

a dozen TROUBLING RUMORS

BY PHILIP REED

As the gamemaster, you're very much aware that there is no such thing as too many ideas. Week after week, session after session, it falls on you to keep the campaign moving forward and adventure flowing. The players are in need of action, and it is your duty to provide it.

For that reason, I have created the dozen rumors that follow. None of these are complete adventures or encounters, but each will give you the spark of inspiration that you need to keep your creative engine running and the game moving.

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anatomy of a RUMOR

1. A title, to help set the mood.
2. Flavor text appears in italics. You may use this text as read aloud text, or you may prefer to use it as inspiration and reword the flavor text in your own language.
3. Each rumor includes an overview of the general idea to get your creative muscles humming. Adapt as you see fit!
4. There are true and false options for each of the rumors, providing you with some ideas on how the rumors might play out. Whether or not a rumor is true or false is your call.
5. Each rumor includes an illustration to help spark your imagination as you think through how to best use the rumor in your campaign.

a cosmic HORROR IN THE SEWERS

"They've pulled four bodies from the sewer this week alone, each one sucked dry of all blood and parts of the arms and legs eaten off my some horrible beast. I was there when they pulled the most recent body, a dwarf who was missing one arm and half a leg, and in all my years working the sewers, I've never seen anything this gruesome and wicked."

Kalyan Bade, rat catcher and sewer sweeper, is eating his noonday meal near the city gate, sitting with a few guards and a traveler outside in the sun. The group of men have been telling stories while the PCs have been answering the guards' questions – the stranger is grilled when they pass through the gates – the adventurers are no doubt anxious to get past the guards and approach the man to ask for more information about the bodies that were found in the city sewers.

"The bodies were blocking the flow, clogging up the pipes and we had no choice but to yank them out. If it were up to me, we wouldn't set foot in those sewers again. I've run into some nasty stuff down there over the years – giant spiders, ratfolk, even a thief from time to time – but I've never heard of anything so large that it could inflict that much damage to a man."

For a few gold, Bade promises to leave one of the out-of-the-way grates to the sewers open later that day. Of course the PCs want to enter the sewers and search for a terrible monster to kill.

True. Select an unusual, uncommon planar creature from your most obscure game supplement and drop it into the city sewers. An evil mage summons the beast and set it loose in the sewers as a way to get back at the city for turning him away several weeks ago.

False. There is something in the sewers, but it isn't an otherworldly beast. A troll is loose in the sewers and has been living off of whatever it can find, mostly the flesh of those foolish enough to explore the tunnels.



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USING THE RUMORS

The dozen rumors detailed on the following pages are first and foremost meant to get your imagination running. As the gamemaster, you're constantly under pressure to devise scenes and stories and to keep the action flowing, always entertaining the players and as much a playwright as you are a movie director.

Atmosphere. The rumor isn't intended to do anything more than add some depth to the campaign setting. You never intend for the players to act on the rumor; it is merely being used to make the campaign feel like there's more going on outside of the player characters' sphere of influence.

Breadcrumbs. Perhaps you're building to something, an encounter against a rival or a larger in-world event

that will shake the player characters and the NPCs. When used in this way, the rumors are leading to an adventure of your own design that, in some way or other, incorporates the rumors in such a way that the players get the feeling you've mapped things out in advance.

Adventure Seed. If you're feeling especially inspired and creative, you can select any rumor and expand it out into a full adventure. In the sample rumor, above, the party is promised an epic battle if they set out to engage the ogres, trolls, and orcs that are approaching the city. Expanding this rumor into an adventure will require you to map the surrounding area, provide statistics for the monsters, and perhaps toss in a few allies – other adventurers, city guards, thrillseekers – who join the party in seeking out and attacking the army.

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SKELETONS SCREAM



"The screams were unbearable. Piercing. Nightmarish. I thought that they would never end and no amount of cotton stuffed in the ears deadened the sounds. It was almost as if the screams were a magical assault on my senses and I was powerless to avoid the noise."

Denis Railean – a common chandler specializing in candles, soap, and other household items – is telling his friends at the Roasted Turnip inn about one night last week when something prevented his rest. The PCs, always in search of adventure, can't help but overhear the man's tale and ask to hear more.

Railean, for a price so low as a mug of ale, is open with his story and tells the adventurers of how a group of skeletons kept him from sleeping late one night. Railean lives on the outskirts of the city, on the wrong side of the wall, and this wasn't the first time that skeletons have disrupted his sleep.

