


# PYRAMID<sup>®</sup>



Issue 3/38 December '11

## THE POWER OF MYTH

### THE GOLDEN GENIZA OF EZKALI

by Matt Riggsby

#### BABA YAGA

by David L. Pulver

#### THE BEAR MYTH

by Alan Leddon

#### BABYLON RISING

by J. Edward Tremlett

#### SEVEN MYTHICAL ARTIFACTS FOR DUNGEON FANTASY

by Antoni Ten Monrós

#### THE JOURNEY OF THE DEAD

by Kyla Ward

#### ART OF PROPHECY

by Megan McDonald

# STEVE JACKSON GAMES

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### Article Colors

Each article is color-coded to help you find your favorite sections.

*Pale Blue:* In This Issue

*Brown:* In Every Issue (letters, humor, editorial, etc.)

*Dark Blue:* **GURPS** Features

*Purple:* Systemless Features

*Green:* Distinguished Columnists

#### COVER ART

Rowena

#### INTERIOR ART

Greg Hyland

Facets of ancient legendary tales continue to touch our language, outlook, and lives. Observe, fleeting mortal, as we unleash the power of myth within this epic *Pyramid*!

We start our journey by asking: Which narrative did you hear? That fundamental question leads to *Dungeon Fantasy* action, with *The Golden Geniza of Ezkali*. Scribed by Matt Riggsby (author of *GURPS Dungeon Fantasy 8: Treasure Tables*), this adventurous locale highlights four traps – complete with maps – and an underlying conundrum that makes survival a challenge. A vast storehouse of knowledge awaits the heroes . . . if they can get their facts straight.

We continue our wondrous plundering with *Seven Mythical Artifacts for Dungeon Fantasy*. Using the format established by *Dungeon Fantasy 6: 40 Artifacts*, it offers several myth-informed pieces of gear, including variations and **GURPS** stats.

Viewed with modern eyes, myths let us ask, “How can we spin that into something even *more* fantastic?” David L. Pulver, creator of *GURPS Spaceships*, uses this month’s *Eidetic Memory* to detail the witch-goddess Baba Yaga and her ultra-tech vessel, both of which come with **GURPS** stats.

*The Journey of the Dead* is made by all souls. Some adventurers even get a head start and brave it while still alive. This systemless article provides ideas for foreshadowing PC death and for using the “final journey” as one more obstacle to overcome.

When you think of myths, do you think of bears? You should. *The Bear Myth* describes the tropes of this surprisingly common legendary type, plus how you can use it in your settings as background flavor and a source of gaming possibilities.

While disturbing to the earthly world, the Middle Eastern conflict has also stirred the immortal realm. *Babylon Rising* reveals a standalone systemless urban-fantasy campaign outline that can serve to augment *The New Kingdom* from *Pyramid* #3/7: *Urban Fantasy*. You’re a returning Mesopotamian god; what’re you doing today?

Discover what you’re doing tomorrow as well with the *Art of Prophecy*. The omens reveal this to include prediction sources, how to phrase revelations, and other useful tips. The next time a hero uses a Divination spell or wants to learn about his death journey, you’ll be prepared.

This month’s *Random Thought Table* looks at ways to mine myths for every ounce of adventure potential. *Odds and Ends* expands that idea with more tips and specifics, and features a *Murphy’s Rules* tribute to the holidays. The power of myth is yours to command!

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# FROM THE EDITOR

## THE POWER OF MYTH . . . IN YOUR HANDS

When I was putting this issue together, I couldn't help but realize that Wikipedia completely changed how this issue was created.

When I sought articles for this issue, I was fairly insistent that submissions shouldn't consist solely of material that is common-knowledge . . . or is only a few mouse-clicks away. For example, an encyclopedic detailing of the Egyptian deities was right out; anyone who wants to know about them can find ample information freely available online.

The public availability of such information is also why this issue is devoted to the *power of myth*, and not (say) mythology. Any well-stocked library has numerous resources on mythology; however, insight into how to use that common information in new and interesting ways for gaming is nowhere near as prevalent.

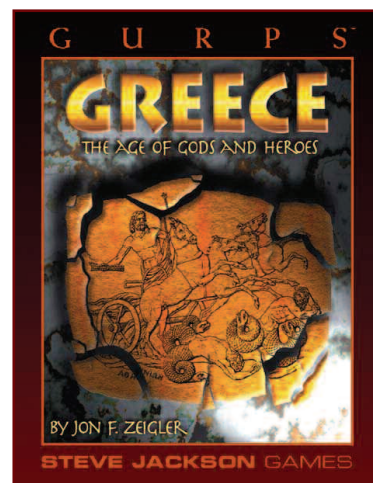
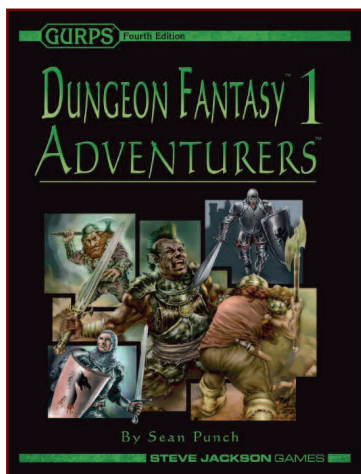
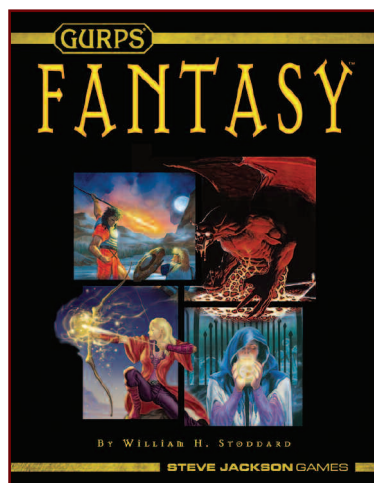
For perhaps the most striking example of how much the Internet has changed what this issue could have been 20 years ago, check out *Odds & Ends* (p. 38). In only a few hundred words, it offers tips into how to tap the gaming potential of the

sword in the stone, a famous Cyclops, and a forgotten biblical artifact. The default premise of the feature is that anyone who wants more details on the specific examples could readily find it online. It's easy to imagine an article from a 1980s gaming magazine expanding that concept to a few pages, since the audience would be assumed not to have quick access to the underlying background info.

Our goal was to fill this issue with insight and ideas that lets you use Wikipedia (and similar sources) to its full potential in the gaming world. We strive to fill *Pyramid* with good stuff you can't get easily elsewhere . . . and hopefully our efforts will be the stuff of legend for eons to come.

## WRITE HERE, WRITE NOW

How did we do in our goal of trying to augment the power of the Information Age in your gaming? Are our efforts worthy of songs sung for generations? Or was there an element where we should go back to the *drawing bard*? (Ha-ha-ha-ha! *Ahem.*) You can send us private feedback at [pyramid@sjgames.com](mailto:pyramid@sjgames.com), or make your epic thoughts known throughout the realms at [forums.sjgames.com](http://forums.sjgames.com).



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# THE GOLDEN GENIZA OF EZKALI

BY MATT RIGGSBY

A valuable treasure awaits adventurers. An ancient legend is their guide. The problem? It may look like a standard dungeon crawl with puzzles and a list of clues to work from, but the adventurers can't agree on what clues they're being given. How is that going to work?

This adventure is written for *GURPS Dungeon Fantasy*, though the core idea can easily be adapted for similar genres.

## THE PHILOSOPHICAL APPARATUS

This adventure is less about the content of myths (gods, culture heroes, the foundation of moral orders, etc.) and more about their form and how they are transmitted. One of the fixtures of fantastic literature is the old myth or legend that turns out to be true. It warns of a great evil that will arise, a hero who will save his people, or something similar. Sure enough, it all happens just like the story says, with the protagonists at the center of things.

Nevertheless, a fundamental though often-overlooked aspect of myths – as well as fairy tales, folk songs, and anything else transmitted through an oral tradition (or even many textual traditions) – is that they are *variable*. That is, people are familiar with slightly different versions of the same stories.

For example, many people know the Biblical version of the story of the Great Flood, wherein Noah and his family, forewarned by an angry God, build a ship to save various animals from water that covers the whole world. The Quran contains a similar story. The ancient Greeks, the Babylonians, and many other cultures across Europe and Asia had similar myths. However, the names of the protagonists, the deities involved and their motivation, the manner in which the survivors ride out the flood, and many other specifics are different. The version in the Quran, though close to the Biblical version, has Noah bringing some pious friends with him as well as family. Where Noah builds an ark, fills it with animals, and sails it for over a year, the Greeks Deucalion and Pyrrha float in a chest for nine days without animals; they repopulate the world by throwing stones that turn into people. In the Babylonian version, the gods send a flood to prevent human overpopulation

rather than to curb human wickedness, and the flood lasts for only seven days.

In many conventional fantasy settings (which are frequently semi-literate and religiously diverse), it's therefore reasonable to have people share a range of similar myths and legends, but each knowing variants of the same stories. Thus, when an Inadequately Lit Lord must be destroyed or a Chosen One found, everyone will have a different opinion on just what the ancient prophecies say on the matter. This can be a plausible way to keep some suspense for clever players whose practiced legalistic reflexes deconstruct the GM's prophetic statements far too quickly. Any gamer worth his Cheetos would quickly react to the witch-king of Angmar's boast that "no man may kill me!" with "Women, children, and non-humans on the ready line!" However, what if one adventurer has heard that no *man* may kill him, while another has heard no *one* could kill him?

*Nothing shall grow  
above or below them.  
No seed shall flower,  
neither in man nor . . .  
they're rebels and they'll  
never ever be any good.*

– Giles, in *Buffy  
the Vampire  
Slayer*, #3.10

This adventure takes advantage of this phenomenon in a less world-shaking context. It presents a myth with which many heroes in a group of adventurers are familiar. An ancient religious order built a now-lost stronghold based on that myth, the details of which provided a mnemonic device by which initiates could easily bypass the many lethal traps that protect the final treasure. The delvers know versions of the same story, which differ from one another on the vital details that will let them stroll through all the spikes and pits. The question is not just how the story relates to the stronghold, but *whose* legend – if anyone’s – applies.

## PREPARING FOR THE ADVENTURE

*The Story of Ezkali* (below) presents a summary of the tale with which at least two adventurers in a group are familiar. For each adventurer who knows the legend, or perhaps for a few groups of people, the GM must create the version they know. Copy the summaries below and modify them as necessary with any text editor. Points of variance are noted in brackets, with different options separated by slashes. For example, “The nuclear bomb is detonated if the [red/green/yellow/plaid] wire is cut.” Pick the desired option and remove the ones that aren’t appropriate; make sure that different versions disagree on at least some points. In this example, one version might say the bomb will go off if the red wire is cut, while another suggests it’s the yellow wire. Distribute different accounts to different players when the adventure begins. Make sure they each read their own rather than relying on one or two players to read them aloud; the point of the exercise is for them to discover that their *characters* know different versions of the story and to negotiate the differences. It’s very important to keep track of which options are chosen through the story. Some are red herrings, but others constitute vital clues concerning how to disarm the traps associated with each section of the story; see the individual entries under *The Temple of the Golden Geniza* (pp. 6-8) for details.

The GM has a few choices as to setting up relationships between the variations handed to the players and the actual situation at their destination, although the question here isn’t which rendering is the historically “true” version of the myth so much as which version is closest to the one the builders of the underground complex knew. Here are three options to consider:

*One True Version:* One person (or one subset of the party) knows the *one* right version – or, at least, the variation used by the builders.

*Majority Rule:* Several versions vary here and there, but more often than not, their information is correct. In any given situation, a majority of the versions with which adventurers are familiar will be correct.

*Independent Versions:* No particular relationship exists between the versions the questers know and the one used by the builders. Any of the adventurers’ accounts could match the builders’ version here and there, but there’s no pattern.

The first two present a solvable puzzle. The third largely introduces an element of randomness into the process, but still provides an interesting complication for the adventurers.

## The Golden What, Now?

The word *geniza* refers to a practice of document storage in the Jewish tradition. Documents containing the name of God cannot simply be thrown away. Rather, they must be ritually disposed of (for example, by burial in a graveyard). Instead of going through the formalities for each individual document as it wore out, people bundled batches together to dispose of all at once. Communities created repositories called *genizot* (singular *geniza*) to contain waiting documents. A *gineza* – often just a cabinet in a synagogue – ended up containing not just ritual texts, but also letters, legal records, contracts, and other items with glancing references to deity. In some places, *anything* in Hebrew and stacks of papers that *might* somewhere contain a reference to God ended up in the *geniza*, just to be on the safe side.

If people were scrupulous about gathering documents but in no hurry to send them to their final destination, a *geniza* could become huge. One of the largest – the legendary Cairo *geniza* – contained nearly a thousand cubic feet of material in an obscure side room, with documents dating from the late ninth century A.D. to the 1880s, when its contents were taken over by a rabbinical scholar, and provided invaluable evidence on a stunning range of topics about daily life in Cairo during the later Middle Ages.

## THE STORY OF EZKALI

The first part of the story sets up Ezkali’s quest. Ezkali is the son of an elderly chief in the frozen lands of the distant south. Carolias is a wanderer who came to live with the tribe, later becoming Ezkali’s boon companion. On the night of the first [full/new] moon of the new year, the benevolent god Zatulu appeared to them both in a dream in the guise of a wise old man, telling them that they were to destroy the temples of the evil god Chuhukag. The next morning, they discover that they have had the same dream, so they set out with the strongest spears they can find. For a [month/year], they go raiding, riding a pair of white bulls sent for them by Zatulu himself. After destroying an evil temple, Carolias loots the bodies of slain priests. Chuhukag sees this destruction and furiously transforms the gold armband of one of his priests into a poisonous [viper/spider/scorpion]. Carolias inadvertently steps on it and is stung. Ezkali kills the venomous creature, but not in time to save his friend. A dying priest tells Ezkali that Chuhukag has taken Carolias’ soul with him to the pits of Hell. Ezkali swears to avenge his friend’s death and – if possible – to save him from Chuhukag.

In the second part of the legend, after taking Carolias’ weapons and wandering for four days, Ezkali encounters the great sage Mbale. Mbale tells him that he may recover his friend only by going to Hell and [defeating the guardians of the underworld/challenging Chuhukag personally]. To reach Hell, Mbale says, he must take his father’s boat across the western ocean to an island. Ezkali spends seven weeks in his boat fighting storms and [sea serpents/sharks/giant squid] sent against him. At dawn of the first day of the third month, he reaches the shore of the island foretold by Mbale.



*Urgent necessity prompts many to do things, at the very thoughts of which they perhaps would start at other times.*

– Cervantes, *Don Quixote*

In the third part of the story, Ezkali finds the black gates of the underworld and ventures into it. He converses with several lost souls who try to get him to turn back: a thief, a [warrior who betrayed his lord/cruel lord who oppressed his people], and an unfaithful [wife/husband]. They also tell him that the spirit of Carolius is not among them. Chuhukag has taken it to a lower hell, to which they eventually direct him. Finally, he comes to the bridge from the upper circle of Hell to the lower. A gong stands next to it, which he rings [three/four] times. Then, taking out his spear, he strikes the gong and breaks it in half. Having struck the alarm to formally challenge Chuhukag, he begins to cross the bridge.

The fourth part of the story covers the grand battle. No sooner does Ezkali cross the bridge than he is confronted by a fierce horde of demons. He faces [crawling/striding/flying] demons first, then [crawling/striding/flying] ones, and finally [crawling/striding/flying] ones. [Here, pick options so that each is faced but the order is different between conflicting versions.] Ezkali and the demons, including Chuhukag himself, fight a long battle, shaking the pillars of Hell and causing earthquakes above. Ezkali strikes the evil god in the eyes with his [spear/fist]. Blinded and screaming, Chuhukag falls back, and Ezkali rushes past him. Ezkali finds Carolius and breaks his bonds. Together, they return to the surface, bearing many treasures.

### *Prolonging the Agony*

This adventure only presents only the core. The GM may want to expand the events, adding complications for getting to the temple (Is it in a jungle somewhere? Atop an inaccessible mountain?) and more areas separating the trap rooms, containing monsters and making it a proper dungeon with more for warriors and wizards to do.

## THE TEMPLE OF THE GOLDEN GENIZA

At the beginning of the scenario, the adventurers learn (in any suitable way) about the ruins of a temple complex dedicated to the hero Ezkali and sheltering the long-lost “golden geniza,” a repository of remarkable wisdom. The founders of the temple, who were hyper-conscious of possible blasphemy, had a practice of never throwing away any document that mentioned any deity. In time, it is believed, they accumulated a vast library of all kinds of information.

Of course, the way to the geniza is now without protection. The library lies in an underground stronghold at the end of a series of tests in the form of elaborate traps, each of which was

inspired by a section of the story of Ezkali. The adventurers must make their way through the rooms and disarm or simply survive the traps to claim the prize, using their knowledge of details of Ezkali’s story as clues. The GM may want to make that much clear to the players, with a resident sage learning of the general nature of the lost temple in finding a treasure map to it, or perhaps inscriptions making it abundantly clear that the temple is inspired by Ezkali once they get there. Plus, of course, the GM should give them a chance to read over their own versions of the story of Ezkali before things start in earnest.

Once inside the ruined temple, there are four areas corresponding to parts of the story: The spike corridor draws clues from the death of Carolius. The sea monster room was inspired by Ezkali’s sea voyage. The bridge was based on Ezkali’s journey to the underworld. The demon room symbolically recounts his battle with the demons. Only when they pass through those do they arrive at the geniza itself.

Each trap in this adventure is described by the following statistics:

*Detect:* The skill to roll against to spot the trap before it gets triggered.

*Disarm:* The skill to stop the trap from going off. “No” indicates that the trap cannot be disarmed.

*Circumvent:* How to avoid the trap entirely; e.g., stepping over tripwires or walking stealthily so as not to waken sleeping guard animals. “No” indicates the trap cannot be circumvented.

*Evoke:* How to avoid or resist the trap’s effects if it can’t be circumvented. “No” indicates the trap cannot be evaded.

*Effects:* What the trap does if it isn’t disarmed, circumvented, or evaded.

*Shots:* How many times the trap can go off before it has to be reset or reloaded. A trap which does not need resetting, such as an open pit, has an infinite number of shots.

*Rearm:* The skill to roll against to reset the trap after it has gone off. This statistic does not exist for a trap with infinite shots.

### *Spike Corridor*

Map on p. 9

This long, narrow corridor has moderately sized (9” square) tiles decorated with images of a variety of unpleasant creatures (spiders, scorpions, snakes, spiky lizards, and so on). The walls are decorated with what appears to be an elaborate fretwork screen made of stone, with many small openings.

The key to avoiding the spikes that stand ready to shoot out of the wall is knowing the right poisonous animal to evade from the first part of the story. Refrain from stepping on the type that killed Carolius, and the corridor is safe. In an ironic twist, this part of the temple is infested by poisonous snakes (treat as the rattlesnake on p. B458), who are too light to trigger the spikes.

*Detect:* Traps+2 to discover that sections of floor down the corridor are pressure-sensitive. *All* are sensitive, but only *some* actually trigger the trap.

*Disarm:* No.

*Circumvent:* Automatic, assuming no one steps on the wrong tiles. Tiles are large enough that avoiding the wrong ones is easy if moving at a walking pace (half Move or less), but roll against DX for each yard of movement if moving faster than that to avoid inadvertently stepping on a wrong tile. An exceptionally nimble hero could use the holes in the wall for the spears as finger-holds and climb the whole length of the corridor, never touching the ground. This requires a Climbing (minus encumbrance) roll to begin, then another every five minutes; failure means falling onto several tiles, triggering the trap on a 15 or less. Climbers can move four horizontal yards per minute.

