted at each other, "*Brohe-tah!*"

The war party howled. They joined the whelps and began pounding the drums, or banging their weapons against their piecemeal armor or shields. After several moments of furious drumming, Kar-Pok spotted Ukluk, who had been hiding behind a rock hoping not to draw the attention of the tribe, which was becoming more and more enraged by the moment. "Slave! Bring totem Iron Spear."

Ukluk scurried toward the entrance to the caverns. He caught the faint scent of the females, who almost always hid themselves when the warrior males were around. He did not have to duck his head like all of the other full-grown orcs as he entered. Still he paused, allowing his pupils to dilate to the size of iron pennies, which allowed him to see every detail in the darkness. The deadly log trap guarded the passage, and Ukluk made certain it was not sagging downward, appearing as if it would fall on him. The trap looked

secure, unmolested by the whelps, though he would check the ropes later that night when there were no prying eyes.

Over forty heavy logs had been lashed together and lined up, twenty on either side of the cave, disguised to look like they were propping up the ceiling by forming a sharp-peaked roof. Hundreds of metal and wooden spikes jutted out from the logs, and some of them had the skulls of humans, dwarves, elves, and orcs on them. Enemies who entered the cave would be crushed and impaled by the walls of logs, which would fall from both sides at the same time and block the tunnel leading deeper into the lair.

Ukluk hopped over the shallow—but wide—crack in the middle of the entry cave where he was forced to sleep. If they were attacked, he would sound the alarm horn and trigger the log trap if the guards failed to do so. Since Ukluk had given Kar-Pok the idea and helped build the trap, the little orc had made certain there were no spikes that would hit him while he hid in the streambed-like depression that ran along the floor in case he was there when the trap was sprung.

He ran into the chief's sleeping cave deeper inside and lifted the totem of the tribe. The long metal spear—with a rusty tip—was actually a solid iron spike over seven feet long, and had been in the possession of the tribe for many orc lifetimes. According to Kar-Pok, it had been used by the infamous Horde King Grashcar, who had impaled hundreds of elves and humans, as well as all of the orc chieftains who would not follow him and the once-vast Iron Spear tribe into the battle that had become known by all races as 'The Breaking.' Tens of thousands of orcs had been annihilated by a combined force of elves and men on the plains of Beykla. The remnants of the Iron Spear tribe were among the smattering of Drunda's spawn that remained in Beykla, while the rest fled south.

Ukluk hefted the spear, likely of dwarf manufacture—though he would never mention that to any of the tribe unless he wanted to be impaled on it himself. He carried it out of the lair as fast as he could, trying not to bang either end of it on the walls. Once outside the spear was ripped from his hands by howling warriors. Two of the whelps left the drums to beat him with

their clubs, playing his skull like a drum instead. Ukluk protected his eyes and crawled away from his attackers as Kar-Pok put a human skull on the tip of the spear and raised it over his head. The drumming and howling soon reached a frenzy.

"Drunda, Drunda, Drunda!" the orcs chanted as they beat their drums.

Kar-Pok suddenly brought the spear down and crushed the skull on top of it against a rock, causing many excited hoots. He shouted to the warriors, handed the spear to Kar-Vrishnek who would keep it safe, and then Kar-Pok charged into night.

"Kar-Pok!" The warriors shouted as they ran after the chief.

As the odor and the sound of the war party faded, Ukluk breathed a sigh of relief. If his plan worked, this would be the last time he ever saw Kar-Pok and the others. He spoke silently to the Angry God as Valga had taught him. *Cruel Drunda, accept the blood offering Ukluk makes in anger. Kill these orcs and accept their blood.* Moonlight glinted off an axe-blade that fell toward Ukluk's head. He tried to duck out of the way, but the flat of an axe glanced across his thick skull and knocked him over. He barely felt the blow, thanks to his inch-thick skull, quick reflexes and the fact that the blow was only meant to get his attention.

"Slave," Kar-Vrishnek pointed at him with his axe—"No-Tusks mine now."

Ukluk groveled, pressing his snout into the dirt. "Kar-Vrishnek's slave."

"Get us some bog wine and tell the females to lock up the milk suckers. We're coming for a visit." Meglarg grunted his approval and snapped his teeth together, all the while keeping a hold on Feglak, who was still trying to follow the war party.

Vrishnek flicked Feglak on the forehead where Ukluk had put the metal plate. The large orc apparently forgot what he was doing and stopped trying to run after the war party. Feglak looked at Vrishnek like it was the first time he had ever seen him.

Back inside the lair, Ukluk served the three wounded warriors chunky bog wine served in bronze helmets sized for human skulls. The smell of rotting blood—kept from clotting with willow bark and other



plants—mixed with pregnant orc urine, and as many types of fermenting grapes, radishes, berries, and onions as could be found, made Ukluk wish he had just taken a bigger drink from the jug before he mixed in a secret ingredient.

Vrishnek and his comrades drained their large cups and howled for more.

“Bring a file-stone and more bog wine,” Vrishnek commanded.

Ukluk shuddered and instinctively hid the nubs of his tusks with his lips. Kar-Pok hadn’t filed them in a while—they were starting to grow back. Instead of bringing what had been asked for, Ukluk hid outside the cave and waited. The three orcs soon became silent and snores replaced the sound of their harsh voices. The sleeping mushrooms worked even faster than he had anticipated, probably because he’d gathered them earlier that day.

Satisfied, Ukluk went into the hills beside the lair and retrieved the gifts he would give to Imyak and her two sisters. The trembling calf was still lashed to the tree, its mouth tied shut so it could make little noise. Using the small cow as a pack animal, Ukluk loaded it with the two sealed pots of honey he had collected and led the animal toward the lair. The calf refused to enter the pitch-black cave and Ukluk reasoned that the darkness and the odor wafting out of the entrance must have frightened it.

The clip-clop of its hooves would alert the whelps inside, so Ukluk picked it up, carrying the baby cow on his shoulders, dangling its legs around his neck. Now all he had to do was get past the whelps. Much deeper inside the hill he could hear them banging on drums and fighting. One yelled, “Chief of Pit!” Roars and howls echoed as the other young orcs challenged for dominance and attacked en masse.

The entrance to the females’ cave was within sight when something wet and slimy struck Ukluk in the middle of his back. Another piece of filth hit him in the face when he turned around.

Three whelps, none more than four winters old, stood behind him scowling with mad hunger in their eyes.

“Give food.” The strongest of the whelps said, eying the calf. He was almost the

same size as Ukluk, but was thinner and weaker. These three had likely decided to avoid the game in the pit, as they had no chance of winning, and a greater chance of being maimed or killed.

“No. Not for you.” Ukluk stepped backward slowly, trying not to provoke the young ones.

“Give now!”

“Mine!”

“Food!”

The tallest whelp threw a rock that hit Ukluk’s crotch. He was used to being struck in his scaly bollocks, and had developed a tolerance over the years that allowed him to shrug off the pain. He turned to run, and without any warning his legs were knocked out from under him by an emaciated two-winter-old whelp that had been hiding in a garbage-filled niche. The three whelps behind him were on Ukluk in an instant trying to tear the calf from his arms. Ukluk maintained a death-grip on the animal as one of the young orcs managed to pull the binding from the calf’s mouth. The squirming animal moored in terror. The youngest whelp began gnawing on one of the calf’s legs as Ukluk got to his feet and began tugging the calf down the tunnel, dragging the little whelps with him.

The sounds of fighting in the pit stopped.

All of the orcs froze, as did the struggling calf.

“Bad. Much bad,” Ukluk said, as the urine in his bladder felt like it had turned to ice.

Nearly a dozen bloodied and bruised whelps emerged from the pit at the end of the tunnel like demons from the Abyss. The odor of sulfur-tinged sweat and bloodied orclings wafted down the hall.

“Food!” Kapik, the largest whelp, who was likely Kar-Pok’s son, shouted as he led the charge at Ukluk. The smaller whelps climbed up the walls or slipped into cracks in the rock.

The frightened slave orc ran for the females’ cave as fast as he could, pulling the calf along with him. He slammed into the thorn-bush-and-log barrier that was strong enough to keep the whelps out, but

not strong enough to keep the adult orcs from paying visits to Imyak and her two sisters whenever they wanted.

“Imyak! No-Tusks has food!” Ukluk shouted as he banged on the barricade.

Grabbing claws and hungry mouths attached themselves to the calf as the orclings yanked Ukluk to the ground. He tried to defend himself, but there were too many.

The log barrier came down and a squat orc female with pendulous breasts, a large swollen belly, and hateful eyes, leapt into the passageway with a flat club in one fist and a three-pronged whip in the other.

“Flee!” The whelps squealed with dread as Imyak, the Spawn Mother of Iron Spear tribe unleashed her fury, beating the orclings mercilessly and whipping them as they ran away. When she finished paddling Kapik, whom she had caught with her whip, she picked him up by his scraggly hair and tossed him down the tunnel.