"I'll show you the place, yes," Railean says if the PCs ask to see his home and the sight of the incident. The man lives in a single-story cottage with his cat; no one else lives there. Looking closely at the ground near the home, the PCs find evidence of several booted men trampling the weeds and grass as recently as a week ago. The trail leads off to the road where it is quickly lost in the tracks of hundreds of travelers.

True. Railean recently took a small ring as payment for some goods. Unfortunately for the man, the ring once belonged to a nobleman who – ever since his death – has followed the aura of the ring. The nobleman has been dead for decades and, over the years, has collected a following. In total there are 2d4 skeletons seeking the ring. The item is not magical, but it is important to the deceased nobleman. The creature won't stop searching until it reclaims the ring.

False. Railean's sleep was disrupted by neighborhood children. If caught, the kids admit that they were only trying to scare the man.

SONG OF THE HARPY

"Fear the song of the harpy, folks, because if you hear the harpy sing, it will be the last thing you hear before your death. I've not tangled with these wretched beasts, but I've met many an adventurer who tells of narrowly escaping death at the claws and teeth of these beautiful – yet grotesque – monsters."

A traveling storyteller is seated at the tavern's bar, talking loudly enough that everyone in the place turns to see what this stranger has to say. The bard, an elf, is dressed in gold and purple clothes, a chain shirt visible beneath the fabric of his tunic. The man asks the tavern keeper for another drink and then turns around, casually making sure that everyone in the place has their attention on him.

"The harpy isn't to be trusted," he says now that he is certain that most in the tavern are paying attention. "These creatures will sometimes wrap themselves in cloaks and robes, seeking to pass themselves off as beautiful human females so that they can lure men to their doom."

"What is worse than the fact that the harpy exists, though, has to be that one of these beasts has moved into this very city and may be waiting to strike." He looks across the room, takes a drink, and then states calmly: "any man here could fall to the monster's touch this very night. Unless you have protection from the song of the harpy."

The man goes on to tell the room that he possesses a potion that, if swallowed, will provide permanent protection against a harpy's song. For only a handful of gold, he will sell the potion so that you may be safe from the monster that even now may be listening. He says he has enough for all; no pushing.

True. The man, Braern Daeris, is a bard and it is true that he has learned of a harpy in the city. What is not true is that a potion of protection against the harpy's song exists . . . or that he has it. What the man has is a bitter drink that he is passing off as a magical potion. His goal is to sell what he can and escape the city tonight, before any find out his potion is useless.

False. The man is lying about everything. There is no harpy in the city and his potion does not work.



THE ENCHANTED SWORD AND THE BARGAIN

"She said her name is Jaimini Gogoi and that she is in search of jewels to feed her sword. I'd never heard of such insane nonsense, so I told her to get lost or I would call the guards."

While shopping for supplies in the city market, the PCs overhear a merchant telling a friend about a strange woman who was in the shop earlier that day.

"I never saw the sword, but she said it was a flaming weapon capable of inflicting great punishment on evil. All I wanted was for her to leave; I was close to yelling for the guards when she bowed, thanked me for her time, and set off to the north."

The shopkeep, if asked by the adventurers, describes the woman as tall, sand-skinned, and wearing red and brown robes over a flame-colored dress. He knows nothing except that she went to the north. "I assume," he says, "that she is hitting up other dealers since she said she needed jewels."

If they set off after the woman, the PCs find that in shop after appropriate shop, the merchants tell the same tale: a strange woman talking of a magic sword was in search of jewels. Every one of them turned her away.

True. Jaimini Gogoi owns a magical sword that can only be recharged by grinding up jewels and gems and sprinkling the dust over the blade. She is running low on fuel for the weapon and is looking to buy the necessary jewels and gems. She is a good and honest person and will not resort to stealing what she needs.

False. The woman was there, certainly, but she is insane and there is no magic sword. Jaimini has fooled herself into believing the story and now she will not stop until she finds a gemstone.



Byo Gogoi

THE WIZARD VISITOR



"His name is Meik Scheuermann and he will be staying here for three weeks. I was talking with his servant earlier and the man told me that Scheuermann, a wizard, is in the city to visit the Library of Arvendon. All his servant knew was that his master is busy researching some magical secret or other, and that the Library of Arvendon is said to have books valuable to the man's research."

While staying in a tavern, the PCs hear that one of the tavern's other guests is a powerful wizard who is visiting the city and will be here for a few more weeks. The man arrived a few days ago, and every day from dawn to dusk he is inside the Library of Arvendon – a building that only arcane spellcasters may enter – where it is said he is spending his time researching a secret subject.