*Effects:* If a hero walking down the corridor steps on the wrong tile (12 or less each turn if he doesn't know which to avoid), several short spears thrust out of the gaps in the screen on each side and immediately retract. Treat as two separate attacks at skill 10. However, an additional spear hits for every two points in the margin of success (that is, one hit on a roll of 10, two on a roll of 8, and so on). Each spear does 1d+3 imp. Active defenses are possible, but at least one set of attacks is likely to come from side or rear hexes.

*Shots:* Infinite.

*Rearm:* Spears retract into the walls, rearming the trap immediately.

*A man should keep his little  
brain attic stocked with all the  
furniture that he is likely to use,  
and the rest he can put away in  
the lumber-room of his library,  
where he can get it if he wants it.*  
– Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

## Sea Monster Room

Map on p. 10

This room is at the bottom of two flights of steps, one leading down and in, the other leading up and out. All surfaces are covered with glazed tile, though the floor also has a great many small (4-6" square) metal gratings. The ceiling is peaked 15' above the floor, like the inside of a gabled roof. The floor, walls, and even ceiling are slightly damp. Along the ceiling are a series of large brass disks, 3' across and dark brown with age. Reliefs on the disks depict a series of aquatic items: a ship, a whale, a serpent, a shark, a squid, and a giant turtle. A brass socket suitable for a pole about 2" across is embedded in the floor beneath each disk, and there's a matching indentation in the center of each disk. A brass-bound pole resembling a dull spear, exactly the correct height to reach from socket to disk-center (about 8'), lies near the foot of the stairs leading out.

The key to avoiding this trap is knowing which monster Ezkali fights in part two of the story.

A door at the top of the stairs leads out of the room, with a sluice gate directly over it. If the adventurers want out, they must open the door; to open the door, they have to go up the stairs, which triggers the trap (see *Effects*, below), assuming it hasn't been disarmed. Because the door is locked, someone must pick the lock or bang open the door, which takes time; with the massive jet of water coming from overhead, any attempts to try to get that door open once the trap is triggered are at a massive penalty (see *Effects*).

*Detect:* Traps+2 to discover that the steps leading out of the room are all pressure-sensitive.

*Disarm:* If the "spear" is set against the disk depicting the monster Ezkali fought, the trap is disarmed for five minutes. After that time, the disk retracts slightly, allowing the "spear" to fall to the floor and roll away. Additionally, if the delvers have enough spears and 8' poles, they can try putting those in place in every position around the room. The fit won't be as good as the spear, so it can go wrong; roll against Traps-2 to make this work.

*Circumvent:* Automatic with levitation or some other way to avoid touching the long set of stairs; otherwise no.

*Effects:* If two steps out are stepped on (a lower, then a higher one; people coming back down the steps don't trigger the trap), all of the disks and a number of other panels in the ceiling are unlocked. These sluice gates release torrents of water into the room, rushing in at a rate of 6" per second, filling the room nearly to the top in 30 seconds. Anyone standing under a disk or at the door out of the room is directly under a particularly strong jet of water; such heroes must roll against ST-4 to retain their footing and are at -4 to any DX-based tasks. Once the room is close to full, the spouts close again and drains in the floor let the water out half as fast as it came in. The water is also full of leaping leeches (*GURPS Dungeon Fantasy Monsters 1*, p. 22): 1d/2 of them per second the water flows into the room.

*Shots:* Infinite.

*Rearm:* The trap rearms after the room has drained of water.

## The Bridge

Map on p. 11

A narrow stone and metal bridge spans an underground chasm. The bridge is clearly divided into several sections. A little pressure, even a firm push on one edge, will make it flip over completely, spinning around what is probably a central beam. Each section has a metal ring at either end, attached to a chain that is anchored to a mechanism deep inside the body of the bridge itself. The ring may be pulled out a few feet, and automatically retracts like the pull-cord on a talking doll.

Several swarms of angry but mundane bats (treat as a swarm of bats, p. B461) equal to the number of adventurers are hidden among the stalactites overhead, as are half that many foul bats (*GURPS Dungeon Fantasy 2*, p. 23); both will attack as soon as anyone makes enough noise to be heard. The floor below is muddy (a slow stream runs through it) and inhabited by a seemingly inexhaustible supply of erupting slimes (*GURPS Dungeon Fantasy 2*, p. 23).

The secret to dealing with the bridge is *not* to pull the ring on one section of bridge, depending on how many times Ezkali rings the gong; it's that number plus one. For example, if it was rung four times, the fifth ring should not be pulled (that is, "no fifth ring").

*Detect:* Traps+5 or IQ to discover that sections of bridge are unsteady.

*Disarm:* When the ring is pulled on most sections, that section becomes secure and will not turn over (see *Effects* below) until the chain has fully retracted five seconds later. However, *one* section acts in the opposite way. It wobbles if touched, but won't flip over *unless* the ring is pulled.

*Circumvent:* Walk very, *very* carefully down the center. For each yard moved along unsecured sections, roll against (DX - total distance moved that turn) to avoid tipping the section over. Also roll against DX-4 after any violent action is taken, including any melee attack or active defense. Those with Perfect Balance don't need to make the DX roll when walking and get +4 to rolls for violent actions. Or bypass the bridge (e.g., via flight).

*Effects:* If a section of bridge is not secured, it can easily flip completely over, dumping anyone on it to the floor 30' below.

*Shots:* Infinite.

*Lightning Attainment, these  
are a Bodhisattva-Mahasattva's  
five stores of wisdom, which  
are great stores of wisdom,  
inexhaustible stores of wisdom,  
universally inexhaustible stores  
of wisdom, and boundless stores  
of wisdom.*

– Chen-chi Chang,  
*A Treasury of  
Mahayana Sutras*

## Demon Room

Map on p. 12

This long room is divided at intervals by sets of three gates equipped with tall turnstiles made of sturdy iron bars (firing missiles through a set of bars is done at -2 per set). In each set, one gate is decorated with the image of a demonic creature on all fours, the second with a demon walking upright, and the third with a winged creature. Only one SM 0 or +1 person at a time can fit through a single turnstile, and all other turnstiles are locked down while another is in motion.

To safely pass through, adventurers must know the order in which Ezkali fought the various types of demons in the fourth part of the story.

*Detect:* Per-based Thaumatology, or Perception + Magery for mages.

*Disarm:* No.

*Circumvent:* Walk through the gates in the correct order. If the story indicates that Ezkali fought flying demons first, the gate marked with the flying monster is the one providing safe passage through that set of gates, and so on.

*Effects:* If someone passes through the wrong gate, *all* gates lock down and a pair of monsters suddenly appear at the edges of the section to attack the offending person, depending on which gate he should have passed through: obsidian jaguars (*Dungeon Fantasy Monsters 1*, p. 24) for creeping monsters, as-Sharak (*Dungeon Fantasy 2*, p. 21) for striding monsters, and winged Demons of Old (*Dungeon Fantasy Monsters 1*, p. 10, but with Flight (Winged), giving them an aerial move of 14) for the flying monsters. The gates remain locked until either the monsters or the trespasser is defeated; monsters then vanish as they appeared.

*Shots:* Infinite.

## The Geniza

Once past the demon room, only the geniza remains. It is held in a small but extremely well-decorated room. The walls and ceiling are adorned with shallow geometric carvings, and every inch of it is coated with gold leaf (about a half-pound total weight if adventurers are determined to scrape it all off and take it with them). The documents are found in cupboards around the room, closed with latches but unlocked.

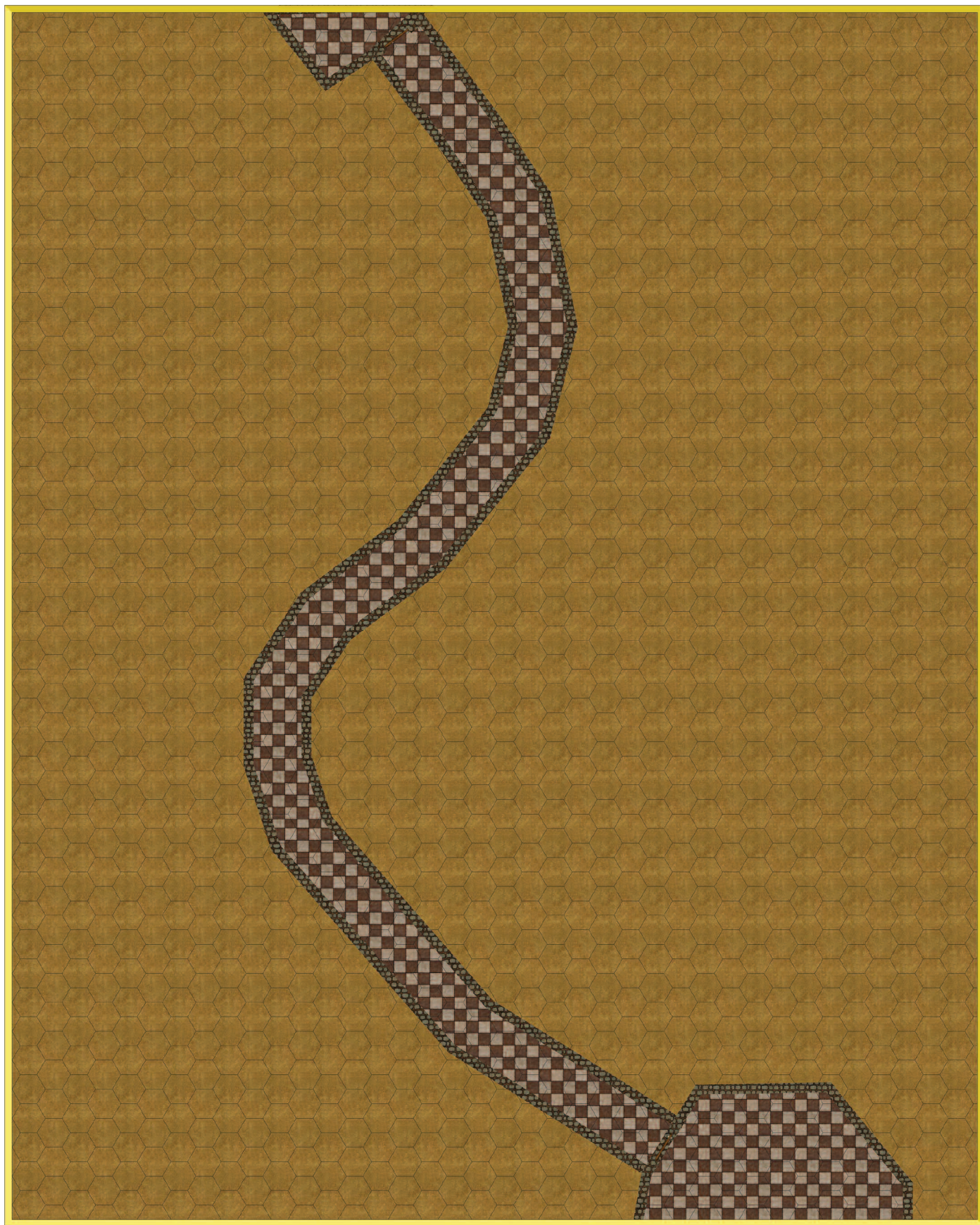
The geniza may be used as a library for esoteric topics, but it's difficult to work with. A scholar may dig through the jumble of papers to find a useful manual, selecting one of these subjects before doing so: Alchemy, Cultural Familiarity (dead civilizations only), Esoteric Medicine, Heraldry, Hidden Lore, any mortal language, History, Naturalist, Occultism, Pharmacy, Philosophy, Physiology, Poisons, Strategy, Thaumatology, or Theology. Each attempt takes eight hours and requires a roll against Research-10. If the attempt succeeds, roll a die. On a 1-3, the manual is the equivalent of a primer; 4-5 gives the equivalent of a textbook, and 6 the equivalent of a thesis. (See *GURPS Dungeon Fantasy 4: Sages*, p. 13, for the game effects of each type.) If desired, use the tables in *GURPS Dungeon Fantasy 8: Treasure Tables*, p. 27 to determine the precise form of the manual. On a critical success, the scholar finds a scroll containing a useful spell, as determined by the GM. On a critical failure, the scholar finds a text which is fascinating but useless. Regardless of the result, the GM determines the skill and type of manual, and the scholar *must* use one of his Book-Learned Wisdom slots (*Dungeon Fantasy 4*, p. 8) to learn it; he must retain it until he acquires a *new* manual with which to replace it.

The drawback is that the geniza is also large and heavy. *Very* large and *very* heavy. All told, the documents of the geniza weigh four tons – giving it 160 HP; it's also Fragile (Flammable) – and taking up about 125 cubic feet. If adventurers can only recover parts of it, or if the collection is damaged, Research rolls are at -1 for every 50 lbs. they fail to keep *and* -1 for every 3 HP of damage the collection takes.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matt Riggsby has been playing RPGs since the only game in town came in three poorly typeset tan booklets in a white box, using cheap dice that slowly converted themselves from icosahedrons to spheres. Having been educated in the lore of lost civilizations, he still kills things and takes their stuff while working a day job for artificers of engines of great healing. The marching order for the rest of his party includes a sorceress, a third-level rogue, and a pack of dogs.