“Stay in pit!” Imyak shouted at her son.

Ukluk crawled into the females’ cave, following the calf who had already gone inside. Imyak closed the barricade and grinned at the bruised slave orc, who knelt at her feet.

“No-Tusks brings food,” Imyak said to her two smaller sisters. Ugash, and Oogrook came out of the shadows from the smaller grotto where all their milk suckers were caged. If left to crawl around the lair, the little biters would fall into crevasses and die or be killed by their older siblings.

Ugash and Oogrook’s bellies were as swollen as Imyak’s, and soon they would spawn a new brood—like they did every seven months. If the spawning went well, Imyak, Ugash, and Oogrook would survive the ordeal. Up to nine, but at least six new whelps would be born. Too many of the Iron Spear females had died in mating or birth accidents over the past few seasons. The tribe was getting smaller as female whelps were rarely born. Not even two in five births yielded a female, and only a few survived to adulthood because of their harsh treatment. The way the Iron Spear males treated the females made Ukluk angry. Females were rare, and he would never treat them so badly if he had power. Unless they deserved it, no



more females would die violently if Ukluk's plans came to pass.

The little orc's desire grew as he inhaled the intoxicating odor of the three sisters and their cave, where the tribe's stores of meat—some salted, some rotting—were kept. Then he presented the calf to them. Imyak licked her lips and the younger sisters rubbed their bulbous stomachs. "I bring more." Ukluk unloaded the two small honey pots from the trembling calf, relieved the stout ceramic jars had not broken in the scuffle outside. "Now No-Tusks make favorite food of Imyak and sisters."

The slave orc used a rock to crush the calf's skull, then he hung the body on a rope and slit its throat. He dripped a large amount of blood into each honey pot, much to the delight of the sisters. Ugash gave him a large urn to drain the rest of the blood as he mixed the honey, then presented the pots to them.

"Fresh blood honey is best," Imyak said as she dipped her fingers into the pot and slurped the red, sticky substance off her fingers. "No-Tusks good. Only orc who brings blood honey."

None of the warriors were smart enough to get the honey without suffering many stings on their vulnerable ears, snout, and lips. Ukluk's exceptional climbing skills allowed him to go where the larger and heavier orcs would never dare. They used him as their honey-gatherer, sometimes forcing him to retrieve the honey after they had already infuriated the bees.

Imyak patted Ukluk on the head and gently smeared some of her mucus on his wounded ear. The females valued him now, a stark difference compared to the first time he tried to mate with them. Several of the warriors had just had their way with the sisters and Ukluk thought he might have a chance. It was the worst mistake he had ever made since joining the tribe and losing his tusks. Imyak, Ugash, and Oogrook pummeled him for so long that it took a month before he could see out of his left eye again. He thought he would never mate with a female until he saw the longing in Imyak's eyes when Kar-Pok feasted on a jar of blood honey. Then he knew how to win them over.

The females ate the blood honey and nibbled on small bits of raw veal as Uk-

luk butchered the animal for them. He presented the warm liver to Imyak. She slurped a piece of it into her mouth and chewed, allowing some of the blood to drip onto her alluring boil-marked chin and down her chest.

"Come, No-Tusks." Imyak invited him to clean the drippings from her body as she lay down on her back, offering the reward he most desired. He enjoyed the taste of the blood as he lay with Imyak quenching his lust. It had taken him a long time, but Ukluk had found a way to mate with the females. He didn't need to bite their necks with his tusks and hold them down.

Near dawn, Ukluk asked Imyak to remove the heavy barricade so he could go to his sleeping place in the entry cave. No one had been guarding the lair entrance, though he doubted that anyone would break through the wooden gate without the whelps calling an alarm.

Imyak grabbed his arm as he got up to depart, and touched his hand to her belly. "Imyak and sisters spawn soon." Ukluk felt the writhing whelps, punching and wrestling inside her body. Her abdomen was much smaller than usual when she was about to birth whelps, and that made Ukluk proud. He had given the females' orcseed-killing tea and the sisters had used it after every encounter with the gangs of Iron Spear orcs who visited them. They did not drink it after he lay with them and in perhaps a week his first whelps would be born. Their smaller birth-size would make it less likely that Imyak or the others would die during the whelping process.

There was so much to do before that exciting day. He sneaked past the whelp pit and into the cave where Vrishnek, Feglak, and Meglarg were sleeping. He prayed to Drunda that the poison mushrooms he'd given them would keep them asleep as he completed his task. Using a club and his sharp claws he bruised and scratched the three orcs, mimicking the injuries they would have suffered if they had mated with the females. None of the warriors awakened, despite the beating he gave them. Ukluk considered killing them, but murdering the three orcs with his own hand was not in his plans. Their deaths would be much more painful.

"Garga!" Kar-Vrishnek shouted, the echoing word waking Ukluk from his blissful

slumber. The slave orc pressed himself into the floor a moment later in front of the angry Kar. The sun had just set and the lair had come alive with howling and banging. Imyak and her sisters were feeding the whelps chunks of rotting meat.

The young orcs jostled to see who would be first.

"Slave, what happened last night?" Kar-Vrishnek inspected the scratch marks on his arms. Meglarg and Feglak were still passed out and snoring loudly.

"Kar drink much bog wine," Ukluk said. "Much time with females. They fight hard."

Kar-Vrishnek rubbed his other scratches, wiped his crotch, and then smelled his fingers. "Kar-Vrishnek not smell females."

Ukluk hid his fear as well as he could. What should he say to this? He stammered, "Kar smells like bog wine."

Vrishnek grabbed Ukluk, pinned him to the ground by sitting on him and inspected the nubs of his growing tusks. "Kar-Vrishnek not remember filing slave's tusks last night. Kar-Vrishnek do it now."

The abrasive stone caused shooting pains every time Vrishnek scraped it across Ukluk's sensitive tusk buds. As he endured the agonizing humiliation he tried to think about Imyak and the taste of calf liver on her leathery skin.

The next day Ukluk tossed and turned in the shallow crack where he slept in the entry cave. His tusk buds throbbed painfully as he prayed to Drunda and asked the Angry God to make today the day that his new ally would arrive and punish Kar-Vrishnek. He pulled his stiff deerhide blanket over his face as the bright morning light beamed into the lair and bothered his eyes. At least Kar-Pok and the war party hadn't returned. Ukluk allowed himself to hope that all of them had been slain in the trap he'd sent them into. If only the next part of his plan would come to pass. To ease his mind, he chewed on a dried lizard tail and eventually fell back asleep as the light faded.

"Halloo!"

The deep echoing voice blasted into the cave like rolling thunder. Ukluk shot



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awake, and scrambled to the guard post, fear tempering his excitement as he pressed against the wooden bars of the gate.

"Halloo! I smell orcs in there!"

Kar-Vrishnek, Feglak, and eventually limping Meglarg arrived a moment later. They picked up weapons and shields as they hid behind the gate.

"What words he say?" Kar-Vrishnek asked.

"Sound like man words," Meglarg said.

"It's a giant's words," Ukluk said. "Giants speak words like the men of Beykla."

"Slave understands man words?" Vrishnek asked.

Ukluk nodded. "No-Tusks understands." The words of men had been the secret way that Valga the witch had spoken to him when she did not want the chief to know what she said. Knowing the man words had allowed Ukluk to slowly become the giant's servant and ally.

"Can giant get into Iron Spear lair?" Meglarg asked, trying to balance on his one good leg.

"No. Too big," Ukluk said.

"Ask giant what giant wants," Kar-Vrishnek said.

"Giant, why are you here?" Ukluk asked in his best man-speech.

"That you, No-Tusks? You know why."

"No-Tusks knows. But guard chief of lair wants No-Tusks to ask because Mungo has come when war chief who sent me to speak to Mungo is not in lair."

Mungo made an irritated noise. "No-Tusks, tell your stupid guard chief that I, Mungo the Red, am here because your chief asked me to come. Now I will lead your tribe on raids. I am the new war chief. Tell them that if all the orcs in this tribe do not follow me, I'll bury this cave and no orc will ever get out alive."

Ukluk made his face contort with fear. His eyes bulged, his knees wavered, and he let a squirt of urine run down his leg. It was the performance he had been practicing for his entire life.

"What giant say?" Vrishnek asked, a tremble in his voice.

"Giant say giant is Mungo the Bloody Haired, new chief of Iron Spear tribe. Giant say that if we not follow him, giant will pour oil into cave, smoke us out, or burn us to death. If tribe go out the escape-holes he will hunt us, peel our skin, and eat all orcs while still alive."

"Iron Spear tribe fights!" Feglak said, weakly raising his hammer.

"No." Vrishnek pulled down the weapon. "Mungo the Bloody Haired will kill us. We need more warriors to fight giant. No-Tusks, tell giant that tribe surrenders."

