

The Silven

# Trumpeter

The Official Magazine of Silven Crossroads

Silven Trumpeter 15 - October 2004 Issue  
<http://www.silven.com>

## Indie RPG Spotlight

We take a close look at Fastlane

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## Modern Gaming

Melissa Piper shows you the in's and out's of taking your fantasy characters into the modern era

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## FEATURE

# Re-thinking the d20 Bard Class

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# From

## the Editor

### Sound off!

Got an urge to send a note to our editor? Would you like to volunteer as a writer? Have comments about an article?

Write to Dana at : [adriayna@yahoo.com](mailto:adriayna@yahoo.com)

### Errata:

Our previous issue (October 2004) contained an image that was not credited to the artist. The portrait on page 58 is copyright Octavirate Games.

Editor-in-Chief: Dana Driscoll

Assistant Editors: Laura Heilman, Elizabeth Liddell and Paul Tevis.

Additional Editing (D&D/d20): David Paul

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I was hanging out with a non-gamer friend a few weeks back, and the subject of gaming was brought up in the conversation. While I'm not embarrassed about the subject or my status as a gamer (as I know some are), I don't necessarily tout about that "I'm a gamer!" to all of my friends and coworkers. So when the subject of RPG games came up, I was more interested in explaining it rather than looking for a hiding place to shelter me from the fallout.

We discussed me going to Gen Con and other conventions, the *Silven Trumpeter*, my weekly gaming sessions, and some other gaming-related tidbits. All the while, I was thinking that my explanation was getting through to her and that at any minute she'd jump and say, "Woohoo! Give me a d20 and lets get started!"

Instead, she took me by storm with a series of questions fired in rapid succession: "What exactly is role-playing? Why do people game? Why devote hours of your time? Why do you *need* to devote entire evenings or full days to it?" Now what role-playing is seems easy enough—you compare it to acting, getting lost in your favorite book, or even seeing a good movie that immerses you in another place for a while. And "why do people game" seemed simple as well—because they enjoy doing it, because it is a means of relaxation and to some, escape, and because it has an inherent reward system where the harder you try, the more you succeed (unlike what often happens in the "real world"). So far, all good answers, I thought.

But then the last and final question came, "Yes, Dana, I understand you *like* it but my question is *why?*" Why?...Why? Perhaps the question isn't

quite so easy to quantify or answer on any level. And even if I were to give an answer here (or to my friend) I think that many readers would find it unsatisfactory. I ended up telling her that I think the why differs for each individual who is playing it. A cop out, yes, but a reasonable one.

One thing is certain, however. From my recent time at Gen Con and activities on the 'net, for whatever the reason, and whatever the "why," many people from all over the world are taking part in our great hobby.

This month's issue features a host of Gen Con related articles and information. We have a Gen Con diary from Etyan Bernstein, several demo reviews, interviews from industry professionals that attended the con, and a very special spotlight on indie gaming. So sit back, relax, and enjoy this new jam-packed issue!

I'd also like to take this chance to welcome our two new editors—Elizabeth Liddell and Paul Tevis—to the *Silven Trumpeter*.

Best Regards,

Dana Driscoll

*Dana Driscoll*

Editor In Chief  
Silven Trumpeter

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by Amaranth

## The White Wolf Insider

Welcome to the "White Wolf Insider." It has been a while since I last wrote the White-Wolf Insider. I do apologize as I have had some difficulties over the past months. However, I am hoping to get back on track with everything for the "White Wolf Insider." So, without any further interruptions, is the latest few months of news from White Wolf!

### Page Count Rises on *World of Darkness Rulebook*: \$19.99 Price Point Remains for First Printing

Atlanta, GA, July 12, 2004: White Wolf Publishing today announced that the page count on its highly anticipated August release, the *World of Darkness Rulebook* has risen to 224 pages, without affecting the retail price for the first print run.

As the central book in White Wolf's all new contemporary horror setting, the hardcover *World of Darkness Rulebook* contains all the core rules for the Storytelling System and everything needed for portraying mortal characters in a world of hidden monsters. Major supplements like *Vampire: The Requiem* (also released in August) build on the main *World of Darkness* rulebook, providing expanded setting and the rules needed to play supernatural characters. *The World of Darkness Rulebook* was originally planned for 160 pages, but as the manuscript was refined, it ultimately grew to 224.

"There isn't an ounce of fat in that book," said Ken Cliffe, White Wolf's Vice-President of Editorial & Development. "Those extra 64 pages allowed us to give readers the complete rulebook they deserved.

We knew we couldn't settle for a stripped down summary."

The first printing of the *World of Darkness Rulebook* will maintain the solicited \$19.99 retail price. "Adding those pages noticeably increases our costs on the book, but we're holding to our \$19.99 price point on the initial printing," explained Mike Tinney, White Wolf's President. "It was important that we honor that and reward those who have been waiting for months to buy this book on the first day."

Subsequent printings of the *World of Darkness Rulebook* will bear a suggested retail price of \$24.99. To prevent stocking problems, these printings will bear a different stock number and ISBN, although the contents will be identical.

*World of Darkness Rulebook* (first printing)  
WW55000; ISBN 1-58846-476-8; 224-page  
hardcover; SRP \$19.99.  
On sale August 21, 2004

### Vampire: The Requiem

WW25000; ISBN 1-58846-247-1; 304-page  
hardcover; SRP \$34.99  
On sale August 21, 2004

*World of Darkness Rulebook* (second printing)  
WW55002; ISBN 1-58846-484-9; 224-page  
hardcover; SRP \$24.99

### White Wolf Delays *Werewolf: The Forsaken* Until February

Atlanta, GA, July 19, 2004: White Wolf Publishing today announced that it is withholding the release of *Werewolf: The Forsaken* until February of 2005. It was originally scheduled for November of 2004.

The second Storytelling game set in the re-imagined *World of Darkness*, *Werewolf: The Forsaken* follows on the heels of the *World of Darkness Rulebook* and *Vampire: The Requiem* (both released August 21st)

"All of us have been working flat-out on *Vampire*," said Ken Cliffe, White Wolf's Vice President of Editing and Development "and it became clear to us that with *Werewolf* set to come out only two and a half months after *Vampire*, it was at risk of getting second-hand treatment. That wasn't acceptable."

White Wolf has revealed very little about *Werewolf: The Forsaken* thus far. "There will be some teaser material in the next White Wolf Quarterly," promised *Werewolf* developer Ethan Skemp, "and plenty more after that."

### New Line Cinema Options *White Wolf's Vampire: The Requiem* for Multi-Picture Deal

Atlanta, GA, July 26, 2004: White Wolf Publishing has reached an agreement with New Line Cinema to produce a motion picture series based on *Vampire: The Requiem*.

A modern horror game about vampires hidden among the living, *Vampire: The Requiem* is the flagship property of White Wolf's *World of Darkness* contemporary horror universe. New Line, the film company responsible for such blockbusters as the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, *Seven* and the *Austin Powers* franchise, brings a unique combination of artistic and commercial acumen to the deal.

"We're excited that the company that brought *Lord of the Rings* to the big screen has taken an interest in our flagship property," said Mike Tinney, president of White Wolf. "New Line's creative executives and producer Adam Fields have a great deal of enthusiasm for *Vampire* and have taken great strides to partner White Wolf with New Line."

Adam Fields, producer of such films as *Donnie Darko* and *Brokedown Palace*, has signed on to the project as producer. "*Vampire* is a unique template for a fantastic movie franchise," said Fields. "I look at a lot of computer games and role-playing games, but *Vampire* and the *World of Darkness* stand out thanks to their compelling visuals and narrative. I'm very excited by the prospects of the movies and of a future relationship with the talented folks at White Wolf."

*Vampire: The Requiem* is the newest property in White Wolf's award winning *World of Darkness* series of books and games. Although other properties tied to the *World of Darkness* have been licensed for television series, action figures and video games, this is the first major licensing agreement for White Wolf's *Vampire: The Requiem*, which will release as a pen-and-paper role-playing game this August 21st. White Wolf is represented by the Gersh Agency.

### **New World of Darkness Game Line All Hardcover; White Wolf Limits WoD Releases to Two Books a Month**

Atlanta, GA, July 27, 2004: White Wolf Publishing today unveiled additional details of its publishing plan for the new *World of Darkness* line. This plan includes an attractive hardcover format for all game books and a smaller overall number of releases.

The *World of Darkness*, launching on August 21st with the *World of Darkness Rulebook* and *Vampire: The Requiem*, is White Wolf's flagship game line of contemporary horror role-playing games. In its first incarnation, published from 1991 to early 2004, the line consisted of many different games, each with hardcover rulebooks and many softcover supplements.

"We took a long, hard look at our publishing model and reworked how we deliver books to our customers," said Mike Tinney, White Wolf's President. "This started with the creation of a central rulebook for the entire *World of Darkness* line", meaning August's *World of Darkness Rulebook* "and continued with the decision to publish fewer, meatier supplements."

Indeed, all role-playing game supplements for the line will be hardcover books of at least 128 pages (and usually 160 or more). White Wolf plans to publish two of these books for the *World of Darkness* every month, for a total of 24 role-playing book releases a year. This total will hold true even once other game lines join *Vampire: The Requiem* in the *World of Darkness*, such as the upcoming *Werewolf: The Forsaken* and *Mage: The Awakening*. Fiction titles, play aids (dice sets, Storyteller screens) and merchandise items (T-shirts, mouse pads) will come in addition to these releases. The *Exalted* and *Sword & Sorcery* game lines will continue their established publishing patterns with a blend of hard and soft cover releases.

### **First Print of World of Darkness Rulebook Sold Out; New Printing Ready--White Wolf maintains \$19.99 Price for Online Pre-Orders and GenCon sales**

Atlanta, GA, August 16, 2004: White Wolf has sold out of the entire first print run of the *World of Darkness Rulebook* at its introductory price of \$19.99.

The second print run is ready to ship at the regular price point of \$24.99, but White Wolf will continue

to accept consumer preorders at the \$19.99 price at its website through Friday August 20th and will sell copies at the GenCon Indy Trade Show (Aug 19-22) at that same introductory price. Consumers will also be able to get the \$19.99 edition in hobby and book stores until those stores sell through the copies they ordered from their distributors.

White Wolf was able to time the printing of the \$24.99 edition of the *World of Darkness Rulebook* so as to prevent any shortage of supply. All distribution, retail and consumer orders will be filled without allocation.

The new printing of the *World of Darkness Rulebook* is identical to the first save for the retail price, ISBN and stock #. No contents have changed.

The *World of Darkness Rulebook* goes on sale with *Vampire: the Requiem* on Saturday, August 21st. Top hobby retailers in the United States, Canada and Great Britain will be open past midnight on the evening of Friday August 20th in order to begin selling the books at the first possible minute. Details are available at <<http://www.worldofdarkness.com>>.

### **White Wolf Takes Part In National Games Week—Coming November 21-27, 2004**

Exciting news! White Wolf Publishing is teaming up with the publisher of *Games Quarterly* and many other game manufacturers in a great new event: National Games Week. National Games Week (NGW) is a coordinated nationwide promotional campaign to raise awareness of games as positive, social entertainment. The industry and game players will achieve this together by creating a weeklong series of events that get people's attention- a celebration of games. The staff of *Games Quarterly* are the coordinators of the event. NGW even has its own official U.S. postage stamp!

National Games Week is now established as the fourth week of November every year. This year's event takes place on November 21-27, a Sunday through Saturday, when families and friends are coming

together. "Host Your Own Event" events will take place, for this inaugural year, in an expected 15,000 homes, schools, churches, colleges, community centers and retail stores. Game Retailers will run events, but otherwise events will be run when people such as you decide to take up the challenge. The more people that hear the message the more new game players there will be. Make your own event wherever you like- your home, school, church, or community center, and invite lots of people. Or, contact your local game retailer to find out what events they are going to run- they might even want your help with their events.

NGW provides the tools to you to the tools you to have a fun, successful event- posters, invitation cards, official stamps, information for teachers, even games. On October 15 the web site <<http://www.nationalgamesweek.net>> will launch. On this site you can get lots of information. Then, should you decide to become a member of National Games Week (there is no fee), you can log in to the secure part of the web site and find all sorts of resources that you can order. Some are free, some have a shipping and handling charge, while others have a minimal cost. Stock up on all the supplies you need, including a special prize pack from White Wolf.

During your Games Day be sure to have both your favorite games and some games suitable for newcomers. Be prepared to teach the games to them so they can start enjoying games right away. In *Games Quarterly Magazine #2* there is a good article on teaching games- you can download it at <<http://www.gamesquarterly.net>>. You can also get a "How To Host a Games Day" kit at no cost, by ordering it on the web site starting October 15. We can't think of a better way to celebrate games than National Games Week. Let's do this as a team! Watch for the web site to launch October 15. For more information, visit the site or contact: [ngw@gamesquarterly.net](mailto:ngw@gamesquarterly.net)

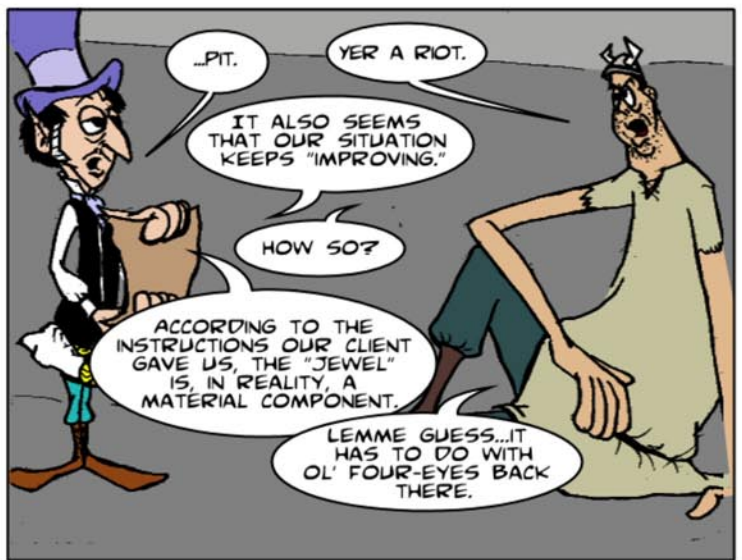
That is it for this month's "White Wolf Insider." See everyone next month when we continue to bring you the latest news and events from White Wolf games.

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by Smokestack Jones



by Chris McCoy

## Silven Interview: Elaine Cunningham

Elaine Cunningham (<http://www.elainecunningham.com>) is a renowned fantasy writer and is the author of over sixteen books and dozens of short stories. Her *Forgotten Realms novels* are filled with swords, songs, and of course, elves. She is a lover of mythology, music, and all things fantastic. This interview was conducted via email on October 13<sup>th</sup>, 2004.

### What are some of your writing influences and how have they affected your style of writing?

I became interested in poetry at a very early age. Reading it, memorizing favorite poems, and trying my hand at various forms all had an impact. First, it made me more aware of the inherent rhythm and music in words. Poetry also teaches you to be concise; you strive to create vivid images with just a few words. Ballads tell their stories very economically, which is a good lesson for a writer. The rigid structure of rhyme and meter forces you to be both disciplined and inventive. Of course, there's always a downside—I've developed the bad habit of tinkering with my prose. That's not a problem when you're working with a fourteen-line poem, but in a hundred thousand word novel, you can bog down very quickly!

Another major influence was folklore and mythology. Years ago I read *The Uses of Enchantment* by Bruno Bettelheim, a discussion of the various layers of meaning people find in familiar tales. One of the reasons fantasy appeals to teenaged boys is that it addresses in story form many of the issues they are facing. The coming-of-age tale is a standard fantasy form, and aspects of the hero's journey—leaving the

familiar behind, defining personal values, seeking a worthwhile goal, developing the skills needed to read it, finding a wise mentor, gathering a group of friends to aid your quest—are closely analogous to the tasks facing every young person.

### When did you decide to become a writer?

I started writing almost as soon as I could hold a pencil, but my first literary ambition was not to write books, but to illustrate them. I was one of those kids who drew incessantly. During my high school years I started concentrating more on music and never got around to taking any formal art training. But I always loved books and read voraciously. When my first son was born, I couldn't stand the thought of putting him in daycare, so my husband suggested that I try to turn a lifelong hobby into a profession.

### What other occupations have you had throughout life before becoming a full time writer?

I have a degree in music education with a secondary focus on history. I taught for several years, worked as a church musician, did a little performing here and there. Between teaching and writing, I worked toward and MBA at night and worked in an office during the day—first as an assistant to the owner of a small real estate development company, then in document production coordination for a management consulting company. Between these jobs and the MBA studies, I learned that I do not belong in a conventional office environment!

### In your *Songs & Swords* series, the characters Danilo Thann and Arilyn Moonblade proclaim their love to each other. What can you tell us about this romance, even if you will not be continuing the series with *Wizards*?

I'm not ready to concede that this series is over, so I'm going to pass on this question. Seriously, I would love to revisit these old friends, and resolve several of the threads introduced in *Dream Spheres*. I have a story firmly in mind and have been adding bits and pieces to it for years. (People who used to frequent the now-defunct *Wizards of the Coast* novels discussion forum may recall some of the "Hamish excerpts" I posted from time to time.)

### What is your favorite novel of all time? What is your favorite *Forgotten Realms* author and novel?

Those are good questions, but I can't narrow the field down to a single choice.

### Besides fantasy and science fiction, have you ever written in any other genres?

Just this month, Tor released *Shadows in the Darkness*, a mainstream hardcover novel that's contemporary mystery with dark fantasy elements. The reviewer in *Publisher's Weekly* categorized it as "New Weird," a sub-genre popularized by Laurell K. Hamilton's Anita Blake vampire slayer novels. There are no vampires in this book, and the world depicted is no different—on the surface, at least—from what



most of us see. But elves exist, living hidden lives in plain sight among us, and they have very little in common with the shining beings Tolkien envisioned. This book is the first in the *Changeling Detective Agency* series (I just finished the first draft of book two).

Most of my fantasy books are sword and sorcery, but I've also written space opera (the *Spelljammer* novel *The Radiant Dragon*), and dark fantasy/horror, the latter mostly in short story form. My short stories range all over the place, from Arthurian tales to historical fiction to odd experimental stuff.

### **I understand you got your first novel published through a TSR open call. What advice do you have to offer to other writers who are seeking to win open calls and start a writing career with Wizards of the Coast?**

- 1) Write about characters you enjoy spending time with. Create a plot that interests you, and incorporate themes that matter to you. If you're not deeply involved with your characters and story, it is unlikely that anyone else will feel strongly about them.
- 2) Follow directions to the letter. Many aspiring writers make the mistake of assuming the rules don't apply to them. If the editors ask for a one-page summary, don't give them three, and don't send a single page of eight-point font with half-inch margins.
- 3) Send a writing sample that shows you can do it all: characterization, vivid description, good dialogue, and action sequences that are interesting and easy to visualize. Familiarity with the setting is vital.
- 4) Follow proper manuscript format. If you have any doubts, I'd strongly suggest investing in a copy of *The Writer's Digest Guide to Manuscript Formats*, published by Writer's Digest Books.
- 5) **DO NOT** write a story about established characters. Your story about Elminster or Drizzt or

Halaster may be very interesting and your writing solid, but it will still come across like fanfic. Fanfic has its place, but not in an open call submission.

### **What do you feel is your strongest novel that you have written to date?**

Hmmm. I keep trying different things, and all the books have their strengths and weaknesses. But I'm particularly fond of *Elfsong*, partially because of my own interest in music and partially because I enjoyed the interaction between the rogue elf Elaith Craulnober and Danilo Thann. People who like the books to relate closely to the *D&D* game rules seem to enjoy this book. It has a pretty thorough exploration of the bards in the *Forgotten Realms*, and it covered most of the bardic types as described in second edition rules. You'll also find a bard who doesn't have a counterpart in any game accessory: a dwarf who specializes in satire through political cartoons.

### **You have written a *Star Wars* novel. What can you tell us about your experience writing in such a vastly publicized shared world?**

I had a good time with the project. Since the story line spanned twenty-some novels, several books were in production at any given time. In order to keep everything on track, authors compared notes, exchanged emails, and talked on the phone. Since writing is primarily a solitary profession, this was a nice change. (As my son dryly commented, "Ooh. Social interaction.") The editors at Del Rey and the continuity team at LucasFilm were terrific. They did a great job managing a huge project. My particular story was challenging, in that it was supposed to be a "small story," a side tale about the after effects of the shattering events in Troy Denning's book *Star by Star*.

### **Are you a fan of *Star Wars*?**

Absolutely! The first movie, *A New Hope*, was the first movie I ever saw in a movie theatre. Since then, every movie release has been an Event, and my kids know they can count on seeing the first midnight

showing. I'm looking forward to the final movie. There's a lot of storytelling ground to cover, and I can't wait to see how all the ends are tied up.

### **I have heard that you will be writing an Arthurian novel. You've also published some Arthurian short fiction, including a story in an anthology (*The Doom of Camelot*) from Green Knight Press. Are you a fan of the *Pendragon* gaming system, also from Green Knight Press?**

I like the gaming system very much, but I don't actively play it. In fact, I'm not currently involved in any RPG groups. It's difficult to find a group of geezer gamers, much less one that's willing to focus on Arthurian lore!

Yes, I do have an Arthurian novel in development. I'm currently working on other projects, but I hope to have the manuscript completed before the end of 2005.

### **Are you a gamer?**

See above. I have a limited amount of time for gaming, but I do play *EverQuest*. I frequently pick up new games at conventions and try them out with my family. *Munchkin*, by Steve Jackson Games, is a hoot. Both of my sons are gamers, and our house is full of dice, RPG books, miniatures, board games (*Settlers of Catan* is a great game, and we went through an *Axis and Allies* stage), and untold thousands of collectible cards. I used to play an elf deck in *Magic the Gathering*, but I haven't kept up with the game of late. And speaking of geezer games, I can play a halfway decent game of pool, and I'm very fond of foosball. (Four players, no spinning allowed. House rules.)

### **What advice would you offer to aspiring writers who want to get published in the fantasy genre?**

Read widely, and not just in the fantasy genre. Write

every day, even if it's just a page or two. Writing is like painting or singing or playing shortstop, in that you can't learn to do it unless you DO it. Write because you enjoy writing, not merely to get published. Write because you're seriously interested in learning the craft and improving your skills. I hear from so many aspiring writers who feel that writing is a "waste of time" unless they're certain that the story they're working on will be published. This puzzles me. An artist doesn't expect to exhibit his first sketches, a swordsmith expects to pound out many journeyman pieces before he creates a fine weapon, a beginning pianist doesn't expect to perform the first song he learns, and a chef learns to make a roux before he expects to tackle a complicated Cajun sauce. I'm not sure why people expect writing to be any different.

### **Besides writing, what are some of the other things you enjoy in life?**

Travel! I'm always up for an excuse to hop on an airplane, particularly if the itinerary includes ancient ruins, medieval castles, and long evenings in music pubs. I love gardens—adding to mine, browsing through nurseries, walking through public gardens (particularly in England and Scotland.) I collect cookbooks and enjoy trying new recipes. Once in a while I make a fabric sculpture dragon, which, since I no longer draw or paint, is one of the few outlets remaining for the "visual creativity" impulse. Music is still a big part of my life, though I no longer teach or perform. These days I focus on Celtic harp and fiddle, and I still sing—folk and traditional music, mostly, as I don't practice enough to pull off opera and oratorio in convincing fashion. Also, the cats get really ticked off when I dust off the upper register, and that never leads anywhere good.

### **What are some of your goals in life?**

One of the most readily defined goals is an advanced degree. I'm working on the prerequisites, and will be applying for the fall semester 2005, working toward a master's degree in writing. I'm doing this with two goals in mind: first to improve my own writing, and also to eventually return to the classroom, teaching

on a college level. For various reasons, I want to improve my language skills. I'm working on German and Spanish, and I just found a class in Irish Gaelic that sounds promising. (The latter is necessary to learning to sing *sean nos* style, which is traditional Irish vocal music.) I want to play the fiddle well enough to sit in on pub sessions, and keep improving my harp playing. Since I'll be writing about bards in upcoming projects, I'd like to incorporate music into my book promotions, and I plan to invest in a travel harp I can schlepp to conventions and book signings. Physical fitness is an important goal. You tend to value it all the more after an extended illness. I'm starting to feel human again after an illness that lasted several years, but I lost a lot of ground and will have to work very hard to gain some back. I plan to start fencing again. My son just switched from epee to saber, and I'd like to be able to fence with him.

### **If you could go back and change one thing about your career as a writer, what would it be?**

I would start writing "original fiction"—that is, stuff set in worlds of my own creation as opposed to licensed settings such as *Star Wars* and the *Forgotten Realms*—almost immediately. I have started several such stories, but never finished one to my satisfaction. I'd still write the shared-world stories, but I think it is important to establish yourself in both types of stories early in your career.

### **You express a great deal of interest in elves, and they are often the main subject of your fantasy stories. Why such the keen interest in them?**

Honestly? I'm not really sure. They appeal to me, but it's hard to pinpoint the reasons why. A partial explanation occurred to me while I was writing *Those Who Hunt*, a fantasy novel that unfortunately did not see publication. (The publisher went out of business before the book was published.) The characters were sentient animals: a pair of swashbuckling raccoons, a morose pony who harbored artistic aspirations despite being profoundly colorblind, and a feline bard.

It occurred to me that once a cat becomes bipedal, carries a sword, and has the speech necessary to express its innate attitudes toward life, what you've got is very akin to an elf. I'm very fond of cats, so I suppose it's a natural extension.