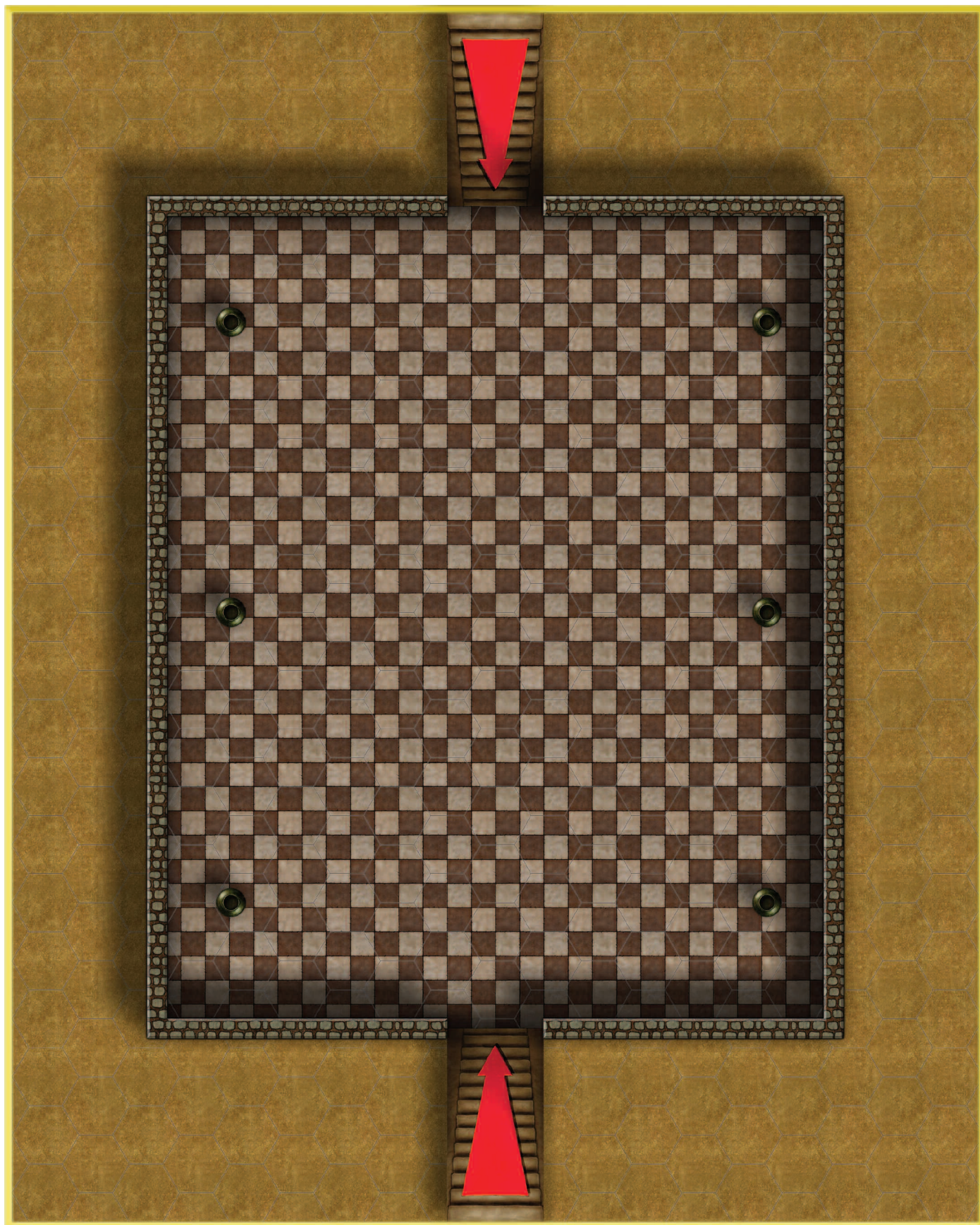




## MAP OF THE SPIKE CORRIDOR

*Scale: 1 hex = 1 yard*

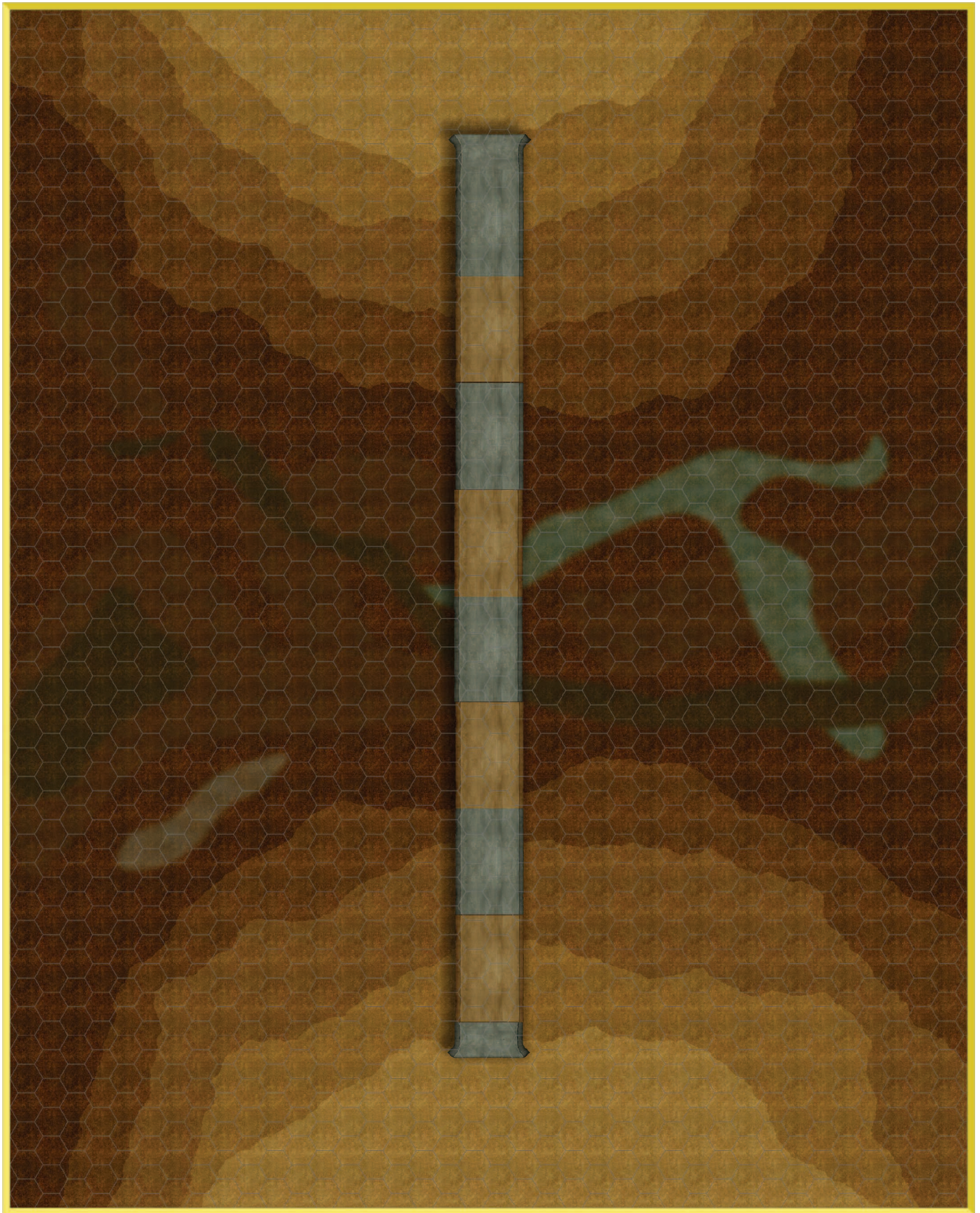




## MAP OF THE SEA MONSTER ROOM

*Scale: 1 hex = 1 yard*

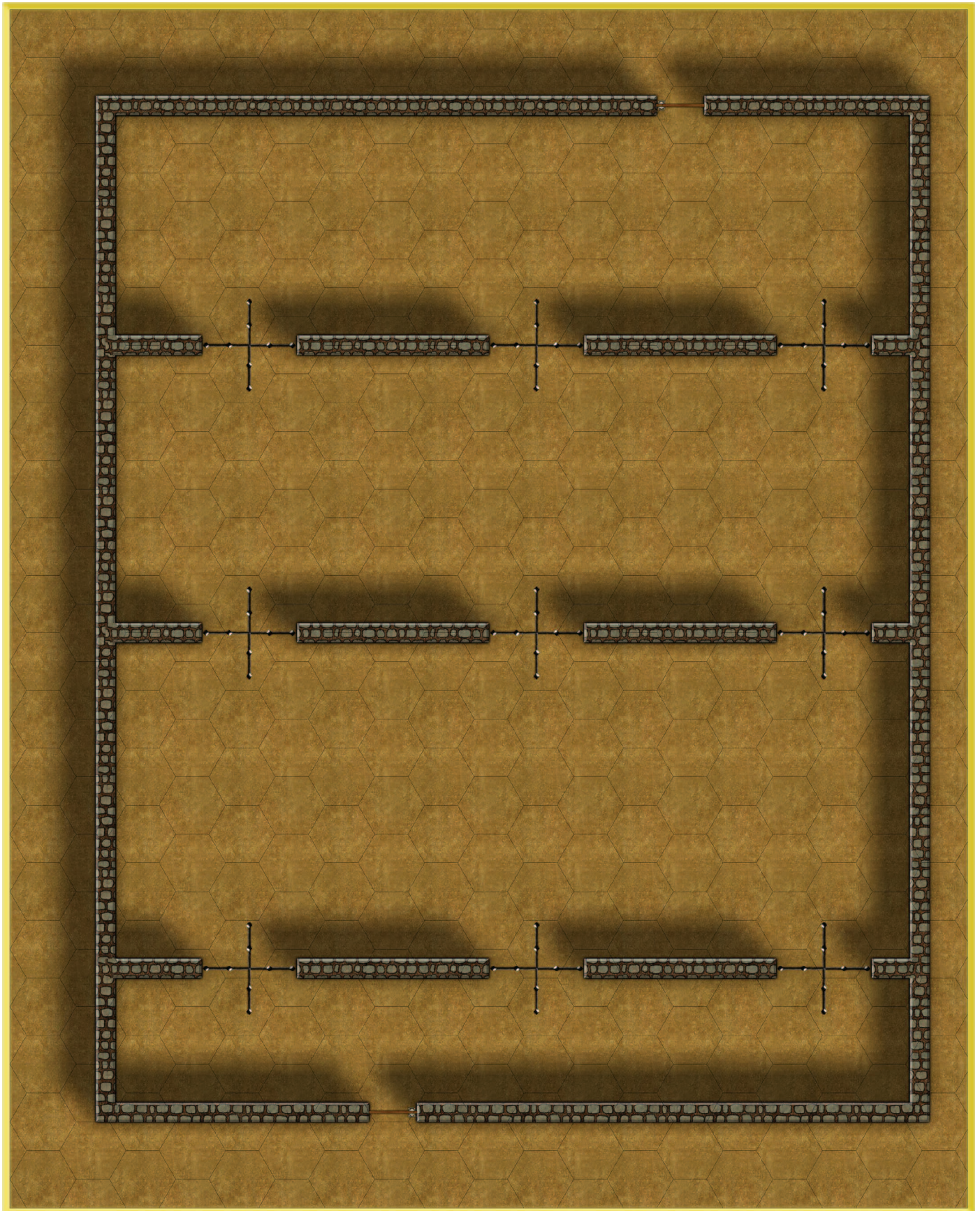




## MAP OF THE BRIDGE

*Scale: 1 hex = 1 yard*





## MAP OF THE DEMON ROOM

*Scale: 1 hex = 1 yard*



# SEVEN MYTHICAL ARTIFACTS FOR *DUNGEON* *FANTASY*

BY ANTONI TEN MONRÓS

Mythology has always been one of the most important sources of inspiration in fantasy roleplaying. In *Dungeon Fantasy*, it is a time-honored tradition to steal the *cool* aspects of mythology without regard to whether they're appropriate or anachronistic for the game world! This article presents seven artifacts from myth, viewed under a *Dungeon Fantasy* lens. This is not a treatise on mythology, though; corners were cut, and myths changed, in order to provide more interesting items for your games. The items' descriptions reference the original myths, however, and curious readers can research the actual stories behind them.

For more information on how to read the item entries (including details on suggested origins), see *GURPS Dungeon Fantasy 6: 40 Artifacts* (pp. 3-4).

*A collection of wondrous items  
inspired by mythology.*

## AEGIS

Power Item: 34 FP

*Suggested Origins:* Cosmic, Divine, or Magical.

Forged by Hephaestus and polished by the Cyclopes, this round shield is property of Zeus, king of the Olympian gods, though he sometimes lends it to his daughter Athena. It looks

like a large Homeric buckler, made of layered ox hide, with a burnished orichalcum facing. Instead of the usual boss, it has the petrified head of the Gorgon Medusa. The rim is decorated with 100 tassels of gold thread, but no matter how roughly the shield is used, the tassels never fall off. The shield provides great powers of defense not only to the wearer, but also to anyone who fights by his side.

### Properties

- *Head of the Gorgon Medusa:* Instead of the customary boss in the shape of a mythological monster, this shield has the real thing! The petrified head of the Gorgon Medusa is affixed to it. Once per day, it can be awakened by the shield's owner, by taking a Concentrate maneuver. Anyone seeing the revived head must make a HT-5 roll or be turned to stone. This costs the wielder 10 FP.

- *Shield Others:* Once per turn, the wielder of Aegis can block an attack against an ally behind or beside him. Use the holder's normal Block score, including the shield's DB 3, as the shield leaps to protect others. This doesn't count as the person's normal block for the turn.

- *Shield Quality:* Aegis is a large balanced orichalcum buckler. As such, it provides DB 3. Its relative lightness and agility, however, mean that it doesn't negatively impact the wearer, negating the usual -2 penalty to attack for using a large shield.

- *Sword-Breaker:* Any weapon that strikes the Aegis, either intentionally, or by being blocked, breaks on a roll of 3 or less (on 1d), modified by the weapon's quality, as if it had parried a weapon weighting four times its own weight.

*Weight:* 18 lbs.

## Variations

- Aegis is a major divine artifact, but Olympian gods are noted for their willingness to lend their possessions to heroes. They sometimes don't even bother to recover them. This might explain how the shield ended in the hands of the delvers. However, it's much more common if it's given as part of a divine quest. In this case, it will probably only work for the hero the gods entrust it to, and will only jump to protect delvers that are weaker or less armored than the wearer. If not using Greco-Roman mythology in your setting, then it's surely a relic of a peace or war god.

- Aegis might instead be a magical artifact, created by both great magics and supreme craftsmanship, probably made by a dwarven master smith who is also an enchanter. In that case, the petrifying ability might not be suitable. Reduce the weight of the shield to 13 lbs. if the head of Medusa is not present.

## COIR CETHAR CHUIN

**Power Item: 20 FP**

*Suggested Origins:* Cosmic, Bardic, Divine, Druidic, or Magical.

Also known as Uaithne and Dur da Blá, this is the harp of the Dagda, the All-Father, one of the Tuatha Dé Danann. In the hands of a god, it can be used to change the ordering of the seasons. In the hands of a mere mortal, it is simply a beautifully ornate harp made of oak. In the hands of someone possessing the Bard-Song abilities, it greatly enhances them, and its beautiful music can produce magical effects.

### Properties

- *Bard-Song Enhancer:* Coir Cethar Chuin grants two levels of Bardic Talent to its owner.

- *Magical Songs:* The owner can perform special melodies that cause all those who hear them to suffer magical afflictions. The harp grants knowledge of these songs to its owner, but should he lose it, he will not be able to remember them. The tunes cannot be transcribed, and they only work when performed with Coir Cethar Chuin. They are performed with Musical Instrument (Harp) at 15 (regardless of the owner's actual skill), plus the user's Bard-Song Talent, Bardic Talent, or Bardic Magery. The songs affect all other sentient beings (those with IQ greater than 6) within eight yards, who resist with Will. Effects last for as long as the bard performs, and the Rule of 16 *does not apply!* Available songs are: *Ballad*, which causes victims to fall down, crying (treat as Agony, p. B428); *Lullaby*, which causes victims to fall asleep; and *Madrigal*, which causes them to fall down, laughing uncontrollably (treat as Ecstasy, p. B428).

- *Masterwork Harp:* The exquisite workmanship that went into this harp makes it a magnificent musical instrument. A user get +2 to his Musical Instrument (Harp) skill to play any melodies other than the *Magical Songs* (above).

*Weight:* 7 lbs.

### Variations

- Maybe the Coir Cethar Chuin is not just an harp, but a bow-harp! Raise weight to 8.5 lbs.; it can thus be used as either a composite bow or an harp.

- If the Tuatha Dé Danann don't exist in your world, this harp can either be the creation of faerie craftsmen, or a druidic artifact of some sort. In the later case, it might grant a bonus to either weather or nature spells, in addition to the ones given to bardic abilities.

## GOLDEN FLEECE

**Power Item: 15 FP**

*Suggested Origins:* Divine or Materials.

The Golden Fleece is the skin of the gold-haired winged ram. It was first hung on an oak tree as a tribute to Ares by Phryxus. It was then stolen by Jason in order to prove his worthiness for the throne of Iolcus in Thessaly.

### Properties

- *Aura of Majesty:* The owner of the Golden Fleece is destined for greatness, and most of its owners have gained kingship. Those who meet the carrier of the Golden Fleece will unconsciously react to this destiny, and treat him as if he was a foreign noble of great importance. This grants the wearer a +5 reaction bonus, not cumulative with bonuses from ornate gear.

- *Poison Resistance:* The Fleece has another property very useful to rulers – it makes the wearer immune to poisons of all kinds, forcing would-be assassins to try a different approach.

- *Toughness:* The Golden Fleece is worn as a makeshift cloak. Although rather heavy, it provides DR 3 against attacks hitting the torso from the back.

*Weight:* 10 lbs.

### Variations

- On top of being a symbol of royalty, the Golden Fleece might also have other powers. Like the skin of the Nemean Lion, worn by Heracles, it might be impenetrable, giving even greater DR and converting all penetrating damage to crushing. The gold-haired ram it was taken from had functional wings, so it is also possible that it grants the ability to fly.

*Hades' helmet, a gift to me  
when I became a psychopomp.*

– N.F. Houck, *Herald*

## HELM OF HADES

**Power Item: 61 FP**

*Suggested Origins:* Cosmic, Divine, or Magical.

The Helm of Hades is a Corinthian-style full helm, offering full skull and face protection. It is made of orichalcum. Only the eyes are accessible, and only through the eye-slits, at the usual -10 penalty. It was given to Hades by the Cyclopes to help the Olympians in their war against the Titans. It not only offers excellent protection, it also hides the wearer from magic and magical creatures, and allows the wearer to appear as he wishes.



## Properties

- *Illusory Disguise*: The wearer can superimpose any appearance he wishes over his. This also negates the *Invisible to Magic* property (below), but it otherwise fools all senses. The projection must be the same SM as the wearer. It is disrupted automatically by damage, and is somewhat tiring for the user. While it is active, the user recovers no FP points, and must pay 1 FP every 10 minutes to maintain the effect.

- *Invisible to Magic*: The wearer is invisible to magical creatures and spells. He cannot be targeted by regular spells, information spells won't detect him or obtain information on him, and magically granted senses won't perceive him. Area, Melee, and Missile spells affect him normally. He is also completely invisible to constructs, demons, elementals, faeries, servitors and undead, as long as he doesn't interact with them. This also means that the Helm in no way registers as having any special properties, regardless of its origin.

- *Toughness*: This helm provides DR 15 to the skull and face areas. It includes padding, already factored into the DR.

- *Unimpeded Perception*: Despite being a fully enclosing helm, this item doesn't reduce the wearer's sensory acuity, meaning that he doesn't get No Depth Perception and Hard of Hearing that these helms usually give.

Weight: 4 lbs.

## Variations

- The powers of the Helm of Hades and the Norse Tarnhelm are very similar, though the Tarnhelm generally has the shape of a skullcap, protecting only the skull. It is possible that they are one and the same.

- The Tarnhelm is reputed to actually transform the wearer, instead of merely projecting an illusion over him. Take inspiration from the Shapeshifting and Great Shapeshift spells!

## NECKLACE OF SKULLS

Power Item: 5 FP

*Suggested Origins*: Cosmic, Divine, or Magical.

This is the necklace of Kali, Hindu goddess of eternal energy, time, and death. It is made out of the skulls of her foes.

Kali is an extremely fierce fighter, who unleashes her incredibly destructive wrath on the demons who plague the world. She is thus not an evil deity, despite her domains. She is more of a force of nature. However, her blood rage often blinds her, and she goes into uncontrolled rampages of violent destruction. When that happens, only her consort, Shiva, can make her come back to her senses.

## Properties

- *Kali's Fury*: The wearer of the Necklace of Skulls can, as a free action, channel a fragment of Kali's fury. He then gets the following traits: +10 ST, Altered Time Rate 1, Extra Attack 2 (Multi-Strike, +20%), and Berserk (6) (Battle Rage, +50%). He also can attempt active defenses while making All-Out Attacks. All effects end the moment the user snaps out of Berserk.

- *Kali's Temper*: Together with the fury, the wearer also gets a taste of Kali's fiery temper. The person gains the Bad Temper disadvantage, with a self-control number of Will-5, or, if he already possesses the Bad Temper disadvantage, lower the self-control

number by 9. This afflicts the bearer for as long as he wears the necklace, and for an equal amount of time after removing it.

Weight: 3 lbs.

## Variations

- Viking berserkers were reputed to be formidable opponents. Lesser versions of the Necklace of Skulls might exist, called Runic Necklaces of the Berserker, made of runestones instead of skulls. Their effects are lesser too, and only grant +5 ST, Berserk (6) (Battle Rage, +50%), the Bad Temper disadvantage (as described above), and the ability to dodge while making All-Out Attacks.

*Certain fierce female spirits demonstrate their wild power by wearing necklaces of skulls around their neck, such as Anat, Baba Taga, and Kali.*

*– Judika Illes,  
Encyclopedia  
of 5,000 Spells*

## NOTHUNG

Power Item: 0 FP

*Suggested Origins*: Materials.

One of the creations of the famed Wayland the Smith, this massive blade might not look like much, but is one of the finest examples of sword-smithing ever created. Made from a strange alloy, said to come from two different fallen stars, its three-yard-long blade shows watery patterns, and its edge remains keen no matter how much abuse is given to it. Despite its humongous size, those strong enough to wield it claim it's an exquisitely balanced and agile weapon. Its properties are entirely due to its strange composition and Master Wayland's supreme craftsmanship, as the star iron seems to be completely impervious to magic. It was used to kill the dragon Fafnir.

## Properties

- *Anti-Magic*: The strange meteoric metal used in the construction of Nothung is completely impervious to magic. It cuts through enchantments as a hot knife cuts through butter. No magic can affect it in any way, either to strengthen or weaken it. No magical defenses ever impede it. This renders blocking spells completely useless against it. Magic-given DR, whether in the form of temporary spells like Armor or enchantments like Fortify, is ignored against its blows.

Magical bonuses to active defenses, such as the ones from the Shield or Deflect spells don't apply either. Finally, magically given insubstantiality such as the one provided by Ethereal Body or Steelwraith is also useless. Unfortunately, this also makes it unsuitable as a power item.

- **Blade Quality:** Nothing is a very fine balanced weapon, made of a strange dark steel. This gives it +3 to avoid breakage, and is wielded at +1 to skill. Its damage bonus is already included in the stats (see below).

- **Fencing Parry:** This weapon gets the same benefits on a parry that a fencing weapon would get; that is, the penalty for successive parries is halved. This does not affect the weapon's ability to defend against flails, though. It also does not cause encumbrance to impose penalties on attacks.

- **Supreme Parry:** This weapon can be used to parry projectiles of all kinds, including area effects such as explosions and monster's breath attacks. Coupled with *Anti-Magic* (above), it allows the wielder to parry non-Missile spells, as long as he is aware of the spell's casting, and can see its caster.

- **Titanic:** Sigfried was a very large man, and this sword was large even for him. It uses Two-Handed Sword skill, and wielders smaller than SM +1 use it at a penalty equal to (their SM - 1). Also, it needs a lot of space to swing, requiring a three-yard clearance either on one side or overhead, in order to be able to use its swing entry.

Weapon	Damage	Reach	Parry	Weight	ST
Nothing	sw+9 cut	1-3	0F	15	17†
or	thr+6 imp	3	0F	–	17†

## Variations

- Since this blade is the product of just mythic craftsmanship and superior materials, it might be possible to commission one. Finding a skilled enough master sword-smith should never be easy, as individuals capable of creating such wonders almost always live in seclusion, either in the mountains where superior ores can be found, or hidden in plain sight, disguised as peaceful old men. Also, such a blade won't be cheap, costing at least \$120,000, though perhaps a part of the price, maybe up to a third, might be paid in the form of the special ores or metal ingots to be used in its forging. Finally, the forging itself won't be fast, so the adventurers ought to wait at least one game-year after commissioning it before being able to pick it up.

- This blade is based on the zweihander found in **GURPS Fantasy-Tech** (p. 11), with the azzalum, balanced, meteoric and very fine modifiers, totaling +47 CF. It is then given a price increase to represent its other special properties, along with a required ST and weight increases. The GM might prefer to base it on a greatsword instead.