If the PCs pry into the wizard's business, they will soon learn that Scheuermann is not a man to disturb. The wizard is instantly aware of their efforts (he uses spells to watch over his belongings when he is away, and he is careful to keep an eye on any who try to follow him). At first, the man warns them off with a simple "leave me be" and a nod. If the PCs persist, the wizard will not hesitate to use his magic to cause them pain.

"He's looking for a mystic gate that connects the Library to a dungeon beneath the king's castle, or so I've heard."

The tavern staff are nothing but a source of rumors and they're more than happy to share every little scrap of info that they have collected to any who share with them a handful of coins.

True. The man is a wizard who has journeyed to the city to research ancient spells. He does know of a gateway between the library and the castle dungeon, but that isn't what he is looking for. He only wishes to be left alone and becomes more and more frustrated as strangers interfere in his daily trips to the library.

False. The man is a wizard, but he isn't going to the library for research. A cabal of wizards meet at the library every day to trade spells, secrets, and share in strong drink.

MORE THIEVES IN THE CITY



"I tells ye it has been getting worse! Night after night, when I set out on my rounds, I swear the soft sound of footpads and roofmen follow me down every street and alley of the city. I sometimes catch a glimpse of an odd shadow or two, often on a low roof, but I've not yet managed to spot one or to catch one of them in the act."

Mathijn Dragonjer is a member of the city watch and has the unfortunate luck of being a night watchman. Tasked with patrolling the city between midnight and dawn, Dragonjer is alone save for his sword and torch when on his rounds, and he is certain that there are more thieves operating in the city these days.

The man is eating hard bread (and even harder cheese) in the tavern and telling the owner about his nightly encounters with shadows and sounds.

The adventurers are seated at a nearby table and overhear the conversation, soon asking the watchman to join them for a drink. The man tells the PCs of his belief that there are more thieves in the city. If they ask, he agrees to allow them to follow him that night.

True. A band of thieves moved into the city three weeks ago and they're doing all they can to identify the most valuable objects in the city. Their plan is to pinpoint the top twelve items of value and then, all in one night, steal the twelve and then flee the city. Luckily for the adventurers, tonight is the night that they will finally take action and steal what they've discovered.

False. It is not thieves that Dragonjer is hearing, but goblins. The little beasts have been stealing trinkets for weeks now and it is about time that they be caught.

THE ROYAL SECRET



"Margaret Smitherman, Duchess of Haerford, is an imposter. Or so they say. The woman is a mystic construct, created from the flesh of the dead Duchess and empowered by the wizard the true Duchess mistakenly trusted before her death. They say that the wizard is planning to use the false Duchess to try and assassinate the king."

Weland Leofgeat is well known in the city as a dissenter and rebel, and he may have taken his rebellious acts too far with his tale of a false Duchess intent on murdering the king. Leofgeat believes he is speaking low enough that the din of the market will mask his words, but he never counted on the dungeoneers being so close that they could make out his words through the many overlapping words of the merchants and shoppers who are out this day.

"Ceolweald of Nortoft, the wizard, is said to have murdered the Duchess months ago and has spent the time since training the copy so that she won't raise questions when she meets the king next week."

If the PCs approach Leofgeat and confront him, the man's face turns white when he realizes that he has been overheard. Unless they act quickly, Leofgeat's confederate, a tall elf in blue robes and carrying a staff, escapes. If they manage to corner both Leofgeat and the elf, the soon learn that they have caught Kailu Liayra, an elven murderer wanted by the town watch.

Leofgeat is a coward and surrenders at the first sign of violence, but Liayra is a skilled swordsman and not one to back down from a fight. He also has no desire to be captured by the watch, so he will fight to defend himself as he tries to escape.

True. The two men are speaking the truth and the wizard truly did kill the Duchess and replace her with an arcane simulacrum. If the adventurers do not take action, the magical creature will make an attempt on the king's life. How the PCs react once they learn of the plot, including how they deal with Leofgeat, will directly impact the upcoming assassination attempt.

False. There is no plot against the king. Leofgeat is trying to trick Liayra into paying for details that don't exist. The entire tale was fabricated by the man in an attempt to make money and he breaks down and admits to his lies if questioned. The elf, if he hears the confession, will try to kill the liar at the first opportunity.

a DRAGON IN THE FOREST

"I'd seen a dragon once, when I was younger. Me pap took me to a traveling carnival where they were showing off a captured blue dragon. I best remember the size of the thing; it were bigger than a house! I hoped at that time that I would never meet a dragon that weren't chained and enslaved. That hope was crushed yesterday when I stumbled across a great green dragon in the woods. I didn't think I would escape, and I likely wouldn't have if the creature hadn't stopped to eat my poor horse. I ran and didn't look back."