### **What preparations do you make when preparing to work on a new writing project?**

First I stock up on coffee, then I read stacks of books as part of the research process, then I write a detailed outline. I also do a writing schedule and try to stick to it.

### **Do you have any new projects that you can tell us about?**

I have three new releases this month (October 2004). *Shadows in the Darkness* I've already mentioned. "Gorlist's Dragon" is my contribution to the latest *Forgotten Realms* anthology, *Realms of the Dragons*. I also wrote a story for a small-press book entitled *Cloaked in Shadows*. It's a collection of tales about the darker side of elves, so I couldn't resist! I enjoy the opportunities short stories provide to try something different. This tale is based in Italian folklore, and tells the story of an aging Strega, a village witch in medieval Tuscany, and her battle against the *linchetto*: night elves who are feared as bringers of nightmares.

My next *Forgotten Realms* book will be *City of Splendors: A Novel of Waterdeep*. This book, co-written with Ed Greenwood, is set in near-current time (DR 1372) with mostly new, young, "low-level" characters.

Also in the pipeline is the next *Changeling Detective Agency* book, *Shadows in the Starlight*. I'm co-writing an original fantasy novel with my son Andrew. It's based in Slavic mythology and medieval Russian history. Also in progress is the Arthurian novel mentioned earlier, and a historical novel set in sixteenth century Scotland. I've got several short stories lined up, and I just signed a contract for an

exciting new fantasy project. Unfortunately, I'm still waiting for the official go-ahead, so I can't make an announcement just yet.

### **Are there any other upcoming releases by other authors that you are interested in?**

I'm looking forward to reading *The Charnel Prince*, Grey Key's sequel to *The Briar King*. That was released in August, but I haven't had a chance to read it yet. Jim Lowder is writing *Brotherhood of the Lost*, a book in R.A. Salvatore's world of Corona. I'm definitely looking forward to that. Bob Salvatore is doing some interesting things, including overseeing a line of adventure novels set in the world of *EverQuest*. The first book, *The Rogue's Hour*, is being released this month. Scott Ciencin wrote it, and I can't wait to see how this incredibly rich setting lends itself to fiction.

*We would like to thank Elaine Cunningham for taking the time out of her schedule to talk to us! For more information, you can visit Elaine Cunningham's website at: <http://www.elainecunningham.com>.*

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▶ <http://www.silven.com/articles.asp?case=show&id=143>

by Chris McCoy

# Oaths

The morning mists rolled through the lowland hills, blanketing the landscape in a shawl of milky white obscurity. The sounds of a nearby bubbling brook mingled with the cooing of mourning doves to create a concord of nature's hymns. The radiance of the sun filtered through the roving mists and fell upon the dew-touched hills below.

Upon one such sun kissed and mist shrouded hill, a pair of armored figures atop equally armored chargers faced each other across a grassy expanse. Both were attired in the finest armor of the age, yet each knight bore different pennants and colors.

On the east end of the hilltop stood an armored man adorned in blue and silver, the shades of his Lady and Goddess Alriva. His gleaming mithril full plate was accented with royal blue quartz and imprinted with the five stars of Alriva, creating a masterful hybrid of art and war. Three pennants fluttered in the wind, attached to the knight's oak and iron-headed lance. A simple blue field a ram's head ensigned with two stars was emblazoned upon the knight's shield. It was his own personal symbol, well earned in his service to Alriva. A sword of archaic design was strapped to his leather saddle, secured inside a well-tooled leather sheath. The silver pommel glimmered in the morning light as the knight of Alriva turned his charger towards the other armored figure that was three hundred feet away, waiting for his opponent to make the first move.

The black knight's shield bore the symbol of Va'Kir, the fallen demon lord of corruption and deceit. This man was no simple mercenary knight. He was a champion of an evil that the knight of Alriva sought

to extinguish from the realm. The Va'Kirian knight was clad in dark blue dragonhide, crafted from the remnants of an elder dragon the blackguard had slain. The joints of the armor were fitted with flexible darksteele chainmail, a darker azure contrast to the dragonhide. He wore no helm upon his head and his face bore the scars of previous battles. The stern features of a soul wholly corrupted by darkness glared at the knight of Alriva, his dark gaze held no emotion save contempt for his opponent. A black-gloved hand settled upon the well-worn pommel of an ornate bastard sword and pulled the unmarred blade from its jeweled scabbard. The sword's edge flared to life with a crimson glow, a glow that reflected in the callous gaze of its wielder. The blackguard stared down the length of tempered steel and saluted his opponent

"With this blade I shall make your life-blood stain the earth that we stand upon and bring about your torment at the hands of my Lord Va'Kir. So I swear and so it shall be done!" The blackguard's deep voice called out. He drove his spurs into his ebony mount's flanks and thundered down the makeshift lists.

The goodly knight readied his lance and spoke a quiet prayer to Alriva. His Goddess had granted him the powers to dispose of such evil and he, a paladin, was going to fulfill those duties even if it cost him his life. Such was his devotion to the causes of good. The paladin leveled his lance and spurred his charger into a run.

"For honor and glory! For Alriva!" The paladin's war cry joined the blackguard's war cry, both calling upon their deities for victory. The battle had begun.

The two knights closed with each other, each one yelling out a war cry for victory. The paladin's lance was by far the longer weapon and left the blackguard with no means to strike at his opponent without risking a grievous blow. The High Priest of Alriva, Gaeleon Silverfyre, had blessed the magnificent oak and iron-headed weapon before the paladin had left his home in the city of Mahis. The tool of war was one of masterwork quality and the blessing of magic flowed through it, granting the lance phenomenal strength and endurance. The paladin's faith was behind his strike. The lance should have struck the blackguard and instantly sent him to the Hells that he so willingly served.

Yet it did not.

The blackguard smiled when the paladin's lance erupted into shards as it touched his shield, showering both combatants with tiny wooden splinters. The symbol of Va'Kir, which was mounted upon the shield, flared to life with unholy fire and had destroyed the lance without a moment's delay. The paladin's eyes widened with surprise as his faith faltered with the breaking of his treasured lance. It was a mistake that the dark emissary capitalized on. His crimson edged bastard sword struck quickly, cutting through the paladin's raised shield and biting deep into the paladin's arm. The blade pulled away as the blackguard rode by, leaving a trail of crimson blood in its wake.

The paladin's gauntleted hands grasped the reins of his charger, causing the animal to rear back. He wheeled his mount around to face his opponent. The blackguard was already charging for another



pass. The paladin's mind screamed at him, a frantic call for action. His left hand reached down and pulled free his silver hilted sword as the blackguard bore down upon him, a promise of death in his eyes.

The two blades crackled in a protest of crimson and azure energies as the blackguard's descending blow landed upon the mithril blade of the paladin's sword. Steel upon mithril rang out across the landscape, sending now silent mourning doves into flight. The blackguard's sword broke through the paladin's guard and scored another hit upon his wounded arm, leaving a twisted smile of grim satisfaction upon the blackguard's bloodless lips. The paladin shuddered as the unholy blade seared his flesh, leaving behind a charred and crimson wound. He cried out desperately to Alriva.

"My Lady, grant me the power to send his unholy servant back to the Hells from which he came!"

The paladin's blade flared with blue-white light and descended upon the blackguard's poised shield. The blackguard cried out in surprise as the unholy symbol of Va'Kir melted away from the surface of the rapidly heating shield. He spurred his midnight charger away from the paladin, putting some distance between him and his opponent. The vile knight cast his ruined shield to the ground, searing the green blades of grass where it landed. Wisps of smoke joined the morning mists as the shield cooled quickly upon leaving its wielder's grasp. The blackguard turned his cold gaze upon the paladin and laughed darkly.

"I was beginning to wonder if you had anything left in your arsenal, sir knight. Unfortunately, from the looks of you, that was the last trick you had... "

The blackguard regarded the heavily wounded paladin who was casting off his shield and clutching his shredded arm. The paladin's helm fell to the trampled earth and snow-white hair cascaded down armored shoulders. Slightly pointed ears and a

handsome angular face showed that the paladin was in fact an elf. Fearless green eyes glanced out at the blackguard and the elven paladin shook his head.

"The Lady of Healing grants me more than you can ever imagine, Blackguard. For I, Lord Amalanth Caldeain, will not rest until you and your kind are removed from this world and banished back to the Hells. I swear as such and so it shall be done."

The paladin's oath echoed the earlier words of the blackguard and the Va'Kirian knight could only smile at the irony.

"I see then. We shall determine who will fulfill their oath this day. So I, Balinthan Darkhope, swear it. Come now, elf, and let us finish this little game of ours."

Balinthan kicked his horse into a charge and raised his bastard sword high, the crimson edge flaring to life. Amalanth brought his blade to bear, blue-white fire flickering along the length of the mithril blade. His snow-white charger sped towards the blackguard's ebony mount. The two blades struck true as the two knights collided with each other, each blow tempered with the strength of their deities. The glowing blue light of the paladin's blade bathed in the crimson, unholy radiance of the blackguard's sword and both flashed brilliantly as their energies were unleashed in one mighty blow. The onslaught of divine force knocked both knights from their mounts, leaving them stunned and wounded upon the dew-covered earth.

Balinthan lay there, stunned. He glanced down at the searing wound in his left leg, a result of his opponent's holy nimbus and what appeared to be a shard of mithril. It had to be part of the paladin's sword. His faith and blade had proven the stronger, destroying the symbol of all that the paladin believed in. Balinthan could only laugh, despite the pain, at the triumph of shattering the beloved holy sword of his adversary. Such a disgrace upon the knight's honor was truly a victory for him and his Lord. Balinthan stood to face his opponent, fighting off the

pain of his wound as best he could as he reclaimed his fallen sword.

The paladin was not standing.

The elf was still upon the bloodstained ground. Crimson blood flowed from a grievous wound in the paladin's chest, a shard of the elf's own sword lodged deep within his body. Balinthan's strike had been true and utterly ironic.

The paladin would die by his own sword.

The lingering pain of Balinthan's own injury brought his attention back upon his condition. His eyes closed as he pulled the piece of smoldering mithril from his leg and tossed it aside. He gasped slightly as blood flowed freely. He drew forth a slender wand from his left bracer and spoke the command word, "Galathia." The thin length of pure white quartz glowed softly with white light and the wound began to close as the mending energies of healing flowed through him. Balinthan grinned wickedly as he replaced the wand of healing into his bracer and returned his gaze upon the fallen elven paladin.

No matter how hard Amanlanth called out for his body to respond he could not will it to do his bidding. The shard was deeper than he imagined, severing all feeling in his broken form. The blackguard had received a grievous wound of his own and he would soon die. Or so Amalanth thought, until the blackguard, his wound wholly mended, stepped into his field of vision. He could only watch in horror as the dark knight came forward, unholy sword in hand. The blackguard placed his blade against the paladin's throat, drawing forth a bead of blood. Balinthan laughed quietly and turned his damning stare upon the elf.

"My oath has been fulfilled this day. Your lifeblood stains this battlefield and you will die here as I have promised. You may think that your death will at least bring you some measure of peace but it shall not. I swore that your soul would belong Va'Kir and so

it shall. By battling me this day and pledging your own oath, you agreed to these terms. Those are the rules and pledges of honor and they shall now be fulfilled. Perhaps you will take heart in the knowledge that I at least thought you a worthy opponent. Goodbye, sir paladin..."

With those condemning words, Balinthan's sword flashed downward and into Amalanth's throat, splattering the elf's lifeblood upon the blade. Amalanth's evergreen eyes did not close as his death was delivered to him. They merely stared up at his slayer in a look of eternal defiance. The paladin's body shuddered slightly as his soul departed, seeking its proper place at Alriva's side in the afterlife.

Yet his soul did not race towards the heavens as it expected to. A feeling of pure dread washed over the elf's soul as something sinister called for it.

*Amalanth...You are now mine...*

A billowing cloud of darkness, unseen by any mortal creature, drifted towards the soul of the paladin. The soul desperately tried to flee, seeking the salvation of his beloved Alriva. But no salvation presented itself. The shadow came closer and fell upon the soul without any sound. The blanket of inky vileness washed over the paladin's temperate and pure soul, drowning it in a sea of evil and corruption. The soul died wordlessly, consumed by the lies and deceit of Va'Kir.

Balinthan smiled, knowing the fate of his departed opponent. He had visited many such fates upon servants of the light. He wiped the stained blade of his sword upon the wet grass beside his fallen opponent. His hands made quick work of the paladin's blood smeared armor as he pulled it off the elf's corpse. The finely crafted plate armor was worth a small fortune but Balinthan meant to keep it as a trophy. A trophy that he would gladly show all who dared oppose him. His greedy gaze looked

about for the paladin's mount but it was nowhere to be seen; it must have bolted after the paladin had been unseated. He sheathed his unholy weapon in its jeweled scabbard and remounted his horse, leaving behind the paladin's corpse for scavengers.

Balinthan turned his ebony mount to the south and spurred it forward. The sun had burned away the pallid morning mists and a day was beginning. The mourning doves' calls were replaced with the cawing of carrion crows that came to feed upon the feast left behind by Balinthan. The brook's waters were streaked with red as the blood soaked ground mingled with the brook, leaving a crimson smear upon the blemished landscape. The blackguard soon faded from sight as he disappeared into the departing mists, moving on to continue his vile conquest of all things good and pure, satisfied that evil had triumphed once more.

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by Matthew J. Hanson

# The Adventures of Starlanko the Magnificent:

## The Puzzle Box of the Crimson Eagles

There are many taverns, bars, and common houses in city of Mazalax, the largest human settlement on the Northern continent, and Starlanko the Magnificent had visited them all. At the moment in question he was enjoying a drink in the Lucky Goblin tavern. Outside the last of the leaves were clinging desperately to the trees, fighting against the bitter autumn winds. Inside Starlanko relaxed by the fire, having recently completed the sale of a dozen abjurations to nearsighted dwarf. For the moment Starlanko was content to enjoy his ale, and eavesdrop on the conversation between his associates Redreck the Fierce and Candessa Voliar.

"What about that girl?" Candessa said, and point out a voluptuous redhead who had just entered the bar.

Redreck the Fierce shook his head, and finished his whisky. The exchange was emblematic of Candessa and Redreck's conversation, which consisted of Candessa pointing out beautiful women to Redreck, all of whom the stoic warrior rejected without saying a word. Starlanko had to chuckle at the irony of Candessa's struggle. Getting Redreck to ask out a woman was like getting a cat to eat a salad.

"Why if it isn't Starlanko the Magnificent. It's been ages," Starlanko recognized the voice as belonging to a woman named Kamril, who Starlanko had once know on a rather personal basis. "When did you start carrying a sword? Or are you just happy to see me?" Kamril slipped an arm around Starlanko's shoulder and kissed his cheek.

"I beg thy pardon," interjected a voice coming from Starlanko's sword, "It is quite a possibility that my master is both carrying a sword, and is happy to see thee."

"And a talking sword at that. How appropriate." Kamril winked.

"Kamril, this is Funbane. Funbane, this is Kamril," Starlanko introduced them.

"An honor, my lady." If Funbane had a knee, it would have been bended and the sword would have been upon it.

"Funbane?" Kamril smirked.

"A Fun is a type of demon," Funbane explained.

Starlanko and Kamril continued their conversation, recollecting old times, and catching up on what had transpired since they last met. As the conversation wore on, somehow one of Kamril's hands found its way to Starlanko's knee.

"Oh my my. How time does fly," Kamril said. "It's getting late. I really must be getting to bed. What about you, Magnificent?"

"No, I think I'll be up for a little bit longer," Starlanko replied.

### About the Author

Matthew J. Hanson is an aspiring writer, as well as a long time gamer. He normally lives in Minnesota, but is currently finishing his senior year of college in Beloit Wisconsin. Recently, his 10-minute play *Who is Ruth* was selected as the winner for the American College Theatre Region III winner, for their 10-minute play competition, and it will be advancing to the national competition in April. If you would like to learn more about Matthew J. Hanson, please feel free to visit his website at [www.matthewjhanson.com](http://www.matthewjhanson.com).

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"Are you sure?" Kamril asked. She slid one of her hands the direction opposite Starlanko's foot.

"I appreciate the thought Kamril," said Starlanko. At the bar, Candessa had move two seats down from Redreck. She was scanning the room. When her gaze reached Starlanko he quickly looked away. "But now is just not a good time for me."

"Are you and she...?" Kamril motioned her head towards the bar.

"No. It's really just not a good time for me."

"Honey, you used to be a better liar," said Kamril. She excused herself and got another drink.

"I thought she said she was tired," said Funbane.

A minute later Candessa paused at Starlanko's table. "Don't wait up for me," she said. Then she walked to the staircase leading to the guestrooms, and placed her arm around the waist of a sturdy young warrior.

Starlanko was soon at Kamril's side. "On second thought I am getting rather tired."

Kamril smiled. "I was just hoping you would say that, Sugar."

Starlanko handed Funbane to Redreck. "Hold this for me."

"Starlanko the Magnificent, I—is that what you meant by busy?"

When Starlanko swung open the oaken door of his bedroom, he found an elven woman crouched on the head foot of the bed. Her position reminded Starlanko of the way Gargoyles sat on the edges of old temples, just before they swooped down and attacked their victims. The thief intruder was dressed all in black, with a small pack on her back, and several daggers on her belt.

Starlanko bit his lip before continuing. "Kamril, this is Vox. We worked together at one point. Vox, this is Kamril, an old friend of mine. Vox," Starlanko asked, forcing himself to be patient, "what are you doing in my room?"

"I broke in," she replied.

"I can see that. I mean, why did you break into my room?"

"I have a job for you."

"I didn't know you were my employer."

"I have a job that I need your help on."

"I thought you worked alone."

Vox grit her teeth. "Yes, I do work alone, but—"

"I thought you said you worked together before," Kamril interjected.

"We didn't work together as much as we tried to steal the same thing," Starlanko explained. "But we didn't steal it because stealing is wrong."

"But now she wants your help stealing something else?" Kamril asked.

"It's not really stealing," Vox explained. "The people who owned the items have been dead for thousands of years."

"The ancient civilization?" Starlanko asked.

"Exactly."

"A puzzle box?" Starlanko asked.

"It is indeed," Vox replied. Puzzle box was an adventuring term for trap and puzzle filled vaults used by members of the ancient civilization to store their valuables. Many of them also contained ancient magical constructs that would attack intruders on sight. "The former owners were a group of powerful wizards: Crimson Eagles."

"Intriguing. And why exactly do you need my help?"

"The way the puzzle box is set up," said Vox. "We need to flick three switches at the same time. Since most of the other people I know are thieves, I don't really trust them. I've got through most of the box already. Minimal risk, large rewards and probably back up copies of the Crimson Eagle's spellbooks."

"Sounds good. What are you not telling me?" Starlanko asked.

"I'd rather not say."

"Let me think about it," said Starlanko. "I'll get back to you in the morning."

"We need to leave now."

"And why is that exactly?" Starlanko asked.

"I'd rather not say."

"If that's the way it is going to be, Vox. I'm afraid I'll have to pass."

"I figured you'd say that, which is why I stole your spellbook."

"You what? You can't have stolen my spellbook. It's in my *bag of holding*."

"Is it?"

Starlanko reached into his bag of holding. Inside he found a book that looked remarkably like his spellbook, but which, upon closer examination, was filled with blank pages.

"I'm allowed to kill you for that, you know. No magistrate in the world will convict me."

"If you kill me you'll never find your spellbook again. It's not as though you've never stolen a spell book yourself."

The object that Starlanko and Vox had both tried to steal previously was a spellbook. Fortunately, Vox had only wanted the massive jewels encrusting the spellbook, and thus they were able to work out a compromise. Starlanko was losing hope that he could



find a suitable compromise in this situation.

"Could I at least..." Starlanko motioned with his head toward Kamril.

"So... ten, fifteen minutes?" Vox asked.

"It will take longer than that, I'm sure," said Starlanko.

"Let's hope so," said Kamril.

"You have a hour."

One hour later, Starlanko was knocking on the room occupied by Candessa Voliar. After a few minutes the door opened a crack.

"What?"

"We have a job."

"Great, can we talk about it in the morning?" Candessa asked.

"I don't think so. It seems critical that we leave soon."

"Well, it will have to wait. I'm busy right now."

"It can't wait."

"I mean: I'm *busy* right now. Why don't you just do the job without me?"

"Vox, she says she doesn't want to come."

There was a popping sound in Candessa's room, and smoke billowed from the crack in the doorway, but there was no heat to suggest a fire. When the smoke cleared, Vox stood not far behind Candessa.

"You must be Candessa," Vox said. "I've stolen your spellbook also. If you want it back, you'll have to assist me."

Candessa whirled around. "I'm allowed to kill you for that you know. No magistrate in the world will convict me."

"If you kill me you'll never find your spellbook again."

Candessa grit her teeth. "Could I at least..." Candessa motioned with his head, towards something Starlanko could not see within the room.

"So... ten, fifteen minutes?" Vox asked.

"It will take longer than that," said a male voice.

"Let's hope so," said Candessa.

"You have a hour."

Sixteen minute later Starlanko, Redreck, Candessa, and Vox left for the puzzle box.

The puzzle box was located several miles into the Dark Woods, the massive forest that made up the much of the northern border of the domain of man. Though the sun had risen, the floor of the forest was kept in a perpetual twilight by the canopy of leaves overhead.

Vox had not lied about the existence of the puzzle box, which both comforted Starlanko the Magnificent and made him slightly nervous. The entrance was far from ornate. It was simply a hole in the ground with a ladder leading downwards. When it had been in use, illusions, or possibly a large stone probably would have concealed the hole. Now a mesh of decaying leaves did the trick. Starlanko doubted that anybody could have found the entrance simply by wandering around the woods.

"How did you find out about this puzzle box anyway?" Starlanko asked upon reaching their destination.

"It's better you don't know," Vox replied.

"I usually prefer to be as informed as possible."

"Sometimes it's good to have plausible deniability."

Starlanko chose not to press the issue.

"Let's do it," Vox suggested.

"Ladies first."

Just as Vox put her foot on the top rung of the ladder, somebody shouted from the woods. "Leska Vail, you are under arrest."

"Everybody down now," Vox commanded. Vox barreled down the stone ladder. When she reached the bottom, she dismounted by jumping several feet to the side.

"Don't step on the stone right below the ladder."

"It's trapped?" asked Candessa.

"Yes."

After Candessa got to the floor safely, Starlanko jumped from the bottom rung of the ladder, making sure not to hit the stone directly below him.

"What happens if you step on the stone?" Starlanko asked.

"I'm not sure," Vox said, "but it's definitely trapped. My guess is that it seals off the entrance for a few days. That's what I'd do. And they don't show signs of violent death." Vox pointed to a clump of skeletons in the corner. "It could have been toxic gas. Or negative energy. Negative energy doesn't leave a trace." At least Vox knew her trade very well.

As soon as Redreck also managed to get safely past the booby-trapped stone, Vox demanded, "Everyone hide, and keep quite." She disappeared into the shadows. Starlanko and Candessa both turned themselves invisible. Redreck did what he could.

Above them, the adventurers heard voices.

"I'm sure I saw her, sir," said an airy tenor.

"I did too," said a gruff baritone. "Here's her tracks, and... well well, what have we here?"

"Shall I investigate, sir?"

The baritone must have nodded, because a man, or rather an elf, soon descended the ladder. He was short and lithe, even by elven standards, but his muscles were well toned, indicating years of training. He was lightly dressed and carried no visible weapons. Starlanko guessed that he was one of those warriors who used his fists and feet in combat.

As he climbed down, the elf's eyes pierced through the shadows, searching for signs of his quarry, but he made no indication of seeing anything. He inched down the ladder in grim silence, until he finally came to the penultimate step, and the silence was broken.

"Prithee good sir!" Shouted Funbane. "Do not step on the stone right below thee!"

"What?" The elf stepped on the stone. The entrance rumbled and scraped. The window of light contracted, until it let in only a sliver of sunshine. Starlanko and Candessa both cast *light*.

"Starlanko, can't you keep that sword of yours under control," Vox complained.

"Don't blame this on me, or my sword. You're the one being chased by the authorities, and because we're with you he's probably going to think we're accomplices, which we're not by the way," Starlanko now addressed the confused elven monk. "Hello, my name is Starlanko the Magnificent. You may have heard of me? Nice to meet you. I just want to let you know that we are innocent bystanders, and completely uninvolved in any crimes this woman is alleged to have committed." Starlanko shook the monk's hand. The wizard had not yet dismissed his invisibility. The only person the confused monk could see was Redreck, so his eyes latched on to the armor bound warrior. Redreck shrugged.

"As a matter of fact," added Candessa, "We didn't even want to associate with this woman, she forced us to come by stealing our spell books."

"Speaking of stolen spooks..." Vox said.

"But the real point is that our new friend would have stepped on the stone anyway. At least Funbane tried to prevent it, unlike the rest of us who

would rather get trapped in a vault so we can remain hidden."

"Yeah... well... you have short ears." Vox's classic elven insult somehow did not have its intended effect.

"Leska Vail, you are under arrest," the elven monk finally spoke.

"You said that already."

"Leska Vail, by order of Lord Dallius and by—"

"Oh, yes I know already. I give surrender; just get me out of here. Oh wait, you can't, because you set off the booby trap that locked us all in here."

"At least it wasn't poison gas," Candessa muttered.

"Umm..." The monk scuttled up the ladder. He spoke through the crack. "Sir, we seem to be stuck sir."

"Don't worry, Terren," said the baritone above. "We'll get you out of there. Hold on tight." There came a clanging like iron against stone. Then, "This might take a while, Little T. Hold tight, we'll think of something."

"If I had my spell book, I could teleport us out," Candessa said. "Unfortunately something seems to have happened to it."