"Tribe surrenders?" Ukluk asked with a grave expression, hiding his joy.

Vrishnek pushed the slave hard into the entry cave. "Tell him, now."

Ukluk faced the entrance to the lair. "Chief Mungo, the orcs of this tribe who want to serve you are away on a raid," Ukluk said. "There are only three warriors here and they will not serve a smelly red haired man-giant who has relations with small goats. They hate your kind, and want to put the totem spear of tribe into your arse and hammer it until it pokes out of your mouth."

Mungo roared angrily. "You tell those dung eating orcs that I will crush their skulls with my bare hands."

Ukluk cringed, reasoning that it would take quite a while even for a giant to crush an orc's skull. He would definitely like to see Vrishnek's skull crushed.

"What giant say?" Vrishnek asked.

"Giant say he accepts surrender of Iron Spear tribe, and wants warriors to march outside, raise weapons to sky, and shout Mungo's name in man words to show we surrender."

"What his man name?" Vrishnek asked.

"*We kill Mungo*," Ukluk said in man words.

Kar-Vrishnek and Meglarg repeated the words, though it took them a couple of tries to get them right. Feglak looked at them stupidly, not understanding what was happening.

"Tell him we are coming out," Vrishnek said.

"The orcs who hate you are coming out to fight," Ukluk said. "They will try to kill you, but they are very frightened."

"Let them come." Mungo said, then laughed heartily.

"He is pleased that you are surrendering," Ukluk said.

Kar-Vrishnek grunted his approval as the three orc warriors of the Iron Spear tribe emerged from their lair, shielding their eyes from the sun, which had luckily gone behind a cloud. Meglarg used his axe as a crutch to hobble out, Vrishnek held his axe with his one good arm and Feglak had a wild pre-battle look in his eyes as he squeezed the handle of his heavy war hammer. Ukluk shuffled behind them, grinning devilishly on the inside, but trembling on the outside.

Twelve-foot-tall Mungo the Red stood several paces away from the entrance. He wore grizzly bear pelts over his pale skin, which was covered with freckles and dirt. His beard and hair were orange-red and he carried a large knotted club made from a black oak tree.

The three orcs stood warily before the giant, the sun partially blinding them. Vrishnek nodded to Meglarg, giving him the signal. "We kill Mungo!" The orcs shouted in man words as they raised their weapons.

Mungo raised his club and crushed Vrishnek's skull. The orc's body crumpled like his bones had turned to swamp jelly.

Meglarg squealed and tried to flee back into the cave. Feglak screamed his battle cry and charged Mungo. The amused giant grabbed the attacking orc by the head with one massive hand, stopping him cold. Ukluk 'accidentally fell' in front of Meglarg and tripped the fleeing orc, giving Mungo enough time to bash the one-legged warrior in the other leg, then in the spine—killing him instantly.

Feglak clawed at Mungo's thick wrist. The giant picked up the orc by the head, broke both his arms with blows from his club, then put Feglak's head into his hairy red armpit and squeezed, grunting like he was trying to pass nightsoil that had been



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hardening for a week. After quite a long time, Mungo's face turned red with effort, then Feglak's skull imploded. Even after gray goo and blood ran onto the ground, the orc's body quivered.

"No-Tusks," Mungo said at last, pointing at Ukluk. "You are my slave now. You will speak to the tribe for me."

"No-Tusks is slave of Chief Mungo." Ukluk bowed, relieved the giant had kept to their bargain. The story was that Ukluk would become Mungo's personal slave as a gift from Chief Kar-Pok. Mungo would become the war chief of the tribe and the orcs would be able to hunt in Mungo's territory.

"Slave, go and fetch me fresh meat and drink."

"Fresh meat we have, Chief Mungo, but for drinking we have brown water and bog wine. Brown water not good and only orcs like bog wine."

Mungo shook his head. "My people taught orcs how to make bog wine. Bring it now."

Ukluk knew what food Mungo hungered for, and had a smirk on his face when he entered the lair cave. He found the whelps huddled together in their pit. Some of the smaller ones perched in ledges on the walls. All of them looked at Ukluk with fear for the first time ever.

Imyak and her sisters stood beside the pit with spears in hand. Mismatched pieces

of rusty armor covered their teats and pregnant bellies.

Ukluk put his hands on his hips. "Vrishnek, Meglarg and Feglak are meat."

The whelps shuddered and the younger ones squealed.

"Mungo the Bloody Haired giant is new chief of Iron Spear tribe."

The sound of urine hitting the floor pleased Ukluk very much.

"Chief Mungo wants all orclings to become his new warriors. He wants to see how strong you fight. He will take the strongest as his raiding party."

"No, we hide in cave!" Kapik, Kar-Pok's son shouted. He was the tallest, meanest, and apparently the most intelligent of all the whelps.

Imyak's whip cracked against the stone. "Iron Spear tribe fights. No hiding. Go serve Chief Mungo."

"No." Kapik stood defiantly, his snout raised, a snarl on his lips.

Imyak jumped into the pit and latched her hands around Kapik's throat. She throttled him and smashed him against the side of the pit, then threw him by the scruff of the neck. "Go fight for new chief."

All of the whelps followed as Kapik staggered out of the lair. They shuddered

when they saw the bodies of the three adult orcs. Fourteen whelps, aged from two- to eight-winters presented themselves to Mungo, who leaned against the hill beside the entrance of the lair. The orclings carried jugs of bog wine that Ukluk had secretly spiked with special ingredients—every last bit of his strongest poisons. The giant smirked at the orclings as they shielded their eyes from the sunlight.

"This all?" Mungo asked.

"Only teat suckers and females left in cave," Ukluk said.

"Small tribe." Mungo shook his head. "What happened? Disease? Elves? Infighting?"

Ukluk grunted. "All things Chief Mungo say have made tribe small, and too much inbreeding make tribe weak." The slave handed the giant a jug of bog wine.

"Chief Mungo, whelps want to show how strong they are. They will fight each other. Winner will be spared. Losers are first to be fresh meat in chief's belly."

Mungo took a draught from the jug, spilling some of the bloody liquor onto his beard. "Strong," he said through puckered lips. "Who made this?"

"No-Tusks make bog wine," the slave said.

"Good. You will stay close by Mungo. I will keep you safe for a long time, and you will make bog wine for me in my cave."



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The giant grabbed Ukluk and deftly fastened a chain around his neck, the other end of which was attached to a metal loop around his belt.

This was not part of Ukluk's plan, and if he was tied to the giant how would he survive what was to come? Ukluk kept his sphincters tight. He could show no fear now.

"Make them fight," Mungo ordered Ukluk. "I am hungry."

It didn't take long for Ukluk to get the whelps to begin their blood matches. They did this every night in their pit, and enjoyed trying to kill and maim each other with bare fists and tusks. A pair of two-winter-old whelps went first and neither had learned that punches to the head were ineffective. Finally, one choked the other out and stood in triumph, howling and stomping on his fallen cousin. Mungo picked up the fallen whelp, whom he proceeded to tear apart and eat raw.

The subsequent matches became more and more vicious as the whelps realized the giant would eat the losers. The younger whelps fell to the older ones. Mungo filled his belly with the most tender meaty parts of half a dozen little orclings before his gut bulged past his belt. To the relief of the whelps, the giant stopped eating after half the matches were fought, instead drinking more and more bog wine. Ukluk waited nervously, then noticed Mungo rubbing his stomach and looking quite ill. His face was pale, his lips slightly blue. The poison was beginning to work, and if the giant realized what was happening while Ukluk was chained to him, the little slave orc would be killed long before Mungo succumbed to the poison.

"I've eaten too much orc flesh," Mungo said.

"Chief, let No-Tusks help." Ukluk began forming a plan as Mungo pulled the chain, lightly choking him.

"How will you help me?"

"Chalk stone in lair. If you eat chalk stone, you be well."

"Get it while I watch the rest of the fights."

Kapik finished pummeling one of his brothers and stood victorious, eying Ukluk suspiciously.

"Chief take chain off No-Tusks?"

Mungo shook his head and took another chain from a pouch and used it to lengthen the chain around Ukluk's neck. "This is as far as you go."

The chain was longer than Ukluk thought and it reached just past the midway point of the entry cave. He called for Imyak and she appeared instantly, as she had been hiding at the guard post. Her eyes focused on the chain. "Imyak fetch hammer and pry bar for No-Tusks."

"No, bring totem iron spear," Ukluk said.

"Slave!" Mungo shouted. "Bring the chalk!" The chain jerked and Ukluk was pulled off his feet, his air cut off as he was dragged across the floor. He was going to die when he was so close to getting what he wanted. Right before he passed out the chain went slack. Ukluk gasped for breath, trying to recover his senses.