## TEZCATLIPOCA'S SMOKING MIRROR

**Power Item: 30 FP**

*Suggested Origins:* Cosmic or Divine.

Tezcatlipoca was one of the four main gods of Aztec mythology, who created the world. His portfolio is large, encompassing, among others, sorcery, storms, and strife, but his main attribute is that he is a god of the night. This 1' mirror of polished obsidian – which emits a faint smoke, and is slightly warm to the touch – is his most holy relic.

## Properties

- **Invested Power:** Clerics and druids of the night or storms who possess this artifact gain +3 to their Power Investiture.

- **Limitless Power:** As a power item, the Mirror has a capacity of 30 FP. However, it can be overcharged. Each point over 30 has double the normal cost to recharge, cumulatively; thus, the 31st point costs \$10 to charge, the 32nd point costs \$20, the 33rd point costs \$40, and so on.

- **Sacrificial Blood:** The penalty for using HP to power a spell is negated, if the spell benefited from the increased Power Investiture given by the Mirror. However, these HP will only heal naturally. Magic cannot restore them or accelerate their recovery.

*Weight:* 5 lbs.

## Variations

- While it is commonly accepted that Tezcatlipoca was not an evil god, that doesn't have to be the norm in **Dungeon Fantasy** games. Maybe he prefers sacrificing others instead of himself! In that case, the only way to recharge it is by killing sentient beings and letting their heart-blood soak the Mirror. The victim must be sacrificed to the mirror, not killed in combat. This provides energy equal to the subject's IQ times the lower of HT or HP for IQ 0-5 victims – or IQ times the higher of HT or HP for IQ 6+ victims. Use the "limitless power" progression: The energy from the sacrifice recharges the mirror on a 1-for-1 basis up until 30 FP; then it takes 2 energy for the 31st point, 4 for the 32nd, and so on, with leftover energy lost. The ritual requires esoteric supplies that have the same cost as recharging the mirror, but the advantage is that it can be done in the field instead of back in town.

*His very cave is yet shown in  
Berkshire, and curious magic  
qualities have from ancient  
times been attributed to that  
"Invisible Smith."*

*– Karl Blind,  
"Wayland the Smith,"  
The Scottish Review, Vol. 35*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Antoni Ten is a IT specialist, database administrator, and Java and web developer from Alboraya, Valencia, Spain. He's seriously thinking about jumping into Android development, and dreams of writing a full-length book for Steve Jackson Games in the future. He has gamed for over 15 years, and now has two regular gaming groups. He wishes to thank Christopher R. "Ghostdancer" Rice and Emily "Bruno" Smirle for acting as his sounding boards, and proofreading this article, and José Antonio "demonsbane" Estarells for sharing his knowledge of Buddhist, Hindu, and Vedic mythology with him.

# EIDETIC MEMORY

## BABA YAGA

BY DAVID L. PULVER

The goddess-hag Baba Yaga is a primal figure in Slavic mythology, lurking in the forests of Russia and Eastern Europe, waiting for children to fall into her clutches or abducting those who stray into the deep woods. The prototype of the fairytale wicked witch, she is infamous for her living hut that walks on chicken legs, and for allegedly eating those children who offend her or fail the tests she sets for them.

In my own modern-day campaign (gonzo journalists chasing the unknown), rumors of Baba Yaga's continued existence flared up, linked to a spate of missing and abducted children in rural Russia. Investigation determined Baba Yaga was no myth . . . but extraterrestrial rather than supernatural.

*Elena, we are going to  
market today; stay in the house  
while we are away, and look  
after your baby brother, for  
Baba Yaga's black geese who  
steal children have been seen  
flying over the village.*

*– Alison Lurie,  
Baba Yaga and  
the Stolen Baby*

### GREY HAG OF THE FORESTS

The Greys are big-headed aliens that have experimented on humans for thousands of years; they are behind many myths regarding people being spirited away by fairies. The Greys can also (with technological assistance) interbreed with humans,

which they do to develop improved psionic powers and reinvigorate their dying race.

Baba Yaga was an extraterrestrial-human hybrid, an early result of such cross-breeding. She developed prodigious mental powers but her unusual sensitivity to thought-waves led to her being exiled – first from the alien society, then from the humans whose thoughts she was equally sensitive to. However, her Grey masters remained in contact with her, providing her with powerful technological tools and a mission to study the psionic development of budding witches, hermits, anchoresses, shamans, and similar rural isolates. Over time, she found these powers most often manifested among children, who became her favorite subjects for experiments.

According to Slavic mythology, Baba Yaga was immortal, had iron fingernails, flew through the air using a mortar and pestle, and lived in a magic hut that walked on bird legs. These legends have been embellished over centuries of sporadic contact between her and the humans she has experimented on, but some of them have a grain of truth in them. Although a millennium old, Baba Yaga looks like a morbidly overweight woman in her 60s or 70s. She has ash-colored skin, protruding teeth, and overly large eyes, but otherwise appears human. The normal tendency of Grey hybrids to slenderness has gone terribly wrong, a side effect of her experimental genetic process that granted her extreme longevity. Due to her great bulk, she cannot walk easily and must instead waddle at a snail's pace or travel in her bowl-shaped contragravity flying platform, an artifact traditionally mistaken by observers for a mortar and pestle. As an alien hybrid she has psi abilities: modest telepathy (as irritating voices in her mind), an ESP sense that gives her a vague ability to detect potential psis, and powerful telekinetic abilities. This gave medieval visitors an impression that she commanded unseen spiritual servants who did her bidding.

Many children develop psi powers as they enter puberty. They often experience strange visions or dreams that drive them away from their own kind, often wandering off alone. Baba Yaga preys upon them. In the past, she limited herself to those who became lost in gloomy forests; today, she is just as likely to be found cruising country roads or blighted urban streets, her hut disguised as a car ready to open its doors to a distressed runaways.



*The words had got altered. This enraged her; she felt like stamping her foot, banging her fist on the table or shouting. As it was, she was left tense, fury foaming in her with a surprising buoyant freshness.*

*– Dubravka Ugresic, **Baba Yaga Laid an Egg***

When a suitable child strays into her steel-fingered clutches, he is forced on pain of death to swiftly perform seemingly impossible tasks such as finding a needle in a haystack, separating poppyseeds from dirt, or guessing the answers to complex riddles. These tasks are not pure sadism – they are actually a psionic-testing program, with each task tailored to determine abilities the child might possess. However, over the centuries, Baba Yaga has become increasingly less sane, in part due to the psychic irritation that she feels from close proximity to humans.

Her mercurial personality can easily flare up at the slightest hint of disrespect. Children who annoy her or fail her tests are killed and turned into fertilizer for the hut's life support system or permanently bound into the oven-like interior of the walking hut's power plant. Those children who do well on tests and manage to avoid offending her are released – with warnings never to speak of what they have seen (not that they would be believed). They also receive subdermal implants installed in their bodies that mark them for future abductions and further experiments by other Grey aliens throughout their lives.

Baba Yaga periodically transmits reports via her mecha's comm system to cloaked Grey orbital spacecraft. On rare occasions, Grey saucers land to pick up promising children or genetic samples that she has collected.

## **Baba Yaga**

Baba Yaga appears to be an obese old woman with gray hair, wrinkled grayish skin, and large black eyes. She wears a peasant woman's dress, or dresses like a bag lady.

**ST 13; DX 12; IQ 17; HT 12.**

Damage 1d/1d+2; BL 38 lbs.; HP 13; Will 17; Per 17; FP 12.

Basic Speed 6.00; Basic Move 2; Dodge 9; Parry 7.

5'8"; 349 lbs.

**Advantages/Disadvantages:** Acute Detect 3; Acute Taste/Smell 2; Acute Vision 2; Appearance (Ugly); Bad Temper (9); Curious; Detect Latent Psionics (ESP; Vague); DR 2 (Flexible); Extended Lifespan 4; ESP Talent 1; Gluttony (12); High TL 4; Night Vision 6; Obsession (Experiments) (12); Peripheral Vision; Photographic Memory; Psychokinesis Talent 1; Reputation -3 (As evil entity; Almost everyone; All the time); Sadism (12); Sharp Claws (Switchable); Supersensitive; Telepathy Talent 1, Telecommunication (Telesend) (Telepathic); Telekinesis 15 (Psychokinetic); Unnatural Features (Large eyes); Very Fat.

**Skills:** Area Knowledge (Slavic Forests)-20; Beam Weapons (Pistol)-15; Brawling-12; Cooking-17; Driving (Mecha)-14; Electronics Operation (Medical)-17; Electronics Operation (Psychotronics)-16; Electronics Repair (Psychotronics)-15; Fast-Talk-17; Gardening-17; Hidden Lore (Russian UFO Lore)-18; Housekeeping-17; Interrogation-17; Intimidation-17; Knot-Tying-16; Mechanic (Mecha)-17; Merchant (Human Trafficking)-17; Mimicry-17; Naturalist-19; Physician-16; Physiology-17; Piloting (Contragravity)-15; Psychology-17; Shortsword-14; Streetwise-18; Stealth-14; Survival (Forest)-17; Tracking-17; Vacc Suit-17; Ventriliquism-17; Wrestling-12.

**Quirks:** Gives cryptic clues; Homicidal if not treated with politeness; Prefers to be called Grandmother; Terrorizes people for fun.

## **Equipment**

Most of her capabilities are the result of her ownership of a Grey scout mecha known as "Baba Yaga's Hut," which is full of ultra-tech (TL10<sup>+</sup>) laboratory and psionic-testing equipment.

She has an electrolaser pistol up her sleeve for self-defense. If necessary, she can wield various tools lying about that she has for gardening and cleaning – a scythe, a pestle or broom (treat each as a staff), a scythe, or a chainsaw.

Her legendary shapeshifting abilities are due to her holobelt (see **GURPS Ultra-Tech**, p. 98). This creates a holographic image around her. A shelf of disks with different holo-images are located in her hut; she can pass as a large man, bear, bush, rock, giant teddy bear, etc. Promising children are sometimes entertained with it. Due to her bulk, she must struggle to put it on, which worsens her temper.

Her primary means of travel outside the hut is a ceramic-metal bowl-shaped object often mistaken for a mortar (grinding bowl). This is actually a TL10<sup>+</sup> contragravity flying platform. Usual maximum speed is 10 mph (Move 5). It can carry up to 700 lbs. (including the user's own weight). It is controlled by an unconnected, handheld stick device; the platform senses its movements. It operates for a month on a D cell, which can be recharged from aboard her hut.

For added security, her hut (when parked) may be surrounded by 12 metal poles tipped with glowing skulls. These are emitters for an invisible (unless using Infrared Vision) laser fence doing 6d(2) damage to anyone crossing. Someone who can see them can roll vs. Acrobatics-3 or Escape-3 to work around it.

## Baba Yaga's Hut

This appears to be a tiny hut made of logs, no larger than a small shack or outhouse. However, the hut can rise up on a pair of long chicken-like legs. In actuality, the hut is a super-science bipedal scout mecha. It is equipped with various exotic technology (see *GURPS Spaceships* and *GURPS Spaceships 7: Divergent and Paranormal Tech* for ideas). The most impressive is the extradimensional interface that gives the hut a larger interior than exterior, transforming an SM +4 shack into an SM +7 ultra-tech mansion (the size of a small starship). It is furnished like a medieval Russian church (thanks to some diligent looting in her younger years).

The front hull contains Baba Yaga's bedchambers, a child's nursery that can reconfigure into a torture chamber, and a psionics laboratory. The central hull engine room superficially resembles a farm workshop with stocks of gardening supplies and tools, but lockers contain advanced tools. Adjacent to that is an ultra-tech sickbay where various experiments can be performed. Each psychotronic power plant is

*Humans are Baba Yaga's favorite food, and she is always hungry. Indeed, her crooked hut is made of human bones, evidence of her numerous meals.*

– Marianna Mayer,  
*Baba Yaga and Vasilisa the Brave*

a humming pseudo-organic machine in which an unlucky psionic child will be shackled, his power drained to provide fuel for the Hut's operation. The rear section contains cages for holding abducted children.

A psi inside the psychotronic generator does not generate psychic noise and so won't disturb Baba Yaga's Supersensitive disadvantage.

### Front Hull Systems

[1-2]	Organic Armor (total dDR 10).
[3]	Habitat (10 tons steerage cargo).
[4]	Habitat (establishment).
[5]	Habitat (lab).
[6]	Habitat (luxury cabin with total life support).
[core]	Control Room (three control stations; comm/sensor 6, C7 computer).

### Central Hull Systems

[1-2]	Organic Armor (total dDR 10).
[3]	Engine Room.
[4]	Habitat (two-person sick bay).
[5-6]	Two Psychotronic Power Plants (total four psi Power Points).
[core!!]	Extradimensional Interface.

### Rear Hull Systems

[1-2]	Organic Armor (total dDR 10).
[3]	Habitat (two cages).
[4-5!]	Robot Legs.
[6]	Holoprojector.

\* One workspace per system. All power-using systems (!) require psionic Power Points.

It has a chameleon system. The usual crew are Baba Yaga and any children in the cages, undergoing testing or in the plant. Occasional Grey visitors may drop by.

## ABOUT THE COLUMNIST

David L. Pulver is a Canadian freelance author. An avid SF fan, he began roleplaying in junior high with the newly released *Basic Dungeons & Dragons*. Upon graduating from university, he decided to become a game designer. Since then, David has written over 70 roleplaying game books, and he has worked as a staff writer, editor, and line developer for Steve Jackson Games and Guardians of Order. He is best known for creating *Transhuman Space*, co-authoring the *Big Eyes, Small Mouth* anime RPG, and writing countless *GURPS* books, including the *GURPS Basic Set, Fourth Edition*, *GURPS Ultra-Tech*, and the *GURPS Spaceships* series.

## Baba Yaga's Hut Table

TL	Vessel	dST/HP	Hnd/SR	HT	Move	LWt.	Load	SM	Occ.	dDR	Range	Cost
10 <sup>^</sup>	Baba Yaga's Hut	50	+1/3§	13	10/10§	300	11	+4/7¶	10ASV	10	–	\$116.6M

§ Move and Hnd/SR are for land movement. It cannot fly or operate in space.

¶ The first SM is the external SM; the second is the internal SM.

# THE JOURNEY OF THE DEAD

BY KYLA WARD

*The sun's crimson rays flooded the hastily dug grave, as Helgrim crossed Berthold's cold hands over the hilt of his sword. "He knew he would die on this trail. Before setting forth, he saw his own father standing in the east and beckoning to him. He told me so."*

*"Berthold was your friend," said Lynefertiti. "And Songtooth is a fine blade. Too fine to rust in the ground."*

*Helgrim shook his head. "He faces the journey to the Deadlands. I cannot disarm him; I would that I could grant him a horse."*

*Her eyes strayed once more to Berthold's torn throat, then to the setting sun. "I would have thought him beyond peril. Unlike us."*

*"You are from the South. A Northern soul must first seek out the black cavern. There are many passages within, fraught with the wretched ghosts of those who fail to cross the River."*

*"So it is believed by my people. But our priests know spells and amulets to ensure safe passage."*

*"There are no spells that can fool the Gatekeeper." Helgrim leaned on his improvised shovel. "Only courage and true-speaking wins entry into the Citadel of Bones."*

*She nodded impatiently. "I have no fears for Berthold, then. Let us finish this and move on, lest those wolves find us again!"*

*Quickly they worked, but still the sunset was embers before Helgrim dragged the final stone atop the mound. "Good journey, my friend," he muttered, and raised his head to see Lynefertiti standing, staring into the rising dark with her Southerner's bow hanging loose from her hand.*

*The man he had covered with earth stood there, a shade among shadows. Songtooth was plain to see in his right hand as with the other, he beckoned them on.*

One belief shared by cultures ranging from the ancient Mesopotamians to traditional Fijian islanders is that the souls of the newly dead must undertake a long and perilous journey in order to reach the afterlife. In epics such as the *Odyssey* and *Elder Edda*, and priestly texts such as the *Book of the Dead*, this journey is described in order to prepare the living for their inevitable fate. The elements shared by the afterlife myths of the ancient Egyptians, classical Greeks, and Norsemen is remarkable, and traces of them can be seen in later works such as Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.

This primal quest also influences roleplaying games. In addition to the seeds of many wonderfully macabre adventures, the archetype gives both the GM and players a way of approaching character death that is meaningful and suspenseful, and it may allow for resurrection even where this is not normally feasible.

## THE DEATH-TOUCHED CHARACTER

Some people are marked by death or possess a special affinity for the underworld. In **GURPS** terms, this can be described through skills (such as those possessed by necromancers and the priests of death gods), an Unusual Background (such as dhampyre or resurrectee), or a special Destiny or Curse. Someone fated to die in a certain way or at a certain time may be visited by harbingers (see *Omens*, p. 21), or recognize the stations of the journey in the circumstances of their current adventure. The world's myths may suggest potential loopholes by which such a marked individual can escape his fate.

Advantages likewise may be expressed in mythic language. The hero of the fairy tale "Godfather Death" becomes a famous doctor through his ability to see which of his patients are doomed. If the GM permits, those individuals with the like of Medium, Spirit Empathy, and various exotic types of Detect may be considered able to cross into the underworld without locating a physical entrance, in order to question, guide, and protect the dead.

## THE HERO'S DESCENT

The journey of death awaits the soul of everyone. The potential unfairness of this situation leads to the use of spells and talismans, and the invocation of such personages as the Bodhisattva Jizo of Japanese Buddhism, who protects dead infants. Many religions insist that a pure heart and obedience to their tenets will ensure safe passage.

All tend to agree: It takes a hero to enter the underworld while still alive, and a truly special one to win a way back out. Such ventures were a specialty of Greek heroes. Odysseus entered the underworld in order to consult the shade of the dead prophet Teiresias. Heracles not only went into the house of Hades, but captured his guard-dog Kerberos and dragged him back out into the daylight. Orpheus won through to Hades' throne and – with the power of his music – gained the release of his dead lover Eurydice . . . at least temporarily. The Norse god Hermod penetrated the realm of Hel, seeking to resurrect his brother Baldr, which likewise failed at the last hurdle.

Heroes wishing to redeem dead comrades or free themselves from doom should locate one of the physical entrances to the underworld. Such adventurers should understand that they will face the same challenges as the dead . . . and be bound by the same rules.



## OMENS

Prophecies of death may be pronounced at birth or in childhood, as is the case with the Greek hero Achilles and the Celtic Chu Chullain. This traditionally leads to futile maneuvering to prevent the child encountering those circumstances, with Achilles' mother going to the lengths of bathing her son in the Styx and disguising him as a girl. Destinies of this kind generally accrue to martial heroes, although the curse pronounced at Sleeping Beauty's christening is an interesting variant.

Omens that death is close are much more common. They make elegant responses, not only to divination spells but successful uses of Empathy and various Detection abilities; such advantages can even be used specifically to *seek* portent! In a world with defined foretokens, their meanings should be readily available through the use of appropriate skills. (In such settings, an unwillingness to believe in death omens would be an entertaining quirk!)

Some signs come through dreams. For example, according to an ancient Egyptian dream book, to dream of your teeth falling out portends the death of an underling, while to dream of guarding monkeys means an evil change for you.

Other portents occur in the course of daily activities. To encounter a large, black hound by dream or daylight is an especially common and ancient omen. In Egypt, the jackal-god Anubis guides the dead through the underworld. For the Greeks, the black, three-headed hound Kerberos guards the entrance. For the Norsemen, the bridge leading into the realm of Hel is guarded by the maiden Modgud and a dog whose chest drips with blood.