"It wouldn't work," Vox said. "Puzzle boxes are all teleport proof. Don't want people to skip to the end. There's probably a reset button in the main vault. The best thing we can do is to get through this.

You can wait here if you want," she said the last part to the monk, evidently named Terren.

"I will not let you out of my sight, Leska Vail."

"Then you'll have to come with us."

"It would be inappropriate for an officer in Lord Dallius's special forces to aid and or abet the enemy," Terren said.

"Then you'll have to wait here," Vox replied.

Starlanko sighed. This was obviously going nowhere. "What do you need our help with?" he asked.

"The switches. I'll show you."

"You coming, Little T?" Starlanko asked the monk. Starlanko was still invisible.

"If I must. I will not let you out of my sight, Leska Vail."

Vox lead the rest through the twisting and turning hallways, often through secret doors, and often having to climb up and down, sometimes on a ladder, sometimes on a rope that Vox provided. The group was soon dangling from a rope above a bed of spikes; Vox was opening a secret door that was built into the side of a pit trap.

"I don't know which is more impressive, the creativity that went into creating this place, or the amount of it you've mastered," commented Starlanko. Then another thought occurred to him: most puzzle boxes were guarded by magical automatons, but they had not encountered one. "Did you take care of the construct also, or where there none to begin with?"

"There were none. It makes you nervous too?"

The secret passage led them down a hallway, which soon came to a crossing. "In each direction there is an identical room. Entrance only from the ceiling. Only thing in the room is a single switch. We need to flip them all at the same time. Now we'll need a way to co-ordinate it."

"If I had access to my spellbook," said Candessa. "I could cast *what's-his-name's telepathic bond* but as it stands..."

"I've got a little spell I could cast that make a loud noise," Starlanko said. "We could try that."

"Fine," Vox replied.

They divided into three groups, Starlanko and Candessa were in one room, Vox and Terren (who still would not let Vox out of his sight) where in another, and Redreck and Funbane were in the Third. Starlanko had lent the sword to Redreck, because Funbane insisted that all groups should have equal numbers.

When he was confident that the others were in place, Starlanko cast his spell, and Candessa flicked the switch. Two sounds followed almost immediately. The first was a quick swish, like the movement of a blade. Starlanko figured out the cause when the rope they used to enter the room fell to the floor, obviously sliced on one end.

The second sound was a grinding caused by stone sliding against stone, a door opened, releasing a metallic statue the shape of a man. The statue took a step towards Starlanko.

"Fly?" Starlanko suggested.

"Fly," Candessa agreed.

While flying back through the corridor, Starlanko noticed another hole in the roof he had not noticed before, directly over the crossing they had just split from. He would investigate it later.

Starlanko and Candessa whizzed to Redreck's room. They touched down as the ironclad warrior finished laying waste to an iron-crafted warrior.

"You okay?" Starlanko asked.

Redreck nodded, and swigged down a potion.

"We should probably go make sure Vox and Terren aren't dead."

Redreck looked at Starlanko.

"I know, but they're still human, or elves. And I kind of need to get my spell book back."

"And Terren is kind of cute," Candessa added.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means I think he's cute. What, you jealous?"

"No."

"That's funny, you sound like you're jealous."

"I'm not."

"Good, because you have no right to be."

A rope fell from the ceiling and Vox descended, followed by Terren.

"Vox, we were just talking about you."

"You too, Terren." Candessa winked. Terren blushed.

"Did you notice the hole in the roof?" Starlanko asked.

"Of course. Let's go reap our reward."

In a matter of minutes the party climbed up to the new portal opened in the ceiling, and found it that it lead directly to the storage post of the Crimson Eagles. It was a small unadorned chamber, but the contents were more than enough to make up for the room's lack of splendor. Inside there were chests filled with gold, magic items galore, and best of all, a copy of the spell book used by the Crimson Eagles.

"Yoink," Starlanko said, and dropped the spellbook into his *bag of holding*, along with a few other trinkets. Vox loaded herself up with most of the magic items.

"You won't be needing those where you're going," Terren said. Vox ignored him. Candessa and Redreck also took their fair share of treasure.

The monk noticed a large red button in the far corner of the room.

"Is this the reset button you were speaking of?" Terren asked as he pushed the button. The ceiling opened up and hurtled all of them out into the open air. The ground closed again behind them, and they

landed on the grass of the Dark Woods.

"Leska Vail, you are under arrest," the gruff baritone voice from before said. The speaker was also an elf, clad in leather and wielding two swords. A large bear accompanied him.

"What in the world could that be?" Vox shouted and pointed behind the latest elf. She threw a small sphere to the ground, and the area filled with smoke. When the air cleared, Vox was gone.

"Hello, my name is Starlanko the Magnificent. You may have heard of me? Nice to meet you. I just want you to know that we are innocent bystanders, and completely uninvolved in any crimes that woman is alleged to have committed." Starlanko shook the baritone elf's hand.

"As a matter of fact," added Candessa, "We didn't even want to associate with that woman, she forced us to come by stealing our spell books."

After a long process of questioning by the elven commander, Starlanko, Candessa, and Redreck where eventually released. They returned to Laughing Goblin Tavern in the city of Mazalax. Starlanko spent the entire journey thinking about how he could recreate or relocate the spells that had vanished when Vox had taken his spell book. Now that she had disappeared he doubted he would ever see his book again.

But when he entered the room he had rented, to Starlanko's great surprise, he found a spellbook that looked very much like his own sitting on his bed. He opened it hesitantly, in fear that it might be blank, but indeed, it was his spell book. Starlanko leafed through the book, stopping now and then to reminisce

about spells he had not prepared in several years. When Starlanko came to the first of the blank pages, the pages that would soon host spells crafted by the Crimson Eagles, he found a slip of paper inserted. On it was a note, which read:

*Leska Vail isn't my real name either. We shall meet again.*

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by Lance Kepner

# Bardic Fortes: A Revisionist Take on the d20 Bard Class

## Overview

The bard in history was an important element in the function of society. Bards acted as diplomatic liaisons between factions bringing tidings and news from their travels near and far. The bard was the harbinger of news of floods, drought, crop loss, heroic tales, marriages, and wars. But the bard wasn't resigned to be simply a traveling informer, for he had many skills with which to make his living. Singing, dancing, oratory, juggling, and all around performing were the bard's trades. They were not only expert musicians but also finely skilled craftsmen and poets that wove epic stories into multicultural and multi-national phenomena. The most renowned works of the ancient era that survive to this day survive because the bard kept the story alive until writing became a practice. Without the bard recounting the works of Homer we would have no *Odysseus*, and without the tale of *Beowulf* where would our monsters come from?

But the term bard is being used generally to describe a plethora of different figures. The bard we are familiar with today in fantasy gaming is actually just one of many variations. The Celtic song-singer and orator was called a bard, the Norse poet and warrior, a scop or skald. Even the English term for druid has a direct link to the bard.

This article is an overview of the fantasy bard and includes a core class revision to the d20 fantasy bard.

## Fantasy Bards

In a fantasy world, the bard can be the most important figure to a campaign or she can be nothing but a juggling act. The choice, while ultimately up to the player on what he wishes to play, is also dictated by the DM's view of bardic roles in society. While historical bards could only describe with flair and charisma, the bards of your fantasy world can show and enhance through magic and supernatural ability. Imagine a historical bard recounting the trials of *Beowulf* as he fought the dragon through words alone; now imagine the impact of illusion and sound in addition to the compelling oratory. The fantasy bard has all the tools at her disposal to be the ultimate crafter of the imagination.

But entertaining patrons at the local inn or royal court is but one aspect of the life of a fantasy bard. The fantasy world is ripe with dangers that lurk in mysterious forests and jungles, deep, dark caves, and dungeons. And so the fantasy bard would go in search of hidden mysteries and lore to keep up with the competition. Bards would often venture out into the wilds with companions to record their tales of heroism or brutality. Even evil bards play a vital role in the fantasy world, for they are the worm-tongues of the age.



With all of the options open to a fantasy character, especially a bard, it seems logical that one would specialize, much like a wizard. While the old saying, "jack-of-all trades, master of none" is appropriate for a bard, it does not seem particularly viable. Yes, the fantasy bard has a vast array of tools at her disposal such as a wide range of skills, magic, and some limited combat potential, but the focus of a bard should be on her performance. How better to improve your performances than to incorporate every act of life into them?

One would think that a bard would be in endless pursuit of mastering her performing abilities through any means available—training or magical. This is why we see very few virtuosos today, the truly gifted musicians capable of picking up any instrument and playing it. While many have the talent and gift of music, few reach that pinnacle of success on every instrument in an orchestra, but rather specialize into one particular instrument or medium of entertainment. Anyone who knows about music will tell you that the classifications of instruments are generally easy to play once you have the basics of one instrument down. For instance, someone skilled in the guitar could easily pick up a banjo or mandolin and play, or a trumpeter could quickly pick up the knack of the tuba or trombone. However, truly mastering multiple instruments is usually not a common practice. It is this versatility in specialization that makes the bard so unique.

### Changing the Way You Think About Bards

What follows is a core class change to the d20 fantasy bard. Bards no longer gain a base set of bardic music abilities through class levels. Instead they choose a forte, a focus or specialization in an area they want to pursue, and follow that course throughout their bardic career. These fortes are not just for show; they grant the bard access to new spells that would normally otherwise not be on their list, new bardic music abilities, and even new bonus feats and feat choices. Much like wizard specialization and clerical domains, the bardic fortes represent a conscious choice and effort on the part of the bard to enhance their skills. As is such, some fortes require more training and dedication than others, and it precisely this dedication and specialization that makes each forte and bard unique.

Unlike wizard specialization that is a true focus of talents, the bardic fortes represent a pre-disposition or predilection towards a common group of instruments or mental focus. Just because a bard has a woodwinds forte, for example, does not mean she lacks diplomacy or oratory skills. Those choices will always be up to the player, however, a forte does represent a serious commitment to the study and mastery of the element, and the rewards are well worth the discipline.

### The New Face of the Bard Class

With the changes to the bard class in the 3.5e revision, the song-spinner received a much needed boost from its old incarnation. The class has come a long way and has no grievous errors that make one unwilling, or unable, to play a bard solidly through all 20 levels. The following is simply an alternative suggestion, points of thought and plans of action for those players or dungeon masters out there that feel that the flavor or practice of the class needs something more.

**Table 1: The Bard**

Level	Base Attack Bonus	Fort Save	Ref Save	Will Save	<i>Special</i>	Spells per Day						
						0	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th
1st	+0	+0	+2	+2	Bardic music, bardic knowledge, forte	2	—	—	—	—	—	—
2nd	+1	+0	+3	+3		3	0	—	—	—	—	—
3rd	+2	+1	+3	+3		3	1	—	—	—	—	—
4th	+3	+1	+4	+4		3	2	0	—	—	—	—
5th	+3	+1	+4	+4		3	3	1	—	—	—	—
6th	+4	+2	+5	+5		3	3	2	—	—	—	—
7th	+5	+2	+5	+5		3	3	2	0	—	—	—
8th	+6/+1	+2	+6	+6		3	3	3	1	—	—	—
9th	+6/+1	+3	+6	+6		3	3	3	2	—	—	—
10th	+7/+2	+3	+7	+7		3	3	3	2	0	—	—
11th	+8/+3	+3	+7	+7		3	3	3	3	1	—	—
12th	+9/+4	+4	+8	+8		3	3	3	3	2	—	—
13th	+9/+4	+4	+8	+8		3	3	3	3	2	0	—
14th	+10/+5	+4	+9	+9		4	3	3	3	3	1	—
15th	+11/+6/+1	+5	+9	+9		4	4	3	3	3	2	—
16th	+12/+7/+2	+5	+10	+10		4	4	4	3	3	2	0
17th	+12/+7/+2	+5	+10	+10		4	4	4	4	3	3	1
18th	+13/+8/+3	+6	+11	+11		4	4	4	4	4	3	2
19th	+14/+9/+4	+6	+11	+11		4	4	4	4	4	4	3
20th	+15/+10/+5	+6	+12	+12		4	4	4	4	4	4	4

**Table 2: Bard Spells Known**

Level	Spells Known						
	0	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th
1st	4	—	—	—	—	—	—
2nd	5	2 <sup>1</sup>	—	—	—	—	—
3rd	6	3	—	—	—	—	—
4th	6	3	2 <sup>1</sup>	—	—	—	—
5th	6	4	3	—	—	—	—
6th	6	4	3	—	—	—	—
7th	6	4	4	2 <sup>1</sup>	—	—	—
8th	6	4	4	3	—	—	—
9th	6	4	4	3	—	—	—
10th	6	4	4	4	2 <sup>1</sup>	—	—
11th	6	4	4	4	3	—	—
12th	6	4	4	4	3	—	—
13th	6	4	4	4	4	2 <sup>1</sup>	—
14th	6	4	4	4	4	3	—
15th	6	4	4	4	4	3	—
16th	6	5	4	4	4	4	2 <sup>1</sup>
17th	6	5	5	4	4	4	3
18th	6	5	5	5	4	4	3
19th	6	5	5	5	5	4	4
20th	6	5	5	5	5	5	4

<sup>1</sup> Provided the bard has a high enough Charisma score to have a bonus spell of this level.

The following is the revised bard core class. You will note that the only change is the removal of the standard bardic music abilities. In this revision, bards do not gain bardic music in the same fashion, although many of their fort abilities are very similar. Instead of gaining one set of abilities throughout their entire career, bards now choose a forte at first level. This forte is a chosen area of interest and serves to provide the bard a more focused approach to his craft. The forte grants the bard new spell choices, feats, and often a completely new set of bardic music abilities. The new forte rules and a large selection of example fortes are listed below.

**BARD**

**Alignment:** Any nonlawful.

**Hit Die:** d6

*Class Skills*

The bard's class skills (and the key ability for each skill) are Appraise (Int), Balance (Dex), Bluff (Cha), Climb (Str), Concentration (Con), Craft (Int), Decipher Script (Int), Diplomacy (Cha), Disguise (Cha), Escape Artist (Dex), Gather Information (Cha), Hide (Dex), Jump (Str), Knowledge (all skills, taken individually) (Int), Listen (Wis), Move Silently (Dex), Perform (Cha), Profession (Wis), Sense Motive (Wis), Sleight of Hand (Dex), Speak Language (n/a), Spellcraft (Int), Swim (Str), Tumble (Dex), and Use Magic Device (Cha).

**Skill Points at 1st Level:** (6 + Int modifier) x4.

**Skill Points at Each Additional Level:** 6 + Int modifier.

*Class Features*

All of the following are class features of the bard.

**Weapon and Armor Proficiency:** A bard is proficient with all simple weapons, plus the longsword, rapier, sap, short sword, shortbow, and whip. Bards are proficient with light armor and shields (except tower shields). A bard can cast bard spells while wearing light armor without incurring the normal arcane spell failure chance. However, like any other arcane spellcaster, a bard wearing medium or heavy armor or using a shield incurs a chance of arcane spell failure if the spell in question has a somatic component (most do). A multiclass bard still incurs the normal arcane spell failure chance for arcane spells received from other classes.

**Spells:** A bard casts arcane spells, which are drawn from the bard spell list. He can cast any spell he knows without preparing it ahead of time. Every bard spell has a verbal component (singing, reciting, or

music). To learn or cast a spell, a bard must have a Charisma score equal to at least 10 + the spell. The Difficulty Class for a saving throw against a bard's spell is 10 + the spell level + the bard's Charisma modifier.

Like other spellcasters, a bard can cast only a certain number of spells of each spell level per day. His base daily spell allotment is given on Table: The Bard. In addition, he receives bonus spells per day if he has a high Charisma score. When Table: Bard Spells Known indicates that the bard gets 0 spells per day of a given spell level, he gains only the bonus spells he would be entitled to based on his Charisma score for that spell level.

The bard's selection of spells is extremely limited. A bard begins play knowing four 0-level spells of your choice. At most new bard levels, he gains one or more new spells, as indicated on Table: Bard Spells Known. (Unlike spells per day, the number of spells a bard knows is not affected by his Charisma score; the

DC	Type of Knowledge
10	Common, known by at least a substantial minority drinking; common legends of the local population.
20	Uncommon but available, known by only a few people legends.
25	Obscure, known by few, hard to come by.
30	Extremely obscure, known by very few, possibly forgotten by most who once knew it, possibly known only by those who don't understand the significance of the knowledge.

numbers on Table: Bard Spells Known are fixed.)

Upon reaching 5th level, and at every third bard level after that (8th, 11th, and so on), a bard can choose to learn a new spell in place of one he already knows. In effect, the bard "loses" the old spell in exchange for the new one. The new spell's level must be the same as that of the spell being exchanged, and it must be at least two levels lower than the highest-level bard spell the bard can cast. A bard may swap only a single spell at any given level, and must choose whether or not to swap the spell at the same time that he gains new spells known for the level.

As noted above, a bard need not prepare his spells in advance. He can cast any spell he knows at any time, assuming he has not yet used up his allotment of spells per day for the spell's level.

**Bardic Knowledge:** A bard may make a special bardic knowledge check with a bonus equal to his bard level + his Intelligence modifier to see whether he knows some relevant information about local notable people, legendary items, or noteworthy places. (If the bard has 5 or more ranks in Knowledge (history), he gains a +2 bonus on this check.)

A successful bardic knowledge check will not reveal the powers of a magic item but may give a hint as to its general function. A bard may not take 10 or take 20 on this check; this sort of knowledge is essentially random.

**Bardic Music:** Once per day per bard level, a bard can use his song or poetics to produce magical effects on those around him (usually including himself, if desired). While these abilities fall under the category of bardic music and the descriptions discuss singing or playing instruments, they can all be activated by reciting poetry, chanting, singing lyrical songs, singing melodies, whistling, playing an instrument, or playing an instrument in combination with some spoken performance. Each ability requires both a minimum bard level and a minimum number of ranks in the Perform skill to qualify; if a bard does not have the required number of ranks in at least one Perform

skill, he does not gain the bardic music ability until he acquires the needed ranks.

Starting a bardic music effect is a standard action. Some bardic music abilities require concentration, which means the bard must take a standard action each round to maintain the ability. Even while using bardic music that doesn't require concentration, a bard cannot cast spells, activate magic items by spell completion (such as scrolls), or activate magic items by magic word (such as wands). Just as for casting a spell with a verbal component, a deaf bard has a 20% chance to fail when attempting to use bardic music. If he fails, the attempt still counts against his daily limit.

**Forte:** A bard is often called a jack of all trades, master of none. This may be somewhat true but most bards tend to excel at one specific form of their craft be it oratory, singing, dancing, or playing a set of instruments. The forte is a specialized area of study that the bard undertakes to heighten his skills and increase his abilities. Fortes grant a number of benefits to the bard. First, there may be new spells added to the general bard spell list as found in the *Player's Handbook*. Second, there are bardic music abilities specific to each forte. Last, some fortes focus more on other trades of the bard and may grant them more combat or magical abilities.

A bard can only choose a Forte when she takes the first class level in bard. Once a bard has chosen a forte she may not change specializations. A forte represents more than just a choice, but rather an innate inner talent and a dedication to one specific path of entertainment. Fortes have two base requirements to use the abilities, a number of sufficient ranks in the appropriate Perform skill, and a base bard level. Even if you meet one of the requirements you cannot use the forte ability until you fulfill both requirements. If you do not meet the requisites for a forte ability you cannot use it, but still may use other abilities of the same forte and continue to gain abilities.

### *Ex-Bards*

A bard who becomes lawful in alignment cannot progress in levels as a bard, though he retains all his bard abilities.

### **Brass [FORTE]**

**Requirements:** Perform (brass) 4 ranks, bard level 1.

You have chosen to focus on the strong and forceful brass instruments.

**Granted Ability:** Because of the loud nature of brass instruments and their requisite lung capacity, your bardic music range is doubled.

**Bardic Music Abilities:** The following abilities are available to a bard that has chosen the Brass Forte.

*Blaring Countersong (Su):* A bard with 3 or more ranks in a Perform (brass) skill can use his music to counter magical effects that depend on sound (but not spells that simply have verbal components). Each round of the countersong, he makes a Perform (brass) check. Any creature within 60 feet of the bard (including the bard himself) that is affected by a sonic or language-dependent magical attack may use the bard's Perform (brass) check result in place of its saving throw if, after the saving throw is rolled, the Perform (brass) check result proves to be higher. If a creature within range of the countersong is already under the effect of a noninstantaneous sonic or language-dependent magical attack, it gains another saving throw against the effect each round it hears the countersong, but it must use the bard's Perform (brass) check result for the save. Blaring countersong has no effect against effects that don't allow saves. The bard may maintain the countersong for 10 rounds.

*Herald (Sp):* A bard of at least 3<sup>rd</sup> level and with 6 or more ranks in Perform (brass) skill can use his brass instrument with such flair as to herald the arrival of his allies into battle. If the bard performs



a herald as an initiator in a surprise round, or the first round of a normal encounter, all allies gain a +1 bonus to their initiative. This bonus increases to +2 at 6<sup>th</sup> level, +3 at 9<sup>th</sup>, +4 at 12<sup>th</sup>, +5 at 15<sup>th</sup>, and +6 at 18<sup>th</sup>. The ally must be within 60 feet and able to see and hear the bard. The bard must also be able to see the ally. This ability is a standard action.

**Expertise (Su):** A bard of 3rd level or higher with 6 or more ranks in a Perform (brass) skill can use his music to help an ally succeed at a task. The ally must be within 60 feet and able to see and hear the bard. The bard must also be able to see the ally.

The ally gets a +2 competence bonus on skill checks with a particular skill as long as he or she continues to hear the bard's music. Certain uses of this ability are infeasible. The effect lasts as long as the bard concentrates, up to a maximum of 2 minutes. A bard can't inspire competence in himself. Inspire competence is a mind-affecting ability.

**Retro (Su):** A bard of at least 6<sup>th</sup> level and with 9 or more ranks in Perform (brass) skill can use music to rebuke some spells. To use this ability the bard must be ready to counterspell, and meet all the requirements of a normal counterspell. In place of casting the same spell the bard makes a Perform (brass) check vs. the spellcaster's caster level check. If the bard wins the check, the spell is rebuked through music and countered. You may only use this ability on spells that require a ranged touch attack and are targeting you.

**Amplitude (Su):** A bard of 9<sup>th</sup> level or higher with 12 or more ranks in Perform (brass) skill can use music to inspire greatness in himself or a single willing ally within 60 feet, granting him or her extra fighting capability. For every three levels a bard attains beyond 9<sup>th</sup>, he can target one additional ally with a single use of this ability (two at 12<sup>th</sup> level, three at 15<sup>th</sup>, four at 18<sup>th</sup>). To inspire greatness, a bard must sing and an ally must hear him sing. The effect lasts for as long as the ally hears the bard sing and for 5 rounds thereafter. A creature inspired with greatness gains 2 bonus Hit Dice (d10s), the commensurate

number of temporary hit points (apply the target's Constitution modifier, if any, to these bonus Hit Dice), a +2 competence bonus on attack rolls, and a +1 competence bonus on Fortitude saves. The bonus Hit Dice count as regular Hit Dice for determining the effect of spells that are Hit Dice dependant. Inspire greatness is a mind-affecting ability.

**Blaring Rebuttal (Su):** A bard of 11<sup>th</sup> level or higher with 13 or more ranks in Perform (brass) skill can further counter a spell and instead of using music to dissipate the spell can instead turn it back on the caster. To use this ability the bard must meet all the requirements of a normal counterspell and make an opposed Perform (brass) check vs. the spellcaster's caster level check. If the bard wins the check the spell's target is redirected to the spellcaster. You may only use this ability on spells that require a ranged touch attack and are targeting you.

**Herald of Freedom (Sp):** A bard of 12<sup>th</sup> level or higher with 15 or more ranks in Perform (brass) skill can use music to create an effect equivalent to the *break enchantment* spell (caster level equals the character's bard level). Using this ability requires 1 minute of uninterrupted concentration and music, and it functions on a single target within 60 feet. A bard can't use *song of freedom* on himself.

**Championism (Su):** A bard of 15<sup>th</sup> level or higher with 18 or more ranks in Perform (brass) skill can use music to inspire tremendous heroism in himself or a single willing ally within 60 feet. For every three bard levels the character attains beyond 15<sup>th</sup>, he can inspire heroics in one additional creature. To inspire heroics, a bard must sing and an ally must hear the bard sing for a full round. A creature so inspired gains a +4 morale bonus on saving throws and a +4 dodge bonus to AC. The effect lasts for as long as the ally hears the bard sing and for up to 5 rounds thereafter. Inspire heroics is a mind-affecting ability.

**Spell List Additions:** Add the following spells to the standard bard spell list as found in the *Player's Handbook*.

## Juggling Weapons

Juggling weapons are specially weighted versions of any simple or martial light melee weapon at an increased cost of 25%. Although a bard juggles three or more weapons at once, she may only make iterative attacks if her base attack, feat, or special ability allows it. Juggling weapons can be used for either melee attacks or ranged attacks. If used for a ranged attack, the bard does not provoke an attack of opportunity for using the weapon in melee. Note, however, that the range on any juggling weapon is only 5 ft and any attack outside of that range denies the bard use of that particular weapon until she picks it up (or it returns to her hand through magical means). A bard using a juggling weapon does not receive a -4 penalty for using a melee weapon as a ranged weapon.

Typically, a bard begins by juggling three weapons and attacking with them alternately. When a bard gains an iterative attack based on base attack bonus, she can increase the number of weapons she juggles (but still may only attack as per her attack bonus). Juggling weapons always start at three, and each is considered a normal weapon for purposes of magically enchanting them (therefore it is possible to enchant all three with the same or different abilities).