Several others in the tavern laugh at the man, his friends and strangers alike calling him a liar and suggesting that he slow down on his drinking. Dejected and frustrated, the man snatches up his heavy coat and sets out into the night air.

If the PCs follow him, the man at first thinks they are thieves and draws his dagger. If they are able to convince him that they only wish to talk, he introduces himself as Nino Richert and agrees to a chat so long as the adventurers are buying. *"Not back in there,"* he says. *"Too many in there will ask questions."* He soon leads the PCs to a nearby tavern where he orders a drink and tells his tale.

True. Richert met a green dragon in the forest, just as he says, and he offers to draw a map if the adventurers will pay him a gold (and if they have the necessary tools). The green dragon is long gone, though they do find tracks and the remains of Richert's unfortunate horse. There's no telling where the dragon could have gone.

False. The man was frightened off by an ogre, and it was only the dim lighting beneath the treetops and an overactive imagination that made Richert imagine he encountered a dragon. If the PCs investigate the area, they soon find a worn and ill-repaired hut where an ogre has made his home. The creature, Glukurg, isn't looking for a fight though he will defend himself if attacked.

If the PCs approach Glukurg cautiously and suggest that they only wish to talk, the ogre allows them in and serves them a strong tea. He remembers the man last week, yes, and the ogre even has the man's horse in the fenced garden behind the cottage and gives the horse over to the PCs if they ask for it.

a RANGER ON THE HUNT

"She told me that she was hunting for evil and that I need not fear her but, to be honest, it wasn't her that had me shaking. The woman's pet was the biggest, strangest beast I've ever seen accompany a hunter. It were a wolf or a dog, perhaps, but something about the thing had the hairs on the back of my neck standing as if I'd seen a ghost."

Jake Gallagher has been a woodcutter since his earliest days, spending almost every day of his life in the forests near the city. The man lives in a cabin in the woods with his wife and three children, and once each week he makes the trek to the city to sit in the tavern and share a few drinks with others. Many know him, and those who do say that he is honest and can be trusted.

Gallagher is telling the others in the tavern of his encounter with a ranger and her animal companion. He said she may have been an elf, but her skin was odd and her ears far longer than any elf that he had met before.

If asked, Gallagher says that the woman didn't give her name and only said that she was in search of the man who stole her coin purse. Gallagher thought it strange that she would be seeking a thief in the forest, especially with such a large beast at her side, but he only wanted to get away from the woman and her creature so he wished her luck and moved on.

True. A nymph ranger is in the forest, though it is not a man that she is seeking. The ranger is in pursuit of a devil that escaped from an extraplanar prison and it is her duty to capture the beast and return it. Would the devil be foolish enough to try to disguise itself as a man and hide in the city?

False. Gallagher isn't lying, but he is exaggerating just a touch. He met an elven ranger in the forest and her wolf companion. The ranger was hunting for deer to feed herself and her friends, and she was annoyed at Gallagher's noisy approach since he scared off her prey. The ranger may still be somewhere near the city.



a DRAGON BLOCKS THE MOUNTAIN PASS

"Those who have come in recently have been saying that they cannot take the mountain pass. Many travelers have reported that they had to take the long way, adding days to their journey, because a dragon at the mountain pass is slaughtering all who are unwise and dare to invade what the beast has claimed as its property."

The rumors of a dragon atop the mountain grow stronger each day, until the town offers a reward for its death.

How the rumor of the dragon was started is unknown, but the PCs quickly hear many people in the city talking about the promise of 500 gold to any who can slay the dragon and bring proof of its death to the city watch. 500 gold isn't much of a bounty for a dragon, especially one as large and powerful as the rumors claim this one is, but perhaps if there is a dragon, there is also a dragon's hoard of treasure waiting to be claimed.

Asking around, the adventurers don't hear from anyone who has actually tried to take the mountain pass, but they meet many travelers who took the long way around the mountain so that they could avoid the threat of the rumored dragon.

True. An ancient dragon has moved into caves near the mountain pass and is now defending its new territory from those it considers to be intruders. The dragon is still in the process of transporting its treasure from a previous lair to the newly-claimed caverns; if the PCs find the lair, it only has about 25% of the dragon's treasure.

False. There is no dragon. A band of ruffians have set up camp atop the mountain, and to reduce the risk of being caught they've been spreading stories of a dragon at the mountain pass.