Being followed by a crow or raven is an omen: so too is a gathering of corvids within a churchyard or potential battlefield. If the birds gather in a less obvious spot, it portends murder. The raven is often credited with foresight, and so this carrion-eater may be said to be staking its claim in advance. But the raven is also one of the forms taken by the valkyrja (Old Norse – chooser of slain warriors), or wælcyrge (Old English – corpse woman), and thus may also be scouting for talent.

A blue candle flame, an owl appearing in daylight, almost any bird entering a house, and a dog howling for no apparent reason can all portend death. Likewise, the death-watch beetle is a comparatively high-tech omen, depending as it does on the similarity of the beetle's clicking to the ticking of a clock, counting down the seconds of a life.

Harbingers may also take on human form. The bean sí (Irish – faerie woman) and white lady are common to Celtic and Norse traditions, and predict more natural deaths within a clan or family. Pale faced, robed in black or white, she appears at night, gaze fixed upon the doomed, or upon his chair or bed. She does not speak, but the bean sí sings a high, wailing song like a traditional Irish mourner. As a faerie, she possesses foresight and just like the raven, she is getting in ahead. A variation is the bean nighe (Irish – washing woman), who is seen washing the bloodstained clothes or amour of those who are about to die.

Dead friends and family members may appear in dreams or even in daylight, advising their loved one that they shall soon be reunited. Such visions have the marks of death upon them: a pale or discolored face, black or gray clothing or mounts, making no noise and leaving no tracks. As disturbing as this may be, seeing your own imago is worse. It may appear beside your natural reflection in a stream or mirror, or stand before

you in three dimensions. When this occurs, death cannot be far away.

## Psychopomps

It is a fine line between the black dogs and white ladies mentioned above, and psychopomps – entities that actually take souls and escort them on their journey. The Norse psychopomps, the valkyrja, sometimes appear as women, beautiful despite wearing gore-drenched armor, to escort dead warriors from the battlefield to the Norse heaven of Valhalla. In ancient Egypt, the god Anubis came to assist the dead. That the valkyrja deals solely in warriors and Anubis assists everyone who performs the proper rites speaks volumes about their respective societies. The Death or Grim Reaper ubiquitous in medieval Europe and the Greek god Thanatos also fill this role, although sometimes Thanatos is replaced by the god Hermes. Death is a corpse or skeleton, bearing a sword or scythe and sometimes wearing the black robes of a priest. Thanatos, interestingly, is a beautiful youth or child with black wings, carrying a sword and chains.

Someone who can overcome his psychopomp may win at least a remission of his death. A Greek myth tells of King Sisyphus, whose death was ordered by Zeus himself as punishment for breaking the sacred laws of hospitality. When Thanatos arrived to place the chains upon him, the king persuaded him to demonstrate how they worked, and promptly locked the god in his own fetters. This meant that not only was Sisyphus safe, but no being on earth could die until the chains were broken by the god of war, who had a vested interest. Sisyphus was subsequently condemned to eternal torment. More successful was Heracles, who wrestled Thanatos and sent him packing when he came to collect the wife of his host.

In Ingmar Bergman's 1957 film *The Seventh Seal*, the protagonist challenges Death to a game of chess. Although there is no direct mythical precedent, tomb inscriptions from New Kingdom of Egypt refer to the occupant playing the game *senet* in the necropolis against his own soul, with salvation the stake.

*He answered, saying, "I ride to Hel in search of Baldr. But have you seen anything of Baldr on the Hel Road?"*

*She replied that Baldr had ridden across Gjöll Bridge, "and down and north lies the road to Hel."*

*– The Elder Edda*

## GATEWAYS

Initially, it may not be clear that the underworld has been reached. The sky may be dark, the colors faded, the buildings decrepit and deserted, but otherwise the threshold tends to resemble the living world. Hermod rode for nine nights through pitch black valleys before reaching the entrance proper, and Odysseus passed through the land of the Cimmerians, where the sun's light never reaches.

In many cosmologies, the newly dead linger in this zone until the completion of their funeral rites. For the Egyptian, the journey literally commences in the tomb: a false door carved or painted on the sarcophagus or the wall of the burial chamber provides the entrance. For the Greeks, it involves entering a cavern or deep lake. Several such places were common knowledge, including a lake in Epirus and a cave near the city of Heracleia. The dead who do not receive a proper funeral ceremony, such as those drowned at sea or executed as criminals, may be doomed to remain there. Such spirits can often provide useful information, but will always request completion of their rites in payment. Over time, some grow malignantly powerful, becoming monsters who attack anyone they encounter.

The traveler who intends to return to the living world must beware of eating or drinking from here on in. In Greek and Celtic myth, to consume so much as the seed of a pomegranate or a cup of water places the person immediately in the power of the gods of death. If the water is from the River Lethe, he will forget he ever knew a life among the living.

## *The River*

All underworlds boast a river, a lake, or a sea, and swimming is a very bad idea. The Greek underworld features Akheron, the river of pain; Kokytus, the river of lamentation; Pyriphlegethon, the river of fire; Lethe, the river of forgetfulness; and Styx, the river of hate. Akheron is the river all souls must cross to enter the afterlife; its waters are described as muddy and bitter, sometimes as an actual swamp. The Styx is said to wind about the underworld nine times, and its waters to be so foul that any god who drinks loses his voice for nine years. Bathing in it made Achilles invulnerable to weapons, but it should be remembered that he was half-divine and consequences for a mortal are liable to be severe. Perhaps for these reasons, an oath sworn by the Styx is irrevocable.

The demon Kharon ferries souls across the Styx in a black-draped boat. He is ancient, filthy, and ugly; has a harsh voice; and (in Roman sources) has blue-black skin, tusks, and serpents for arms. His invariable fee is a single coin. Coins were placed into the mouths of corpses to ensure they could pay.

The Norse underworld is bordered by two burning rivers, the Valglaurmur and Gjöll (Norse – Din of Combat and Tumultuous), the Geirvimul or “Swarming with Spears,” and the Slidr (Peril) whose waters are likewise filled with floating weapons. The dead are provided a bridge across the Gjöll, only needing to satisfy Modgud of their lineage. Of course, no one destined for Valhalla ever crosses the Gjöll, and the precautions are all there to stop souls escaping.

In Egyptian mythology, the river Nile runs through the underworld as it does through the living world. Having passed through the sky on its waters by day, by night the sun boat floats through the realm of Osiris. However, the Book of the Dead describes additionally a Lake of Fire that the deceased must cross. In the book prepared for the priestess Ta-shed-Khonsu, she is depicted steering a skiff with the head of Anubis on the prow.

## *The Gate*

Beyond the Akheron lies an adamant gate guarded by Kerberos. Hound and gate allow anyone entrance, but someone seeking to exit has a major feat of strength and a bad fight

on his hands. Beyond the Gjöll lies Helgrind, or Hel's Gate, which opens only to allow the dead inside. Hermod side-stepped this rule by jumping his horse over the top. The Book of the Dead describes the gate of the Hall of Double Maat, listing the exact words that must be recited to each of its components before they will permit passage. But once accepted by Osiris, the dead Egyptian has the freedom of the underworld and can even send part of his soul back to the land of the living to receive offerings and check on his descendants.

## *The Hall*

Beyond the Gate lies judgment. The dread house of Hades is described by some as a gloomy cavern, some as a dark and forbidding castle. Hades sits on a throne, attended by Thanatos, the Fates, and the Furies, to decide the future of each soul that comes before him.

In the Hall of Double Maat, the dead person must pass through a cohort of lesser gods armed with knives. He does this by making the so-called negative confession, assuring them he is innocent of all wrongdoing. When he reaches the throne of Osiris, his heart is weighed against the Feather of Truth. At Osiris' feet sits the Devourer, a ghastly compound of crocodile and lion, to take care of any liars.

In the realm of Hel stand several halls, in which the dead are assigned places according to merit. Hel and her most valued “guests” reside in a tall building with many doors, resembling the hall of a great chieftain. Hel herself occupies the high seat, with the shadowy dragon Níöhöggr awaiting her command.

In each of these places, among courtiers and enforcers, the god passes judgment on the dead, and here they will also hear any living supplicants. Not even Hercules was game to assault Hades in his stronghold. Although many heroes have fought their way to this point, the challenge in the Hall is of a different kind.

What happens to the dead beyond this point exceeds the scope of this article. One way or another, their journey is over.

## *Cheating Death*

Undertaking the journey of the dead while still alive can technically fulfill prophecies of the kind “shall die before his thirtieth year” and “shall not return home a living woman.” This leaves the challenge of returning. The gods of death are notoriously intolerant of attempts to flout their sovereignty, and should they agree to release a soul, there is always a catch.

Few better roleplaying opportunities exist than arguing with a god. The adventurers' background, disadvantages, and quirks are all open to exploitation – the GM can ask players to justify anything their characters have ever done. The resolution of such a confrontation should never be left up to skill rolls, although Orpheus' playing is said to have been so beautiful as to move Hades' heart. His one condition was that Orpheus should not look at his wife until they were both out of his realm. Hermod's courage gained a promise from Hel that she would release Balder if every living thing wept for him. The GM should allow players to come up with a way to impress the deity, and then present a choice. Oaths of service (which may include quotas), feats that Death Itself cannot undertake (killing an immortal, bearing a child), and a single kiss are all good places to start. A word to the wise: never agree to sacrifice the first thing that you meet back in the living world!

## GUARDIANS

The template of the journey can be applied to settings and situations well beyond the fantastical. Symbolic journeys through the underworld are also appropriate to military expeditions, police procedurals, noir detective stories, and dream or cyberspace sequences. Consider a hostage negotiation requiring a journey to the terrorist's base, or a security system consciously modeled upon the archetype. The myth of Orpheus became the basis for a real-world cult bearing his name, which put initiates through just such a simulated ordeal.

The following encounters are examples of this flexibility – the first suitable for a “realistic” modern game, the second an outright fantasy. When basing an adventure on the archetype, the GM should play fair and allow player/character knowledge of the myths to be an advantage.

### *Don't Pay the Ferryman*

Seeking information from a shadowy member of the underworld, the party at last has a solid lead on her location. After traveling through the wasteland of an industrial district and through the cellars of a crumbling factory, a storm drain is all that stands between them and their goal. Well, almost all.

The drain is huge and half-filled with obviously toxic sludge. Too wide to jump, the roof of the pipe is covered with razor wire and looks in any case too unsound to climb. The only way across is a rickety, metal barge in the care of an ancient derelict, who announces himself as their target's doorman to a chorus of frantically barking dogs. Three huge beasts fling themselves against the grill covering the passage onwards, as the party attempt to negotiate.

The ferryman is an utterly repulsive individual, who cannot be intimidated and plays upon every intolerance, quirk, and Phobia in the party. Successful use of Empathy or other such advantage suggests this is deliberate and the party's reactions are being carefully observed. A critical success reveals the man has a Code of Honor and enjoys bargaining and humiliating opponents (his boss may well be watching and assessing the nature of her guests – just how desperate and aggressive they are). If asked to take the party to meet his boss, the ferryman will insist upon payment in any number of ways, which successful use of Diplomacy can negotiate down to the local currency. If the party ask specifically, and succeed in a hard Diplomacy contest, he will agree to half now, half later or a similar concession.

The grill blocking the passage is a three-lobed affair, which can be swung to allow access, or to release the dogs. Manipulating it requires a successful DX roll.

No matter how things go with the boss, if the return deal is not already in place with the ferryman, the party will have to agree to the original conditions, or fight their way out. The ferryman is tougher than he looks and the absolute master of the three dogs. His primary goal is to knock opponents into the sludge, which deals poison damage each round, requires the successful use of Swimming each round to stay afloat (a failure means double damage from swallowing), and makes climbing out a hard DX contest.

### *Don't Fear the Reaper*

The party enters what appears to be a large field of grain under a threatening sky. The laborers work frantically to bring in as much of the harvest as possible before the storm breaks,

and pay no attention to the party. The only way forward is to cross the field.

As they do, Sense rolls, Danger Sense, and the like may alert the group to the fact that no matter how fast the laborers move, the harvested area never increases. The laborers themselves all look exactly the same. Furthermore, the plants they are tending do not resemble plants as much as the taloned hands of something long and spiny protruding from the earth – especially the bed just ahead, where the number of growths and laborers equal that of the party. This bed remains in front of the party no matter where they turn, and any kind of movement will bring them into it.

Someone who approaches a laborer is asked a question pertaining to his past, such as why he killed so and so, why he abandoned his family to pursue the adventuring life – anything that puts him on the spot. The laborer then asks if the person repents.

The adventurer who answers truthfully and who has no regrets is given a handful of grain heads. It wasn't a monster after all. He can proceed to the edge of the field unhindered.

If the person hesitates, he notices the “plant” growing taller and the ground starting to crack.

A laborer who is struck melts immediately into the soil as a Harvest Demon (see below) shoots up to replace him.

Should he answer truthfully but does not repent, a full-grown Harvest Demon springs up from the ground. The adventurer who lies in any respect is faced with a Harvest Demon for each lie. In either case, if he defeats it, he receives a handful of grain heads and is allowed to continue. Otherwise, he is killed and dragged beneath the ground to the Hall of Judgment, where the victim's fate shall be decided.

The grain heads may be the key to unlocking the Gate of the underworld, exist as a pass back out, or have any other property the GM desires.

## The Harvest Demon

A Harvest Demon exists only for the person whose deeds “sowed” it. Only that person can injure it, or be injured by it, unless someone else claims the right to aid him by ties of love, blood, or religion. In that case, both may attack the Demon and be attacked by it. These creatures strive to beat their opponent into submission and drag him beneath the earth.

The Demon has primary and secondary characteristics equal to the person for who it was created. It also has skin with DR equal to what the victim is wearing, and claws with thr+1 cr. If the person attempts to flee, or is reduced to one-quarter starting HP, arms lash out for sw+2 cr and entangle with an effective Lasso of 18.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kyla Ward is a Sydney-based writer whose interest in necrology exceeds the conceivably healthy. After working as a freelancer for White Wolf, Goldrush, and Eden Games, and seeing her articles in *Dragon*, *Black Gate*, *D20 Weekly*, and *Pyramid*, she was a guest at Gencon Australia, programmed the horror stream for the 68th Worldcon, and produced a novel. Her most recent release, *The Land of Bad Dreams*, may be viewed at [tabula-rasa.info/LandOfBadDreams](http://tabula-rasa.info/LandOfBadDreams) or on YouTube.com.



# THE BEAR MYTH

BY ALAN LEDDON

Throughout the Northern Hemisphere, evidence for the long-ago veneration of bears abounds. At least 41 mythological figures from continental European, Finnish, Indian, Irish, Japanese, Korean, Native American, Sumerian, Welsh, and other mythologies can be shown to follow the pattern of the bear myth. So important to the modern human psyche is this myth that even Hollywood continues to propagate it today.

## THE ORIGIN OF THE BEAR MYTH

During the Oligocene and early Miocene epochs, Earth did not experience the modern degree of seasonal variation (time travelers, take note!). During the period from about 34 million years ago to about 20 million years ago, there existed a genus of animals called *Cephalogale*, which were predators combining many traits of dogs and bears. As the climate began to change, resulting in periods of winter, *Cephalogale* and other, similar species (such as those of the genus *Amphocynidae*) began to evolve to adapt to the new periods of cold and limited food. Smaller animals, such as the ancestors of squirrels, developed *true hibernation* (with a marked slowing of their body processes and a long period to become aroused). The animals evolving into bears developed *torpor*, with body processes remaining near their normal levels, and the animal being easily aroused.

Millions of years later, creatures of the genus *Homo* found their way out of Africa and into places where black bears, brown bears, and cave bears roamed. To them, the latter two animals were positively divine! A human used to looking down on a lion or wolf would look up to the face of a cave bear (*Ursus Speleaus*) who was 13' tall standing on his hind legs! The puny primates could watch the bears in awe as they excavated roots and small animals by digging with powerful claws and well-developed muscles; they witnessed the bear's power over life and death as the bear slept away the cold months of the once unfamiliar winter. The bear did not eat, drink, defecate, or urinate for up to eight months at a time (don't try this yourself).

The conclusions that Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon witnesses to these matters must have drawn are easy enough to guess. When there was strong sunlight, plentiful food, and warmth, the bear was present in the forest. When there was weak sunlight, snow, and scarce food, the bear, absent from the forest, lay in a deathlike state beneath the ground. The bear

was a god of sun, a god of death and the underworld, and a god of vegetation, all at once.

We know that Neanderthal venerated the bear because archaeologists have found bear skulls at Neanderthal sites, with the bear's thighbones thrust through their cheekbones in some manner of ritual activity. We know that Cro-Magnon ancestors venerated the bear because many cultures still retain traces of that veneration, and many mythological features follow the bear myth.

*"There's no use shooting these arrows at me," the bear said. "You can't kill me." The hunter realized that this was a medicine bear, protected by magic. "Come to my house," the bear said. "We can live together."*

– "The Magic Bear"  
(Cherokee legend)

## WHAT IS THE BEAR MYTH?

The bear myth is a plot in which the protagonist encounters some distressing event, enters an underworld, gains some wisdom or power, and returns to resolve his issue. The underworld need not be literal; Orpheus entered Hades, but Zalmoxis lived for three years in a pit. The underworld could be the grief felt while visiting the grave of a loved one, it could be a coma, a prison cell, etc. This follows the lifecycle of most bears, from growing fat, to a period of torpor, to awakening ready for the spring.

### *For Example . . .*

The ancient veneration of the bear evolved with culture. Humans who lived where bears existed envisioned their deities as taking on human form and attributes, while allowing them to remain true to their origin as a bear by keeping the plot in their myths.

The Irish Celtic figure Airmid is one example of the bear myth. The daughter of the physician of the Tuatha De Danaan, she assisted him and one of her brothers in tending a magical well (a connection to the underworld) that restored life to those who were placed in it (the bear reincarnates or resurrects after his long sleep). At one point, her father, Dian Cecht, replaced the king's severed arm with one of silver. Airmid and a different brother, Miach, fashioned him a living arm and attached it in place of the silver one. In a jealous rage, Dian Cecht killed Miach. Airmid went one day to tend Miach's grave (her grief being the symbolic underworld), and found 365 herbs growing from the stones on top of his grave; every one of them was a medicinal herb.

The Japanese sun goddess Amaterasu is another. Her brother, the God of Storms, wrecked her rice fields and muddled her temples one day (this happens in November in Japan), so she shut herself into a cave (causing winter). The other gods tried various means to lure her out, finally tricking her by saying they had a new sun and backing this up by showing her the Divine Reflection in a mirror. She came out to meet the interloper (spring arrived), and the other gods sealed her cave behind her. She learned not to trust the tricks of her fellow gods.

Among the Olympians, a number of figures follow the bear myth. Artemis is a huntress, once worshipped by children dressed in brown cloaks and called "Bears," the root of her name (*Art-*) is the word for bear. Persephone's story follows the bear myth: It is winter when she is with her husband (in the Underworld) and summer when she is with her mother (Goddess of Vegetation).

Then there is Zeus. Zeus was the youngest of the children of Rhea and Cronus. When his siblings (Demeter, Hades, Hera, Poseidon, and Hestia) were born, Cronus swallowed them, placing them in a symbolic underworld. Zeus was born in a cave (an underworld), and Rhea fed Cronus a rock in place of her youngest infant. Zeus was fed on honey (which bears eat) until he was able to win a victory over his father, freeing his siblings.