Imyak appeared, a determined expression on her boil-marked face as she carried the iron spear along with a sack containing a hammer, chisel, and pry bar. He crawled toward her and slipped the ring of iron that kept him collared over the spear shaft and down to the halfway point of its length. "Push spear into hole in stone." Ukluk pointed to an opening in the depression in the floor where he had slept for the past three years. He had drilled it himself to drain rainwater and other fluids that tended to be deposited where he slept.

Imyak drove the shaft downward. Three feet of the iron spear disappeared in the rock. The shaft would move side to side, but would not budge if pulled toward the cave mouth. Ukluk positioned himself behind it, setting his feet in place, and desperately hoping that Mungo would not be able to break the spear or pry it loose. "Imyak, wait at guard place." She obeyed immediately, and Ukluk felt a strange emotion for Imyak that he never had before. He did not know what long-ing feeling was, but it was much stronger than the primal lust he usually had when he smelled her.

"Slave? Come. Now!" Mungo slurred his words as the poison took hold. "What are you doing? Hurry." The giant pulled on the chain, but the shaft held fast.

Ukluk kept silent, refusing to answer the dying giant. Finally, after some loud shouting and jerking on the chain the giant peered warily into the cavern.

"Slave, you defy your chief?" Mungo pulled on the chain hard and Ukluk noticed the ring binding him start to come open, the metal bending. He was almost free.

Mungo noticed it too and stopped pulling. "You are smart for a slave orc. Come here and I shall kill you quickly."

"No-Tusks stays. I wait and watch Mungo die."

Mungo's face scrunched up. He coughed, clutching his abdomen, the horror on his face turning to rage as he realized he had been poisoned.

Ukluk shook his head and said, "No-Tusks tell Mungo not to drink the bog wine."

The giant roared and the whelps outside started squealing in panic. Mungo vented his rage on them, and Ukluk heard several of the orclings die from the giant's blows as the rest fled into the hills. Mungo returned a moment later with blood and gore on his hands. Ukluk recoiled as the giant reached into the cave. "I'll break your bones then peel off your hide." Mungo squeezed his head and shoulders through the opening of the cave, his hand coming closer.

Ukluk shouted, "Imyak, now!"

The female pulled the lever. The spiked log walls did not fall on the giant. They remained in place, the empty eye sockets on the elf and dwarf skulls mocking Ukluk.

Mungo grinned as he came closer and reached for the little orc.

Ukluk's eyes bulged.

Imyak kicked part of the log wall trap and heavy timbers fell on the giant. Metal spikes pierced Mungo's body and crushed him to the ground. Ukluk flattened himself inside the crack in the floor as the iron spear was pushed over. When the dust began to settle, Mungo moaned in pain, trapped under the logs.

Safe in his sleeping place, Ukluk used the hammer, chisel, and pry bar to free him-



self from the chain, wedging apart one of the links. He crawled along the crack to the edge of the cave and slipped out the escape-hole that led deeper into the lair. He wanted to see Imyak, but there would be time for that later. Ukluk slipped out of the lair using one of the secret tunnels and found himself looking down on the legs of the dying giant. Would the poison in the bog wine kill him, or would blood loss from the spiked logs? He didn't know for sure, and thought Mungo would have been long dead by now from the poisons. At least Mungo had slain all but two or three whelps. Kapik's body was not among the ones outside, and that made Ukluk nervous.

Dropping rocks on the giant's back bone took up the rest of the afternoon, and by evening there were few stones left that Ukluk could move by himself. He would have to recruit Imyak and her sisters.

Movement in the bushes at the edge of the clearing in front of the lair made Ukluk hide on his belly. Fear made his heart skip several beats as a group of three adult orcs emerged from the shadows. *Drunda's bollacks!* Ukluk cursed silently, some of the war party had survived. The orcs stared at the giant's legs poking out of their lair long enough to raise their weapons, then charged, screaming for blood. The first one to hit the giant cut his leg open with a vicious overhand axe chop. Mungo's leg jerked and struck the orc under the chin and snapped his head back with enough force to kill him instantly.

Enraged, Kar-Pok leapt onto the giant's back and chopped at Mungo's back until he stopped moving. Torgash, the lone surviving orc warrior, climbed up and stood with his chief upon Mungo's paralyzed body. The whelp, Kapik, appeared at the edge of the clearing and howled victoriously, shouting his father's name.

Ukluk thought about slinking off into the night, never to return. He started to slip away and his foot dislodged a pebble, which rolled down the hill.

Kapik rushed forward pointing at Ukluk and grunting.

Kar-Pok backed up from the giant and spotted Ukluk. "Come here, slave."

Ukluk's bones turned to swamp slime. He could never outrun them. Instead, Ukluk crawled down the hill and prostrated himself at Kar-Pok's feet. The war leader kicked him in the side. "What happened?"

"Giant killed warriors and many whelps," Ukluk said.

"Why did tribe come out of lair?" Kar-Pok asked.

"Slave made bad things happen," Kapik said.

"No," Ukluk said, "Kar-Vrishnek and the warriors were meat. No-Tusks saved tribe. No-Tusks poison giant with bog wine, then drop the logs on him. No-Tusks save tribe."

Kapik opened his jaws to speak, but his father cut him off with a backhanded slap. "Kapik ran into the woods," Kar-Pok accused his son, then threw him to the ground. "Kapik is frightened dog while slave stay, fight as warrior."

"Good slave," Ukluk groveled in the dirt, eying Kapik with contempt.

Kar-Pok shook his head at Kapik. "Kar-Pok lets coward whelp live for now. Coward will help butcher giant so tribe has meat until next moon."

"Other warriors not coming with cattle?" Ukluk asked, a glimmer of hope returning.

"No." Kar-Pok said, shaking his head grimly. "Warriors ambushed on way to raid."

Ukluk tried to look as surprised as he could, though he wanted to play the elf-skin drums and chant Drunda's name. The Angry God had accepted most of his offering, but why had Drunda not taken Kar-Pok and Torgash?

"No matter that cattle not taken. Tribe has many things to eat now," Kar-Pok said, as he glanced at the giant, the warriors, and the dead whelps strewn about. "Harvest this meat. Waste nothing."

Three days later, Ukluk lay in his sleeping place in entry cave, staring up at the dried blood on the spikes on the reset log trap. His sense of dread increased with every howl of pain echoing from the fe-

males' cave deeper in the lair. He should go now, flee while Kar-Pok and Torgash were distracted by the bloody spectacle in the birth cave. Ukluk would lose himself in the swamp tonight, then make his way to Mungo's lair where they had made their agreement. Perhaps someday Ukluk would find another tribe and join them. He would start over. As a slave. Again.

Imyak and her sisters would face the wrath of Kar-Pok alone. They would probably survive the terrible punishment, but if he stayed, Ukluk would not. The screaming in the birth cave increased in volume, three voices howling as they dropped their whelps, one after another as the little biters charged out of their mothers. Oogrook's voice was the loudest. Of the three sisters she was the most affected by pain, and required the most milk of the poppy after giving birth. He should have prepared some for her in advance.

Head hanging down, Ukluk gathered his meager belongings into a sack, put his poisoned needles into a sheath on his wrist, and prepared to leave the lair of the Iron Spear tribe forever.

The howling stopped. It could only mean one thing. All of the whelps had come. Ukluk's whelps, though he would never see them. If only Kar-Pok had been killed in the ambush, everything would have been different. Perhaps if he had had more time, Ukluk could gather some poison mushrooms from the swamp and take care of the chief and Torgash.

Harsh shouting echoed from the depths. An enraged Kar-Pok spewed curses at the females. Imyak's voice pleaded and a brood of newborn orclings began to wail. Oogrook or Ugash—definitely not Imyak—screamed for mercy as Ukluk nearly went mad with worry. Would the chief kill the females and all the newborn milk suckers? How could Ukluk let this happen?

"Kar-Pok!" Ukluk screamed as loud as he could, his challenge filled with hatred. The chief's name reverberated off the walls. It could not be taken back or mistaken for what it was. Ukluk would not run. Not today.

The little slave wrapped the pull-cord for the log trap he had installed around his an-



kle and waited. He thought about the poison needles hidden in his wrist sheath, but knew the poison was not strong enough to kill orcs as strong as Kar-Pok or Torgash.

The stomping sounds of the chief and Torgash coming to kill Ukluk were unmistakable. The pair of rage-filled orcs burst into the entry cave and Kar-Pok dangled a mewling newborn whelp by a skinny green leg.

Veins in Kar-Pok's forehead bulged as he glared at the tiny orcling, so obviously slave spawn. "No-Tusks put slave seed in all females. No-Tusks gets prisoner treatment, then Kar-Pok finishes slave by heating up totem iron spear and impaling slave on red hot metal."

Torgash laughed, then said, "We make No-Tusks tell how he force females to mate with slave."

Ukluk shrugged. "I tell how."

The two warriors paused and Ukluk said, "Females do anything for blood honey."

Ukluk thought he saw both Kar-Pok and Torgash nodding their heads at the moment he jerked the pull-cord with his ankle, fell prone, and triggered the spiked logs, which fell and killed the surprised orcs.