For example, a 10<sup>th</sup> level bard has a base attack bonus of +7/+2 and the juggling forte. This allows the bard to juggle 4 weapons at once (base 3 and then an extra one for the second attack bonus) but still only attack twice in one round as a full-attack action (barring any other feats).

Two weapon fighting does not apply to juggling weapons, although feats that affect throwing may.



## 1ST-LEVEL BARD SPELLS

*Hold Portal*

*Enlarge Person*

## 3RD-LEVEL BARD SPELLS

*Explosive Runes*

## 4TH-LEVEL BARD SPELLS

*Fire Shield*

## 5TH-LEVEL BARD SPELLS

*Magic Jar*

## 6TH-LEVEL BARD SPELLS

*Forceful Hand*

### Dancing [FORTE]

**Requirements:** Perform (dancing) 4 ranks, bard level 1.

You have chosen to focus on the graceful appreciation of music in the form of dance.

**Granted Ability:** Dancing and practicing for so long have granted you superb movements. You gain the Dodge feat for free at 1<sup>st</sup> level even if you do not meet the prerequisites for the Dodge feat.

**Bardic Music Abilities:** The following abilities are available to a bard that has chosen the Dancing Forte.

*Note: Dancing is not music, but is still a forte, therefore most of these abilities are non-sound based, but still use a bardic music use upon activation.*

*Allure (Sp):* A bard with 3 or more ranks in a Perform (dancing) skill can use his performance to cause one or more creatures to become fascinated with him. Each creature to be fascinated must be within 30 feet, able to see the bard, and able to pay attention to him. The bard must also be able to see the creature. The distraction of a nearby combat or other dangers prevents the ability from working. For every two levels a bard attains beyond 1st, he can

target one additional creature with a single use of this ability.

To use the ability, a bard makes a Perform (dancing) check. His check result is the DC for each affected creature's Will save against the effect. If a creature's saving throw succeeds, the bard cannot attempt to fascinate that creature again for 24 hours. If its saving throw fails, the creature sits quietly and watches, taking no other actions, for as long as the bard continues to perform and concentrate (up to a maximum of 1 round per bard level). While fascinated, a target takes a -4 penalty on skill checks made as reactions, such as Listen and Spot checks. Any potential threat requires the bard to make another Perform (dancing) check and allows the creature a new saving throw against a DC equal to the new Perform check result.

Any obvious threat, such as someone drawing a weapon, casting a spell, or aiming a ranged weapon at the target, automatically breaks the effect. *Allure* is an enchantment (compulsion), mind-affecting ability.

*Waltz (Ex):* A bard of 3<sup>rd</sup> level or higher with 6 or more ranks in Perform (dancing) skill can move with fine grace. For as long as the bard dances he gains the Mobility feat (if he does not already possess it) and a +1 bonus to AC. This bonus increases to +2 at 8<sup>th</sup> level, +3 at 12<sup>th</sup> level, +4 at 15<sup>th</sup> level, and +5 at 20<sup>th</sup> level.

*Subtlety (Sp):* A bard of 6th level or higher with 9 or more ranks in Perform (dancing) skill can make a *suggestion* (as the spell) to a creature that he has already fascinated (see above). Using this ability does not break the bard's concentration on the *allure* effect, nor does it allow a second saving throw against the *allure* effect.

Making a *suggestion* doesn't count against a bard's daily limit on bardic music performances. A Will saving throw (DC 10 + 1/2 bard's level + bard's Cha modifier) negates the effect. This ability affects only a single creature (but see *mass subtlety*, below). *Suggestion* is an enchantment (compulsion), mind-affecting, language dependent ability.

*Fandango (Ex):* A bard of at least 6<sup>th</sup> level and with 9 or more ranks in Perform (dancing) can lull an opponent or opponents into a false sense of security. While dancing, the bard can choose any one opponent within 30 ft to distract. The number of opponents a bard can distract increases to 2 at 10<sup>th</sup> level, 3 at 15<sup>th</sup> and 4 at 20<sup>th</sup>. The target makes a Sense Motive check (DC = Perform (dancing) result) or becomes flat-footed for 1 round and dazed for 1d4 rounds thereafter. If a target succeeds the target is merely dazed for 1 round.

*Tango (Ex):* A bard of at least 9<sup>th</sup> level and with 12 or more ranks in Perform (dancing) skill can perform a sensuous dance to entice a creature within 30 ft. The bard must dance for one full round and the creature must see the bard dance for the full round as well. After which time the creature's attitude towards the bard is increased by two degrees, and the creature suffers a -4 penalty to all Charisma based checks made against the bard as well as a -4 penalty to saving throws vs. the bard's *suggestion* ability or any mind-influencing compulsion spell the bard casts.

*Sword Dance (Ex):* A bard of at least 12<sup>th</sup> level and with 15 or more ranks in Perform (dancing) skill can perform a dance that catches his target off guard. The target of the dance loses his Dex bonus to AC to the bard, who can stab the victim with his weapon. This attack is a normal attack that if successful deals +1d6 points of damage. This damage increases by +1d6 every two bard levels afterwards to a max of +5d6 at 20<sup>th</sup> level. Dancing in this manner takes a standard action to initiate and the bard may take no other actions other than maintain the dance (move action) and attack the target. If the bard breaks the dance the target immediately regains composure. The dance and ability ends once the bard attacks the target (successful or not).

*Dance of Fate (Sp):* A bard of at least 15<sup>th</sup> level and with 18 or more ranks in Perform (dancing) skill can dance in an excited and undulating manner to create the same effect in all creatures within 30 ft. The creatures make a Will save (DC = Perform check) to resist the effect. If failed the creatures become

affected as per the *irresistible dance* spell. If the creature saves they suffer no ill effects. To use this ability the creatures must be able to see the bard and the bard must perform for 5 rounds.

*Mass Subtlety (Sp)*: This ability functions like *subtlety*, above, except that a bard of 18th level or higher with 21 or more ranks in a Perform skill can make the *suggestion* simultaneously to any number of creatures that he has already fascinated (see above). *Mass subtlety* is an enchantment (compulsion), mind-affecting, language-dependent ability.

**Spell List Additions:** Add the following spells to the standard bard spell list as found in the *Player's Handbook*.

#### 0-LEVEL BARD SPELLS (CANTRIPS)

*Touch of Fatigue*

#### 1ST-LEVEL BARD SPELLS

*Enlarge Person*

#### 2ND-LEVEL BARD SPELLS

*Nondetection*

#### 3RD-LEVEL BARD SPELLS

*Keen Edge*

#### 5TH-LEVEL BARD SPELLS

*Passwall*

#### 6TH-LEVEL BARD SPELLS

*Transformation*

### Juggling [FORTE]

**Requirements:** Perform (juggling) 4 ranks, bard level 1.

You have chosen to focus on stunning feats of juggling rather than music

**Granted Ability:** You have a gift for juggling and for getting into trouble, so you have developed a fighting style using specially made juggling weapons. These

are exotic weapons (one broad category) with which you automatically gain proficiency with at level 1.

**Bardic Music Abilities:** The following abilities are available to a bard that has chosen the Juggling Forte.

*Note: Juggling is not music, but is still a forte, therefore most of these abilities are non-sound based, but still use a bardic music use upon activation.*

*Engage (Sp)*: A bard with 3 or more ranks in a Perform (juggling) skill can use his performance to cause one or more creatures to become fascinated with him. Each creature to be fascinated must be within 30 feet, able to see the bard, and able to pay attention to him. The bard must also be able to see the creature. The distraction of a nearby combat or other dangers prevents the ability from working. For every two levels a bard attains beyond 1st, he can target one additional creature with a single use of this ability.

To use the ability, a bard makes a Perform (juggling) check. His check result is the DC for each affected creature's Will save against the effect. If a creature's saving throw succeeds, the bard cannot attempt to fascinate that creature again for 24 hours. If its saving throw fails, the creature sits quietly and watches, taking no other actions, for as long as the bard continues to perform and concentrate (up to a maximum of 1 round per bard level). While fascinated, a target takes a -4 penalty on skill checks made as reactions, such as Listen and Spot checks. Any potential threat requires the bard to make another Perform (juggling) check and allows the creature a new saving throw against a DC equal to the new Perform check result.

Any obvious threat, such as someone drawing a weapon, casting a spell, or aiming a ranged weapon at the target, automatically breaks the effect. *Engage* is an enchantment (compulsion), mind-affecting ability.

*Returning Act (Su)*: A bard of at least 5th level and with 8 or more ranks in Perform (juggling) can cause his juggling weapons to become magically

enchanted with the *returning* ability for 1 round per bard level. Activating this ability is a standard action. If at any time the bard enchants his juggling weapons to have the *returning* ability, a bard using *returning* act gains one extra attack at the highest base attack bonus for the duration of the ability.

*Gimmick(Sp)*: A bard of 6th level or higher with 9 or more ranks in Perform (juggling) skill can make a *suggestion* (as the spell) to a creature that he has already fascinated (see above). Using this ability does not break the bard's concentration on the *engage* effect, nor does it allow a second saving throw against the *engage* effect.

Making a *suggestion* doesn't count against a bard's daily limit on bardic music performances. A Will saving throw (DC 10 + 1/2 bard's level + bard's Cha modifier) negates the effect. This ability affects only a single creature (but see *mass gimmick*, below). *Gimmick* is an enchantment (compulsion), mind-affecting, language dependent ability.

*Spell Act (Sp)*: A bard of at least 9th level and with 12 or more ranks in Perform (juggling) skill can cast any touch spell they know into their juggling weapons and have that spell discharge upon impact with the target. Activating this ability takes a full-round action and the spell can be stored within the weapon for 1 round per bard level. This ability does not allow a bard to store a spell if he cannot cast it.

*Show Stopper (Sp)*: A bard of at least 12th level and with 15 or more ranks in Perform (juggling) skill can cast a touch spell he knows into each one of his juggling weapons. This allows the bard to potentially juggle three or more weapons with different stored spells. When the weapon impacts a target it discharges the spell. Spells can be stored within the weapon for 1 round per bard level. This ability does not allow a bard to store a spell if they cannot cast it.

*Grand Finale (Sp)*: A bard of at least 15th level and with 18 or more ranks in Perform (juggling) skill can use the *show stopper* ability all at once, on

one target. To do this the bard must have already used the above ability and not discharged any of the spells. The bard can hurl the weapons as multiple ranged touch attacks starting at his highest base attack bonus and suffering a -2 penalty for each consecutive attack (-2, then -4, then -6, etc.). Each attack that hits also discharges that spell. Resolve the attacks before resolving the spell effects. If one attack hits the bard can heighten (as per the metamagic feat) the spell freely, if two attacks hit the bard can maximize (as per the metamagic feat) one of the spells that hit freely, if three or more attacks succeeded the bard can choose a spell to both maximize and heighten (as per the metamagic feats) freely.

*Mass Gimmick (Sp):* This ability functions like *gimmick*, above, except that a bard of 18th level or higher with 21 or more ranks in a Perform skill can make the *suggestion* simultaneously to any number of creatures that he has already fascinated (see above). *Mass gimmick* is an enchantment (compulsion), mind-affecting, language-dependent ability.

**Spell List Additions:** Add the following spells to the standard bard spell list as found in the *Player's Handbook*.

#### 0-LEVEL BARD SPELLS (CANTRIPS)

*Touch of Fatigue*

#### 1ST-LEVEL BARD SPELLS

*Chill Touch*

*Shocking Grasp*

#### 2ND-LEVEL BARD SPELLS

*Ghoul Touch*

*Touch of Idiocy*

#### 3RD-LEVEL BARD SPELLS

*Vampiric Touch*

#### 4TH-LEVEL BARD SPELLS

*Enervation*

#### 5TH-LEVEL BARD SPELLS

*Telekinesis*

#### 6TH-LEVEL BARD SPELLS

*Disintegrate*

#### Keyboard [FORTE]

**Requirements:** Perform (keyboards) 4 ranks, bard level 1.

You have chosen to focus on the intellectual and grand sounds of the keyboards.

**Note: Since keyboard instruments are quite large and bulky they are impossible to pull out and play on a whim (unless through magical means). Thus, most of the bardic music abilities in this forte are for NPCs or PCs that have a base of operations.**

**Granted Ability:** Focusing on such a bulky device has made you realize how important it is to borrow one. You have bartered for usage of such devices so much that you receive a +1 bonus to all Charisma based skill checks.

**Bardic Music Abilities:** The following abilities are available to a bard that has chosen the Keyboards Forte.

*Enrapture (Sp):* A bard with 3 or more ranks in a Perform (keyboards) skill can use his music to cause one or more creatures to become fascinated with him. Each creature to be fascinated must be within 200 feet, able to see and hear the bard and able to pay attention to him. The bard must also be able to see the creature. The distraction of a nearby combat or other dangers prevents the ability from working. For every two levels a bard attains beyond 1st, he can target one additional creature with a single use of this ability.

To use the ability, a bard makes a Perform (keyboards) check. His check result is the DC for each affected creature's Will save against the effect. If a creature's saving throw succeeds, the bard cannot attempt to fascinate that creature again for 24 hours.

If its saving throw fails, the creature sits quietly and listens to the song, taking no other actions, for as long as the bard continues to play and concentrate (up to a maximum of 1 round per bard level). While fascinated, a target takes a -4 penalty on skill checks made as reactions, such as Listen and Spot checks. Any potential threat requires the bard to make another Perform (keyboards) check and allows the creature a new saving throw against a DC equal to the new Perform check result.

Any obvious threat, such as someone drawing a weapon, casting a spell, or aiming a ranged weapon at the target, automatically breaks the effect. *Enrapture* is an enchantment (compulsion), mind-affecting ability.

*Savvy (Su):* A bard of 3rd level or higher with 6 or more ranks in a Perform (keyboards) skill can use his music to help an ally succeed at a task. The ally must be within 60 feet and able to see and hear the bard. The bard must also be able to see the ally.

The ally gets a +2 competence bonus on skill checks with a particular skill as long as he or she continues to hear the bard's music. Certain uses of this ability are infeasible. The effect lasts as long as the bard concentrates, up to a maximum of 2 minutes. A bard can't inspire competence in himself. Inspire competence is a mind-affecting ability.

*Dirge (Sp):* A bard of at least 6th level with 9 or more ranks in Perform (keyboards) skill can play a dirge so powerful it stirs the dead to re-animate. If a bard plays a dirge for 5 consecutive rounds he can summon undead as per the *animate dead* spell. He cannot control more HD of undead than a cleric of his level and Charisma. If you are a bard of good alignment the undead are infused with positive energy instead of negative energy and are instead corporeal spirits of fallen heroes.

*Stirring Performance (Su):* A bard of at least 9th level with 12 or more ranks in Perform (keyboards) skill can play music with such flair and grace as to

bolster his allies or minions. Any ally or minion within 120 ft of the bard and that is able to see and hear the bard play, gain 1 extra HD of their current HD type (gaining the appropriate amount of hit points) for as long as the bard plays (maximum number of rounds equal to bard level) and five rounds thereafter.

*Eminence (Su):* A bard of 9th level or higher with 12 or more ranks in Perform (keyboards) skill can use music to inspire greatness in himself or a single willing ally within 60 feet, granting him or her extra fighting capability. For every three levels a bard attains beyond 9th, he can target one additional ally with a single use of this ability (two at 12th level, three at 15th, four at 18th). To inspire greatness, a bard must sing and an ally must hear him sing. The effect lasts for as long as the ally hears the bard sing and for 5 rounds thereafter. A creature inspired with greatness gains 2 bonus Hit Dice (d10s), the commensurate number of temporary hit points (apply the target's Constitution modifier, if any, to these bonus Hit Dice), a +2 competence bonus on attack rolls, and a +1 competence bonus on Fortitude saves. The bonus Hit Dice count as regular Hit Dice for determining the effect of spells that are Hit Dice dependant. Eminence is a mind-affecting ability.

*Bestowal (Sp):* A bard of at least 11<sup>th</sup> level with 14 or more ranks in Perform (keyboards) skill can cause any one creature within 60 ft of the bard and that is able to see and hear the bard, to fall victim to a curse of the bard's choosing as per the spell *bestow curse*. For every three bard levels the character attains beyond 11th, he can curse one additional creature. To bestow a curse, a bard must play and a creature must hear the bard play for a full round.

*Song of Salvation (Sp):* A bard of 12th level or higher with 15 or more ranks in Perform (keyboards) skill can use music to create an effect equivalent to the *break enchantment* spell (caster level equals the character's bard level). Using this ability requires 1 minute of uninterrupted concentration and music, and it functions on a single target within 60 feet. A bard can't use *song of freedom* on himself.

*Grandiloquence (Su):* A bard of 15th level or higher with 18 or more ranks in Perform (keyboards) skill can use music to inspire tremendous heroism in himself or a single willing ally within 60 feet. For every three bard levels the character attains beyond 15th, he can inspire heroics in one additional creature. To inspire heroics, a bard must sing and an ally must hear the bard sing for a full round. A creature so inspired gains a +4 morale bonus on saving throws and a +4 dodge bonus to AC. The effect lasts for as long as the ally hears the bard sing and for up to 5 rounds thereafter. Inspire heroics is a mind-affecting ability.

*Ode to Joy/Hate (Su):* A bard of 20<sup>th</sup> level and with 23 or more ranks in Perform (keyboards) skill can play a song so great that it can be heard within 1 mile of the bard's location. The preparation for such an event costs the bard no less than 50,000gp to acquire and build the necessary amplification instruments. When played, the bard can choose any one of the following effects based on what song they play.

*Ode to Joy:* All creatures in the area of effect gain a +1 morale bonus to saving throws, or all creatures gain a +2 morale bonus to all skill checks, or all creatures are cured 1d4+1 hit points, or all evil creatures in the area suffer a -1 penalty to saving throws, or all evil creatures within the area lose 1d4-1 hit points.

*Ode to Hate:* All creatures in the effect gain a +1 bonus to weapon damage rolls, or all creatures in the area gain a +1 morale bonus to attack rolls, or all good creatures in the area suffer 1 point of ability damage (bard's choice), or all evil creatures in the area gain 1 temporary ability point (bard's choice).

No matter what song is chosen the effects are mind influencing and last for 24 hours. Using this ability uses up 20 bardic music uses, and a bard cannot use this ability unless they have all 20 uses. This ability can be used as many times as the bard wishes, but no more than once per day. Each activation takes 1d4+1 hours.

**Spell List Additions:** Add the following spells to the standard bard spell list as found in the *Player's Handbook*. A bard of good or evil alignment receives the appropriate spell choice (*cure* for good, *inflict* for evil. A neutral bard can choose between *cure* or *inflict*.)

#### 0-LEVEL BARD SPELLS (CANTRIPS)

*Cure Minor Wounds*

*Inflict Minor Wounds*

#### 1ST-LEVEL BARD SPELLS

*Cure Light Wounds*

*Inflict Light Wounds*

#### 2ND-LEVEL BARD SPELLS

*Cure Moderate Wounds*

*Inflict Moderate Wounds*

#### 3RD-LEVEL BARD SPELLS

*Cure Serious Wounds*

*Inflict Serious Wounds*

#### 4TH-LEVEL BARD SPELLS

*Cure Critical Wounds*

*Inflict Critical Wounds*

#### 5TH-LEVEL BARD SPELLS

*Cure Light Wounds, mass*

*Inflict Light Wounds, mass*

#### 6TH-LEVEL BARD SPELLS

*Heal*

*Harm*

#### Percussion [FORTE]

**Requirements:** Perform (drums) 4 ranks, bard level 1.

You have chosen to march to the tune of your own drum and pursue the rhythmic bass tones of the beat.

**Granted Ability:** By practicing for such a long time



you have finely honed your perceptions of rhythmic beats to the point where you can measure off one second of time with perfect accuracy.

**Bardic Music Abilities:** The following abilities are available to a bard that has chosen the Percussion Forte.

*Rhythmic Disturbance (Sp):* A bard of at least 1<sup>st</sup> level with 3 or more ranks in Perform (drums) skill can use his music to cause one or more creatures to become fascinated with him. Each creature to be fascinated must be within 90 feet, able to see and hear the bard, and able to pay attention to him. The bard must also be able to see the creature. The distraction of a nearby combat or other dangers prevents the ability from working. For every three levels a bard attains beyond 1st, he can target one additional creature with a single use of this ability.

To use the ability, a bard makes a Perform (drums) check. His check result is the DC for each affected creature's Will save against the effect. If a creature's saving throw succeeds, the bard cannot attempt to fascinate that creature again for 24 hours. If its saving throw fails, the creature sits quietly and listens to the song, taking no other actions, for as long as the bard continues to play and concentrate (up to a maximum of 1 round per bard level). While fascinated, a target takes a -4 penalty on skill checks made as reactions, such as Listen and Spot checks. Any potential threat requires the bard to make another Perform (drums) check and allows the creature a new saving throw against a DC equal to the new Perform check result.

Any obvious threat, such as someone drawing a weapon, casting a spell, or aiming a ranged weapon at the target, automatically breaks the effect. *Rhythmic Disturbance* is an enchantment (compulsion), mind-affecting ability.

*Stir the Blood (Su):* A bard of at least 1<sup>st</sup> level with 3 or more ranks in a Perform (drums) skill can use music to inspire courage in his allies (including himself), bolstering them against fear and

improving their combat abilities. To be affected, an ally must be able to hear the bard play. The effect lasts for as long as the ally hears the bard sing and for 5 rounds thereafter. An affected ally receives a +1 morale bonus on saving throws against charm and fear effects and a +1 morale bonus on attack and weapon damage rolls. At 6th level, and every five bard levels thereafter, this bonus increases by 1 (+2 at 6th, +3 at 11th, and +4 at 16th). Inspire courage is a mind-affecting ability.

*Up Tempo (Sp):* A bard of at least 3<sup>rd</sup> level with 6 or more ranks in Perform (drums) skill can speed up his allies (including himself) by playing music. To be affected an ally must be able to see and hear the bard and be within 30 ft. A bard may affect one ally per bard level. Affected allies are treated as if under the effects of *expeditious retreat* for a number of rounds equal to five plus the bard's level.

*Hammering Thunder (Su):* A bard of at least 6<sup>th</sup> level with 9 or more ranks in Perform (drums) skill can match his beat to the strikes of his comrades bludgeoning weapons to produce profound impacts. Any ally's bludgeoning weapon within 30 ft. of the bard becomes charged with sonic damage. Each strike made by an ally with a charged bludgeoning weapon deals an extra 1d8 points of sonic damage. An ally must be able to see and hear the bard for the effect to work. A bard can affect as many weapons as half his bard level.

*Plume (Su):* A bard of 9th level or higher with 12 or more ranks in a Perform (drums) skill can use music to inspire greatness in himself or a single willing ally within 30 feet, granting him or her extra fighting capability. For every three levels a bard attains beyond 9th, he can target one additional ally with a single use of this ability (two at 12th level, three at 15th, four at 18th). To inspire greatness, a bard must play and an ally must hear him play. The effect lasts for as long as the ally hears the bard play and for 5 rounds thereafter. A creature inspired with greatness gains 2 bonus Hit Dice (d10s), the commensurate number of temporary hit points (apply the target's Constitution modifier, if any, to

these bonus Hit Dice), a +2 competence bonus on attack rolls, and a +1 competence bonus on Fortitude saves. The bonus Hit Dice count as regular Hit Dice for determining the effect of spells that are Hit Dice dependant. *Plume* is a mind-affecting ability.

*Beat of Freedom (Sp):* A bard of 12th level or higher with 15 or more ranks in a Perform (drums) skill can use music to create an effect equivalent to the *break enchantment* spell (caster level equals the character's bard level). Using this ability requires 1 minute of uninterrupted concentration and music, and it functions on a single target within 30 feet. A bard can't use *song of freedom* on himself.

*Victory (Su):* A bard of 15th level or higher with 18 or more ranks in a Perform (drums) skill can use music to inspire tremendous heroism in himself or a single willing ally within 30 feet. For every two bard levels the character attains beyond 15th, he can inspire heroics in one additional creature. To inspire heroics, a bard must sing and an ally must hear the bard sing for a full round. A creature so inspired gains a +4 morale bonus on saving throws and a +4 dodge bonus to AC. The effect lasts for as long as the ally hears the bard play and for up to 5 rounds thereafter. Inspire heroics is a mind-affecting ability.

**Spell List Additions:** Add the following spells to the standard bard spell list as found in the *Player's Handbook*.

#### 0-LEVEL BARD SPELLS (CANTRIPS)

*Virtue*

#### 1ST-LEVEL BARD SPELLS

*Bane*

*Mount*

#### 2ND-LEVEL BARD SPELLS

*Bull's Strength*

*Soften Earth and Stone*

#### 3RD-LEVEL BARD SPELLS

*Animate Dead*



*Invisibility purge*

4TH-LEVEL BARD SPELLS

*Sleet Storm*

5TH-LEVEL BARD SPELLS

*Ice Storm*

*Stoneskin*

*Waves of Fatigue*

6TH-LEVEL BARD SPELLS

*Bull's Strength, Mass*

*Create Undead*

*Forbiddance*

*Forcecage*

### Strings [FORTE]

**Requirements:** Perform (strings) 4 ranks, bard level 1.

You have chosen to focus on the vicarious vibrations of the string instruments.