## HOLLYWOOD

The bear myth resonates with modern humans to such a degree that Hollywood profits from it. Many popular movies embody this plotline, as do many less popular films and TV series.

The best known of all adventurers is the only son of Jor-El. In *Superman II*, he falls in love, goes to his "cave" at the very

center of the bear's range, enters a symbolic underworld (giving up his powers), learns a valuable lesson (the one in the diner), regains his powers, and uses his new wisdom to defeat Zod and his minions. The theme is repeated in *Superman Returns*, wherein the underworld is a stay in a hospital.

*The 13th Warrior*, a remake of the Grendel story, includes a visit to an underworld escaped by swimming, followed by a victory. In *Hard to Kill*, Mason Storm hears the voice of his enemy, spends a decade in a coma, and awakens to match the voice to a face and name (on TV); then he wins a victory. Luke Skywalker goes to the symbolic underworld of Dagobah to gain the wisdom to fight his father, and Han Solo spends time in Jabba's Palace before leading the Rebel ground assault on the moon of Endor. The list is almost endless.

## CULTURAL EVIDENCE

Modern Western culture includes considerable evidence for the ancient veneration of bears. Besides the many mythological figures associated with the bear myth, or actually having bear cloaks, bears, or other bear-like possessions, evidence in language exists to indicate the importance of bears to humans long ago.

Among the artifacts that can be examined today, there are coins dating from the 470s B.C. to 490s B.C. depicting a bear on one side, and, in some cases, Pallas or an acorn on the other. Other items include undated terracotta bears from the Indus Valley, lead appliqué bear heads dating to 500 B.C., statuettes from the Han Dynasty (about 2.5" tall, and dating from 206 B.C. to 220 A.D.), figures showing both human mothers nursing bear cubs and bear mothers nursing human infants. Of all the statuary offered to the Greek gods, bear images were the most common. In a realistic game, such items should be plentiful and valuable.

In northern Great Britain, bear amulets (of undisclosed age) made of jet have been found. Even today, sometimes parents place these in the cribs of babies to invoke the protection of the Mother Bear – in lands where bears have been extinct for centuries! In a magical game, these may repel certain supernatural creatures or provide resistance to some diseases.

The ferocity of the bear is represented even today with bear-skin hats. Made from bear hide, these tall hats are currently worn by 27 military formations; many other formations have phased the hats out over last couple of hundred years. In the past, the tall hats were used to make elite soldiers, such

*Ahmed Ibn Fahdlan: They think they are bears . . . they want us to think they are bears . . . hey, how do you hunt a bear?*

*Weath the Musician: Chase it down with dogs. What . . . ?*

*Ahmed Ibn Fahdlan: How do you hunt a bear in winter?*

*Herger the Joyous: Go in its cave with spears.*

– *The 13th Warrior*

as Grenadiers, seem more intimidating and more dangerous on the battlefield. The size of the hat is only part of the effect; it may also play upon an ingrained recollection of the ancient worship of bears.

In Whittlesey, Cambridgeshire, England, there remains an interesting ritual called “The Straw Bear of Whittlesea”; it is sometimes called the “Straw Bower.” On “the first Tuesday after 12th Night,” a man is dressed in a straw effigy of a bear, and paraded through town to dance at homes and businesses in exchange for alcohol, snacks, and money. The performance died out in the late 1800s, but was revived in 1980. No one knows how the ritual actually began, but, no doubt, it is a survival of an activity in honor of the bear. Like the Shrovetide Bear Costumes of Germany, the Whittlesey Bear costume is ritually burned after use; dancing follows this event. This resembles the Slavic Spring Fertility festival of Maslenitsa, still celebrated by Slavs, in which a straw effigy is burned to celebrate the imminent end of winter (and the arousal of the bear); Maslenitsa is (now) the last chance before Lent to partake of dairy products. The GM may allow such rituals, performed by the PCs, to grant a bonus to magic done to protect crops for the coming year.

## Adventure Seeds

*Awakening:* Some action by the adventurers has awakened a long slumbering being – an ancient bear, a powerful giant, perhaps mighty Cronus himself. The party must descend, both literally (into a cave) and figuratively (looking to long forgotten magic or drugs) to lull the being back to sleep.

*Dreamscape:* The secrets of the universe can finally be learned. All that is required of modern university students is to take a powerful drug and slip into a state dangerously close to death. After adventuring (together!) in this state, the foolhardy explorers return with true information about the universe. These secrets might be physics proofs, the true actions of forgotten gods, or even magic spells.

*Returning Gods:* Aliens make contact with Earth, conveniently picking the very mountain where the PCs are camping or adventuring. They will answer questions about long ago interference in human affairs, perhaps explaining why their own ancestors dressed as bears and performed technological miracles in front of incredulous Neanderthals. Or, perhaps they look like bears.

## THE BEAR MYTH IN A GAME

The most obvious use of the bear myth is in the world background. Each campaign culture could have two or three mythological or historical figures who imitate the myth; the adventurers discover in play that these tales relate to events occurring in the campaign. The important part here is to make the myth a part of the life of the setting; it should be present from the beginning, but its value or use should only become

obvious well into the campaign. Perhaps a bard’s tale tells of entering an amethyst cave to retrieve a sword that slays giants; the tale is known from the beginning of the adventure series and is retold often in pubs and at campfires. Months or years into the campaign (real time if possible), when an army of giants is spotted approaching the adventurers’ home town, one of the PCs spies a glittering purple speck on a distant mountain in the last moments of twilight.

Should the GM take on the task of creating his own pantheon of deities for his setting, the presence of several important figures whose stories follow the plot of the bear myth will make it seem more realistic and believable to players who have extensive knowledge of real-world myths. A mixed pantheon (like the Norse Aesir and Vanir) could be differentiated by the plot, all of the Ancient Gods have the plot as part of their myth, while none of the (Younger, Newer, False) Gods do, for example.

Cultures may exist that require people to personally experience the plot of the bear myth before taking on some status, such as chieftain, shaman, or even *adult*. Perhaps this trial must happen before marriage, or before owning a home. Maybe, if it doesn’t occur by a certain age, the unfortunate is put to death or otherwise punished due to the perceived disfavor of the gods (or some other culturally relevant reason). In this case, the myth becomes an individual adventure for each person, or for a group of friends who work closely together. The plot is the important part; the exact form of the events around the plot are special effects. They must gain wisdom through some danger, descent, or loss, and apply that wisdom. Actual bears are optional.

The use of the plot of the bear myth and associated mythological elements can add realism, variety, and interest to a new campaign or one that is growing stale. Material of this time has fascinated and entertained our ancestors for at least 40,000 years; there is no reason for it to stop now.

## FURTHER READING

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alan continues to reside in Madison, Wisconsin, with his (insert list of superlatives here) wife, Bekki. The couple are the parents of six-year-old were-beast Raven, who is very well-behaved all day until bed time forces her transformation into a ferocious monster. The couple are also plagued by a cat who considers itself a divine being and demands worship in the form of cat food and physical attention; the deity is unfamiliar with the concept of “no.” The family’s latest adventure involved adding a fiddler crab to their aquarium, and the gruesome little creature has provided endless entertainment.



# BABYLON RISING

BY J. EDWARD TREMLETT

*It was early April of 2003, and PFC Charles G. Jardin was trying not to move.*

*He didn't need to look at his legs to know they were gone. He didn't need to look over at what was left of his Humvee, burning in the Iraqi night, to know his buddies were dead.*

*He didn't need to breathe, either, really. He'd been as good as dead the moment the RPG blew him out of his ride.*

*He gritted his teeth and weakly spat blood, knowing his lungs were busted, too. This was a lousy way to die, and a lousy place to do it. He'd never even heard of Al Hillah until he'd gotten in country, and now he was dying here.*

*For a moment, he thought he could crawl over to that rocky outcropping, nearby. But the pain came back and he screamed, hoarsely, almost blacking out.*

*Anything, he thought. I'd give anything not to die. Not here. Not now. Anything.*

*Anything?* Something asked. It had a voice as steady as stone, full as the sand around him. Was it God . . . or an angel?

*"Anything . . ." Charles breathed, closing his eyes: "Just get me out of here."*

*It is done,* the voice replied. Suddenly Charles felt something coming at him. He saw a face in his mind – bearded and howling, eyes full of sparks and contempt – and then it was upon him, and he was somewhere cold and dark.

Marduk breathed in through Charles' broken lungs, and exhaled through healed ones. He leaned up and erased the other wounds with a wave of his hand.

*He got to his borrowed feet, and stretched imperiously. What had happened to mighty Babylon? Where were the strong walls, gates, and mighty ziggurats? What had they done to the Hanging Gardens?*

*Why was that statue of him, nearby, nothing more than broken rock?*

*Then he remembered what had happened, all those years ago, and he scowled.*

*"This world is unacceptable," he pronounced, regarding the wretched bodies of the dead. He took the dog tags from around his neck and, reading his new name, felt a flicker of emotion from his host, now deep in the Underworld.*

*"We shall change this world, Charles," Marduk announced, lightning crackling in his eyes. "But first we must raise an army of our own."*

Over 50 years ago, the gods of Ancient Egypt were reborn – raised up by the tidal wave of attention caused by the discovery of King Tut's tomb. So far as they knew, they were the only such pantheon to return. But, in recent years, another group of Middle Eastern deities have awoken from long slumber.

The gods of ancient Mesopotamia came up from their Underworld just after the start of the recent conflict in Iraq. Unlike their Egyptian cousins, they could not return as their divine selves, but had to strike magical "bargains" with mortals. Wrapped in often-stolen flesh, the gods of Mesopotamia walk the world again, seeking to reestablish themselves in what was once the cradle of civilization.

Unfortunately, things have not gone smoothly. A sensible plan to slowly take over has been hamstrung by insurgency, sabotage, divine disagreements, and unknown enemies. Overt violence has wound down, but subtle and underhanded threats are manifesting behind the scenes. Secrets are wrapped within ambitious lies, and the truth could destroy everything.

This could be the start of a new and greater Babylon, or it could be something much worse.

## New Kingdoms and Old Neighbors

This article is based on *The New Kingdom*, an urban-fantasy campaign that appeared in *Pyramid* #3/7: *Urban Fantasy*. The GM doesn't need it to use *Babylon Rising*, but he may want to have it handy, as the Egyptian deities could serve as allies, enemies, or background noise.

As written, both sets of gods are unaware of each other's return, but that could quickly change. The Egyptian deities still have ties to the Middle East, and the gods' front companies may meet one another. Mutual enemies could bring them together, but competing interests could cause war.

*Babylon Rising* is a generic campaign setting that has the ancient gods of Mesopotamia returning to modern Iraq. It tells of their recent history, profiles their more notable members, talks about their enemies, and provides numerous "ins" for PCs. It could be the basis of an urban-fantasy campaign, or added onto another, preexisting campaign in which one area's mythology is as true as any other.

## ASLEEP IN THE BIG LAND

Unlike their Egyptian cousins, the gods of ancient Babylon were neither sold out nor enslaved. Instead, they suffered the fate of most other heathen gods: consigned to the rubbish heap of history once new, more compelling religions took their place.

Christianity slowly pulled down the gods of the great cities, and Islam all but wiped them out. Except for a few enclaves of quiet veneration, the gods of Mesopotamia were forgotten. Their temples crumbling, and statues falling into sand, the gods became weak and without will, eventually tumbling into their Underworld, there to sleep away the new, simpler age.

As they slumbered, the Caliphate became an Empire, and a Mandate became a Kingdom. Eventually, there was revolution, and then tyranny.

Then war:

In 2003, a coalition, chiefly led by America, invaded Iraq, and the carnage destroyed priceless things dating back to the days of Sumer itself. In the Underworld, the deities of Mesopotamia stirred, ever so slightly, but mostly went right back to dreams. Their time was gone and done – what mattered their elder trinkets?

But one god – Marduk, rightful king of all gods – opened a wary eye, sensing fire in his city of Babylon. Sending a whisper of self up to see what had happened, he beheld his capitol in hoary ruins, and a nearby, newer place on fire, attacked by strange forces that could command metal and fire. The sight of his city in dust was enough to stir him to seek a way to the land of the living.

The law of Nergal, Lord of the Dead, states clearly that for one to leave the Underworld, another must take his place. So Marduk found a dying, frightened soul among the invaders, and made a bargain with it. The two sprits were now connected, and as Marduk entered and healed the dying body, its former owner fell down into the Big Land.

## AWAKE IN THE CRADLE

Reborn, disguised, and flush with power, Marduk walked the land in time of war. As he traveled, he soon learned much of what had happened since he had fallen asleep. He occasionally had to awaken the soul of his body for more information, or to learn how to do certain things, but most of the time, he let him sleep.

Marduk did not like this world, with its “one true god,” disunity of purpose, and failure to appreciate its history. But within its people, he saw the spark of his ancient worshippers, and knew there were possibilities. If the invaders claimed they’d let these people pick a new government once the old one was gone, how hard would it be to reassert the rule of the gods?

To do this, he would need allies. He could feel the presence of mortals who still held the gods of old in reverence, but to turn this country back, he would need the other gods alongside him. Unfortunately, their rule had been a divided thing; each god with its own city, reigning supreme within its walls. Marduk “ruled” only because of the lofty status of Babylon, and the power of official myth.

If the gods would call him king again, he would have to be something more than what he once was. He would have to be the one to awaken them from their sleep, just as he had awoken. Surely the god of magic could do no less?

So he began to search the land, going to each archaeological site and ruined temple in the hopes of uncovering some awakening spell. While in Afak (once Nippur), he encountered mighty but doddering Enlil, himself, moping about his ruined temples and loudly bemoaning his confusion. Why was he back? Why could he feel the others coming? Where were they?

Marduk was angry to see his plan broken around him, but, thinking quickly, realized there was a chance. Playing a ruse, he appeared, and berated the elder god for not coming to Babylon to pay homage to the one who’d set him free from Nergal’s realm. To his relief, Enlil fell to his knees – thanking his rescuer, and pledging his service.

Marduk was relieved. If Enlil believed him, then so would most others.

*Marduk sought power  
from the gods to heal in order  
to unseat Daniel and all other  
contenders from favored  
positions.*

– T. L. Higley,  
*Marduk’s Tablet*

## TOWERING BABEL

The duo traveled the country, finding other, awakened gods, and bidding them to come to Babylon. Not all chose to, but Marduk, pretending magnanimity, told them they could join later. Thankfully, many gods he’d wanted on his Council agreed – especially his son, Nabu, and lovely but cruel Ishtar – and those who refused were mostly ones he didn’t need.

Once enough gods assembled, Marduk outlined his plan. The invaders had created a provisional government, but why should once-proud people bow to puppet rulers, much less a god they couldn’t even see? All the gods had to do was reveal themselves to the people, in all their glory, and they would beg them to lead again. They could then reunite all cities they once ruled, and bring back the glorious land.

Some gods liked this plan, but many more were doubtful. They, too, had traveled the land, and had discovered that the people had changed too much to accept them. The gods would be denounced as *djinn*, or worse, and no amount of magic would get them to recant Islam. As for reuniting the land, it was now part of several different countries, including a very hostile one.

Marduk was not happy to have his great plan dismissed by facts. Before he could rage and storm, Nabu suggested they play a longer game. If they quietly infiltrated this government, now that it was in its infancy, they could eventually change the country’s culture to where they *could* reveal themselves. So long as they avoided doing any open magic, or mating with humans, they should be safe. It might take centuries, but what was that to them?

Before Marduk could start making empty threats about sending people back to the Big Land, the gods voted overwhelmingly in favor of the slow plan. Nabu then wisely suggested they have Marduk lead them, as they would need his magic, protection, and strength.

What could a god-king do? He pretended to humbly accept the wisdom of the plan, and thanked them for their faith in him. He also decided he would sabotage the mortal's government, making his plan look like the best solution after all.

## NUMBERED, WEIGHED, DIVIDED

That was nine years ago. Things have not gone very well.

The notion that mortal hostilities were coming to an end proved shockingly incorrect. An insurgency grew up, and they were soon joined by outside agitators, seeking to combat America on the front lines. Coalition troops needed several years to beat them back, and numerous changes in commanders and strategy didn't help.

A number of societal upheavals also took place. As reformers tried to influence how the new Iraq would go, and influential expatriates tried to become king, Saddam's loyalists did their best to deny them any opportunity, dueling clerics fought for the country's soul, and outsiders tried to weigh things in favor of their neighbors. The great families were rent asunder, allies became enemies, and things that had been taken for granted were trodden underfoot.

Near the center of it all have been the gods, all working to bring about the cornerstone for a new Babylon. Some of the gods who once believed in Marduk are no longer at his side, much less working for the plan. Others, disillusioned by his poor leadership, stay with him if only because they believe in it.

Nabu finds that he's running interference a lot these days, and Ishtar goes out of her way to embarrass the two of them. Meanwhile, his first and most influential ally, Enlil, was killed by a truck bomb two years ago, and has not returned from the Underworld.

Marduk is fine with that; behind the scenes, the king of the gods plays a dangerous game. He secretly commands an army of insurgents, whom he sets on certain targets to weaken the government, and make it look ineffectual. Worried that doddering Enlil might discover them, he had them assassinate him. Then he personally destroyed that god's Tablet of Destiny – condemning him to the Underworld for millennia.

Unfortunately, he's got other problems. Iraq is currently infested with ghosts, causing the walking dead and possessed humans to run rampant. Demons stalk the earth, and the

Scorpion Men have gone from servants to ravagers. They cause nasty and gruesome situations, which are blamed on terrorists and factional fighting, but this makes it harder to convince America to finally quit the country.

Some gods are in favor of Marduk's original plan – just without Marduk. These dissidents have allied themselves with Iraqi polytheists, who are hoping to go open with their beliefs soon. There's even word of a “flying miracle worker” down in Basra, who appears, performs feats of divine magic, and then vanishes.

The Council hopes to reason with these gods, but will force them to stop if needed, which puts Marduk in an awkward position. Worse, they're going to tell the dissidents to be good or else be sent back to the Underworld, which Marduk still cannot do – except with high explosives and smashed Tablets.

Fortunately, someone seems to be beating him to it. Gods among the dissident factions are being cut down by an unseen enemy that no augury or fact-finding mission has yet exposed. The only connection between the victims is that they've had successful sexual congress with mortals, producing children that could be at least partly divine. This is leading the Council to wonder if one of their own is the culprit, as the victims are doing what they specifically said *not* to do.

Nominally in charge of a fractured and suspicious group of gods that don't entirely trust him or like him, Marduk seeks an insurance policy. He takes many secret “fact-finding missions,” looking for how he escaped the Underworld, and how he could magic someone there. Failing that, if he can find a spell to lead him to the others' Tablets of Destiny, he can control their very existences. He toils alone in this, unwilling to trust anyone, and knowing that his idealistic son would betray him.

Yet another problem: Marduk is starting to experience what the humans call “missing time.” Just a minute here and there, but he often winds up some distance from where he was originally. He thinks it's his mortal's soul taking him over, and while he hasn't used the whiny little worm in years, legends say that some souls get more powerful over time. Soon they can contest even a god, and will do destructive things to get attention.

What *has* his mortal done?

## FIXING THE DESTINIES

Players who wish to have returning gods as characters have countless options for campaigns.

The country has countless vacuums where a returned god can insert himself to take or make power. For example: those with dominions in agriculture could go into farming, make or sell farming supplies, or ministerial resource administration.