Lying safe in the fissure where he slept, Ukluk listened for the sound of the newborn Kar-Pok had been holding. There was nothing. He sighed remorsefully, knowing Imyak and her sisters had probably had sets of twins at least, if not triplets. He had to find out. He crawled though the fissure to the escape-tunnel, which led deeper into the lair.

He crawled to the edge of the cavern and went down the escape-hole. He had to see Imyak and his brood of newborn whelps. The strange feeling returned when he thought of Imyak. He realized that he coveted her more than anything else. She would be his, and his alone. No other male would ever have her again, and if they did, Ukluk would kill them.

Something hard cracked him on the back of the neck as he emerged from the narrow tunnel. Ukluk crumpled to the ground as the young orc Kapik stood over him, brandishing an iron-shod club.

"No-Tusks be Kar-Kapik's slave now," the whelp said, then struck Ukluk on the snout. Kar-Kapik beat Ukluk with the war club, striking his legs, arms, feet, and head.

Bloody and dazed, Ukluk groveled on the floor and licked Kar-Kapik's feet. "Good slave. No-Tusks is Kar-Kapik's slave now."

The whelp grunted after sudden pain, kicked Ukluk in the face, and stumbled backwards. Kar-Kapik fell to the ground and held his foot, inspecting the trickle of blood coming from his ankle. "What No-Tusks do?"

Ukluk showed the dying whelp the metal needle he had stabbed him with and swallowed the delicious blood in his mouth. "No-Tusks kills Kar-Kapik."

The whelp slumped to the floor, his muscles twitching. Ukluk crawled on top of Kapik and sat on his chest.

"No-Tusks never be warrior, never be Kar, never be chief," Kapik said as tremors wracked his entire body.

Ukluk nodded. "No-Tusks never be called chief, but No-Tusks is only father of new tribe. When these grow long, tribe will call me Tezok the Witch Doctor."

"Warriors will kill No-Tusks," Kapik said, his tongue swelling in his mouth.

Ukluk snarled, displaying his newly filed tusks and hungering for the day when they would grow back and he could reclaim his old name.

"No-Tusks"—the whelp gagged—"is nothing."

"Not nothing. No orc will cross Witch Doctor Poison Master of Drunda."

Kapik's eyes bulged as he died choking on his own tongue.

Satisfied, Ukluk strolled down the empty tunnel eager to see Imyak, Ugash, Oogrook, and his spawn. He would make many more orclings with the females until the entire tribe was just like him: short, clever, and ruthless. The Angry God Drunda had accepted the blood of all the Iron Spear tribes' warriors, some of its whelps, and most importantly, a red haired giant had been defeated by him.

The omens were clear.

The new tribe would prosper, and someday, Ukluk—no, Tezok!—would send his sons on raids with Drunda's poison on their weapons. Humans and elves would fear the Poisoned Spear tribe above all others. *It will all come to pass*, he thought, as he rubbed the nubs of his tusks, knowing that they would never be filed down again.

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The Angry Gamer

by Some Angry Troll Dude



GEEKS AND MOVIES: WHY NOBODY NEEDS YOUR CRAP

By the Angry Gamer



he Internet has given everyone across the board, in all manner of fandom, crafting, hobbies; you name it, a voice.

Man, does that suck.

Don't get me wrong: the Web has done great things. I've got friends and colleagues I never would have met if I weren't online. Unfortunately, there are a lot of negativist a-holes out there as well, spouting off their garbage at every turn, and with every chance they get. And you know what? Nobody needs it.

If you'd brought the pioneers at NASA who sent us to the moon forward fifty years, and shown them the way we use the Internet to turn the world into a place where we piss and moan about how much we hate the things we supposedly love? They'd head desk like you've never seen.

For some time now there has been a sort of truism bandied around—you're not a *real* fan of something unless you have nothing good to say about it. And that's just crap. It's time to stop. Just...stop. Nobody needs it. If you see a trailer for an anticipated movie and you think it looks like garbage? By all means, *don't* #\$\$@## go see it. Save the rest of the world your infantile groaning about how they ruined your favorite book or comic or other sf/fantasy property.

There's something to be said about, "If you haven't got something nice to say, don't say anything at all." People who actually *enjoy* sf/fantasy movies are sick to death of being shamed into silence by

loudmouthed idiots who say things like, "it was like re-writing the Bible," or "it raped my childhood."

Come off it. I have bad news for you. Your "Holy Trilogy" isn't the Bible, or the Torah, or the Quran, or the Bhagavad Gita, or any other holy book. It's a #@\$%\$ fantasy, sci-fi, or planetary romance. Also, nobody took a #*@&^ on your childhood. I wonder what people whose childhood's were really #*!@# up think about people throwing that particular one around so casually.

"I have a right to my opinion!" you are now indignantly crying.

Yep, you do. And you have a right to express it. I've got another piece of news for you—just because you have the right to do something, that doesn't make it a good idea. Your rights also don't come consequence-free. And if you're whining about the latest installment of your supposed favorite property (which let's face it, is really just your favorite property *about which to whine*), you should expect to be taken to task for it by people who aren't as pissy as you.

To be clear: I'm not saying you shouldn't be *allowed* to express your opinion. I'm saying you should have the decency and presence of mind to realize that all you're doing is filling up the world with negativity and



you should *choose* to keep your mouth shut about it. After all, you have another great freedom: the freedom of choice.

Choose to keep the world a little more positive, and choose not to go see it if you think it's going to suck. This garbage of "I really wanted to like it," is just that: garbage. You didn't. You went in looking for reasons to hate it so you could bitch on the Web. Be honest with yourself, for crying out loud. Nobody needs your crap, and some of us would like to exercise *our* right to enjoy a movie, book, game or comic without you telling us we're wrong for it.



INZAE: THE INNER WORLD

by Davis and Stephen Chenault



Within the world of Aihrde lies the Inner World of Inzae, shaped like a bowl. Inzae was formed by the Dragon Goddess

Inzaa in the first Rin of the World. Inzae hung beneath Aihrde and created from both the Maelstrom and the Language of Creation. When Unklar attacked Inzaa he bound her and her world within Aihrde, in an infinite space so that they stood a part of, but wholly separate from, his own. Inzae, a brutal place, is much akin to Aihrde in that it is peopled by dwarves, elves, orcs, men, and so on.

From the First Oration of the Andanuth:

And so uncounted lengths of the Arc of Time played out, pooling as it did in a great heap upon the edge of creation, and the All Father labored upon his forge, taking of himself and giving to an ever-growing host of creatures that began to people the Void. And then he saw that he labored without purpose and that his creations drifted in the lonely empty

or stood to heel about him. He at last paused to see what next he might affect.

He looked far and wide and his gaze fell upon the Dragon where she hung in the emptiness, spinning upon herself, creating a maelstrom of chaos about her. He watched her split the fabric of the Void in her thrashings, and how those splits tore rifts, portals, and doors to other places beyond the Empty and this caused the Maelstrom. So Erde drifted to her. Spying her madness he envied it and the understanding of it grew upon him and he saw that she was filling the Void with her own madness; wild energies, and elements, forming around her. And this awoke a lust within him like never before, because as ever he loved creation. He settled upon her chaos and the word of her came to his mind, Inzaa.

And lo, Erde made the world from the Maelstrom. He named it in his voice and it became the crucible of his mind. He pounded substance from the Maelstrom and set great gulfs between the fire, earth, water, air, and energy of all kinds. And these he ordered as desired so that he could draw from them at need. Life clung to his hammer and tools and

spilled into the manifold realms of his imagining, bringing life to where there had been none before. And these realms were called the Firmament by scholars in later ages.

Using the Language of Creation Erde drew substance from the Firmament, casting it into shape upon the Void. And so the world came into being. It was flat, and over its edges spilled the substance of his creation to mingle with the Maelstrom of Inzaa. and the substance of creation fell upon Inzaa and she marveled at it, for she knew nothing of Erde's presence above the Maelstrom.

Therefore, surrounding herself with the heat of fire, the rush of wind, the cold hard earth, and the liquid blanket of water, Inzaa began to form and mold. From these elements, and others whose nature passes all understanding, she configured her own world, and its pieces drifted upward to lay upon the underside of the world of Erde's making, bound to it and a part of the whole. With it she caused the mountains to grow, the seas to pool, the skies to dash, and the warmth of the day to radiate. Thus, there came to be two worlds in the Void, one astride the other, bound together.



NOTABLE TERMS:

All terminology used in the following text is in Jutt.

Inzae: (In-Zay'-uh) The name of the world.

Inzaa: (In-Zay') The name of the earth dragon. The word is never used openly as it brings curses with it and it is said, the more often it is spoken, the sooner the Dragon will awake.

THE MAELSTROM

Before, there was naught but the maelstrom, the Eye of the Void. Out of the Eye of the Void came Inzaa, the Flame of Life, Destroyer of Worlds, the Earth Mother.