**Granted Ability:** By practicing for such long months on a wide array of emotional songs, you have learned to control your emotions better than most, granting you a  $+1-2$  bonus to Bluff.\_

**Bardic Music Abilities:** The following abilities are available to a bard that has chosen the Strings Forte.

*Surrendering Strings (Su):* A bard with 3 or more ranks in a Perform (strings) skill can use his music to counter magical effects that depend on sound (but not spells that simply have verbal components). Each round of the countersong, he makes a Perform (strings) check. Any creature within 30 feet of the bard (including the bard himself) that is affected by a sonic or language-dependent magical attack may use the bard's Perform (strings) check result in place of its saving throw if, after the saving throw is rolled, the Perform (strings) check result proves to be higher. If a creature within range

of the countersong is already under the effect of a noninstantaneous sonic or language-dependent magical attack, it gains another saving throw against the effect each round it hears the countersong, but it must use the bard's Perform (strings) check result for the save. *Surrendering Strings* has no effect against effects that don't allow saves. The bard may keep up the countersong for 10 rounds.

*Mesmerize (Sp):* A bard with 3 or more ranks in a Perform (strings) skill can use his music to cause one or more creatures to become fascinated with him. Each creature to be fascinated must be within 90 feet, able to see and hear the bard, and able to pay attention to him. The bard must also be able to see the creature. The distraction of a nearby combat or other dangers prevents the ability from working. For every two levels a bard attains beyond 1st, he can target one additional creature with a single use of this ability.

To use the ability, a bard makes a Perform (strings) check. His check result is the DC for each affected creature's Will save against the effect. If a creature's saving throw succeeds, the bard cannot attempt to fascinate that creature again for 24 hours. If its saving throw fails, the creature sits quietly and listens to the song, taking no other actions, for as long as the bard continues to play and concentrate (up to a maximum of 1 round per bard level). While fascinated, a target takes a  $-4$  penalty on skill checks made as reactions, such as Listen and Spot checks. Any potential threat requires the bard to make another Perform (strings) check and allows the creature a new saving throw against a DC equal to the new Perform check result.

Any obvious threat, such as someone drawing a weapon, casting a spell, or aiming a ranged weapon at the target, automatically breaks the effect. *Mesmerize* is an enchantment (compulsion), mind-affecting ability.

*Instill Doubt (Su):* A bard with 3 or more ranks in Perform (strings) skill can use songs to instill doubt in his enemies, weakening them against fear

and debilitating their combat abilities. To be affected, an opponent must be able to hear the bard sing. The effect lasts for as long as the opponent hears the bard sing and for 5 rounds thereafter. An affected opponent suffers a  $-1$  morale penalty on saving throws against charm and fear effects and a  $-1$  morale penalty on attack and weapon damage rolls. At 8th level and every six bard levels thereafter this penalty increases by 1 ( $-2$  at 8th,  $-3$  at 14th, and  $-4$  at 20th). *Mesmerize* is a mind-affecting ability.

*Impose (Sp):* A bard of 5th level or higher with 8 or more ranks in a Perform (strings) skill can make a *suggestion* (as the spell) to a creature that he has already fascinated (see above). Using this ability does not break the bard's concentration on the *mesmerize* effect, nor does it allow a second saving throw against the *mesmerize* effect.

Making a *suggestion* doesn't count against a bard's daily limit on bardic music performances. A Will saving throw (DC  $10 + 1/2$  bard's level + bard's Cha modifier) negates the effect. This ability affects only a single creature (but see *mass impose*, below). *Impose* is an enchantment (compulsion), mind-affecting, language dependent ability.

*Suspend Will (Su):* A bard of 9th level or higher with 12 or more ranks in Perform (strings) can use music to cause an emotional breakdown to a creature within 30 feet, making them almost completely helpless. For every three levels a bard attains beyond 9th, he can target one additional creature with a single use of this ability (two at 12th level, three at 15th, four at 18th). To *Suspend Will*, a bard must sing and a creature must hear him sing. The effect lasts for as long as the creature hears the bard sing and for 5 rounds thereafter. A creature of suspended will is disheartened about life and suffers a  $-4$  penalty to initiative, a  $-4$  penalty to saving throws and AC, and can only take a standard action each round. A creature may attempt a Will save (DC =  $10 + 1/2$  Perform (strings) check + bard's Charisma modifier) on the first round of the ability to overcome the loss of motivation. If successful the creature suffers only a  $-4$  penalty to initiative and cannot be

affected by the same bard's Suspend Will again for 24 hours. *Suspend Will* penalties do not stack with those from *Instill Doubt*.

*Inspire Heroics (Su)*: A bard of 15th level or higher with 18 or more ranks in Perform (strings) skill can use music to inspire tremendous heroism in himself or a single willing ally within 30 feet. For every three bard levels the character attains beyond 15th, he can inspire heroics in one additional creature. To inspire heroics, a bard must sing and an ally must hear the bard sing for a full round. A creature so inspired gains a +4 morale bonus on saving throws and a +4 dodge bonus to AC. The effect lasts for as long as the ally hears the bard sing and for up to 5 rounds thereafter. Inspire heroics is a mind-affecting ability.

*Mass Impose (Sp)*: This ability functions like *impose*, above, except that a bard of 16th level or higher with 19 or more ranks in a Perform (woodwinds) skill can make the *suggestion* simultaneously to any number of creatures that he has already fascinated (see above). *Mass impose* is an enchantment (compulsion), mind-affecting, language-dependent ability.

**Spell List Additions:** Add the following spells to the standard bard spell list as found in the *Player's Handbook*.

#### 0-LEVEL BARD SPELLS (CANTRIPS)

*Ray of Frost*

#### 1ST-LEVEL BARD SPELLS

*Reduce Person*

#### 2ND-LEVEL BARD SPELLS

*Spider Climb*

#### 3RD-LEVEL BARD SPELLS

*Gentle Repose*\_

#### 4TH-LEVEL BARD SPELLS

*Gaes, Lesser*

#### 5TH-LEVEL BARD SPELLS

*Contingency*

#### 6TH-LEVEL BARD SPELLS

*Insanity*

#### Woodwinds [FORTE]

**Requirements:** Perform (woodwinds) 4 ranks, bard level 1.

You have chosen to focus on the airy and wispy resonance of the woodwind instruments.

**Granted Ability:** Through practice you have finely honed your perceptions of air movements to which you can tell the direction and relative speed of the airflow in any environment.\_

**Bardic Music Abilities:** The following abilities are available to a bard that has chosen the Woodwinds Forte.

*Incessant Ringing (Su)*: A bard with 3 or more ranks in a Perform (woodwinds) skill can use his music to counter magical effects that depend on sound (but not spells that simply have verbal components). Each round of the countersong, he makes a Perform (woodwinds) check. Any creature within 30 feet of the bard (including the bard himself) that is affected by a sonic or language-dependent magical attack may use the bard's Perform (woodwinds) check result in place of its saving throw if, after the saving throw is rolled, the Perform (woodwinds) check result proves to be higher. If a creature within range of the countersong is already under the effect of a noninstantaneous sonic or language-dependent magical attack, it gains another saving throw against the effect each round it hears the countersong, but it must use the bard's Perform (woodwinds) check result for the save. *Incessant Ringing* has no effect against effects that don't allow saves. The bard may keep up the countersong for 10 rounds.

*Flight of Fancy (Sp)*: A bard with 3 or more ranks in a Perform (woodwinds) skill can use his music to cause one or more creatures to become

fascinated with him. Each creature to be fascinated must be within 90 feet, able to see and hear the bard, and able to pay attention to him. The bard must also be able to see the creature. The distraction of a nearby combat or other dangers prevents the ability from working. For every two levels a bard attains beyond 1st, he can target one additional creature with a single use of this ability.

To use the ability, a bard makes a Perform (woodwinds) check. His check result is the DC for each affected creature's Will save against the effect. If a creature's saving throw succeeds, the bard cannot attempt to fascinate that creature again for 24 hours. If its saving throw fails, the creature sits quietly and listens to the song, taking no other actions, for as long as the bard continues to play and concentrate (up to a maximum of 1 round per bard level). While fascinated, a target takes a -4 penalty on skill checks made as reactions, such as Listen and Spot checks. Any potential threat requires the bard to make another Perform (woodwinds) check and allows the creature a new saving throw against a DC equal to the new Perform check result.

Any obvious threat, such as someone drawing a weapon, casting a spell, or aiming a ranged weapon at the target, automatically breaks the effect. *Flight of Fancy* is an enchantment (compulsion), mind-affecting ability.

*Adeptness (Su)*: A bard of 3rd level or higher with 6 or more ranks in a Perform (woodwinds) skill can use his music to help an ally succeed at a task. The ally must be within 30 feet and able to see and hear the bard. The bard must also be able to see the ally.

The ally gets a +2 competence bonus on skill checks with a particular skill as long as he or she continues to hear the bard's music. Certain uses of this ability are infeasible. The effect lasts as long as the bard concentrates, up to a maximum of 2 minutes. A bard can't inspire competence in himself. Inspire competence is a mind-affecting ability.

*Whisper (Sp)*: A bard of 5th level or higher with 8 or more ranks in a Perform (woodwinds) skill can make a *suggestion* (as the spell) to a creature that he has already fascinated (see above). Using this ability does not break the bard's concentration on the *flight of fancy* effect, nor does it allow a second saving throw against the *flight of fancy* effect.

Making a *suggestion* doesn't count against a bard's daily limit on bardic music performances. A Will saving throw (DC 10 + 1/2 bard's level + bard's Cha modifier) negates the effect. This ability affects only a single creature (but see *mass*, below). *Whisper* is an enchantment (compulsion), mind-affecting, language dependent ability.

*Piper(Sp)*: A bard of 9th level or higher with 12 or more ranks in Perform (woodwinds) skill can play the woodwinds with such flair that it attracts a swarm of creatures. If the bard plays the music for 5 consecutive rounds a swarm appears as per the spell *summon swarm* and is controllable by the bard by using musical signals. This requires concentration and although normal battle does not interfere with the bard's control of the swarm, if the bard is damaged in any way he must make a Concentration check or lose control of the swarm. A bard may not have more than one swarm controlled at a time.

*Tinnitus (Su)*: A bard of at least 13th level with 16 or more ranks in Perform (woodwinds) skill can play a pitch so high and loud that it deafens all within earshot. Every creature that has a sense of hearing within 60 ft. of the bard is potentially deafened (Fortitude save partial DC = 10 + one half bard's Perform (woodwinds) skill + bard's charisma modifier). The bard is not affected by the ability but his allies are. Anyone saving against the effect cannot be affected by the same bard's tinnitus for 24 hours, although the residual affects remain. The deafened effect lasts for as long as the bard performs (maximum bard level in rounds) and five rounds thereafter. If a creature saves they are considered deafened for 5 rounds and takes 1d8 points of sonic damage. If a creature fails the saving throw they are deafened for the duration of the tinnitus and takes

1d8 points of sonic damage each round the tinnitus remains in effect (even the 5 rounds after the bard stops performing).

*Mass Flight (Sp)*: This ability functions like flight of fancy above, except that a bard of at least 15th level with 18 or more ranks in Perform(woodwinds) skill can affect twice as many creatures as normal.

*Mass Whisper (Sp)*: This ability functions like *whisper*, above, except that a bard of 16th level or higher with 19 or more ranks in a Perform (woodwinds) skill can make the *whisper* simultaneously to any number of creatures that he has already fascinated (see above). *Mass whisper* is an enchantment (compulsion), mind-affecting, language-dependent ability.

**Spell List Additions:** Add the following spells to the standard bard spell list as found in the *Player's Handbook*.

#### 0-LEVEL BARD SPELLS (CANTRIPS)

*Ray of Frost*

#### 1ST-LEVEL BARD SPELLS

*Floating Disk*

*Gust of Wind*

#### 2ND-LEVEL BARD SPELLS

*Fog Cloud*

*Wind Wall*

#### 3RD-LEVEL BARD SPELLS

*Air Walk*

#### 4TH-LEVEL BARD SPELLS

*Control Winds*

#### 5TH-LEVEL BARD SPELLS

*Overland Flight*

#### 6TH-LEVEL BARD SPELLS

*Whirlwind*

*Wind Walk*

by Khaz Axzen

# Cruxuzule Mammibia, Demon of Zaurcrag, Part III: The Druidic Order of the Dragon

*After fleeing the small town of Voth, our heroes, Sarel Duthar, renegade frost elf from the frozen north; and Khaz Axzen, dwarven nomad and former gladiatorial slave, join forces with Rebanian Captain Garelgar Janlyn to rid the wild frontier province of DeVothia of the demon Cruxuzule Mammibia and its predatory minions. Please join us for part three of Cruxuzule Mammibia, Demon of Zaurcrag.*

The croaking, growling, and barking of the gargoyles carried in the chill night air, accompanied by the wet sound of tearing flesh, the occasional crunch of bone, and the snapping of broad, toothy jaws.

Perched atop a dead buffalo, the largest and most dominant of the seven feasting gargoyles raised its scaled, greenish-black, blood covered snout to the sky, and its sinewy neck bulged as it gulped down a large piece of meat. It sniffed the air, flicking its forked tongue and turning its monstrous head back and forth, trailing thick ropey strands of blood-streaked saliva before returning to its bovine meal.

Amir Sotho, accompanied by six of his trackers and the frost elf Sarel Duthar, crept closer to the carnage. They sounded like nothing more than the wind rustling the high, dry autumn grass.

Pausing below the sweeping boughs of a huge willow, still fifty yards from the feeding hellspawn, Amir signaled to his scouts to nock their arrows and spread out in a semi-circle around the horrific scene. With his ever-present wolfish grin, Amir nodded toward Sarel, rolled away from the willows trunk, and began the final stage of their ambush.

Since fleeing Voth five days before, Amir and the frost elf had become fast friends. Sarel had agreed to teach Amir the art of knife throwing, and in exchange, Amir helped Sarel master the bow and arrow. This was Sarel's first chance to test his archery skills in combat.

As they crept closer, the creatures lifted their blood stained snouts to the sky, grunting and twitching their wings nervously as their heads swayed back and forth, trying to locate the direction of this new scent. Their dull predatory brains did not realize they were the prey.

"Now!" Amir yelled, jumping to his feet and loosing an arrow at the largest of the gargoyles. The whistling sound of loosed arrows filled the night, followed by the dull thwack of iron tips impacting scales and flesh.

Sarel quickly drew another arrow, nocked it, and aimed down the dart's length at the charging gargoyles. Picking the creature closest to him, the frost elf released his arrow, and watched it fly true, sinking half way into his target's left eye socket. The creature croaked its pain and thrashed its head back and forth, tripping another gargoyle in the process. Without pausing, it headed straight for the elf.

"Good shot, brother!" yelled Amir over the croaking and roaring gargoyles. "It's blade work now. May Nuune guide your sword, my friend!"

To Sarel's right, the eight priests of Beordin broke from hiding. With them were Khaz and the leader of their order, Keldrid Thunderhand. Bellowing war cries to their Nordic god, the priests ran directly at the

## About the Author

Khaz Axzen and wife Donna currently live in the Pocono mountains in north east Pennsylvania with their two children, Devan and Lauryn. When not working or chasing the kids around, Khaz enjoys reading, writing, watching Yankee games and shopping for additions to his fantasy knife collection.

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gargoyles. Their white, fox-fur cloaks billowed behind them, revealing shining leather and chain mail armor emblazoned with the white hammer of Beordin. Brandishing huge two-handed swords, they advanced on the creatures' flank. From the other side, ten mounted soldiers led by Garelgar rode from the tree line, spears and polearms ready, hemming the gargoyles in and preventing their escape.

Drawing his slender elven sword, Sarel sidestepped the charging gargoyle and slashed at its back, cutting through the bone of its folded wing. Staying on the creature's blind side and avoiding its taloned limbs and flailing tail, the frost elf was a blur of movement, darting to and fro on the balls of his feet, opening gaping wounds along the gargoyles broad flanks, hindquarters, and neck with every slash of his blade until the monster lay twitching in the grass.

Looking around, Sarel saw a priest of Beordin lose his footing and fall before one of the gargoyles. The frost elf threw himself between the priest and the surprised hellspawn. Rising up on its haunches, the gargoyle struck with its taloned right front leg. Sarel ducked the blow and swept his sword across the beast's belly from right to left, parting scales and flesh. Coming out of his crouch, the elf's left to right return stroke sliced through the enraged creature's windpipe. The wounded gargoyle reared up, spreading its wings and forelimbs in an attempt to leap on top of the frost elf and crush him beneath its weight.

Sarel turned sideways to make himself a smaller target, drew his sword up to shoulder level in a two-handed grip, hoping to spin out while inflicting

another slashing wound. The impact never came. Instead, the gargoyle crumpled to the ground in a spray of acidic ichors and brain matter.

Perched between the dead beast's wings was a smiling Khaz Axzen, his huge arms bulging as he attempted to pull his druidic axe from the base of the gargoyle's skull.

"This's axe work, elf!" the dwarf said with a grunt. His axe came free with a spurt of gore and spinal fluid, and in his battle lust he was oblivious to the acidic blood dotting his tattooed arms, face, and bald scalp.

Sarel brushed his snow-white hair from his frost-blue face with a sweep of his left hand, turning to the priest of Beordin he had just saved. He was surprised to see that it was Keldrid Thunderhand.

All around them the battle was dying down. Two of the injured creatures tried to flee as Garelgar sent his horseman after them. The soldiers impaling the beasts with heavy spears and halberds, keeping their horses' legs clear of the snapping jaws, thrashing tails, and flailing wings.

"Thank you, Sir Elf," Keldrid said, inclining his head toward Sarel, as he used his broad sword to regain his feet. "It appears I owe you my life."

"You would have done the same for me," responded the frost elf, giving the human the benefit of the doubt. The priests of Beordin were sworn enemies of the demon-worshipping frost elves, and those in Garelgar's service had treated Sarel with distrust.

Amir strode up to the trio carrying Sarel's bow, discarded during the battle. "Good shootin', Sar!" the easterner exclaimed as he handed Sarel the bow and clapped him roughly on the back. "I'll make a bowmen outa ya yet!" he said before hustling off to attend to the wounded.

"That is an interesting weapon you carry," Keldrid said, brushing himself off. "Timborian elf craftsmanship?" he asked in an almost accusatory

tone. He used the elven name for Sarel's race. The noble house of Timbor had been exiled from Thantwilanoria thousands of years ago after the Demon Wars for worshipping demonic gods and practicing dark sorcery.

"Be nice, priest," growled Khaz as he rubbed the gargoyles' acidic blood from his flesh with a clump of spit moistened dirt.

"I mean no offense," Keldrid replied, brushing his long, graying blond hair away from his clean-shaven, weather-beaten face and tying it behind his head. He gestured toward the battlefield. "Some of our weapons barely made a dent in those demonspawn's thick hides, some were notched, and some were even broken. Yet yours seemed to cut through scales and flesh like butter. I am merely enquiring as to its origin. Mayhap the best weapons against the enemies of light could be chaotic in nature?"

Sarel held his sword in front of him, the flat of the blade resting on his palm. Its frost blue and blood-spattered blade looked purplish in the red moonlight. It was shaped like a straightened "S" with a bone handle and no noticeable crosspiece, and its razor sharp edge had never lost its hone.

"Indeed, it is of frost elf manufacture, and likely forged with dark sorcery and chaotic incantations. But the sword does not make the elf, Sir Priest," answered Sarel patiently.

Keldrid nodded agreeably and inhaled deeply. "You are a living, breathing contradiction Mr. Duthar. A member of a dark race, fighting alongside warriors dedicated to the cause of good, wielding a blade of evil origins, shrouded in druidic garb." He gestured toward Sarel's cheetah-spotted cloak. It had been a gift from the druid Kimba Truehart, and it seemed to change color with the light and surroundings.

Keldrid exhaled and placed his calloused right hand on the frost elf's shoulder as he walked past. "Forgive me, good Sir Elf. Old prejudices die hard," he said

quietly. Looking past Sarel to where another warrior priest of Beordin stood, he bellowed, "Burn the corpses and let's get out of here, Norge. We've more hellspawn to hunt!"

Norge bowed before Keldrid and then paused, nodding in Sarel's direction as if to thank the elf before turning to follow his leader's orders.

Khaz still stared at Keldrid's retreating back, his narrowed eyes seeming to bore holes through the cleric. "Humans are a ungrateful lot, ain't they?" the dwarf rumbled. "But ya gotta' admit, these here northern priests'r some hardy folk, eh?"

Sarel was deep in thought and merely nodded at Khaz's observation. Absently but carefully cleaning the acidic blood from his blade, he watched as the priests' sprinkled oil on the rapidly decaying corpses before igniting them with torches. He barely noticed Garelgar's horse sidle up.

"Is all well here?" the captain asked. His horse's nostrils flared, filled with the stench of death and predators, and he struggled to keep it under control. "You should get some salve from Amir for those burns, Khaz."

"I'll live," responded the dwarf with a frown, crouching to clean the caustic ichors from his axe in the grass. "Tell im ta keep his girly salve!"

Sarel and Garelgar laughed at the dwarf's reaction. Since their meeting in Voth, Amir had delighted in instigating the grumpy, short-tempered dwarf to anger.

"As long as every one is well, and no one is grievously injured, we'll leave as soon as we've cleaned up around here. I've sent some men to retrieve the horses and the remaining company," Garelgar said. They had left ten soldiers at a farmer's barn to guard the clerics and the archers' mounts. "We should reach Allura a little after midnight."

Garelgar spurred his horse, leaving the dwarf to his



Transformation complete, Kimba Truehart, from the Druidic Order of the Cheetah swept the hood of her cloak back, and shook her long, white blond hair loose.

mumbling and the frost elf to his contemplations. Sarel pulled his hood back over his head and walked off, out of the torch light, gazing at the stars visible in the south and east, while in the north, low hanging storm clouds gathered, accompanied by a cold, winter wind. To the contemplative frost elf, this was an ominous omen.

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Plumes of steam rose from the cheetah's open mouth and flaring nostrils as it raced through the autumn leaves of the great Furia Forest. It nimbly leapt over a fallen tree, and startled a female white-tailed deer and its fawn. The mother tensed for flight before relaxing as the great cat sped westward.

A light snow began to fall from the overcast sky as the cheetah burst from the tree line. With great loping strides, it ascended a grassy hill that rose from the forest floor like a bald pate.

Crowning the hill was a ring of massive stones. The rune-covered monuments appeared to be set and stacked haphazardly about the clearing. Some formed archways and walls, some seemed to be benches for sitting and lounging, and some were solitary, set upright as if pointing to the heavens. Many were so huge that sorcery must have been used to stack and balance them atop of each other.

Stopping in the middle of the ring, the cheetah sat on its haunches, its sides rapidly expanding and contracting, its back arching as it caught its breath. The great cat raised its head, letting snowflakes fall on its lolling tongue and letting the cold breeze from the north ruffle its fur and cool its overheated body.

Closing its yellow, slitted eyes, the cheetah relaxed, its jagged breathing becoming steady and rhythmic.

Slowly the cat began to rise on its hind feet as the air around it shimmered and wavered like heat rising from a smoldering forge. The runes etched into the ancient stones began to glow and pulse. The shape of the cheetah began to warp and transform as magic crackled and hissed all around it. Its rich gold and black spotted coat began to flow like a cloak as the creature bent and reshaped itself into a slender elven form.

Transformation complete, Kimba Truehart, from the Druidic Order of the Cheetah swept the hood of her cloak back, and shook her long, white blond hair loose. And, like her cat-self, held her head back, letting the large snowflakes gently alight on her sun browned, angular elven face. She slowly opened her almond shaped, yellow eyes which still retained slitted, feline pupils, while her elongated, pointed ears, poking through her blond tresses, picked up the sounds of the forest she called home.

Across the clearing, she saw a male sasquatch watch her transformation with dark, sad eyes. She smiled at the creature, sending it a mental greeting. The creature responded with an almost imperceptible nod of its hairy head and a contortion of its bestial mouth that may have been a returned smile. It turned and ambled down the hill, disappearing into the tree line.

Turning southwest toward the coast, Kimba saw the mist shrouded towers of Thantwilanoria, ancient ancestral home of the elves. The towers tops were hidden by the steel-gray clouds that hung over the woodland. The Furia dominated much of Ta-Teharune's west coast, from the Graode Mountains in the north to the volcanic borders of Ghan and Reban of the south. She idly wondered if her elven brethren and sisters residing in isolation within those towers knew or even cared about the demonic troubles that plagued the rest of the continent and perhaps the

world. She blinked, and the towers disappeared. They reappeared a moment later in the east, the result of magical wards put in place after the Demon Wars and subsequent exile of House Timbor. Only those of untainted elven blood knew the exact direction and location of Thantwilanoria, which elven magic made clear with a simple thought and incantation.

With a sigh, the druid turned her mind outward, searching for others of her order. She sought one druid in particular: Rathistar, from the druidic order of the Dragon and eldest of the druids. Alas, aside from the animals of the forest, the only minds she sensed where those of the mysterious Indaai, the only non-elven race permitted to dwell within the Furia. The most ancient race of humans, the red-skinned, black-haired and dark-eyed Indaai protected Furia's borders from intruders and human colonization. They not only dwelled within the forest but they were a part of the forest, taking only what they needed for survival and returning what they could to the land.

Not sensing Rathistar's presence, Kimba walked across the clearing to a massive tapered stone near the center. This place was called Stonemeet in the common tongue, and it was one of the druids' most sacred sites. She gently stroked a series of weather-beaten runes etched into the granite. They responded with soft, warm light. Through them she reached into the natural conduits that weaved their way through the earth's fabric and sent an urgent message to Rathistar, requesting a council. This done, she returned to the ring's outer edge and sat upon a smooth bench, clasping her hands and closing her eyes. As day slowly turned to night, she lapsed into the elven meditative state of sleep, recovering her strength and patiently awaiting Rathistar's arrival in Stonemeet.