*Of the jar-bearers, whoever has a sacrifice (to offer) will offer it. Whoever offers up one qa of his food, may enter the house of Nabu. May they perfectly execute the ordinances of the gods, to the life and health of the prince, my lord.*

– Christopher Johnston, “Assyrian and Babylonian Letters,”  
*Assyrian and Babylonian Literature*



But they could also protect a large marketplace, so that buyers and sellers will return. All these things bring energy to agricultural gods.

Do the returning gods ally themselves with the Council? If they don't mind constant bickering, power-plays, and Marduk's increasingly shrill leadership, those who get in good with him might find themselves in lofty, possibly important positions. However those gods that hate him will hate them, too. Falling in with his detractors risks a trip to the Underworld, but could protect them when the inevitable toppling occurs.

The PC gods could also make friends with the dissidents and their mortal followers. The path to a more spiritually open Iraq is clear, but requires the willingness to make enemies in high places. An important task is to discover how Marduk brought them up from the Underworld, so they can stop him from sending them back down. Another is to find out who is killing them – perhaps the PCs will uncover his identity.

The children need looking after, too. The oldest of the progeny will be turning eight soon, and each year increases the chance of them manifesting their divine nature. A god needs only look at a child to see its divine nature, but whether they are powerless, half divine, or two-thirds divine, like blessed Gilgamesh, is unknown until manifestation.

Above all things: they must find and secure their Tablet of Destiny. This sacred, physical representation of all their proper names is their greatest weakness, and should be treated with the utmost care. Most would have been in their chief temples, long since fallen to ruin and looted, and some may have crumbled into fragments. However, if someone finds even a grain, and knows what it is, that unfortunate god will be at the bearer's mercy.

*Before you came,  
there had been no  
sacrifices for a year.  
Dagon needs her.*

*– Uxía Cambarro,  
in Dagon*

## MEET THE REBORN

Some of the more prominent Mesopotamian deities, and their mortal halves, are listed below, along with what they're currently up to.

### *Ishtar (Haffiz Mohammed el-Badr)*

When el-Badr, well-regarded religious leader, lay dying of cancer, he prayed to Allah for deliverance from pain. He did not imagine that, when his prayers were answered, he'd be cast into the Underworld, and his body turned into a woman. But such is the way of cruel Ishtar, goddess of love, fertility, and war.

She joined the Council to make trouble for Marduk, chiefly because he needed her there. She has also moved herself into several areas of government and commerce, all complementing her less warlike dominions. She's in the Ministry of Health, denying contraception to women, and on the film board, approving "unseemly" Western movies with a minimum of censorship. She also works *against* religious hardliners to guarantee more rights for women, and makes sure Iraq's maternity wards are well-kept, and staffed by competent, well-trained doctors. Perhaps the cruel can be kind when it suits their needs?

El-Badr's lanky, cancer-ravaged frame is now a canvas of desire. Those who view her see the perfect mate for them, no matter what gender, shape, or shade. The only stable features are loving eyes and a cruel smile.

### *Enlil (Munah Salam Bint-Araki)*

When the somewhat-doddering god of the wind and storms came back in early 2003, he accepted Marduk's lies as truth, and promised to be his loyal servant. Then he learned, through a note in Marduk's own handwriting – clearly left by the mortal soul – that his leader had lied about that and many other things. Enlil planned to denounce him, but a terrorist attack destroyed his human body, and he fell back into the Underworld. While there, he felt his Tablet of Destiny shatter, and then he felt nothing at all.

Drifting and mindless, he was barely conscious of anything for years, until something actually called to *him*. A high priestess of Enlil summoned his shade, and willingly bade him enter her body. Once there, he discovered that she and her priesthood had recovered his original Tablet of Destiny, from the time when *he* was the God-King. Reading his many names, Enlil changed into his previous, more powerful self, and swore revenge against scheming Marduk.

Out of respect for Munah, the woman who brought him back, he has not changed her gender or even improved her somewhat dowdy appearance. When he flies through the air and performs miracles before the people, he claims to be doing so in the name of Enlil. He uses illusions and his dominions to speak with his followers as himself, taking the form of a storm cloud in the shape of a man, with darkness for eyes and lightning for a beard.

### *Dagon (Jeremiah D. Happstert)*

Perhaps the most well-travelled of gods, Dagon has been many things to many different civilizations. He's always a god of agriculture – sometimes *the* god – but his ubiquity in the region means he's namedropped in its widely revered holy books. This is good, as he gains power just from being mentioned. It's also bad because he's never sure of his own motives. Much like his appearance as man, fish, or man-fish, whether he's good, evil, or uncaring depends on the day, sometimes the hour.

That's why he took Jeremiah: an overly large, homely British contractor who saw the Iraq War as a chance to fatten his company's coffers. The agricultural giant, Growcraft, came to corner the postwar market on supplies and equipment, but the people already had their own. So Jeremiah hired thugs to sow bioengineered plant diseases in their fields – illnesses that only Growcraft could cure. The thugs wanted more money, but Jeremiah didn't have it, so they shot him with an automatic rifle. Enter Dagon.

Now, Jeremiah seems schizoid. On good days, he sells cheap, untainted fertilizer and seeds to the poor, and tainted goods to overly wealthy agricultural combines. On bad days, he does the reverse. He calls it “crop rotation” and prospers either way.

Dagon refuses to sit at Marduk’s Council, but has no interest in coming out of the god closet, either. He doesn’t need to: So long as there’s a farmer, a field, and the sweet bounty of the earth, ever-mutable Dagon will be venerated, even if not by name.

## *Nabu (Massoud al-Baghdadi)*

It didn’t surprise his colleagues when Nabu, god of knowledge and writing, turned out to have the best grasp on how the modern world worked. The real surprise would have been *how* he knew: Unlike them, he never left the world of the living – prospering under the new religions rather than crumbling. In spite of its antipathy towards his followers, Nabu came to appreciate Islam, with its respect for knowledge, discovery, science, and, above all, literacy.

Thusly empowered, he took on mortal guise and placed himself in Baghdad, quickly becoming an intellectual center. Living, “dying,” and coming back as a son or cousin of his previous identity, he lived in the city throughout its golden age, during the Caliphate. When it was sacked, he helped hide and restore its treasures, and remained a useful, popular scholar throughout the rule of the Ottomans and every power that ruled thereafter. Even Saddam Hussein “spared” his favorite scholar in exchange for finds related to King Nebuchadnezzar.

Nabu felt the war and occupation were no different, but then realized his fellow gods were returning. Knowing that his father was most likely going to seek to rule, he decided to try and stop him from ruining everything. Since then, Nabu has been the sanest and most well-informed voice on the Council, but rapidly tires of “handling” his father’s errors. These include Marduk’s many underhanded perfidies, including Enlil’s murder, but Nabu’s too concerned about who’s killing the dissidents, and why the ghost problems continue, to think of reproaching his father.

“Massoud” is a portly, handsome gentleman of Middle Eastern descent who dresses like a conservative scholar, and keeps a long, well-oiled beard. A brilliant silk scarf sits folded in his shirt pocket; this is his dragon, SIRRUSH, which he can unfurl and fly away on in seconds.

## **ENEMIES OF THE KINGDOM**

Besides the occasional influx of insurgents, hostile hardliners, and flocks of ancient demons, there are some rather unsettling dangers walking the world, along with the gods.

### *The Ghost Storm*

Ever since the most recent war started, Iraq has been infested with ghosts: thousands of displaced, restless spirits who swirl about towns and cities, seeking bodies to possess. They prefer the living, but they’ll take the dead, and once they’re in, they must feed on live human flesh, both for sustenance and to remember who and what they were. This situation is doubly noxious, considering Islamic funeral practices, and how terrifying the Babylonians found ghosts.

It turns out dark Nergal isn’t the only Underworld god with a secret. His dour bride, Ereshkigal, has seen to it that so many souls per day are blocked from entering his domain. Another god – his name unknown, even to her – has stolen her heart, and he craves the fear that their presence causes both mortal and god. So long as this mysterious affair continues, the ghosts will plague the living.

Apart from wearing magical charms to deflect the ghosts’ power, the living have two ways to handle them. The kinder way is to find out their names, and leave them meat and drink to placate them, hoping they will find their way to the Underworld once their faces are recognized and their bellies are full. The other way is to use powerful magic – death or life-based – to blast them apart, either in or out of a vessel. Such magic tends to destroy the undead and seriously wound the living, so a possessed human should really be exorcized instead.

## **Nergal**

Nergal has a secret – one that not even dour Ereshkigal, his mate, knows. No one can leave the Underworld *without* his express permission, even if they’ve bargained with a soul. Yet Nergal had no idea Marduk was missing, and a soldier asleep in his place, until well after that god’s escape.

How was this possible? Nergal suspected that either Marduk had learned some great and secret spell, or else the he, Lord of the Dead, was losing his power. Neither of these options boded well.

To test the theory, Nergal allowed the other gods to wake up just enough to copy Marduk’s escape. They all made the same bargain, but he retained veto power over all of them. This meant either Marduk had a spell that Nergal knew nothing of – he *was* the god of magic, after all – or someone was helping him from outside.

Nergal decided to allow the gods leave, figuring that the truth would be exposed by their divine interactions. He didn’t expect Marduk to shamelessly lie about being responsible for their escape, but declined to correct him. Now that dissident gods are trying to find out what spell he used, Nergal expects an answer will soon appear. If it doesn’t, he plans to eventually reveal his hand to some less powerful gods, and blackmail them into teaching Marduk a lesson.

A permanent lesson, perhaps involving that god’s Tablet of Destiny and a very large and strong hammer.

Nergal appears as one might expect a Lord of the Dead to: big, mean, and wrapped in shadows. He carries a heavy, black mace with the head shaped like a lion, and is fond of turning into a large, black lion as he prowls the length of the Big Land, looking for subjects trying to escape, or fools trying to enter.

### *The Scorpion Men*

Massively powerful servitor creatures, the half-man, half-scorpion warriors were once knights of the cities and trusted guards for the Sun God. Unfortunately, when the gods fell into the Underworld, their former servants were left behind. Those years were not kind, and, over time, as they sold themselves to new masters, and became less of what they once were, they came to curse the gods for abandoning them.

Now the gods are back, and the Scorpion Men will have their revenge. Disguised by powerful magic, the warriors stalk and kill those gods who seek congress with mortals. This is mostly out of jealousy, for the Scorpion Men are barren creatures, but by leaving Council gods alone, they drive a stake of suspicion between the two factions.

Scorpion Men appear as muscular male humans with the lower bodies and long, poisonous stingers of desert scorpions. They can grow up to 10 times the size of a man, shrink down to “normal” size, and fold their many legs and tail into two legs, so as to walk among mortals. Their stingers can kill a god, yet leave no wound or trace of poison behind.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

By day an unassuming bookstore clerk, J. Edward Tremlett takes his ancient keyboard from its hiding place and unfurls his words upon the world. His bizarre lifestyle has taken him to such exotic locales as South Korea and Dubai, UAE. He is a frequent contributor to *Pyramid*, has been the editor of *The Wraith Project*, and has seen print in *The End Is Nigh* and *Worlds of Cthulhu*. He's also part of the *Echoes of Terror* anthology. Currently, he writes for Op-Ed News, and lives in Lansing, Michigan, with his wife and three cats.

## The Law of the Divine

Much like their Egyptian counterparts, the gods of Mesopotamia walk the line between what they were, and what they are. They are immortal but not invulnerable; powerful but not all-powerful; far-seeing but not omniscient. They have access to amazing magic and divine abilities, but can still be brought low by too much damage, certain magic, or mortal will.

The Mesopotamian gods do not have the same level of “staying power” as the Egyptian deities do. Once a soul is in Nergal's domain, he can only fully leave if another takes his place. All tenants of the Big Land can temporarily escape as unseen, intangible, and mostly powerless spirits, but that's as much leeway as the God of Death is willing to give.

To fully escape the Underworld, a god must make a spiritual bargain with another, conscious soul to swap places. The other need not know all details – if they'll do “anything” to get out of death, it's enough. The bargain creates a connection between the two souls, the spirit comes up, and the other soul takes its place.

The gods regain their magic, immortality, and divine power, but do not gain the knowledge of their borrowed bodies. They can wake up the sleeping souls to answer questions, or help perform unfamiliar tasks. But whenever a god does this, he risks the soul retaking the body. The soul can also try if the god's severely weak, or badly damaged.

The soul's initial “escape” might be brief – just enough time to do or say one thing. However, every time the captive soul succeeds, a chance occurs to be free for even longer, maybe permanently. It depends on how strong the minds of the human and the god are, and what advantages and schemes each can bring to bear.

Once in flesh, the gods wholly own it. So long as they have power, they can change it, heal it, and keep it from aging. If the body is harmed beyond their power to heal, the bargain ends, the god falls back to the Underworld, and the soul goes to its proper rest. The god may be so badly damaged or weakened by the body's demise that he'll fall asleep. Waking up from such trauma could take months, years, or possibly centuries.

The bargain has a drawback: Once in flesh, the gods are trapped within it. They can no longer walk the land in spirit, or inhabit their consecrated statues or well-kept

temples. Likewise, summoning them is no longer the great and portentous affair it once was; the god hears the call, but must physically travel there.

Certain spells allow the gods to travel in spirit, but there's a danger of the body's soul – or another ghost – repossessing the body while they're gone. Such trauma would hurl the god back to the Underworld, there to sleep for quite some time. Wise gods leave their bodies protected by many spells when they do this.

All gods have at least one thing that they are god of: their dominions. They gain power from these things, can use magic based on them, and can use them to sense the world around them. They must tend these things as a farmer does his fields; when they prosper, so do their gods, but when they falter, the gods are deprived of power.

For example, Utu is the god of the sun, lawgiving, and fertility. So long as they are unimpeded, he is well-stocked with energy. His magic is based on heat and light, justice, and the giving of life. He can see anything the sun can see, or that is within range of a court of law or a fertile field. If other gods who share his dominions are using them, he knows it, though not why or how.

Like their Egyptian cousins, the gods' true names are immensely important. However, where the True Names of the Egyptians were singular, the Mesopotamians have *dozens* of names, all of which would have to be known for anyone, god or man, to truly command them. These were written on special Tablets of Destiny, and hidden in each god's chief temple, never to be shown to anyone. Most of the names have been lost to the ages, and not even the gods remember all their names, but to knowingly hold even a sliver of another's Tablet of Destiny is to have illimitable power over that god. To purposefully destroy it is to cast that god down into spiritual destruction that only millenia in the Underworld could repair.

Unlike their Egyptian counterparts, the Mesopotamian gods are not overly affected by the presence or aspects of any Abrahamic religion, *including* Islam. They can walk into mosques and Islamic graveyards without fear, and pretend to worship and pray without being struck down. Why they enjoy this freedom is unknown.



# ART OF PROPHECY

BY MEGAN McDONALD

A prophecy is a prediction, divine or otherwise. While real predictions rarely come true, fictional foretellings are another matter. Indeed, a prophecy in fiction that doesn't have some truth can be very unsatisfying. That doesn't mean that the GM has to give the plot away or railroad the players toward a particular end. The key elements of a prediction are what it says, what it means, what it does, and who does the prophesying. Using these elements correctly will allow the GM to provide prophecies that don't lay out the entire course of the campaign in advance, but that are still relevant to the adventure and its outcome.

## WHAT THE PROPHECY SAYS AND WHAT IT MEANS

The exact wording of the soothsaying, and what those words mean, are two different things. The more specific a prophecy is, the harder it is to implement without spoiling the climax or making the protagonists feel as if they must work toward a particular end. If the foretelling reveals exactly how and when the villain will die, for example, the adventurers may feel as if their actions have no effect on the story, and they could purposefully try to avoid making the prediction come true.

A prophecy that says that a group of heroes will be the end of the villain, however, only states the obvious in a roleplaying game. The group will most likely be the reason the villain fails, either because they kill him or because they thwart his evil plans. That's the way the game is set up. A forecast that only tells you what you already know is unsatisfying.

Soothsaying should be vague enough to have multiple interpretations, but specific enough to make the participants feel as if they have some meaning and can impact the story. Words or phrases that can have several meanings are the key. Instead of saying, "The heroes will kill the villain," declare, "The heroes will be the cause of the villain's downfall." This allows the players to determine how their characters will stop the villain without being told what to do.

Employ imprecise descriptions of places. For example, don't say that the villain "will die in his castle," but that he "will meet his end in the place he feels safest." This gives the GM an out should the group not kill the villain in his castle like he thought they would. Instead, the final showdown could occur at his childhood home, a secluded glade, or his basement laboratory, allowing the prophecy to still be true, even if it isn't true the way the GM imagined it would be.

Don't put events on a timetable. Avoid a prophecy that must take place at a specific time, unless part of the plan is use the prediction to force everyone to be in a certain location when the plot needs them there. Rather, word the soothsaying in such a way that the time-telling devices are vague and may refer to something else entirely. Instead of saying the villain "will die when the clock strikes one," say that "a single stroke will mark his end." That way, he can die at one o'clock, or die by a single sword swing. It can even mean the villain sealed his fate when he signed his name to a particular document.

Likewise, rather than suggesting something will happen "when the moon is full," say it will happen "when the silver disc shines most bright." Not only does it sound more flowery – and prophecies are usually flowery – it can refer to the moon or a literal silver disc. If the heroes didn't wait for a full moon before making their move, the GM can still make the prediction true by adding appropriate descriptions to events that do happen. A mirror lighting up because it was hit by stray magic, a well-timed sunbeam or headlight that reflects off the villain's brooch, or the villain tossing a silver dollar and watching it catch the light: all of these scenarios fulfill the terms of the prophecy and have nothing to do with the phases of the moon. Seeing something that looks like the foretold event will give the adventurers a clue that now is the time to strike.

## WHO GIVES THE PROPHECY

Who offers the prediction is as important as what it says. If the GM wants the players to act on the information he gives them, their characters need reasons to believe it came from a trustworthy source, or they won't take it seriously. If the prophecy is divine in origin, the god has to be one that the adventurers are likely to believe in. In a fantasy setting, where the gods exist without question, this is less important. Any god can give a prophecy that could affect the group, and the setting provides the reasons that they may believe a foretelling given by a god they don't necessarily support.

In a world where the gods may or may not exist, this issue becomes more complicated. A prophecy from a god the heroes don't believe in is less likely to be something they will take seriously. Of course, additional story ideas and plot complications exist in that situation.

If the cosmology of the story requires that one or more gods be real, whether the group believes in their existence, then a prophecy from one of them that comes true can be a way to illustrate the god's (or gods') existence in the setting.

If the gods don't exist, a prophecy that doesn't come true can similarly help prove that fact.

Gods don't always talk directly to mortals, especially non-clerical ones, and not all prophecies are divine in origin. Prophecies that come from mere mortals can have all sorts of sources or inspiration: a connection to demons or a higher plane, the ability to see in more than three dimensions, or an mind that can process data faster than most. As with divine prophecy, the secular prophet needs to be someone the group will trust or at least listen to. They don't have to believe it will come true, though, for it to make a difference in the adventure.

## Other Tips

*Say it in verse.* It's a silly gimmick, but providing a prophecy in verse gives it an air of authenticity. It also makes it easier to remember, which can be of great value to the GM and the players several sessions later when the prediction comes up again and no one thought to write it down.