"Of all the monsters in the world, dragons are the most feared."
– **Monster Manual** (4th Edition),
Mike Mearls, Stephen Schubert,
and James Wyatt



THE KENKU'S THREAT

"You all heard that beast threaten me!"

On the busy city streets, as the sun begins to set on the horizon, a man is shouting and drawing a crowd as a kenku pushes his way through the crowd. The people part, granting the angry kenku a clear path and doing their best to avoid making eye contact with the creature.

The PCs are too far away from the scene to intervene, but they do witness the following commotion as the man yells again and again, *"someone stop that birdfolk and call the watch."*

Unfortunately for the man, none dare stop the kenku and the town watch arrive just as the PCs get close enough to overhear.

"That thing pushed me down and threatened to kill me if it ever saw me again. Imagine, the nerve of such a monster to threaten a good, honest citizen such as myself. What is this city coming to when you allow things like that to walk free?"

If asked, the man says that he is Arnosst Adamec and that he works on the docks where he loads and unloads cargo. The kenku, who he names as Apholixus, is a regular to the docks. The birdman works on a merchant ship, *Pride of the Stars*, and Adamec and the kenku have argued before.

"That thing's a killer, and I know that he's wanted on the Isle of Netherward. Whosoever captures the beast and delivers him there will no doubt be rewarded."

True. The kenku, Apholixus, is wanted for the murder of three men on the Isle of Netherward. He hasn't been to the island in years, but the people there remember him.

False. There is no bounty on the kenku. Adamec and the birdman have a history – they were once partners in crime and robbed homes in a distant town – but it was Adamec who was caught. The kenku escaped and Adamec has never forgiven him.



a cosmic HORROR IN THE sewers

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Kalyan Bade, rat catcher and sewer sweeper, is eating his noonday meal near the city gate, sitting with a few guards and a traveler outside in the sun. The group of men have been telling stories while the PCs have been answering the guards' questions – every stranger is grilled when they pass through the gates – and the adventurers are no doubt anxious to get past the guards and approach the man to ask for more information about the bodies that were found in the city sewers.

"The bodies were blocking the flow, clogging up the pipes, and we had no choice but to yank them out. If it were up to me, we wouldn't set foot in those sewers again. I've run into some nasty stuff down there over the years – giant spiders, ratfolk, even a thief from time to time – but I've never heard of anything so large that it could inflict that much damage."

For a few gold, Bade promises to leave one of the out-of-the-way grates to the sewers open later that day. Of course the PCs want to enter the sewers and search for a terrible monster to kill.

True. Select one of the strangest planar creatures that you can from your most obscure game supplement and drop it into the city sewers. An evil mage summoned the beast and set it loose in the sewers as a way to get back at the city for turning him away several weeks ago.

False. There is something in the sewers, but it isn't an otherworldly beast. A troll is loose in the sewers and has been living off of whatever it can find, mostly the flesh of those foolish enough to explore the tunnels.



THE BARBARIAN AND THE MAGIC WARHAMMER

"The shopkeepers were talking about nothing else this afternoon. A barbarian from the northern mountains, as tall as a troll and as strong as an ogre, went from market stall to market stall in search of food and supplies. A few of the merchants managed to engage the man in chatter, but none of them could learn more than that he was a stranger in need of supplies for his journey."

"What do we care of a barbarian?" The man turns to his noisy friend and answered, "because the shopkeepers say that barbarian was carrying one of the largest and most powerful magic hammers known. Word is, according to those who saw the man, he carries the warhammer known as Blightstrike and if true, that item is worth more than such as you will ever see in your lifetime."

The man, Stanley Chad, suggests to some of his friends over drinks that they should go after this barbarian and take the hammer to sell. None of them look keen on the idea, though, and after an hour or so of drinking and chatting, Chad leaves.

If the PCs engage the man in conversation, either before he leaves or outside of the tavern, Stanley Chad swears that it was the magic hammer and that the merchants last heard the barbarian was going to camp outside of the city gates. Chad is all talk, though, and his boasts and cries of "let's take that hammer!" fade away quickly if the PCs suggest that he join them in tracking down the barbarian and the weapon.

True. The barbarian, his name is Jarle Torkelson, does own Blightstrike and has had the weapon in his possession for several months. If the PCs find him and ask about the weapon, Torkelson tells them he took it from a dragon's hoard that he raided in the northern mountains. The dragon was away at the time, he tells them, and he has heard rumors that the dragon is now searching for him and the weapon.

False. The barbarian's warhammer is not at all magical; the merchants were hoping that it was Blightstrike because they all wish to one day see the fabled weapon.