Unto Inzaa were thralls given. Many in number, vast in power and learned in the languages of the Void and the Maelstrom, the thralls labored for her.

The Forstmin: These are the first and foremost, those who came first into the word and were enthralled to Inzaa. They served her for many ages and saw the building of the Endless Palace and the placement of the Heart of the World.

Before the coming of the Waters of the World and the Sundering of the Rings of Brass, many of the Forstmin rose up and cast Inzaa down. Some sided with Inzaa and others remained aloof from the war.

The Firmin: These are the Forstmin who rose in revolt against Inzaa. They roam the wide world but their ancestral hall and palace is in Insalla. Great in power, the Firmin are worshipped as gods.

The Dorstmin: The Dorstmin are the Forstmin who sided with Inzaa in the revolt and fought against the Firmin. They scattered to the four winds and hid themselves far and wide after Inzaa was cast down.

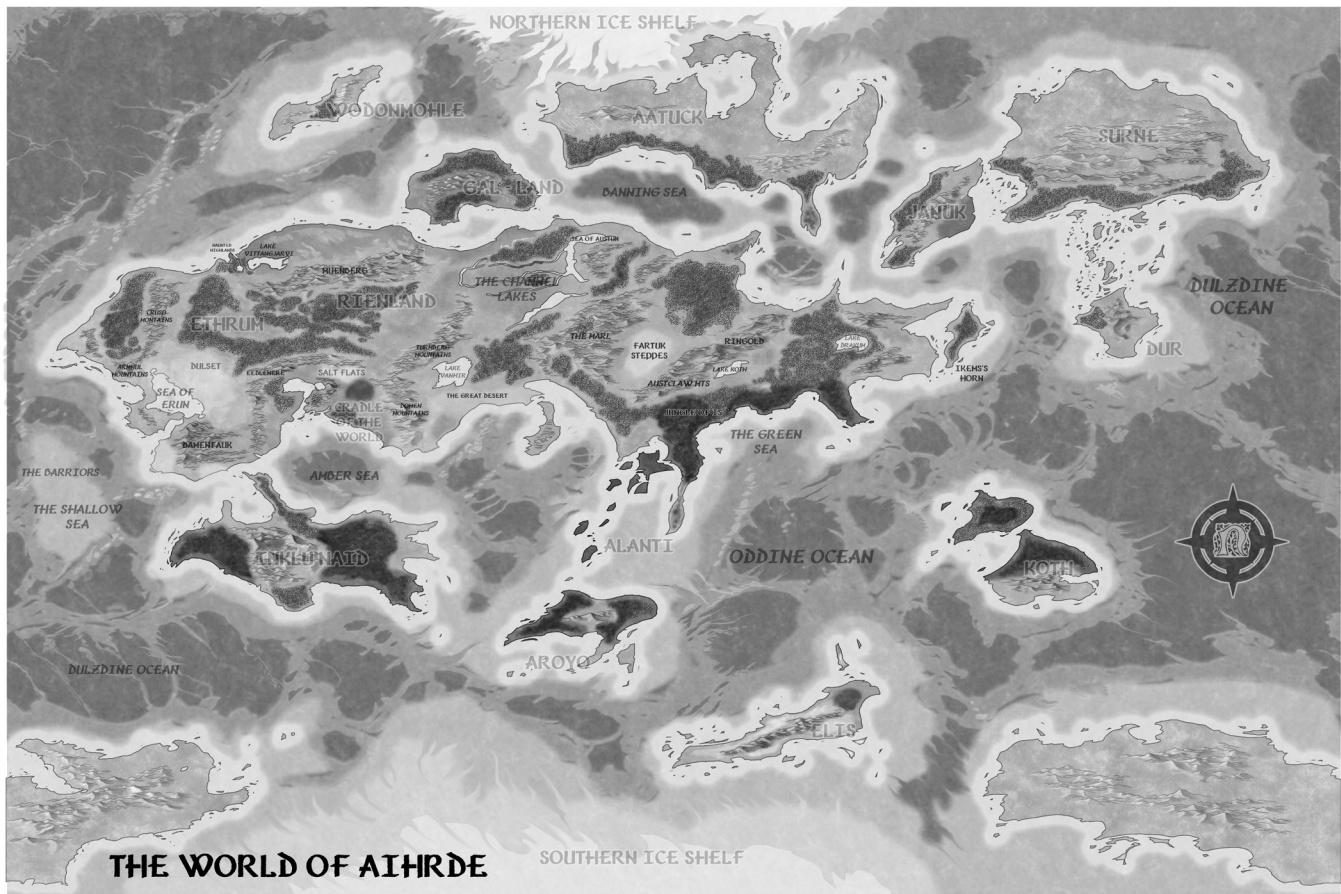
The Irselmin: These are the Forstmin who remained aloof from the revolt against Inzaa. They neither sided with the Firmin nor against them. Some of the Irselmin are worshipped as gods. Their ancestral hall and palace is on Mount Nistor.

The Ninzane: Inzaa's first clutch of eggs produced 100 spawn. The first was given over so that only the 99 remained. They served Inzaa and insured her thralls obeyed her commands. During the revolt

against Inzaa, many were slain and the rest scattered to the remote corners of the world awaiting their mother's return but are known to guard their realms jealously.

The 99 gave birth to other dragons of lesser make but fearsome and deadly in any respect. These are rare and wonderful creatures few of whom live long in one place but wander the world awaiting the return of the earth mother. Dragons are bent upon destruction but all are intelligent and bear with them the desire for beautiful things. They gather treasures of unique and beautiful make. They enjoy the palaces and halls made by others. But these must be airy places and capable of holding creatures of such immense size. They have also been known to take slaves and bid them undertake tasks of varying natures. On rare occasions one might find several dragons in one spot. Dragons war with one another. All are afraid of the 99 and seek to avoid them.

No dragon can give birth. There are no more dragons until one or more of the 99 mate and give birth.



TO KNOW OR NOT TO KNOW

by Todd Gray



Gaming is such a fun time and an outlet for me. I love getting together with my friends and spending countless hours around the table solving, conquering or whatever else the CK has in store for our gaming group. It is a great release from the day to day workload we have to endure.

With that being said, how are we to begin our gaming adventures? On one side of the coin, for the ease of getting the game running quickly and with no excess baggage, all characters start off knowing each other. On the other side of the coin is the CK introducing the characters as the beginning of the adventure unfolds.

I understand that both methods have merit when running a game. But does one method short the characters? At tournaments and conventions, the CK often has the characters introduced. Not the pick-up games, mind you, but the cataloged games.

Is this really necessary? In the tournament/convention setting I understand the reluctance to allow the characters to meet. The CK is under time restraints for the game and even with pre-generated characters and the adventuring party starting together, it is very difficult to finish the game on time and adding role playing chance meetings doesn't help. The player characters may be slow to make their decisions, or they may misinterpret the given information and go in an entirely different direction than the CK expected. Generally the group already knows or has an idea of what is expected from them since the cataloged games have the information in their titles. Whatever the reason, chance meetings can really detract from your gaming experience in tournaments and conventions.

However, when a group of friends come together, or a group has a pick-up session I believe there is only one option. The CK must work the party into the adventure. So, knowing one another is out of the picture, or should be in my opinion.



Most people I have gamed with, both privately and at cons put a great deal of thought into their characters. They have varied personalities, dark demeanors, rugged scars, missing appendages, crazy quirks and colorful descriptions. These personages should be given a venue to showcase the masterpiece they have so cleverly created!

Starting an adventuring party that knows each other is just . . . bland. "You have known each other for six months. You have traveled extensively and encountered many things. You overhear that there is a great and nasty giant terrorizing the village north of where you are." Now on with the adventure!

It's not creative. It's definitely cookie cutter gaming. And for me, as a gamer, it's truly not fun. Some of the best times I have had at the gaming table have been when myself, or the group that's already together meets a new character.

A good example would be from early on when I started gaming. Our party had been traveling overland for quite some time when we heard a great commotion and saw smoke coming from over the next hill. We hurried to see what was happening, and when we topped the rise we saw an awesome sight. A group of hobgoblins had attacked a group of travelers and had laid waste to the entire group. Well, all but one. The bodies of the fallen were scattered all over the encampment, and the hobgoblins were attacking a young mage in the back of a wagon, which happened to be on fire. We rushed in and a vicious and bloody fight ensued. Luther the paladin, my character, skewered one with his spear and dropped from his horse. Volstag the ranger ran and vaulted off a boulder and buried his axe in the head of another. Luther drove his sword through a large hob's stomach and Volstag decapitated another. They both looked into the wagon. The last one had climbed up and was





about to grab the mage when we heard a great crackling sound. Electricity surged through the mage's hand as Aristobulus the mage grabbed the creature. The hob convulsed and then stiffened as it died. Two members of our party went to negative hit points before we dropped the last of the hobs. This event was the first meeting Luther Pendagrance and Mac Golden's mage Aristobulus (see the **Codex of Aihrde**).