Kimba's eyes snapped open. It was after midnight, and the wind howled, swirling the accumulating snow into small tornadoes. An ominous rhythmic thrumming in the earth's fabric came from the south. Shaking the thin layer of snow from her cloak, she stood. "Hurry, Rathistar!" she urgently whispered.

Thousands of miles to the south, thirty-one weary riders rode past the low rubble and mortar wall of Allura. Garelgar Janlyn and Amir Sotho rode at their head, closely followed by a standard bearer. The red and golden Razorback insignia of Reban flapped in the cold north wind.

From the south, a foul, dry wind began to blow. As it mixed and swirled with the moist northern winds, an unnatural mist began to form and spread out across the ground. Carried on the south wind were low, ghostly wails, and a slow rhythmic thrumming. War drums.

*Boom...Boom...Boom...Boom...*

\*\*\*TO BE CONTINUED\*\*\*

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## Resources for the Harried Game Master

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### About the Author

Alicia (Lynxara) writes the webcomic Fantasy Wars and the RPG Wars comic strips for the Silven Trumpeter. She graduated from Roanoke College in Salem, Virginia in 2002 with a major in Religion & Philosophy and is currently a graduate student at Radford University in Radford, Virginia. When not changed to her word processor, her hobbies include anime, video games, and of course, role-playing.

### About the Artist

Elizabeth Ellis (KouAidou) draws the webcomic Fantasy Wars and the RPG Wars comic strips for the Silven Trumpeter. She graduated from the University of Maryland with a major in Japanese in 2003 and is currently at large. When not shackled to her art supplies, her hobbies include anime, translating, and of course, role-playing.





by Alexander Cherry

## Product Spotlight: **Fastlane : Everything, All the Time**

**Publisher:** Twisted Confessions Games

**Price:** PDF: 6.00 Print:\$12.00

**Website:** <http://www.twistedconfessions.com/>

**Reviewer Bias:** I received a review copy of this product. I also sat in on a live demo at Gen Con 2004 and had a chance to talk with the author.

**From the introduction:** *"Fastlane is a game of unchecked indulgence and reckless abandon, insatiable lusts and lofty ambitions, a roller coaster of sky-high peaks and rock-bottom valleys in a world of decadence and debasement. Characters burn their candles at both ends, hoping to live fast, die young, and leave a good looking corpse. Their debauchery continues even as their life unravels before them—they put the things they love on the line, and lock horns with everyone else on the same wild ride. Sometimes, if they're lucky, they'll find new meaning at the bottom of the glass, but more often it's a reflection of the emptiness in their hearts and souls. And when the abyss starts looking back into you, it's time for another shot."*

### Introduction

*Fastlane* is an innovative, flexible, and speedy RPG. It combines elements of good design with creative mechanics to produce a game that can certainly live up to "life in the *Fastlane*!" It is fairly clear and easy to understand, and the rules do not take an eternity to learn or master. Overall, I recommend giving this indie RPG a shot!

### Physical Specifics

Since I'm reviewing the PDF, I don't have too much to say about the physical version of the book. I was able to take a look at a printed copy at Gen Con 2004, and the spiral-bound construction seems to be able to stand up to a lot of wear.

The cover is color while the inside pages are black and white. A minimal diamond border appears on every page, but that is the extent of the graphics to be found within *Fastlane*. I must commend the designer on the choice of fonts—not only is the game easy to read (even on screen), the use of different fonts throughout the book helps a reader quickly designate what are mechanics, examples, game terms, and more.

As this is an indie product, the lack of artwork is understandable and forgivable (as anyone who has attempted to publish a book knows the high price of most artwork). While artwork would have helped, Alexander Cherry's writing is clear and flavorful, helping to alleviate the artwork issue.

### Reader-Friendly Elements

One of my favorite parts about this whole book is the extended play example that is presented throughout the book. Along with the mechanics and specifics of play, each chapter includes a lengthy example of how these could work at a table. The author includes a note stating that the play example is actually taken from his own play-testing of *Fastlane*, which makes it all the more interesting.

### Premeditation

Play begins with the premeditation stage; a state where players in the group sit and discuss the setting the game will take place in and possibilities for characters. Once these basics are decided upon, play can begin. Including this type of premeditation as a specific game phase one finds common in indie game design, and indeed, it works well in this game.

### Characters

Characters have two basic elements—facets and styles. Facets are similar to limitations—the higher the number the character has within your facet, the less limited your character is in that area. The five facets include: people, assets, nerve, guile, and sobriety. Styles are specific notations concerning the facets—they are one or several words that describe specifically how that facet manifests itself for the character in game.

Another mechanic that helps define characters is "life." These are essentially a list of motivations for the character and why the character believes his or her life is worth living.

The "favors" mechanic is one that I particularly like—you have a list of people you owe favors to and who owe you favors. These can be called upon in-game for a variety of interesting results. Going along with favors are "factions" or allegiances of characters may have to specific groups of people—family, gangs, organizations, etc.

The character traits section of this chapter seems to strike a good balance—the traits are defining enough to give you a solid indication of who the character is, but are not so specific that they limit characters (or players) choices in game. Furthermore, the character creation system fits solidly within the theme of the game itself—aspects that should be accounted for are accounted for, and those that are not necessary are not included.

Characters are constantly changing and evolving as the game progresses. Based on the gameplay, traits, styles, life, and favors will be being altered throughout the game. Generally, winning conflicts will help boost your traits, while losing conflicts will reduce your traits (although the actual mechanics are far more detailed). If a character loses all points in the ÒlifeÓ area, the character has Òburned outÓ and no longer wants to live life in the fast lane (and is usually subsequently removed from the game). The choice is up to the player whether she wants to play hard and burn life fast or to wait it out and calculate.

### Basic Game Mechanics

Each player has a ÒbankÓ in which they store their casino chips, which are used similarly to how dice would be used in most RPG games. Players are given a set number of chips at the beginning of the game and can gain or lose chips as the game progresses, primarily though betting on the roulette wheel. (Note: The author includes a d6 version of the game for those individuals who do not own a roulette wheel.)

What is interesting about the ÒbankÓ concept within the game itself is that the croupier (GM) only gains chips in the game through the losses of the players. In one way, the game could not only be about players vs. each other or players vs. non-player characters, but also players vs. the croupier himself (just like what occurs in some casino games).

For those of you who haven't played roulette before, the mechanics as presented (along with a chart explaining payouts) may be a little complicated and hard to follow as the author didn't provide a detailed explanation of how roulette works. The included example helps clarify the process, however. When I played the demo of this game at Gen Con, even though I had never played roulette before, I caught on pretty quick.

Chips are primarily used to resolve conflict situations through betting on the roulette wheel. A player has the choice of taking a high risk for a high payout, taking a moderate risk for a moderate payout, or playing it safe in betting on a more secure low payout option. This significantly changes the whole mechanic of the way an RPG is run—its no longer about taking your chance with the roll of a d6 or d20—players now have a choice in how much risk they want to take in each situation. In essence, players can put it all on the line with a big risk, or take few chances and gain fewer rewards.

If a player wins big, she can choose to pay extra to narrate the situation. Winners can also "humble" the losers by reducing facets or styles based on how many chips they have won by. Alternatively, if one player helps out another, the player helped can owe the individual who assisted a favor (see "favor" mechanics discussed above).

Chips have another function: they allow players to spend them to assist or hinder other players, NPCs, or objects in a given situation.

### Setting the Game

The author includes information on adapting *Fastlane* to different types of settings including possibilities of rules tweaks to fit the specific setting. He also includes some sample setting ideas that can be used with the game including western, space, fantasy, and more.

### End Credits

Included in the book is a list of "Croupier's Tips" to help the croupier run a more effective game. Included also is an optional "rotational" croupier rule in which each player takes a turn at being the croupier during a single session so that everyone has a chance to play a character. The book ends with a complete (and very helpful) glossary of terms found within in the game itself, character sheets, and the d6 roulette wheel.

### Final Thoughts

*Fastlane* is a solid RPG with flair and style. Unlike so many dry and boring RPGs and games that have recently appeared on the market, it has a unique style and flavor all of its own. The mechanics are solid, the game is flexible, and the pace is fast. If your group is looking for something new to try, consider *Fastlane!*

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by Jeffrey Thetford

## Shades of Duty

The Shining Souls of the South, sent to retrieve the Shadow Lens, a fabled artifact created by dwarven smith, found that the quest would prove more dangerous than they first thought. Having found the fabled artifact deep in an ancient tomb the Shining Souls have inadvertently destroyed the tomb in which they were battling a shade guardian- a creature created solely for the purpose of killing thieves and guarding ancient relics. Will Aomas' and Laeirtil's ranger skills or Gadlyn's dwarven instincts help them? Will Koulor's barbarian strength pull them once again out of harms way or will Valdicor's magic set the stage for further disaster?

Aomas coughed and spit something out of his mouth as he pushed himself from the rubble. Everything was covered with a sticky residue that looked like liquid charcoal. Those items that were not firmly secure were now heaped against the front of the tomb in a sticky mess. Seeing a movement in the rubble, Aomas reached in and grabbed Laeirtil's hand and pulled her from the black goo.

"What happened?" she asked as she cleaned the sticky substance from her face.

Aomas spit more of the black goo out of his mouth and shrugged. "I don't know. I barely had time enough time to leap to your side before the whole place went black- literally!" A huge slab of stone nearby bucked twice as a groaning Koulor pushed it to the side. The barbarian sat up slowly, shook his head like a dog soaked with water and looked around the room. When his eyes fell on Aomas and Laeirtil, he gave a half smile and blew a glob of the black liquid from his nostrils.

Their eyes met as they noticed their missing member. "Valdicor!" the three shouted out. Koulor pushed himself to his feet as the three began searching for the mage. Koulor stopped and looked about, puzzled.

"Aomas, the shadows!" Aomas and Laeirtil suddenly realized that the shadowy mists of the chamber were gone. The three companions looked over to the south end of the chamber and saw that the explosion of the mixing magic had blown the main crypt door away, revealing the burial crypt beyond the shattered seal. Inside the crypt, they saw a soft light growing brighter near the back of the room. A stone sarcophagus had been blown apart near the center and its contents scattered across the back wall. A large iron-bound crate lay broken there and a light poured from the center of the shattered pieces, growing brighter with each passing breath.

Koulor heard a muffled cry from behind that pulled his attention from the light. Twenty feet away, he found Valdicor's feet sticking out of a huge ball of the viscous black substance. The mage sputtered and spit when Koulor pulled him out and sat him on the ground.

"How long to you think I could hold my breath buried in that mess?" Valdicor coughed as he pulled the mess from his eyes and face.

"I would guess not long since ye can't go more than a moment or two without saying two blasted words!" Gadlyn said as he pushed a sticky cloak-like form off his body.

"Gadlyn!" Laeirtil screamed as she spun to see the dwarf alive. Aomas stumbled over a chunk of stone and stared in disbelief.

"You're a-alive?" Aomas stuttered as he spoke. "B-but I saw your head hanging from your body by a sliver of skin and your blood pooled over the floor like . . ." Gadlyn cut him off with a raised hand.

"I appreciate the details lad, but not 'til I have some food in me gut," he said as he rubbed his neck. He felt odd, but passed it off as the remnants of whatever had just happened to him. Valdicor stared with open mouth at Gadlyn, not knowing what to think and Koulor leapt across the stone rubble, landing in a pool of the black mess. His leg still numb from the creature's attack caused his footing to slip and he slide, unbalanced, into the dwarf sending both crashing into the wall. The hug he gave Gadlyn was not unlike the hugs given by kraken when they entangle their soon to be dinner.

"I am . . . glad . . . to see you . . . too, ya behemoth!" Gadlyn managed to croak. Koulor put him back down on the ground and smiled.

"We will have time for re-acquaintance later," Valdicor said as he stepped through the mire. "Something is wrong, listen."

Everyone grew quiet. From the main crypt, a faint buzzing sound could be heard. The sound was metallic; as if a bee were trapped in a tin coffer and Aomas tilted his head toward the sound, furrowing his brow.

"That can't be good," he said quietly. "Laeirtill, you and Koulor stay here and make sure no other shadow beings appear. Valdicor, Gadlyn and I will check the crypt."

Aomas led the way, his sword out in front and ready for whatever he may find hiding in the shadows. Valdicor found a broken leg of a table and cast a cantrip on one end. The fire sputtered for but a moment and then flared to life, casting flitting shadows across the room. The smell of death and dust hung heavy in the air as the trio entered the crypt. A robed skeleton, crumpled and broken, lay in the corner, the fabric of its garment having all but given to the decay of time. Aomas recognized the robe as belonging to a noble of Caramont- specifically Lac Dlarrin. As the three crossed the room, the buzzing grew in pitch and changed to an almost screeching wail. Light filled the side of the room as if a blazing fire had been lit.

"Look!" Valdicor yelled over the cacophony. Amidst the broken iron-bound box laid a conical piece of pure gold that vibrated against the wall. The sheer beauty of the crafted metal, the runic carvings that covered nearly every inch of its surface and the clan insignia that was carved near its apex left no doubt that they had found the Shadow Lens. Gadlyn stepped up and pulled a medallion from his pocket and compared the symbols.

"They match," he said proudly. "Tis' of the Deep-Gem hand. I recognize the work and the writings." Gadlyn stood in awe of the artifact.

Something caught Aomas' eye as he watched Gadlyn. Looking up, he saw the shadows of the room flowing across the ceiling toward the lens.

"Look!" he shouted as he grabbed Valdicor's arm, "The shadows! They're . . . moving toward the lens!" Valdicor and Gadlyn both looked to the flowing shadow across the ceiling and gasped.

"It really works!" Valdicor yelled.

Gadlyn gave the mage a hot look. "What did ye expect it to do?" he snapped, thinking the mage was insulting the work of the legendary clan.

The shadows cast by the burning table leg flickered about the chamber like sprites performing a solstice dance, swirling and darting as they poured with liquid efficacy toward the cone and melded with its surface, flowing into the concentric runic symbols. The shadows from the ceiling poured like black rain toward the artifact, brightening the chamber overhead, as the flowing liquid darkness fell into the lens. Then a loud pop sounded as silver energy erupted from the apex of the cone and shot like lightning throughout the room, sucking even the shadows from the antechamber into its depths.

Laeirtill ran as Koulor limped on his wounded leg to the crypt door when they saw the shadows pouring through the shattered entryway. A few paces in, they stopped with readied weapons.

Before they could comment, a loud crash sounded from the main entrance. Koulor spun on his good leg and shouted.

"Bresarius help us! Look!" Koulor pointed toward the front of the antechamber. The rippling doorway they had passed through shrank in and disappeared, as the walls surrounding it seemed to swell forward. Aomas ran past Koulor and looked into the antechamber. The entrance was not swelling, but folding inward as the room was consumed in the falling shadows that arced up and flew past him into the lens.

"The crypt is collapsing in on itself!" the ranger shouted as he turned and pushed Koulor and Laeirtill toward the others. "It looks like the lens will remain here unless we find another way out!" The shrieking of the lens became deafening as it sucked in the shadowstuff that infused the crypt, causing it to collapse.

"Damn," Gadlyn exclaimed as he noticed what was happening as he pulled his attention from the lens. "To come as close as this and to lose it all because of

the thing ye seek!"

Valdicor, his fingers massaging his chin, tried to think of something to do but was at a loss. He knew that the lens was protected by the box which kept it hidden from outside sources of shadows. He stared at the lens and watched as chunks of what was once dark stone turned vaporous and flew into the metal cone. Then he understood.

"That's it!" he said, snapping his fingers. "Shadows!"

Gadlyn cocked an eyebrow and turned toward the mage. "Aye, they're shadows," he said as he rolled his eyes, thinking the mage had finally lost his mind.

"No!" Valdicor yelled as he shook his head. "There is a spell I can cast that will allow us to leave here safely! It is called *cloaked travel*. Not only will it save us from this place, but it will allow us to travel to the Troll Gates with greater speed!" Valdicor reached down and grasped Gadlyn's hand. "Join hands quickly!"

"You have a plan magic man?" Gadlyn yelled, growing impatient.

"Yes, but you need to trust me. We should be able to leave here alive with the lens." Valdicor looked at his companions. It would not be the first time that they had entrusted their lives to the mage.

"We have little time for anything else," Aomas yelled.

"Or little choice," Gadlyn added quietly, letting the whine of the lens drown out his comment.

Valdicor began his spell. From the back, Koulor turned and watched as the antechamber completely collapsed, the wall of black liquid rolling toward them like a tidal wave on a black sea, consuming the outer crypt and cascading onto the floor a few feet away.

"Bresarius help us," Koulor whispered to the god of strength, as everything around him became blurry and dark.

A moment later, the Shining Souls of the South found themselves standing amidst a great landscape of shifting shades of gray and black. Off in the distance could be seen the silhouette of a mountain range that seemed to flow and undulate like thick cold porridge and behind the mountains shone a light that burned their eyes. The light shot forth and dissipated into the shadowy thick clouds that hung in the sky that was the Shadowscape. Shaking the dizziness from his head, Valdicor glanced back and counted the shadowy visions of his companions to make sure all had made the journey.

Koulor turned slowly around and took in his unrealistic surroundings. He shuddered as he thought of the tales told by his clan elders of the beasts that visit the shaman in their dreams—beasts of darkness and shadow. Laeirtil sensed the barbarian's growing apprehension and tightened her grip on his finger.

Before she could say a soothing word, Koulor yelled to Aomas, "Look behind you!"

The outline of a line of rock gently curved from the darkness to rise twenty feet in the air and off in either direction, melding with the surrounding darkness. A dozen steps up the side of the shadowy stone protruded the apex of Hathar's Lens, shining like a golden beacon in stark contrast to the surrounding darkness of the Plane. A black liquid poured from its tip and splashed to the ground where it formed a pool of viscous liquid that spread away from the rock base and disappeared into the surrounding landscape.

"Well, we can't leave that thing stick'n out for anyone to take, now can we?" Gadlyn snorted as he drug Valdicor and the others up to the stone. Koulor lifted Gadlyn up as he tied his belt around the fluted end of the lens and dropped to the ground. Koulor tied the dangling end around his hand and pulled. The metal of the lens groaned under the strain of Koulor's strength, the edges of the shadow ridge holding fast for but a moment as the lens pulled free and toppled to the ground. The second it fell, the lens began to wail and vibrate wildly. Everyone clasped their ears and shrieked in pain as the trilling of the lens drove

them to their knees. Through clenched teeth and squinted eyes, Valdicor watched as the shadowstuff of the surrounding area flew so quickly into the lens that it looked like a giant whirlpool of blurring shadows spinning above the golden artifact.

"Cover the blasted thing, quickly!" he yelled, his hands clamped about his ears.

Koulor tore off his shirt and covered the lens. Immediately, the shrieking died and the whirlpool of shadows spun away to dissipate in the air. The group pulled themselves to their feet and stared at the covered lens in Koulor's arms.

"I guess we know we can't be doin' that again, eh?" Gadlyn said as he tied the barbarian's shirt tightly around the lens.

"I think we should be off," Aomas said, although all were thinking the same thing. They walked with hands tightly clasped and the lens tucked safely under Koulor's arm.

Aomas could not believe his surroundings. Everything looked as it did on their home plane except for two very distinct differences; there were no colors here and everything had blurred and wavy edges. Everything, as far as the eye could see, was every possible shade between pitch black and gray. There were no browns and greens associated with the forests or the breathtaking hues that would be cast across the sky with the dawning of a new day. Everything was a washed out gray-black except for the light that spilled over the mountain range to his right as the sun rose above the cold grayness of the landscape. The light was as pure and bright as any sunlit day he had seen in his life, full of possibility, dreams and hope. But as the sun reached its light-filled arms across the sky, it dulled as it mixed with the atmosphere of the plane, spilling overhead in sheets of light gray and black.

Aomas noticed his attention being pulled toward that light more and more. Maybe because it was the only thing in the dark surroundings that gave him hope.

The bleakness of his surroundings was becoming depressing. When he looked back at his companions, he saw that they were affected as well by the strange surroundings and the brightness that never seemed to peak over the horizon—looming ominously just out of reach.

As the Shining Souls walked, time became as slow as a snail. Aomas, a ranger for the last forty years, was growing ever funereal as they passed through forest after forest of dark and shadowy canopies made of dark, looming oaks. Often, he would close his eyes and imagine the lushness of a mist-filled forest and the vivid colors he would see on any given summer day. But the cold darkness of the shadows seemed to slip even into his thoughts as even his memories became shrouded in darkness. Time seemed to creep along, causing the companions to only guess as to how long they had been walking.

"How much fur . . ." Aomas started to ask when Valdicor suddenly stopped, held up a hand, and hissed him silent. Slowly, the mage led the party through a small copse of trees that opened before a small depression of no less than a hundred yards across and littered with shadowy rocks. At the base of the depression, two large, semi-circular disks floated a few inches off the ground. Nearby, two creatures floated near the disks. One disk flashed with images of men darting back and forth inside the gate; archers and swordsmen all trading blows with satyr and goblin. The other disk was sandy-brown in color, a dim glow from inside revealing the rough edges of a tunnel running into the darkness.

"There!" Valdicor whispered as he pointed to the portal on the left. "That is our way back to the Trollgates. It is a portal connecting to our Prime Plane."

As he spoke, from the gate on the left, a large bulbous creature with tentacles projecting from the sides of its body floated into the mists.

With renewed urgency, the group inched their way around the outer ring of taller stones, stopping a dozen yards away from the center of the depression. The mist was thinner here allowing them a better look at the floating figures. The creatures were large and semi-circular in shape, their mouths a tooth-encrusted nightmare of razor sharp bone, filled with decay and disease. A long multi-forked tongue flicked through the air as they floated about the two shimmering portals. Surrounding their large mouth and along their sides were eight powerful arms that moved slowly, front to back, as if the creatures were swimming more than floating through the air. The Shining Souls all felt their hearts sink for it left no doubt two *vouivre* had just blocked their only way home. The subterranean dwellers were known to shape-shift into grotesque abominations of the unnatural to instill fear in their victims.

Valdicor grabbed Aaomas and pulled him close. "Did you know about this?" Valdicor's anger was reflected in the dark faces of his companions. Aaomas thought for a moment then shook his head.

"No." He whispered the lie, looking back to the creatures, as he was unable to meet his friends' gaze. "I knew of their presence near the borderlands, but was not told they would be this near the Trollgates."

"Great," Gadlyn said plopping to the ground, the lens across his lap. "And to first find this out now!" Laeirtill pulled her bow and strung an arrow as she took aim at the closest creature.

"It would be easy to take one out from here," she said as she pulled the string taught. Aaomas pushed the bow down and shook his head.

"Your arrows may stop a charging bull, but to these creatures they are little more than bothersome gnats." His words were grim and Laeirtill cursed silently at the revelation. Valdicor leaned against one of the stones and scratched his head. He had read of the *vouivre* during a stay at the Grand Library of the Magical Arts in Ju'Terrana, but the information was old and less than reliable. But if the information were true,

Valdicor knew that his spells would have little, if any, effect on them. Relaying the information only caused his companions to shake their heads in despair.

"Look!" Koulor urged as he pointed toward the creatures. "More are coming through!" As they watched, two more *vouivre* floated out of the dark portal opening from their home. A guttural, bubbling sound filled the air as they floated in a circle about ten paces from the portals.

"Ogre guts!" Gadlyn exclaimed. "If we don't do something soon, the whole blasted Plane will be crawling with those infernal bubbling beasts!"

"Gadlyn is right," Valdicor said grimly. "We need to act now or the *vouivre* will enter the portal into the Trollgates. I don't even want to speculate on how many more are down the tunnels of the other portal, but my guess is more than we can handle." Turning to the Gadlyn, Valdicor pointed to the covered lens on his lap. "We'll be needing a distraction to draw the *vouivre*'s attention."

"Aye," Gadlyn said with a smile, "I think I know what yer gett'n at wizard." Valdicor explained his plan to the rest and all agreed that it was better to act now than to wait. They did not know how many, if any, had already entered into the Trollgates through the portal, but Valdicor reasoned that if any had, the four before them now would surely have entered already. They were waiting for something, or someone—most likely more *vouivre*.

"See ya bunch of ugly souls on the other side," Gadlyn said as he picked up the lens and started off. Laeirtill stopped him and gave him a kiss on his dented helm.

"What was that for?" Gadlyn said, apparently embarrassed.

"Luck," she said smiling. Gadlyn cleared his throat and disappeared into the swirling shadows.

\* \* \* \* \*

It is near time to join the giants and their allies, Zelander said as he floated near the other *vouivre*. The others will join us soon and then we will go. The words, spoken in the strange fluid-like language of their race, caused the other *vouivre* to bubble in laughter as they reveled in thoughts of conquering Ju'Terrana after centuries of waiting beneath the hot sands of the great desert.

"Time to pay the ferryman!" Gadlyn yelled as he leapt out from behind a shadowy rock. Zelander spun in the air and pointed his four arms toward the dwarf and trilled wildly. Gadlyn hoped that meant he had surprised the beasts. As the *vouivre* floated toward him, the crackling of forming magic swirling about their heads, Gadlyn let the belt tied about the lens drop.

"That's it, ye overgrown tick," he growled, "Just a bit closer." When the first *vouivre* was within thirty paces, he pulled Koulor's shirt from the lens and pointed it, apex first, toward the beast.

The air erupted instantly in a fury of swirling shadows and was split with the sound of the shrieking lens as it sucked in the shadowmists around him. A breath later the black viscous oil of transformed shadows spewed forth and into the mouth of the advancing creature just as a faint blue glow was forming over its head. The *vouivre*, forgetting its spell, pitched wildly in the air as it tried to remove the thick oil from its mouth. Gadlyn drew the lens back and forth as he moved slowly forward, sending the oil over the entire length of the creature. Zelander trilled to the other *vouivre* and directed them to flank the dwarf as he floated high into the mists and began casting a spell.