*Do it live.* When the GM doesn't have an ending in mind, and he wants the story to progress organically, he can use a divination method at the table, and have an NPC prophet do a reading in-game. Fortunetelling devices produce results vague enough that they can be interpreted then or later rather freely. The human mind will search for patterns, even where none exist, so give a set of predictions early on and then let the adventure progress. The players will furnish ample inspiration for story development as they strive to make the prophecy fit the events that transpire. This works best with devices like tarot cards or bones. It's probably not a good idea to disembowel a dove at the table to do some impromptu haruspicy.

*Use backstories.* If the players have supplied any character history or biographical information, the GM can use it in your prophecies. Instead of someone foretelling the coming of a generic hero, have him be specific about the hero's origin. A man born in the wilds, an orphan raised by the church, a widow who lost her husband in an accident: using the specifics about the adventurers can provide a reason to believe they are the heroes foretold in legend.

*Give them nightmares.* The most common place in a game to find a prophecy is in a dream. Unlike in the real world, if a person has a dream in a game, the player knows it means something. This is a way for the GM to dispense clues, tell the group what the bad guys are up to, or plant seeds for future adventures. Keep in mind, though, that information the GM specifies came in a dream will be remembered, analyzed, reanalyzed, and dissected; the GM should make sure it's something relevant and really what he wants the heroes to know. A red herring in a dream can send the group off on tangents that obliterate the planned plot. Of course, the GM could turn those red herrings into clever plot clues.

## ARCHETYPAL PROPHETS

*The Bard:* Poets make great prophets. Maybe their abilities put them in touch with higher powers or maybe the act of writing itself puts them in a state that allows them to perceive or process more information. Poets and bards can have divine

gifts, or may use chemical stimuli to put them in the proper mindset for prophecy. Poet-prophets can be used in any setting: a bard in a medieval village, a fool who works in the king's castle, an opium-addled Victorian, a modern poet or musician who uses automatic writing techniques, a rockstar who uses sex, drugs, and/or rock and roll. Whoever it is, he can deliver messages directly to the group, or the party may stumble upon the bard's works in another context and recognize the true message in his songs or poems.

*The Street-Corner Preacher:* It doesn't matter what religion, if any, the street corner preacher espouses. He delivers predictions about the future – based on visions, prayers, or careful readings of divine texts – to all and sundry, and never charges for the information he disseminates. The street-corner preacher may address the heroes directly, or they may overhear a prediction intended for another recipient. Whether loud and pushy or mild yet determined, most people ignore him.

*The Oracle:* Ancient peoples went to temples designed specifically for the purposes of receiving helpful advice or information about what course of action they should take or what events may unfold in the future. The oracle is usually female and works out of a temple or office; she might be a priestess, an old woman, or even an alien. Oracles have the distinction of being professionals in the field, and the populace generally believes their words. They may charge a fee, or require some strange sacrifice or ritual be performed, to access their powers; this can set up another adventure.

*The Cleric:* Some clerics believe they speak directly to a god, and that that god gives them generalities about future events. Clerics may receive this information through prayer or other church-sanctioned techniques, such as augury. Clerics deal exclusively with divine prophecy, claiming their knowledge comes directly from their deity. They usually predict large-scale events that have religious import. This includes things like the coming of a messiah or anti-messiah and the end of the world. Clerics are different from street preachers in that a church sanctions their work. Because of this, people who follow the same god are more likely to believe that the information the cleric delivers is true. The group may run into a cleric prophet in a king's court, in a local temple or church, or while the cleric is out doing missionary work.

*The Blind Man:* When someone loses the ability to see, his other senses may become enhanced to make up for the lack of sensory input. In fantastical settings, this often includes the ability to "see" the future. The prophet's blindness may be directly related to his new gifts, or may be coincidental, but the trope of the blind man who sees what others can't is common in literature. The blind prophet usually also falls into one of the other categories, such as bard, oracle, or preacher. Wherever or however the blind man receives his otherworldly information, the adventurers may seek him out, based on rumors or legends, or may run into him while doing other things.

*The Cursed:* Sometimes prophecy isn't a gift, but a curse. If a person has offended the gods in some way, it's possible that those gods will punish the transgressor with the ability to see the future. In some cases, such as Cassandra's, the curse was two-fold. She was cursed with not only always getting true visions or information, but also that she would never be believed. This type of prophet doesn't typically embrace the art, and may even actively try to suppress or ignore it.



Players may come in contact with a cursed prophet in any time period or game setting, but they may have to convince him to share what he knows.

*The Lunatic:* Committed to an asylum or wandering the streets, the lunatic spouts nonsense that most other people ignore. Still, sometimes more can be found in his ramblings than simple madness. A lunatic prophet may make predictions about global events or a smaller matter, depending on the needs of the story. The party is likely to encounter lunatic prophets while on other business, maybe in a local tavern, in the park, in a government facility, or hanging around a crime scene.

*The Fortuneteller:* A prophet by profession, the fortuneteller uses a tool of some kind – tarot, I-Ching, augury, magic, psychic powers, physical aspects (such as a palm) of the petitioner, etc. – to see what events will affect the petitioner. Fortunetellers rarely work for free, and usually predict a person's future, not the fate of the world. Someone may approach the fortuneteller because of his involvement in another quest, only to have him deliver a prediction that may relate to the reason that brought the person to the soothsayer. Alternately, the group could come across a fortuneteller at a carnival, fair, or other event. Witches also fall into this category.

*The Scholar:* Sometimes, studying ancient texts or vast data collections can give the reader new insight into future events. Scholar-prophets have complete faith in their work, not because of a connection to the divine, but because of their trust in logic and science. Scholar-prophets fit well in a modern or futuristic game setting, because they can use scientific data to predict natural or artificial phenomena, such as earthquakes, volcano eruptions, market crashes, or a new ice age. The scholar-prophet delivers predictions about large-scale events, though not necessarily global ones. He might be believed by a small group of dedicated followers, such as his students or colleagues, but he is often derided by the Powers That Be as an alarmist or attention-seeker. It may be up to the adventurers to use the information the scholar-prophet has gleaned to prevent disasters against the wishes of important people or organizations, or help the prophet prove his predictions to people who can do something about it.

*The Time Traveler:* It may seem like cheating if you've already been there, but the time traveler is a prophet, too, in many ways. His knowledge comes from direct experience, though people in the current time rarely find that argument very convincing. As such, a time traveler is rarely believed by the general public, but he doesn't have to convince everyone. Getting just one important person to trust the information can be enough, especially if that person is one of the heroes. The time traveler's advice may be about stopping some future catastrophe, or ensuring that certain events take place. Either way, he can enlist the aid of the party to help make the future a better place.

*Inanimate Prophets:* When the GM doesn't want to insert an NPC into the story, he can rely on a fortunetelling machine or toy that delivers eerily prescient advice or predictions. This includes fortunetelling arcade machines, Magic 8 Balls, and fortune cookies. The prognostication may also appear in text, instead of being delivered verbally. An ancient book of prophecy, scribbles on a cell wall, notes left in an important tome, artworks that depict some future event: any of these things permits the GM to offer an omen without the group meeting the person who did the prophesying.

## WHAT THE PROPHECY DOES

True or not, the very existence of a prediction can affect the people who know about it. If a prophet tells a king that his oldest son will never succeed him, that king might take steps to better educate and prepare his other children for the role, "just in case." It doesn't matter if the prophecy is true or whether the king believes it; its existence can still affect his decisions. Likewise, a general told that attacking on a Monday morning will result in disaster may decide to postpone military action for the same reason. Better safe than sorry is a common reaction to superstitions and prophecies.

Indeed, the very existence of a foretelling may cause it to come true. When people (PCs or NPCs) are told that something will happen and that they will be involved, they will probably engage in activities that make them relevant to the situation and that can make it come true. The GM can use this as a subtle way to push the party in a direction of his choosing, even if he doesn't intend for the prophecy to be true.

## NOT JUST FOR PCs

Another way to use prophecy while still avoiding railroad-ing the players is to create a prediction that is about the NPCs. For example, if the villain received a soothsaying indicating that a red-headed child would be the cause of his failure, he may set about eliminating all the gingers he can find. If a king is told that he cannot be killed but by his own hand, he may start taking ridiculous risks or provoke a few wars. This kind of prophecy works to give the NPCs motivation for their actions other than just "because the story needs them to" or "because they're bad guys." It can also inspire some pretty cinematic actions, like forcing the king to stab himself or convincing someone to dye his hair, only to have an epic reveal later.

Giving the group a prophecy about how they will encounter a villain with specific traits is another way to use the device. The parts of the foretelling that relate to the villain can be very specific because the GM knows exactly what the villain will look like, what his story is, and how he will make his entrance. This can provide clues as to who the villain is, if it isn't obvious. It also allows the GM to offer a detailed prophecy without dictating the course of the story. So, tell them that a man who was once an angel but is now a devil – literally or metaphorically – will be the cause of their misfortune and then make it so by introducing him as he is and later revealing what he was. This can give the protagonists (and their players) that epiphany moment that is so satisfying in a mystery when they finally learn the truth about the guy's past at just the right moment.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Megan McDonald has been writing professionally since 2006, specializing in gaming, crafting, and cooking. Megan runs games at conventions and for friends, and has been playing roleplaying games (computer, tabletop, and play-by-email) for 15 years. Her life goals include being the first person to win a Pulitzer Prize for a video-game tie-in novel, and playing the voice of the computer in a movie, television show, or video game.

# RANDOM THOUGHT TABLE

## MYTHING AROUND

BY STEVEN MARSH, *PYRAMID* EDITOR

I recall *Deities & Demigods* being the third *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* item I ever owned after I started weaning myself off (what I felt to be) the more “basic” *Dungeons & Dragons* boxed sets. Being a preteen with limited outlets, my attraction to the hardcover version of a game I loved (yet did not understand) was in ramping up the power to ludicrous levels. (See the boxed text on p. 37 for more insights into madness.) And what’s more ludicrously powerful than game stats for gods?

I’m not proud of the prepubescent era of my gaming history, but I still find it fascinating to revisit, trying to re-create the appeal in my mind. I’m flipping through my dog-eared copy of *Deities & Demigods*, and I feel myself literally salivating at the ideas herein. As one example, I’m about to post a sentence taken by pointing a finger at a random page. It’s about the legendary phoenix of Egyptian lore – and it’s so interesting, I think it warrants its own section.

### *Myth: Busted!*

#### RANDOM INSPIRATION

*The phoenix was said to exist and be watching at the time of the creation of the universe, and it stands for everlasting life beyond even the power of gods to attain.*

– *Deities & Demigods*

I know my phoenixes, and on the surface there isn’t anything there too earth-shattering in that sentence. However, let’s look at that through the power of myth.

• It’s said to exist and *be watching* at the beginning of time. If you’re scientific-minded and have an appreciation for the Big Bang, you can probably wrap your mind around some primal explosive force at the beginning of time. Now, give that force an eyeball.

• There’s nothing in the above description about the phoenix having taken an active part in the universe’s creation. In other words, take the eyeball-possessing Big Bang force we posited in the previous paragraph, and then give it a bowl of popcorn to munch while it watches what’s going on, since it’s not actually *doing* anything.

• The phoenix stands for everlasting life beyond even the power of the gods. In other words, in the Egyptian pantheon, you have some deities looking sheepishly at the floor and saying something like, “Well, when you call us ‘all-knowing,’ there’s actually an important footnote there . . .”

So, let’s put it all together. In this mythos, you have your all-powerful gods at the top. Then you have the phoenix, which *isn’t* a god, who has a huge bit of the puzzle as part of its very being. Oh, and this bird-who-knows-things-gods-don’t was there at the beginning of time, and it was sitting on the sidelines.

And all that is from one sentence about one entity from one pantheon in one supplement about one game. This is all to say, myths are powerful . . . in a way that’s not immediately obvious.

#### THE WAY MYTHS ARE POWERFUL THAT ISN’T IMMEDIATELY OBVIOUS

You’ll note that I managed to get an entire section out of turning a critical eye to just one sentence. This is because, in many ways, mythology is fractal. In other words, the closer you zoom in on specific, broad-seeming elements, the more you realize that there are additional elements that can be examined, expanded on, considered, or combined with other elements.

This is because myths are – at their core – stories about entities who are (generally) people. It is a fact of human existence that there is more information to be gleaned about nearly any one topic than can be absorbed in one lifetime – and almost all of us have multiple topics vying for our attention.

As a brief aside, I caught our five-year-old son practicing his sulking in the hallway yesterday, when he thought I wasn’t looking: the exaggerated sighs, the slumped shoulders, the way he was trying to figure out where his arms should go, and so on.



It was a cute moment, and I was sure to post it on my Twitter feed. However, it isn't an anecdote that would make it into any biography of him, or be considered a "pivotal" moment.

In the same way, we can zoom in our view of each element of mythology to as fine a detail as we desire, filling in, expanding, and extrapolating as we like.

## A HEADY EXAMPLE

This is all pretty heady stuff, so let's build an example. The Lernaean Hydra in Greek mythology pretty much exists as something for Heracles to kill. Its shtick is that its serpentine heads grow back – each decapitation results in two heads regenerating. It's reasonable to assume that the Hydra had something approaching "childhood," that it killed many not-good-enough heroes before encountering Heracles, and so on. Any aspect of that would be great material for gaming interpolation. For now, though, we'll just keep in mind the Hydra's known abilities.

The snake-haired Medusa is another mythological entity who exists solely to serve as a punchline to a "look how cool I am!" story – in this case, for Perseus to behead her.

Moving tangentially for a moment: One neat trick they like to do with powerful telescopes is to zoom in on one hair follicle. Let's try that now – only we'll use a hair of *Medusa*.

According to legend, Medusa had her hair turned into snakes. However, they were still obviously attached to her head, and the serpentine mass was still functional in the role of hair – albeit funky hair. One thing our mortal heads do is shed hair. Is it reasonable to assume that Medusa could shed her "hair"? If we presume that hair (which is dead tissue) was converted to living snakes, then it isn't much of a stretch to assume that any "shed hairs" are actually fully living snakes. (It's not like these "loose hairs" would bother Medusa any more than we're attacked by our own freed follicles.)

Now, let's expand our understanding of the Medusa. We know she can turn people to stone with her head. We know that the only thing that's different about her head is that there are snakes where there ought to be hair. Let's make

the logical conclusion and decide that it's the *mass of snakes* that petrifies people.

This fact isn't immediately applicable; we've only posited the existence of loose strand-snakes skittering around. Surely one strand of "hair" isn't enough to petrify someone, right? Here's where our fractal viewing comes in handy again. A bit more poking on Wikipedia reveals that – depending on who you listen to – there's a direct relationship path between Medusa and the Lernaean Hydra. Let's run with that.

So, we have a familial path between something with a head of serpents and something else with a mass of serpent heads. The thing that's a mass of serpent heads has a trick that it grows back two for everyone struck down. We've postulated it's the mass of snakes that gives Medusa her petrifying powers, and we've established the possibility of loose strand snake-hairs.

I'm sure most of you know where I'm going with this, but just to be sure . . .

In an otherwise ordinary dungeon room, the heroes encounter a snake, which attacks them. Someone cuts the snake in half – and each half grows into a new snake. As the heroes attempt to defend themselves, they find the damage they inflict on the snakes merely results in more snakes. And as the number of snakes increases, the heroes start feeling their limbs turning less responsive and more petrified . . .

## GOING FRACTAL

The infinitely zoomable nature of myths means that they can retain power even greatly removed, which is advantageous to the GM and players.

From the GM's point of view, going fractal means that it's possible to come up with a never-ending array of adventure and encounter possibilities. Look at each deity and his accoutrements. What facts present themselves? What facts are plausible by looking at what's unsaid? What holes can be filled in ways that suggest adventures and encounters?

From the players' perspectives, the fractal nature of myths means that encounters feel more real and "organic." Heroes who face the Medusa/Hydra snake encounter will quickly realize what they're up against – and, since it only combines elements they know exist already (regeneration, petrification, snakes), it should seem devoid of arbitrariness and feel very "natural" . . . even when dealing with unnatural elements!

Even though bygone myths are no longer active parts of our day-to-day experience, the millennia-old stories that form their foundations are still powerful today. It's inspiring for the GM to tap into that power; it's rewarding for players to encounter something with a known heritage, and it's enriching to the game to return to these ancient stories. Succumb to myth adventure!

## ABOUT THE EDITOR

Steven Marsh is a freelance writer and editor. He has contributed to roleplaying game releases from Green Ronin, West End Games, White Wolf, Hogshead Publishing, and others. He has been editing *Pyramid* for over 10 years; during that time, he has won four Origins awards. He lives in Indiana with his wife, Nikola Vrtis, and their son.

## Random Thoughts About Early Books

I opened this column with the revelation that *Deities & Demigods* was the third *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* item I ever owned. So what were the other two?

The first item was the high-powered adventure *Q1: Queen of the Demonweb Pits*. Having no other experience beyond basic boxed-set material, I assure you that this was nigh-incomprehensible to me as a child. While my peers were sneaking swigs of their parents' booze or licking strange toads, I had my mind blown by a metaphorical shotgun loaded with random crazy ideas. "Hey, kid! You like dungeons with bugbears and orcs? Well, here's an adventure with multiple planes of existence, half-naked evil psionic gelatinous women, and a GIANT STEAM-POWERED SPIDER SPACESHIP!"

The second item was the *Player's Handbook*, which I bought in a desperate attempt to comprehend *Queen of the Demonweb Pits*.

And, as mentioned, the third was *Deities & Demigods*.

I really, really do not recommend this as a logical progression.

# ODDS AND ENDS

## HOW TO GET MYTH ADVENTURE

We've discussed elsewhere the advantages of "zooming in close" on a mythological idea to mine it for adventure potential (see pp. 36-37). Here are some specific areas to examine for inspiration.

### Time

Every mythological story deals with a specific moment in time. Questions of what happened before and after are hardly ever considered. When looking at an interesting story, ask what happened *before* or *after* that event.

*Example:* Polyphemus is the Cyclops blinded by Odysseus in Homer's *Odyssey*. What if the heroes encounter him sometime after that blinding? Polyphemus might be an oracle, a sightless criminal mastermind, a humbled diplomat, or something else. In this example, the heroes (and players) will have claim to something not even Odysseus possesses: knowledge of how Polyphemus' story turns out.

### Parts of the Whole

Any object is comprised of parts. (So are *people* – see the Medusa on p. 37!) Look at any item, and decide what parts it's composed of, or where its elements could have come from. Try to figure out what properties those elements might have on their own.

*Example:* The Arthurian sword in the stone (which may or may not be Excalibur) is a sign of sovereignty: whoever can pull the sword from the stone is the true king. Since many people want to be king but can't, and since we as humans generally know how to deal with stones, it could stand to reason that the stone is indestructible in some way. (Otherwise, some unscrupulous cad could chisel his way to the throne.) Regardless of the era, postulating the existence of a hunk of indestructible rock opens up all kinds of adventure possibilities . . . even if it has a sword sticking out of it!

### Forgotten Pieces

Similar to the two preceding ideas, often pieces of legends are known but simply forgotten. With a critical eye on the elements of a story, ask, "Whatever happened to that person/place/thing?"

*Example:* In *Genesis 31*, Rachel stole her father's household idols when she left with her husband.

The father – Laban – chased down the travelers, searching all their possessions. During this investigation, Rachel hid them under her seat, then claimed to be during her monthly cycle so she wouldn't be searched. The father never discovers the location of his household gods and leaves empty-handed (after the husband unwittingly asks the heavens to take the life of whomever stole them). Scripture doesn't say what happened to those idols after that. What became of them and what powers they held could form the basis of a memorable adventure.

## MURPHY'S RULES

BY GREG HYLAND





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