Another example would be from the history of the great rogue, Michael Bagleton. His adventuring party was wiped out. Two of them were poisoned and another beheaded. Michael swore vengeance upon the Warlord Danloth, a captain among the forces of the cursed horned god Unklar. Michael, under the cover of night, scaled the wall to the fortress. Climbing onto the roof he silently crept along the edge until he reached the doorway to the main hall. Below him were two guards standing watch over the entrance. Slowly he lowered himself and dropped behind one guard and plunged his dagger into his back. The second guard quickly raised a horn to his lips to sound the alarm. But he never made a sound as Michael's thrown dagger pierced his neck. Michael entered the dark fortress and using stealth

made his way down several corridors; three guards later he was at Danloth's chambers. Danloth was alone. Hoping to take the powerful warrior by surprise, all good things quickly go south! As Michael passed through the antechamber, he walked over runes inscribed on the floor. The burning pain from the runes' explosion was great but he had to reach his target. It was too late for surprise. Danloth rolled out of his bed with sword in hand and the battle commenced. Even fighting with all of his might, Michael was no match for Danloth. As the deathstroke was about to fall, the door to the chamber crashes open. Dolgon, one time king of Grundeliche Hohle, charges in with axe in hand, and Kain the Godless (played by Steve Chenault), timeless warrior of great renown, wielding his massive broad sword and the two slay the captain in a rain of mighty blows. A grand meeting of fellows instead of the rogue's demise!

Countless more meetings and beginnings have occurred in adventures everywhere. But this is the beauty of the description and meeting of these grand beings. The introduction of the many and various characters brings such a passion into the game and makes memories that gaming

groups talk about for years. This has definitely been my experience.

Some like to have their characters have a flamboyant entrance. Others like to describe their characters whenever possible, sparing no details. Some, upon entering the game like to try to shock the party with some strange bit of information about themselves, and a few like to try to immediately get under the skin of one or maybe even all of their group. All of these methods add flavor to the game. True, not everyone likes a lot of role playing within their game. They are more about the adventure, gaining wealth and experience and moving on. But, I believe there are many gamers that gain enjoyment from the travel, not just the final destination.

I now endeavor to change my convention gaming whenever possible. I want to break that mold as well. I believe that to personalize a gamer's character is to breathe a special life within the game itself and this leads to a greater enjoyment by all, and sets that game apart in the hall of memories.





MONSTER ECOLOGY

EXPLAINING THE STRANGE BEASTS THAT PEOPLE THE
HALLS OF OUR IMAGINATION.

BRIAN KIVARI &
ALICIA STANLEY



BULETTE

by Brian Kivari



On the plains of Achrothos, you find a richness and abundance of life. Here you'll find the hunters and the hunted that complete the circle of life, from zebras and antelope to lions and cheetahs. Each serves a purpose in nature's balance, for here there are no such things as good and bad; those terms are reserved for the intelligent bipedal beings of men, dwarves, elves and other humanoids that grace our planet. Here you'll only find the perfect harmony that defines life's eternal struggle for survival.

The plains are a vast swath of open ground, grasses of many different varieties sweep across the open sky as far as the eye can see. The land is dotted with small oases of shade in the form of trees that can withstand the extreme environment that the plains have to offer. From the acacia to the candelabra, the trees are not only a source of food, but supply shade and homes for the wide variety of animals and birds that call this land home.

Looking off into the distance, you can watch as the fierce lion stalks its prey. The gazelles are always on the lookout. All it takes is one miscalculation by the lioness and the gazelles will scatter, leaving her to look for prey elsewhere.

A mighty huntress she is, but we are not here to observe the king of the beasts, nor are we here to track gazelles. No, we are here for a much more secretive animal, the bulette!

Living in burrows, the bulette (pronounced "byoo-lay") is a large mammal, covered in

a tough hide that is very hard to penetrate even with the sharpest sword or a lance at a full gallop on a strong steed. Its large size dwarfs even the elephant and has been known to swallow prey as large as a horse whole. It digs enormous burrows, where it waits patiently for unsuspecting prey to walk by. The burrows are meticulously covered up so the unknowing and unfortunate animal does not know the danger it is in. Even man has a hard time distinguishing the bulette's burrow from the dried up grass of the plains. Those who do not look closely can become a bulette's lunch in short order as the beast, upon sensing their prey, will shoot up from the ground in such a violent manner that earth flies for over a hundred feet, raining down like a monsoon of dirt. Then, just as quickly the attack came, the bulette disappears back into its burrow to eat its meal at a leisurely pace.

Though the bulette is known for swallowing some animals whole, the larger meals are dragged back into the burrow as far as the bulette can take it. Most of the time the prey is still alive and will fight for life uselessly against the bulette's tough hide and strong, beak-like mouth. Safe underneath the surface, the bulette will rend the animal to scraps, pinned beneath its massive forelegs. Even the most agile and strong fauna on the planet are no match for the bulette's weight, and in the constricted burrow it is only a matter of time before the animal surrenders helplessly to the captor.

At times, the bulette will venture forth by digging its way through the underground for miles before finding a suitable stopping point. "Tunneling," though, does not accurately describe the way the bulette moves about. Once the bulette decides to move its location, it meticulously digs

through the earth, shifting dirt from the front to its rear. The back legs then expertly pack the newly shifted soil back into place, sealing the path of movement. More of a moving bubble or egg than a tunnel, the bulette swims through the ground at an amazing speed of 1 mile per hour. The bulette has the instinctive ability to remain 3 feet from the surface, no matter how uneven the stretch of land it decides to travel. With the earth packed solidly behind and above the bulette, even the largest and heaviest of land creatures needn't fear falling into a pit left behind. Even though these tunnels are relatively close to the surface, the beast's movement is only betrayed by a small hump that can be followed only by the studious eye to track the bulette's path. In the tall grass, however, these humps are all but indistinguishable to the naked eye. Even the sharp eyesight of the elf or the keen ability to sense underground happenings of the dwarves is rendered useless in finding the subtly moving mounds.

The meaning of this bizarre sub-terrestrial migration was once a mystery. For a time it was commonly believed that the bulette grew bored with its location or lacked ample prey, and chose to dig through the earth rather than surface and walk. It has been known to attack prey above while in the process of moving its burrow, which seems to support the theory of the bulette looking for greener pastures, so to speak. The question remains though, why does such a large animal with seemingly no natural enemies, burrow through the earth rather than choose the more energy-efficient option to travel over land? One theory puts forth the idea that the bulette was better served moving



through the earth because of the great stealth it afforded, something such a large beast would be hard-pressed to achieve on the surface. Though massive in size, it can hardly be described as mobile nor agile when surfaced. Since it depends solely on the element of surprise to catch most of its meals, traveling above ground would surely hamper hunting efforts for the clumsily-sized bulette.

Recent tracking investigation sheds additional light onto why the bulette stays on the move. When taken into account that all life requires similar life to continue thriving, it seems only natural that procreation be as vital to the bulette as any other species.

It would be unfair to paint the bulette as a complete villain. Seemingly at the top of the food chain, its large size and voracious appetite surely encourage fear amongst most, though life in the savanna creates an instinctual feeling of flight, fight, or die, even in the most modern of men.

Nature has made him terrible and terrifying to be sure, but, the bulette has a soft side.

Unlike other mammals whose estrous cycle depends on abundance of food or regularly timed heat periods, the female bulette is poly-estrous at will. In this hostile environment, it is clear that having frequent heat cycles is nature's way of helping the bulette stay competitively reproductive. During times of drought which cause a lack of suitable prey for all life in the plains, its ability to bear young at any time ensures the bulette will bounce back quicker than other species that do not share this trait. Most successful mating will result in only one pup and on rare occasion, twins. More than two pups in a litter is extremely rare and it is unknown if the female is even able to care for more than two pups, since a bulette with twin pups will often abandon one, leaving it to die when or if she is unable to feed them both.

It has recently been discovered just how the bulette perform their mating ritual, and it is unusual indeed. The female instinctively makes her way to an area that is roughly in the middle of competing males. Once there, she burrows down to about 15 feet

and forms a small nest. When she is ready to accept a suitor, she will make a low, powerful growl and thump her front and hind legs against the walls of her nest, emitting a clear signal to all around that she is seeking a mate. Then the competing males descend upon her in a race against the earth and each other. The first to reach the female now has a chance to entice her to mate with him. Once her nest has been breached by a victorious male, she ends her mating call and the other males stop their advances and return to their original hunting grounds.

However, it isn't first-come first-served in the world of the bulette. Reaching the burrow first means only that the male bulette has been given a chance to win her affection. Before he can begin mating, he must



first go through an intricate ritual to prove he is worthy of fathering her pups.