"Tough? Bah!" Gadlyn snorted as he continued to coat the creature. It was then that Gadlyn noticed something very strange. As he focused the stream of oil onto the *vouivre*, he was able to form the liquid into a cocoon of flowing oily blackness that encapsulated the creature. "This is new," Gadlyn whispered as he focused his thoughts on the forming ball of oil. The creature inside fell to the ground as the liquid coated its body. The creature then began

to convulse and spasm inside the cocoon as the liquid then fell down its throat, closing off its air. Looking to his right, Gadlyn smiled and pointed the lens toward the other approaching vouivre.

"I think I can get used to this," Gadlyn laughed. The beast let fly half a dozen sparkling streaks of magic that slammed into Gadlyn's body causing him to stumble back and cry out. However, he held fast to the lens and sent the oil into the beast. The air about him was screaming now, as if the shadows pouring into the lens were causing it pain. The shadow oil poured forth like a waterfall, coating the second vouivre in mere seconds as it fell to the ground, encapsulated in a black cocoon.

Aaomas and the others slipped around the other side of the rocks and darted toward the portal. They would only have a moment before the vouivre noticed them and hoped that Gadlyn could keep them preoccupied until then. Hopefully, he would be able to make his escape as well. That part of the plan they wished could be different, but they had little choice and even less time to devise another. Valdicor pushed Laeirill through the portal and leapt in after her.

Zelander finished his spell, sending a streaking bolt of lightning from his outstretched hands that slammed into Gadlyn's chest. The impact sent him flying back, his chest blackened and smoldering, into the arms of the last vouivre as it circled behind him. The lens fell to the ground and continued its conversion of the shadows, shrieking and spinning wildly, spewing oil in a torrent across the ground.

Aaomas and Koulor started for the portal when the crack of lightning caused them to stop. They spun in time to see Gadlyn fly back and into the waiting arms of one of the vouivre, the lens spinning across the ground. Fifty feet above was the third, already reciting the words of another spell. Aaomas, seeing the lens, grabbed Koulor's arm.

"Koulor, can you get me to the lens before the beast above strikes?" Aaomas asked quickly. Koulor did not answer but grabbed Aaomas around the chest and

ran, ignoring his wounded leg. The bubbling sound of the vouivre mixing with the shrieking of the lens formed a cacophony of dissimilar tones that scraped at their ears like daggers. Koulor dropped Aaomas next to the lens and leapt toward the vouivre that held Gadlyn by the feet, stuffing the dwarf into its mouth. Pulling his great sword, Koulor called to his god and, as he came down, chopped at the base of the arms that held his friend.

A shrill cry filled his ears as two of the appendages released their hold and dropped to the shadowy soil. Grabbing Gadlyn's boot, Koulor put both of his feet against the body of the vouivre and kicked out. A series of cracks echoed around the barbarian as the force of his kick shattered several of the bones in the creature's face. Koulor pulled Gadlyn free just as the creature snapped its jaws together and fell to the ground spewing ichor and blood.

"Can't say I recommend 'em," Gadlyn coughed as he wiped vouivre saliva from his face and fell to his rump.

Aaomas wrapped his arms around the lens and yelled for Koulor.

"Throw me toward the vouivre!" he yelled to the barbarian. Koulor protested but Aaomas cut him off.

"No time for discussions! Throw me now!" Koulor raised Aaomas over his head, took three steps and launched him into the air. Zelander let loose his spell, sending a dozen flaming arrows streaking toward Koulor. He knew the error in his choice of targets seconds later when Aaomas flew towards his mouth and jammed the artifact- tip first- into his open maw, tumbled over his plated back, and toward the misty ground below.

Koulor went into a limping run, determined to catch the friend he had just thrown into the jaws of death. The flaming arrows burst into the ground around him- two of them finding their mark against his leg. Koulor gritted his teeth against the pain and heat of the flames but ran on, leaping just as Aaomas fell to the

ground and catching him in his arms then slamming hard onto the ground.

Zelander spun wildly as the lens pulled the shadows into its magical depths and sent the oil surging into his stomach. His guts bulged and ripped as they filled with the magical liquid as he tried to claw the lens from his mouth but the artifact would not budge. Zelander gurgled an oil-choked scream, and fell toward Koulor and Aaomas, his hands reaching out as he was determined to rip them apart before he died. Koulor rolled over Aaomas to protect him when he saw the vouivre fall toward them, its hands clawing the air. Suddenly, Zelander bucked in the air and began to spin when his body exploded from the pressure of the oil that continued to surge into him.

Koulor and Aaomas sighed in relief as bits of oil coated creature rained down around them. Gadlyn, jarred by the explosion, regained enough of his senses to catch the artifact before it crashed into the ground.

"We need to seal those portals," Aaomas said urgently, leaping to his feet as he pulled the barbarian behind.

"How?" Koulor asked incredulously. "Valdicor has already returned to the Trollgates and none of us has any magic!"

"With this." Gadlyn ran up to the first portal and turned the lens, letting the oil splash into the opening. As the black liquid flowed over the portal, it coalesced and formed a new layer, slowly bringing the edges together until it winked shut and the bandage of shadow oil fell to the ground and disappeared. Gadlyn turned and motioned toward the other opening.

"Go now!" he yelled. Koulor started to move when Aaomas stopped him.

"You do understand," he said to the barbarian quietly, "that the only way to seal the breach is from the inside."



Laeirtill watched as her last arrow sailed toward the giant. Ten feet before sinking into its brain, the shaft slammed into an invisible wall and fell to the dirt in pieces. A guttural laugh filled the air as the giant moved toward her, waving a long ashen staff that sparkled with black energy. Laeirtill knew her chances of finding shelter were slim without at least being hit by a blast from the giant's magical staff.

"Valdicor," she whispered, "Where are you?" As if in answer, the mage sailed through the trees behind the giant, screaming the words of a spell- a pair of membranous wings flapping from his shoulders.

"Tilly, run!" he yelled as the bloodstone in his hand disappeared. Laeirtill looked once to the laughing giant as it spun and faced the flying mage before darting into the trees.

A thin beam of green light shot from Valdicor's hand and struck the giant's body. The creature groaned and shuttered for a second before it evaporated into bits of sparkling dust. Valdicor dropped lightly to the ground as Laeirtill ran from the trees and embraced him.

"My thanks, but what of the others?" she asked, realizing that the others had not yet joined them.

As they turned toward the breach, Koulor and Aomas stepped through.

"Where's Gadlyn" the mage shouted.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gadlyn stood before the final portal trying to figure how to get out of the predicament he had gotten himself into. He did not plan on sacrificing himself but 'the best laid plans of goblins and ogres are but folly' he remembered his father telling him. He was beginning to think that that included dwarves as well.

"Ye can't live forever," he finally grunted as he pointed

the flow of shadows toward the portal. Suddenly, he felt something. Intuition or dumb luck he was not sure, but an idea formed in his mind. Since the lens was able to take the shadows and move them through the lens, he should be able to do the same. Only problem was, he was not sure what he would come out of the device as! Again, the feeling came over him. This time, it was in the form of a clear thought. *You are now brothers with the shadows, use them to set you free!* Gadlyn shook his head as if trying to loosen his brains.

"I must be goin' mad!" No, not madness he thought. Clarity. When he was brought back from the realm of the dead by that shadow guard, something had happened. Somehow he was joined with that being and part of its shadow essence infused with his, changing him. Gadlyn knew how he could close the portal and not sacrifice himself in the process. Pushing the lens into the portal, Gadlyn stepped through. As he did, he used his newfound energy to pull the edges of the portal together and sealed them.

The whining of the lens filled their ears as everyone turned and watched as Gadlyn pulled the portal together and sealed it. The breach was sealed. Koulor pulled a saddle blanket from the remains of a nearby horse and covered the lens. Gadlyn smiled.

"How . . . What?" Valdicor did not know what to say.

"How about we talk about this over some of Tilly's famous rabbit stew," Aomas said as patted Gadlyn on the back. "Good job, my friend" he whispered in the dwarf's ear. Turning to Laeirtill, he took her by the hand and looked into her eyes, the images of crashing waves of deep blue water still coming to mind.

"I believe you and I have some things to discuss," he said softly. Laeirtill embraced him tightly and smiled.

"What took you so long?"

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by Pike Stephenson

## Behind Every Great Tale

A pack of ravenous storm clouds devoured the evening sun before it could escape over the horizon. Darkness swept in, blanketing the surrounding woods, smothering a lone tavern called the Broken Forge.

Inside, Tram Dreamweaver hurled another wad of parchment into the blazing hearth. He watched with bitter frustration as the paper lit a vibrant orange and then disintegrated. A day's work lay in ashes, a pile of failed attempts to capture another man's glory on paper.

Tram gritted his teeth and sighed. How could he, a bard of notoriety, a teller of epic tales, fall victim to a stagnated mind? Ordinarily words flowed effortlessly from his tongue and his quill and danced upon page after page. As he traveled the countryside, Tram often heard locals singing his ballads or reciting versions of his work. This inspired him and drove him to craft grander and more powerful tales. And yet, this past summer, Tram felt as if his mind was filled with mud. Nothing came naturally, almost as if he were trying to force a mountain through the eye of a needle. Was it a spell or a curse that disabled him?

The elf turned away from the fire and returned to his table. Parchment lay strewn among the bent quills and empty inkwells that littered the table. He glided into a bench and adjusted his silver-stitched surcoat. The coat was a deep maroon, fastened at the cuffs and front with pearl buttons. He gathered the papers, stacked them neatly, and picked up a decent-looking quill. He squinted, peering through the shadows that fell across the parchment. Though his elven eyes were accustomed to the darkness, he found it to be a further annoyance. Even his hat annoyed him. It

was his favorite: a broad brimmed fedora with a large eagle's feather that was dyed a brilliant crimson. Now it felt like a world of worry resting on his head. "Damn it all," he said as he ripped it from his head and flung it to the floor.

A few tables over sat a pair of filthy trappers, reeking of sweat and carrion. Other than Tram, they were the only patrons of the Forge this dismal evening. Their ale-soaked tongues had been arguing about who would track and capture some man-eating beast. Now they leered at Tram, nodding and snickering at his frustrations. He did his best to ignore such common riffraff. Tram hadn't traveled to the middle of nowhere to be mocked by a pair of fools.

"Hey, long ear," said the larger of the two. "If ya need help with the big words, Clem here can learn ya some."

"Yep, for those boots. How'd ya keep them so shiny and clean? Ya got wings like some fairy?" Clem's thick, dark beard parted and revealed a broad, gapped-tooth smile. "But Cletus is good with the riball... ribold..."

"Ribaldry, you flea-infested worm. How can you grasp its complexities and nuances if you cannot spit the word from your lips?" Tram said. Clem lurched up, knocking over his chair and glared at Tram. The human wasn't as large or menacing as the bard had assumed, merely covered in dense layers of leathers and hides that carried bits of forest debris in the fur.

"Easy, boys," said Barekk from behind the bar. He was the owner of the Forge, an odd-looking man, stockily built and weathered like an old growth stump. He and

his company of adventurers had led the charge in the War of the Wraith some twenty winters ago. Barekk was long thought dead and regarded as a legend, but Tram's gilded tongue and a hefty bag of gold garnered him the truth. Tram had hoped to gather some inspiration from the man, to feed his muse and to write the epic tale to end all tales. Unfortunately, Barekk had very little to say about what happened to the rest of his company and how they truly ended the war. This was yet another obstacle that blocked Tram's quill.

Clem's shoulders dipped at Barekk's words. He picked up his chair and sat back down. With his two simple words, Barekk commanded full attention and respect from the trappers, and from Tram as well. Barekk was an interesting fellow to behold, even as he performed a task as mundane as wiping clean a row of beaten steel mugs. Lines etched his face like a map of each and every battle that he had fought. His arms were corded mazes of muscle and coarse hair, and his eyes, full of steel and as cold as the northern wind, peered through people and bored deep within their souls. He carried his past in those eyes, and Tram wanted to know it all.

A candle flickered and glided towards the table, carried by the room's other occupant. Olivia was tall by human standards, with slender, delicate hands and pretty in a warm, earthen sort of way. She was Barekk's daughter, and she could not look any less like him. Tram studied them both, father and daughter, and noted what a deep contrast they were to each other. While Barekk was short, standing only half a head taller than Tram, she was like a great willow, and she was crowned with a frazzled mane of hair as red as a spring sunrise.

"I'm thinkin' that was number fifteen," she said, nodding towards the hearth and the ashes of his parchment. Olivia placed the candle upon the table, careful not to drip wax on any of Tram's tools. She smiled at the elf, her gaze full of sympathy and encouragement.

"Does the lady presume that I am unable to count?" Tram said in a coy yet sarcastic tone.

"I presume that the gentlemen is bein' too hard on himself." Olivia leaned against the table and peered down at the blank pages. "My father's past is best left buried there. He doesn't mean any disrespect; it's just too painful, even after all these years. I hope you can understand that."

"Dear child, this is not about him," Tram said, "This is about me. People may gather around the campfire to hear the ballads of heroes past, but who crafted those tales? Any oaf can peddle his adventures, but it takes a true artist to turn the most common of skirmishes into an apocalyptic battle. We bards are the reason that adventurers travel deep into the abyss to fight unspeakable evils. They want to hear their names praised and revered by commoners and kings. We are what makes them great."

Olivia scowled at the elf. "Suit yourself. I've heard some say that it's a far cry easier to spread the glory of another man's success without having succeeded as such. But me," she said with a stern look in her eyes, "I'm thinkin' that it's just the opposite."

"Why, the sheer audacity," Tram said under his breath. He never allowed anyone, especially serving wenches, speak to him as such, and yet her words pained his heart. He mulled each word as the firewood crackled and the raindrops rapped on the window glass. Did he only chase other men's glory? While most adventurous souls picked up swords or dabbled with magic, he was content with scribing tales and ballads. Tram took great pride in his mastery of the written word and the effect his work had on others, but he had never considered seeking adventure for himself. Did this make him a coward? Should he seek out

danger to better understand the heroes in his tales?

Rubbish, he thought to himself. Pure rubbish. How could some commoner expect to understand the grand scheme? Still, the conversation captivated his thoughts, so much so that he never heard Barekk calling to him.

"Elf," Barkeep shouted, obviously frustrated with having to repeat himself. "Make yourself useful and gather some wood so my daughter doesn't catch her death of cold."

"Indeed," Tram said. "Good sir, you are aware that this surcoat was hand crafted by one of the finest tailors in Ashendale. It would be a disservice to the man if I were to stain or tear it by hauling in wood."

"You could always be finding another shelter to sleep under. The Leaky Keg isn't more than a day's ride."

"What of them?" Tram said as he pointed at the trappers.

"I got wood last night," said Clem.

"My back's a breakin'," Cletus said while massaging his back. "'Sides, we're too tired from tracking the Beast."

"A wild bore perhaps?" Tram crossed his arms and pursed his lips as he waited for their reply.

"Mock us if you're wishin' to but there's a beast out there. It's eaten up parts of elk and leavin' the rest in a heap. Its claw marks can be seen up the tree trunks taller than I can reach." At this, Clem stood and stretched his arm as high as he could reach. "Which is twice as tall as you," he added. Both of the men broke into laughter, slapping their thighs and wiping the tears from their eyes.

"Fools," Tram said as he threw his burgundy cloak over his shoulders. He strode to the Forge's single door and without looking at the dung heaps that continued to enjoy their jest. As he opened the door, a blast of wind and rain slapped against his face. Tram shot back one dark glance, then stepped outside.

It took a moment for his sensitive eyes to adjust to the sudden darkness. He bundled his cloak up tight and began his trek around the building to the wood crib. With the exception of some windswept limbs that batted against him, the path was clear. At the rear of the building he found the crib. Tram quickly gathered a small armload when a flash of motion to his right caught his attention. He studied the trees, the wavering branches, but saw nothing unusual. Still, something deep in his heart told him that he wasn't alone. Maybe one of the trappers had stepped outside for another laugh. Or could it be their wild beast in search of some food?

Tram cradled his load in his left arm and with his free right hand, reached for his only weapon, a dagger. He drew the blade slowly, and held it point out as he backed around the building. Lightning flashed across the sky and Tram could see a man standing a short distance away. He leaned against a tree and locked eyes with the elf.

"You there," Tram called out. "Who are you?"

The man turned and melted into the shadows. Tram dropped the wood and called out again but still he did not reply. The elf took a deep breath and darted into the night to confront the stalker. It had to be the trappers out to play another prank. Tram had his fill being the butt of their jokes and he wished to straighten them out for good. The harsh rain pelted his face as he charged after the figure. Slim rays of moonlight slipped through the clouds and dense oak boughs, enough to aid Tram in his search. They weren't too far apart by Tram's initial judgment, maybe thirty paces, but Tram was unable to close the gap.

Though slender and spry, a runner he was not. Tram stopped under a great oak and tried to catch his breath. "This is insane," he called out. "Why are you doing this to me? What joy will come of this? Why do I care?" Weary and decidedly bored from the chase, Tram reversed step to return to the Forge when instead he walked into the stalker. Tram staggered back into the tree and dropped his dagger. The figure

appeared to be no more than a lad, maybe a year or two from manhood. He wore a dark, silken shirt and breeches, both torn and shredded. The lad was soaked to the bone; his bare feet and hands were covered in a dark layer of mud.

"What are doing out here, boy? Didn't your mother teach you not to play in the rain?" Tram reached for his dagger. "It would be wise for you to seek shelter."

"No." His voice was a deep growl, both tired and foreboding.

"How joyous," mused Tram, "You must be delirious with fever. That's fine because if the cold doesn't kill you then the beasts of the forest will."

"I don't care," he said as he slumped against the tree near Tram. He looked past the elf with a hollow gaze.

Tram studied the boy. Even in the darkness he could see the craftsmanship of lad's clothing in the quality of the cut and the fineness of the stitches. Hanging from his neck was a signet ring. Tram couldn't make out the intricacies of the symbol or coloration but understood that this lad wasn't some simpleton or farm hand. Perhaps this beaten and lost fool is a nobleman's son? he thought. There is a story brewing for sure! He needed more information, but hee could feel his muse bubbling with joy. Tram tossed his cloak over the boy's shoulders and attempted to guide him back inside.

"What is your name, lad?"

"Rhaelin... Rhaelin Redblade."

"Redblade, Redblade... do you mean you're the son of old Bloodblade?"

"It's Redblade," Rhaelin corrected.

"Sorry, lad but your father has quite a reputation."

"I know." The words came out in a gasp. Tram could feel the fatigue in the boy. What was he running from that drove him out into the storm unprotected? By the gods, Tram was as giddy as a child! Was the lad reduced to petty thievery? Maybe he found the bed of a young lass and her father beat him nearly to death. The possibilities were limitless.

"Lad, you can't stay out here much longer," Tram said, "Neither of us can. Let me get you back –

"I'm not going back," Rhaelin shouted. The boy struggled to pull away from Tram but only managed to topple over into a thick patch of mud. Tram knelt next to him and attempted to help him back to his feet.

"Just to the tavern near by," Tram reassured the boy. He couldn't lose this golden opportunity, not now. Tram took hold of Rhaelin's arm and helped steady him. They both stood, Rhaelin towering over the elf.

"I'm not going anywhere. You just don't understand." Rhaelin turned and stared down into Tram's eyes. The panic and fear there was profound. "You can't understand; my father always gets he wants."

As Tram stared at the lad, the rain began to let up. A cold breeze brushed across Tram's shoulders. He was sure that they would be sick if they were to stay outside for much longer. He had to find a way to bring Rhaelin back to the Forge. Tram needed distract the boy.

"Rhaelin, I know that fathers can be pig-headed at times. What does yours find so distasteful about you?"

"That I refuse to fight."

"Fighting, that's it? A strapping lad such as yourself doesn't want to pick up his father's sword and adventure across the lands?"

Rhaelin's face shifted from fear to utter disbelief. He looked down at the elf, his mouth lying agape. "My father is Nevil Redblade, the scourge of the Clondian Canyon. No army has ever won in battle against

his warriors. No man has ever stood against him and lived. His whole life, his very existence is about bloodshed. He has never taken my mother's death with good grace, and he blames me along with the rest of the world for his indiscretions. I refused to shed another man's blood because it went against my spirit, which my father took as a sign of weakness."

Rhaelin stopped again. He ran dirty fingers through his long, dark locks and closed his tired eyes. "He has spent the last year trying to break me, to change my nature into something he could tolerate. He hadn't counted on me being so damned stubborn, which I begrudgingly inherited from him."

The lad looked up, into the clouded sky, and breathed in the night. "He called me a coward, a disgrace to our name. Had he simply disowned me and left it at that, I would be fine. No, he made sure that I would be his little killer."

The clouds parted, and a large harvest moon hung in the sky. Its gentle light illuminated the clearing and bathed them both in its lunar beauty. Tram turned to Rhaelin and said, "I'm sure I can find the way to the Forge if you're willing to come and share your story. The soul of a saint, the hands of a killer. I can already hear the rhyme in the verse."

Tram reached to take his arm but the lad fell to his knees and screamed. His hands dug deep rifts in the dirt and mud. Rhaelin tore at his shirt, shredding it into a hundred ribbons of cloth. His skin rippled and boiled as sporadic pops filled the air. Rhaelin turned on Tram, yet it wasn't Rhaelin. His face had elongated into a vicious maw filled with wicked fangs. His breath came in hoarse, heated gasps that puffed out into steam above his fur-laden head.

"Oh, deary me," said Tram. "This puts a wrinkle in my ending."

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## About the Author

Caio Maximino de Oliveira is a wannabe Brazilian neuroscientist, autodidact political scientist, and many other things (as he claims). He has been playing RPGs in the Third World since 1992

by Caio Maximino de Oliveira

## Micro-sociology of RPGs: Role-playing as a Political Act

Politics are everywhere. Politics are found in the congressional and governing bodies of a country and in the war-torn nations currently under fire; they are even in our everyday lives. Politics are not only about power but also about potency. Power is what happens when the joined potencies that form the collective strength for action, a multitude, get separated from their origins. So, what does this have to do with RPGs?

This new column embarks upon a discussion of the micropolitics of role-playing games; thus, the first question to ask is: how do politics and RPGs relate? If politics are everywhere, then relationships of potency and power are also everywhere. In a utterly heteronomous society like the society of the spectacle, every relationship of potency is turned into a relationship of power. This means that every encounter of two or more human beings to create something greater than the sum of themselves is a relationship of command-and-obey, utterly denying their ability to join capabilities and strengths to act over the world on common grounds. The old dialectics of slave and sire is reborn here with the heteronomy of our society. We do not need to analyse the State to see that; we need go no further than our everyday lives.

Playing role-playing games is supposed to be entertaining, but it also carries with itself marks of commodity fetishism. We can see this in the way we divinise authors and game designers; in the way we consecrate styles of playing (and 'popular' style changes with time: from war-gamism to simulationism to rules-lite...); in the way we set up our conventions as big markets of commodities; in the way we simply forget about the use value of books, dice, and all that

stuff and start paying loads of money for products we don't need; in the way we represent and simulate social relationships within the game—to sum up, in the way we relate to our 'hobby' [1]. This 'commodity' feature of spectacle society poisons every aspect of human life; a society that is based on alienated activity and consumption is a society that is alienated in every aspect of its structure. What I will try to show, here, is how this relates to role-playing, on the outside (in the relationship between players, the RPG industry, and society in general) and on the inside (game dynamics, relationships of the role-playing act with politics of subjectivity).

As an aside that doesn't directly relate to the introduction—think about the types of patterns we see mimiced through RPGs that are so prevalent in the real world. Our games are filled with conflict, greed, oppression—because those are the entertaining things, and those are what we see modeled through the political structures of the "real world". How are these structures politically motivated through the socialization and instillment of ideology?

The role-playing games are simulation events; we gather around a table (or other places, the case of SHERPA, web-based (PbEM, OpenRPG/WebRPG/PnP or LARPs) and simulate, in our imaginations, relationships between people that do not exist, in places that also do not exist. Sometimes, our games are about fiction; sometimes they are about a simulacrum of reality. That is what makes RPGs interesting. In a great book, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art* [2], Daniel Mackay analyses the role-playing experience taking into account various levels of immersion in the simulation.

To the author, role-playing involves switching between those many levels, and skill in this switch is thus skill in the game. The levels identified are:

1. Social frame, the domain of the person
2. Game frame, the domain of the player
3. Narrative frame, domain of the raconteur
4. Constative frame, domain of the addresser
5. Performative frame, domain of the

character

Every role-playing game is the articulation of those five frames, simultaneously or not, in a way that involves both players and referees (I, like Paul Mason, prefer this term to game master). Thus, RPGs have "in-character" moments, mostly involving the third to fifth frames, and "out-of-character" moments, involving the first two frames. The RPG game is, thus, an illusion that reveals itself, and one in which the players are conscious of its illusive nature. Being imaginative, RPGs allow participants to project their desires, actions, and other teleological features into an virtual space that knows no limits. We can see these features as layers that interact with each other in a massively parallel fashion (much like the brain), congruent to each other in many moments.

Those frames can be related to what I call politics in, mainly, two ways: (1) they form a rhizomatic web that, if faced and understood, can reveal much about the relationship between society and the individual. RPGs reveal many frames of interaction



between the individual subjectivity (the character) and other instances of the social-historical (the other characters, the game-world, both natural and social-historical environments). (2) RPGs relate to the politics of subjectivity, which are currently very little developed. By politics of subjectivity, I mean the dynamic processes that are involved in the relationship of the individual and his or her social environment, and the dualistic processes of externalization and internalization (internalization of society in the individual subjectivity; externalization of the subjectivity in the social environment). In the society of the spectacle, subjectivity is lacking [3].