Slowly, the male pokes his head into the female's small nest. They both recognize each other as potential mates and he immediately begins to work. He starts to dig around the female, widening her nest until there is enough room for him to enter the chamber and for her potential pups to be born. Unlike when a bulette moves through the earth, this excess dirt must be moved to make room for the ever widening nest. The male makes a tunnel that extends to the surface and with this tunnel, he'll move the dirt to the surface. If you are ever on the plains and happen to see a mound of dirt that seems out of place, there is a good chance that below is a nesting site of a pair of bulette. Like the bubble they use to move about, the male will com-

pack the earth around her nest to a brick-like consistency so there is little chance of a cave-in, even if another bulette crosses her path. When the male has finished his arduous task, he'll fill in the excavation tunnel, fully encasing the female.

Once the nest has been finished, the male stands in front of the female and tries to rub his snout against hers. Bulette nostrils are surrounded by scent glands that pass information much the same way pheromones act in other species. Individual to each animal, the scent sends information to the female such as the general health of the male as well as strength, migration routes, and diet, all of which help the female decide if copulation with this male will result in strong, healthy pups. At this

point either the female is impressed and allows the male to copulate with her or she spurns his advance. If the female is satisfied, she turns her back to him, allows him to mount her, and the breeding begins.

If the male is spurned, he will be snarled and swiped at, and he leaves the nest to return to his hunting grounds. Then, like before, the female sends out a new signal and the process starts over again. The next male will take advantage of the previous male's hard work in burrowing out a den but will often attempt to improve it in hopes of raising the possibility of mating with the female. The ritual will continue until she finds a suitable mate, often rejecting 4-5 males until she is satisfied. However, just as she is poly-estrous, the female bulette is poly-amorous.

It was discovered that once the first male had completed his task, he would leave. Then the female would again send out a signal and start the process all over again. Two things should be noted: firstly, that a male who has already mated will not compete again for another chance with the same female. Secondly, he will not take advantage of the open plain left evacuated by the other suitors. Each time she calls a mate to her, the female modulates her tone differently, creating a siren call specific to the male who answers it first. The male instinctively knows his call and will respond to no other song from the same female.

After all the males have visited the female to either be granted a coupling or spurned



violently, they return to their hunting ground to resume life as normal. But, this is not the end of the responsibility of all the males. There is another reason why the female would call each male individually and also give them a call all their own. Now that the female is impregnated, she will not leave her nesting place until the pups are weaned and big enough to fend for themselves. During this time she does not hunt for herself. When she needs nourishment, she calls one of the males and they will bring her food so she and her pups do not starve. She will call each male in careful turn, to bring her nourishment, being careful to keep the rotation in order. This is a smart move by the female, as it ensures that each male will have enough time to hunt for itself and not over-hunt his territory. It also does not matter if the male had the opportunity to mate with the female or not, they will answer the call and bring food for the female and by extension the pups that are gestating within her whether they are his or not.

The gestation period as well as the weaning takes a very long time, compared to other species. By comparison, lion cubs do not open their eyes until the third week and are fully weaned at about four months. They begin hunting with their mother at three months and will continue to depend on their mother's care until they are around two years old.

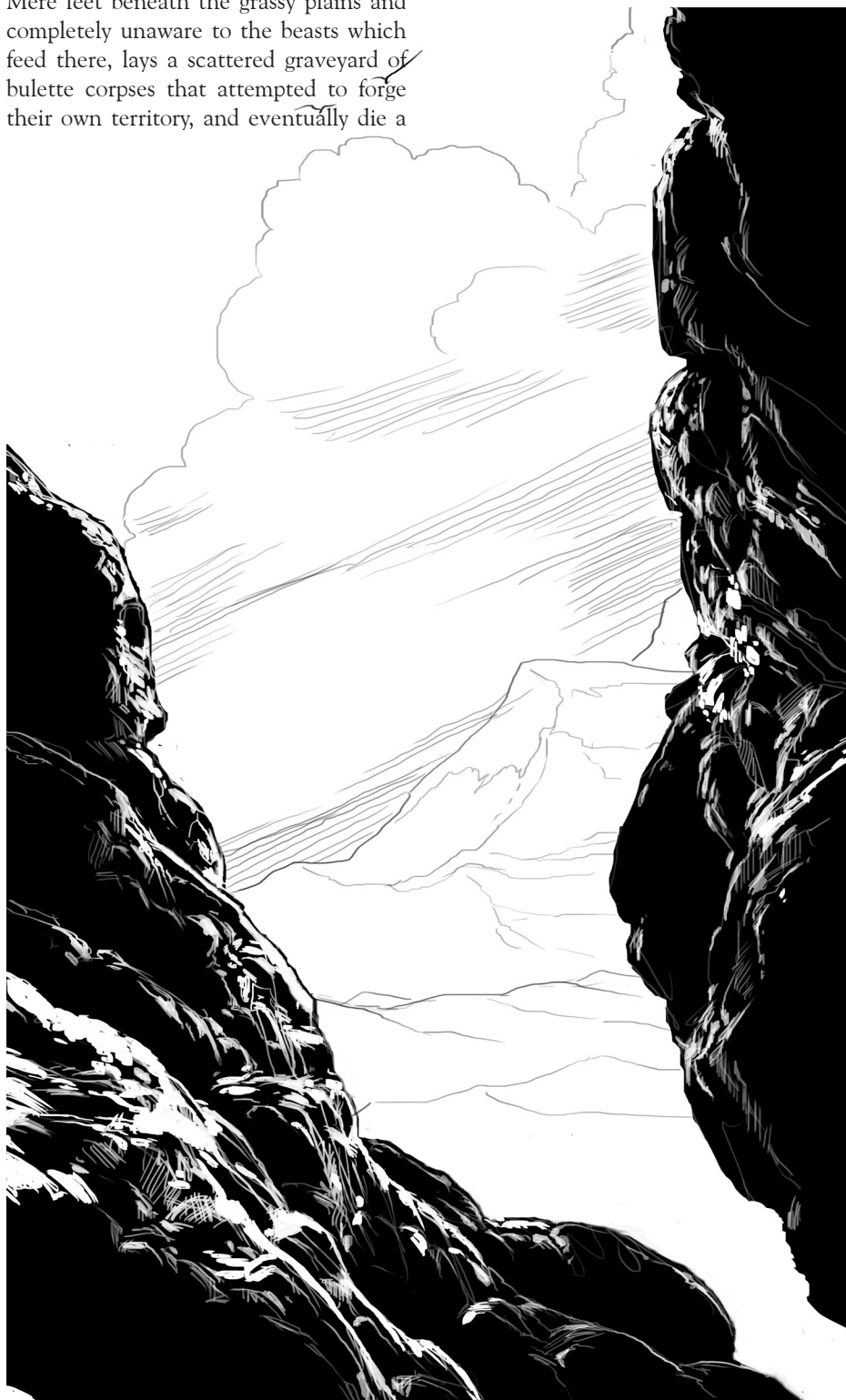
The bulette weans their pups around nine months. Before that time the pups are quite helpless. As they have no need to see in the small confines of the dark nest, it is around 6 months before they even attempt to do so. With no predators and a constant supply of food the pups can take time to develop, giving them a greater chance at continued survival. The female and the pups can stay in the same nest for up to a amazing eighteen months. Amazingly for such a long time in such a small confine, the female appears to suffer no atrophy or degeneration in overall musculature or strength. She keeps a normal sleep cycle but her body seems to go into a hibernating state. The pups can remain with the female from three to five years. Once large and experienced enough, they separate from their mother and start the search for their own hunting grounds.

A storyteller would like to stop here and have that happy ending. Unfortunately

in the savanna, happy endings are rarely the last chapter. A young bulette, freshly out of the nest, must be opportunistic in its hunting. He will instinctively know if another bulette is in the area and has claimed this patch of the savanna. It will travel around until it finds a suitable tract of land where it will begin hunting. The journey will often take days of hard travel before a pup is able to call a place home. Mere feet beneath the grassy plains and completely unaware to the beasts which feed there, lays a scattered graveyard of bulette corpses that attempted to forge their own territory, and eventually die a

lonely death from lack of food, exhaustion, and no safe territory within range.

The life of the bulette has been mostly mysterious and unknown. Our understanding has been ever expanding, but questions still remain. Until then, all we can do is marvel at the life they lead and remember they deserve the same respect that we give to all living species populating this tiny blue dot that lives in the vast cosmos.





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Codex of Ahrde

THE ALL FATHER SAW THE VOID AS A PLACE UNRELENTING, AND HE CAST OUT UPON IT. A GREAT WIND ROSE ABOUT HIM AND THIS WAS HIS SECOND THOUGHT AND HE GOVERNED IT, SO THAT IT STOOD LIKE A VESSEL UPON THE VOID, WIDE AND OPEN, AND FROM IT ALL HIS THOUGHTS FLOWED AS A RIVER INTO THE VOID

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