This illusion is created by the performative nature of role-playing games. Frames can be utopian, dystopian or simply alienated. But, most importantly, the self-conscious nature of the illusion of the game is, paradoxically, what makes it real. For RPGs are like art—an illusion that, when dealt with, denounces the illusion of the commodity and of this heteronomous society.

Being a player in an RPG is being someone different than who you actually are. This has major consequences to personality—a psychic feature that is very much lacking in the spectacle society [4]—for it allows a major boost in the self-conscious aspect and in our self-deemed ‘needs’ that spins our personalities in an auto-poietic movement. In addressing this, we have reached our aim: to demonstrate that RPGs are political both outwards or inwards. They are objectively and subjectively political; they relate to commodity society as well as with the subjective. Of course, it does not mean that role-playing games are always progressive; actually, nowadays, infected as they are by an RPG industry that is nothing else than a part of culture industry, they are very reactionary. But the micropolitics of role-playing games are also a space to be criticized. There is no turning back now.

[1] Of course, we’re talking here about commodity fetishism related to an immaterial product. Even though we can argue that there is, indeed, a material result (a book or whatnot), it is all about the ideas, or rather the immaterial work, that are attached to it. This immaterial nature complexifies matters a bit. The idea of intellectual work and its relationships to commodity fetishism have been analyzed thoroughly by many; there is no room here, of course, to sum up such ideas. I’d recommend reading Pierre Bordieu, Guy Debord, Theodor Adorno and Stewart Home.

[2] Mackay D, 2001. *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art*. McFarland & Company

[3] This is, again, due to commodity fetishism. Under the spectacle society, our needs are forged by the system; thus, we are no longer the subjects of the production of society and history; instead, Father Capital is. We’re nothing but objects and we behave accordingly. More on this can be found on Marx’s *The Capital*, Adorno’s *Fetishism on Music and the Regression of Listening* and Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle*.

[4] This relates to Leontiev’s *Activity and Personality*. Summing up, it is the relationship between our activities (tool-mediated behavior oriented towards a goal; by tool, he means not only physical objects, but mental functions as well), and consciousness and the object. Personality is built as a motivational hierarchy. The process of consciousness, where the world is represented in the mind, is mediated by a process of self-consciousness that is lacking. Also, since activity is goal-oriented, one can hardly say that the structuration of need does not enter this equation. Since our needs are determined by the spectacle (see [3], above), personality can be said to be virtually non-existent in the spectacle society; this is equivalent to saying that subjectivities are homogeneized.

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by Aaron Todd

## Travinara Part 3

Sleep came easily that night for the brothers. They had been walking for two days and this was the first bed they had seen since leaving Wellmoore. A good meal of some stew and ale downstairs at the Dupaal Inn was all that they had needed to cap off the day. Sleep would come easily tonight to the weary travelers.

That night, Droito dreamt of time he could spend with the waitress. It didn't matter what Chukra had told them. Droito knew that he was capable of making his own decisions. The woman was beautiful, no doubt about that.

The siren still wore the blue scarf, but the ragged peasant shirt had been replaced by a long, silk, ivory-colored dress, embellished in gold embroidery and small pearls. Her hair was pulled completely away from her face, back into a single braid, and she sat on a blanket in a field of grass, leaning to one side with her legs stretched out in front of her. Her bare feet were at the edge of the blanket and tickled the grasses as she rested on one arm and absently toyed with a white wish-flower with her other hand. She rolled it between her thumb and forefinger as Droito envisioned the flower as his own hand, cupped and caressed in hers.

He watched her from behind a nearby tree. An unseen will held him steady behind its trunk as he watched her play with the flower. He wanted to join her on the blanket, but he couldn't move. She didn't seem to notice him.

He was so transfixed that he didn't notice the area underneath and around her change into dark sand. A small wave of foamy surf rolled in behind her, dissolving the blanket into the sand beneath it and soaking her dress where it touched the new ground.

A second wave followed just seconds after. This one struck her almost willfully. It crashed at her back, spraying up and over her. The flower disappeared into the water, and her hair wet spilled out of its braid and sprawled, clinging to her. She looked down at her hand and saw that the flower was gone.

A shrill cry exploded from her lips. The wave of sound disturbed the very air around Droito and knocked him from his hiding place behind the tree. He fell to the ground on his back, stunned by the impact of her scream. His head struck the earth and bounced back up. He closed his eyes at the impact.

When he looked up again, he was lying at the base of the Wizen tree, but the road to home was nowhere to be seen. Starlight and a soft breeze were his only companions.

"I warned you to stay away from her." Chukra's voice came from behind him.

"But you didn't say why." Droito turned around, but the deer wasn't there.

"I shouldn't have to say why. You should just listen. The man in the bar told you why."

"But how did you..."

"You must be careful. The world is a dangerous place. And you could get swallowed up by it."

Droito couldn't see anyone, but the fading gallop of a small animal confirmed that it must have been Chukra. Their guide had come to him again in the cover of night, and left Droito with only a vague

### About the Author

Aaron Todd is a devoted husband and Computer Operations Manager in a Philadelphia suburb. A classically trained literature buff and an award-winning poet, he has turned his attentions over the last year to his long-sought-after career as a novel writer. With his first work nearly finished, Aaron is actively seeking a publisher and agent. In his free time Aaron likes to jog, bike ride, read Star Wars novels, and enjoys a challenge at any level. With Football, Hockey, and Lacrosse as his favorite things to watch, activity is never in short supply.

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notion of what he and his brother were to know about the times that approached them.

The rising sun took over the night sky. Blinding light swallowed the horizon, forcing Droito to cover his eyes.

The light of day pushed through and around the wooden window shutters at first light. The twins' rented room was situated on the east side of the inn, so the morning sun warmed the stone wall at the earliest hour. It was the breakfast hour in Dupaal, and it was time to get up and find their new place of work.

Parto got himself out of bed with ease, while his brother struggled to accept that morning had come so soon. With Parto's prodding, Droito managed to join his brother as they prepared for the day. They had enough time to get up and get ready, but they would have to eat along the way.

They picked up some cheese from the innkeeper on their way out ate it with some flat bread as they walked from the Inn to the edge of town. They found the farm exactly where Marco told them it would be. They went into the 'old' barn to see if they could find Marco.

Inside the 'old' barn were the stallions that he had spoken of. And what stallions they were! As tall as the two boys would be standing on top of each

other, the horses each had narrow fore quarters and large, muscular flanks. Their magnificent, sinewy legs perfectly balanced the weight of the beautiful animals. These were racing stallions. Of the four, the first one they came to was as gold as any fall leaf they had ever seen. The two boys approached its stall.

"He looks sad," Parto said to his brother.

"Yeah, he kind of does. No that we know much about horses, but if I were to say he could be, he does look sad." The boys approached the gallant beast.

Once they were close enough, the horse bent its head down and nuzzled against each of them and nickered softly like the purr of a cat. They stroked its head and neck, introducing themselves to the creature they would be spending so much time with over the next couple of days.

Droito found a carrot in a pail next to the stall, just out of reach for the horse to get on its own. Picking it up, Droito fed it to the receptive animal, who ate it eagerly.

While Droito fed the first horse, Parto walked around to the other stalls. There were four other stalls, but only three other horses. The horses were each as rich and pure a color as though nature had intended for them to be the very meaning of color itself. One of them was a darker black than any night Parto had ever seen. The horse was so dark, that he imagined it disappearing into the night right before his eyes if it ever ran off. He responded to Parto just as the golden horse had.

The third horse was a brilliant red. Every bit as attentive as the first two, this horse also seemed more aware of the young men. While Parto was petting the head of the black, the red waved his head and clopped his foot, inviting Parto to come over. When Parto came to the stall, Red bent its neck down to the small young man and made a slightly different noise than the other two had. If a horse could talk, it sounded as though it might be talking to him, telling him something.

While Parto was speaking to the red horse, Droito decided to introduce himself to the fourth and final horse. As pure as the first snow of the season, the horse was white and clean. Not like other white horses that they had seen, this animal was completely white from head to foot, to tail, with not a speck of dust on him. It was quite an accomplishment for a farm animal.

"I see you've met my friends." Marco had entered the barn while they were introducing themselves to the animals.

"They are such beautiful horses," Parto remarked.

"Yeah, finest around. And fast, too. Ye should see 'em when they get out on an open field. Fastest things I ever seen." Marco didn't get any closer to them. He remained at the door to the barn.

"I can imagine," Droito said, barely loud enough for anyone else to hear. He and his brother had only ridden horses a couple of times before, but those had been much smaller than these and not nearly so glorious.

"Ye boys are punctual, I like dat. Ye ready ta do some work?"

"Sure are." Parto answered for both of them.

"Well, c'mon, I'll show you the new barn and we can git ya started." He led them out the door.

The new barn was very close to the old barn, and didn't look much larger from the outside. The 'old' barn appeared to be in perfectly good condition, too. Once inside, the boys could see the differences. The horse stalls were a bit smaller and the walls were higher. The doors on the fronts of the stalls were as tall as the horses themselves, with a large hole just above the middle of the door, large enough for them to get their heads through for feeding.

This barn had six stalls and a storage area. No bigger than the other barn, it was clear that the

horses would be less comfortable. Marco showed them where they would be putting things in the new barn. "Now be careful in there as yer movin stuff. Those horses look a might calm now, but they can git pretty restless. Never open their gates, not fer nothin! We'll get the stuff from their pens after we git them moved, maybe tomorrow."

"Sure, no problem," the two said together.

They spent the entire day moving things from one barn to the other. There were saddles, blankets, bridles and piles and piles of hay.

After the arduous work of the day, Parto and Droito returned to the Dupaal Inn to have some dinner before retiring for the evening. The work of the day was hard, but well worth the effort. They had earned their keep for the day and still had a few grommels left in their pockets after paying the keeper for the day's rent.

The Inn was less crowded this evening than the previous night. While the crowd was made up of the same type of people as before, the people who were here tonight seemed more quiet and isolated.

The twins took the same seats as the night before. The familiar siren who had served them approached the table only moments later. She caught them unexpectedly in the middle of a conversation about the horses.

"Well, what'll it be for you boys tonight?" She had very few choices to offer, but the young men didn't care. Whatever the Inn served would be better than the flatbread that awaited them upstairs in their room.

"I think the stew and ale will be fine for us tonight." Parto was tired, but they did need to eat.

Droito remained silent. His gaze averted from her alluring presence.

"Just the stew and ale for you tonight, too?" She looked directly at him.

Droito looked up to answer her, so as not to be impolite. He had exchanged looks with countless people in his life, but this was different. He felt that she was looking into him, not just at him. She winked at him as though the two of them shared a secret.

"Yes, the stew and ale will be fine for me as well." His voice shook nervously as he looked away from her and back down to the table. He continued to stare at a single knot in the wood until she walked away.

"Brother, is something wrong? You look nervous. You're shaking." Parto was looking directly at his brother's forehead.

Droito glanced to the side, making sure that the waitress had left the table, he looked up at his brother. "I had a dream last night about her."

"A dream? Why brother, just what happened in this dream?" Parto chuckled.

"I think she knows, too." He started to tell Parto about the dream that he had had and how he felt when the siren looked at him as she took their order.

"So Chukra came to you last night, eh? I think you're worrying over nothing. How could she possibly know about your dream?"

Droito continued to tell his brother about the dream for a few minutes. Then, during a pause in their conversation, they overheard two men talking about their employer.

"I'm telling you, you'll never beat Marco's horses," the first man said.

"And why not? I've got the fastest horses in the region," the other man claimed.

"I'm telling you, those horses of his are from

the Mist. He holds them back when they race just so it isn't obvious. You can't win."

"So where are the wings? Horses of the Mist are supposed to have winged hooves. I've never seen any wings."

"Haven't you noticed that he wraps their legs, just above the hoof? Don't let your pride get in the way, Johin. You will lose."

Parto and Droito stared at each other for a moment as they absorbed what they just heard.

"You don't think..." Parto lowered his voice to that the men couldn't hear them talking.

"I don't know. I didn't really look. I thought they were just stories that parents told their kids. I didn't think we'd ever actually see a horse that can run with the wind. But if Marco's got them, we need to do something about it," Droito's conviction on the matter was clear.

Typically considered the most beautiful creatures in the land, Mist Horses were only ever seen in the early mornings as they raced across valleys and fields, riding along the morning mist. As silent as the wind itself, the galloping beauties winged feet kept them moving along a film of air just above the ground as they ran. No one ever knew where they would be at any time, and they ran too fast to be followed. The elusive creatures were rumored to have an intellect greater than all other animals. That advantage gave them the ability to remain hidden when they were not on their morning runs.

"When we go to work tomorrow, we'll have to check..." Parto was interrupted by the waitress.

Droito kept his head down again, deliberately eluding her stare. He could feel her looking right at him as she set the bowls and mugs on the table. She paused for several seconds after putting their meal in front of them, but Droito still did not look up.

"You boys need anything else, you just wave, and I'll be right over."

"Thank you, ma'am, I think we'll be fine." Parto looked right at her, but she was focused on his brother.

They ate their dinner in peace and went up to their rooms for the night, falling asleep almost immediately. They were more tired than they thought.

Droito dreamt of the siren again, but this time he came out from behind the tree and she did acknowledge him. He joined her on the blanket and she sang to him in such a way as he had never heard before. He had heard many women in his village sing before, but none had ever sung to him the way the siren sang. The waves did not come and the grass did not turn to sand. Droito enjoyed the peaceful dream, uninterrupted by the troubles of waking times. Chukra did not come to him this night.

When he awoke, he was more rested than the night before and he felt no fear of the woman anymore.

The invading sun was as rude as it had been the prior morning, and it was time to start another work day. And it was time to see if some of the most heralded horses in the land were being enslaved. It had never been declared a crime to keep Mist Horses because it was never believed that they could be caught.

If Marco was indeed keeping these beautiful creatures, he would have to be stopped.

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by Nash J. Devita

# Review: Ramshead Publishing – Robots & Rapiers Quick Start Rules

Authors: Ralpf Mazza  
 Publisher: [Ramshead Publishing](#)  
 Review Date: October 29th, 2004

*Reviewer Bias: This title was received for review purposes. This was sent to me following Gen Con Indy 2004 though I had talked to a couple of different people about the title quite a bit. I can't wait for the full version to be released!*

*Robots & Rapiers* is an upcoming title from Ramshead Studios, a member of [The Forge](#). Beings as that the full title is still upcoming this particular version is, more or less, and alpha version of the game, if you will, or a sneak peek at what is to come.

*R&R Quick Start* is a 37 page paperback that contains a brief overview of the premise of the game, the setting(s), character creation, and the system. None of these items is fully fleshed out in this version. That being the case, this article is more of a sneak peak itself rather than a review.

## From the Back Cover

"The Band of Four

**Welcome to Auvernais**, a resort theme park where the court of Louis the Sun King is brought to life by robotic characters for the entertainment of the wealthy and social elite.

However, the guests are long since dead, leaving the robots to continue to act out the lives of the characters they've been programmed to portray. Only now a few are starting to notice that the reality of Auvernais is not what it seems.

You are one such character; a Sparked robot taking the first steps along the path to true sentience. You've only just begun to realize that your life, your home, and everything you've known have all been an illusion; an artificial construct of your programming. It's all been a lie. But now that you know the truth, what will you do with it?

**Introducing Robots & Rapiers**, a new role playing game from Ramshead Publishing, creators of the award winning *Universalis: The Game of Unlimited Stories*. Powered by a unique twist on the familiar dice pool system, Robots & Rapiers gives players the freedom to create customized feats of derring-do on the fly, with the flexibility to define the effects of most any stunt they can imagine in moments.

As characters navigate a world of intrigue, danger, and swashbuckling adventure; the players guide them along the path from being a programmed slave to the Tapestry to becoming a truly free thinking sentient being. Along the way, the players will completely redefine who their robot is, by first tearing down who it was programmed to be, in order to transform it into who they desire it to be."

## Presentation

The cover features two swashbuckling individuals, one jumping through a window with sword drawn, the other with a rapier and a pistol out. These two individuals are quite clearly robots – thanks to their sharp features and (the real give away) metallic faces. This is bordered by a pair of black & grey bars with gears throughout.

## Review snapshot

### Archetype: Core Book

**Body: 8** (*Game Mechanics*): What I have seen feels solid.

**Mind: 10** (*Organization*): Great For what is here – it works well.

**Spirit: 8** (*Look & Feel*): Not bad, for what it is. I expect better from the full version.

**Attack: 10** (*Value of Content*): An expanded version is available as a PDF for free. You don't get cheaper than that.

**Defense: 11** (*Originality of Content*): Very nice concept. I love it!

**Health: 7** (*Physical Quality*): Very thin paperback. I expect better from the final version!

**Magic: 9** (*Options & Adaptability*): Many possibilities within the concept of the game. I can't wait to see what the author has to say in the end.

## Scoring Definitions:

**12 = Superior.** Best of the best.

**11 = Excellent.** Just a hair from perfect.

**10 = Very Good.** Part of a Baker's Dozen.

**9 = Good.** Most gamers would like this.

**8 = Fair.** Some gamers would like this.

**7 = Average.** Most gamers would be indifferent.

**6 = Sub-par.** Flawed, but not without promise.

**5 = Poor.** Some gamers would dislike this.

**4 = Bad.** Most gamers would dislike this.

**3 = Very Bad.** Among the dirty dozen.

**2 = Inferior.** Worst of the worst.

There is very little art included in the quick start rules. Those illustrations that are present are (mostly) of varying styles of robots. Some of these individuals are very clearly robotic while others look human or almost human.

## Content

A very brief overview of character creation kicks off this paperback with a look at character roles, hardware, software, skills, and even the different types of robots.

**Roles** are chosen for the various facets of character concept. They determine what skills are available to the characters and what the skill ranks are. One's



**hardware** is his attribute ratings. There are some modifications to these numbers from previous choices.

The most important stats in *Robots & Rapiers* are **Role** and **Self Awareness**. These are two ends of a sliding scale. The total of these two stats will always equal ten (10). A high Role means that the programmed role is still highly intact. A high self awareness, on the other hand, means that the role has been broken and the character controls his actions instead of having his programming control them.

Much of this game is a struggle between the GM and the Players for control. The more the GM tries to control the actions of the robot, however, the greater the chances of further control being gained by the player. The more the system tries to hold a character down, the more the character fights back.

There are a few examples of how one robot who gains self-awareness could proceed – revolution against the system, personal gain, etc.

One of the things I find most interesting about the system is the damage sub-system. Most of the damage the character takes is not real. The robot is programmed to believe it is real, however, so if enough is taken, the robot temporarily shuts down. There is little permanent damage done from shutting down and restarting. Real damage can occur. Systems can become damaged from this.

Included within is a scenario for GM's and players to test the system. There is not much that is personally chosen within here – the characters are pre-generated as are the NPC's.

## Conclusion

I wish there was more in this book. I don't feel as if, even for quick start rules, enough of the rules are given. This is far more of a sneak peek, as I have stated previously, rather than a set of quick start rules.

What is included here has made me even more eager for the full version of *Robots & Rapiers*. I have added the Ramshead website to the list of those I check regularly so I know when the full version is available.

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▶ <http://www.silven.com/otherrpgs.asp?case=show&id=439>

by Shane Cubis

## Antipodean Adventures: **The Bull Mine Disaster**

G'Day all. I have been supremely busy this month, writing a million things (including a one day trial at a weekly magazine). Unfortunately, this means that Antipodean Adventures slipped down the totem pole of importance for a brief moment. Rather than leave this space blank for a month, I decided to simply submit a shorter column than usual. I promise it will be back to its lengthy glory by next issue!

This month, I'm taking a quick look at some local history: the Bulli Mine Disaster. My grandfather, his father and brothers all worked in the Bulli coal mine years after the Disaster we are about to explore. It is closed down now, but the pit – such a dirty, dark place to work – was always the site of industrial disputes and accidents. I find the labor history of the region fascinating, and believe it would provide an excellent backdrop to a town-based Antipodean Adventures campaign. This month, though, I intend to focus on the Disaster and its effects.

### Background

*"The remains are in some cases burned to a cinder. The heads are smashed in, the arms and legs broken, and fearful gashes appear on the bodies. The clothes in some cases are burned to ashes. The hair is singed from heads and faces and the flesh roasted and shrivelled."*

March 23rd, 1887 was a fateful day for the sleepy coalmining town of Bulli. A major gas explosion rocked the colliery, throwing young Herbert Cope clear of the entrance. He was the only survivor. Eighty-one men were buried in the disaster and the days that followed, leaving behind many widows and more orphans.

Coalmining was one of the only sources of work in the region, meaning that many women lost not only a husband, but often a son or two as well. The official inquiry into the cause of the accident came away with a simple answer: firedamp.

More commonly known today as methane, firedamp was a constant source of worry to miners, and Bulli was an especially gassy pit. Regulations were in place, according to which all miner lamps (which were essentially open oil flames at the time) should be covered with a sheet of gauze to prevent them igniting the methane. Unfortunately, the Bulli miners had become increasingly casual about the firedamp, and would often remove the gauze to give themselves more light to work by. Add a deputy willing to look the other way, and the disaster was waiting to happen.

*"J.B. Nicholson, secretary of the Miners' Association, had met some of the men a day or so before the disaster. 'I suppose', he said, 'there's a bit of gas?'"*

*'Too much gas, too little air', one miner replied.*

*'I hear you men are working in the bords with naked lights' – 'Oh, yes'.*

*'God help you', said Nicholson, 'You'll get it one of these days'"*

-Daily Mirror

### About the Author

Shane Cubis is a young, fit, Australian plagiarist with an affinity for Spider-Man. He has recently succumbed to internet peer pressure and now secretly refers to himself as a 'gamer.' He wrote and starred in an award-winning short film, "Dream Date" (also starring Aussie cricketer Brett Lee), has had an article published in 'Knights of the Dinner Table,' as well as regular articles in such publications as 'Tertangala,' 'The Northern Leader,' and 'Beanz Baxter.'

He has an Honors degree in History/Politics, and is currently studying to be a primary (grade) school teacher. On Saturdays he calls bingo - a job his nana got him five years ago. His favorite book is 'Catch 22,' his favorite band is TISM, and his favorite movie is 'Back to the Future.'

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On that warm March day, miners put the shot into the coalface, as they did every day, to blow the mineral out. Instead of merely breaking up the coal, the dynamite ignited the intense concentration of firedamp in the vicinity, killing the men where they stood. This fireball ignited other patches of gas throughout the mine, and if the blast did not kill, the carbon monoxide it left in its wake finished off the job.

Local woman Mary Ann Jones was called upon by the mine manager to dress the bodies and prepare them for burial. Jones had experience with smaller-scale mine accidents and their aftermath, having had to bury more than a few working men in her time in England. The many widows left behind were in no fit state to help her, being largely overwhelmed with grief. She worked tirelessly in the company's work shed, washing the corpses and readying them for the grave. Outside, coffins were hastily knocked together on the roadside. Graves had to be dug, and eighty men were hired on to get the job done quickly.

The Disaster was obviously a huge blow to the entire Bulli community. Every church in the district held a memorial service the following Sunday, and the region was overwhelmed by a sense of grief. In a town the

size of Bulli, having that many people die in one day was more of a depopulation than an accident. The struggle to rebuild the community united those left behind. Anger at the lax safety conditions and shock at the extent of the damage were paramount, to the point that the Royal Commission into the Disaster had to be held in Wollongong rather than Bulli, in the hopes of protecting it from the worst ravages of heated emotion.

Possibly the worst part of the whole affair: the mine had only been in operation for four weeks, in the aftermath of a major strike (which the miners had been forced to halt with no won concessions) that had gone on six months.

## Adventure/Campaign Ideas

Herbert Cope, the 17 year-old survivor of the Bulli Mine Disaster, was heading out of the pit to have his lunch when the explosion took place. "I saw the props straining and I thought it was an earth fall. Then a tremendous blast flung me violently against a pit prop," he later said. "That's all I knew, except that I managed to stagger the rest of the way out." Besides a few bruises and an ulcerated gash on his shin that never fully healed, Cope was unscathed. Oddly enough, Cope was to have a life full of the sort of coincidences that make great fodder for a campaign. In 1895 he narrowly escaped death once more, when a boiler exploded in his family butcher shop – killing his two brothers. It seems that someone or something was watching out for Herbert Cope – a Guardian Angel, perhaps? Or maybe Cope made some sort of pact that allowed him to survive these events. The question remains – what did he offer in return? Another option is that Herbert Cope was like Bruce Willis in *Unbreakable*. He could provide a clue to the existence of superheroes.

The core of this story is the impact it had on those left behind. The official report claimed that the Disaster left behind fifty widows and 150 orphans. In a time where workers are undervalued, unionism is frowned

upon and work is scarce, being left without a family breadwinner would be a scary prospect. There are many social and political themes to explore in such a setting – envision the PCs swaggering into town after performing a minor quest to find that a huge number of the working men have been killed. Wailing women, stunned children, authorities scratching their heads, and the local baron is just worried about where his next silvers are coming from.

Another facet of the story is managerial incompetence and a casual disregard for the lives of workers. There was an adversarial relationship between miners and pit bosses, and this can really be teased out in the aftermath of such a disaster. While the owners may mouth platitudes and shed a tear or two, they aren't intending to help out the poor families left behind, or take responsibility for the accident. The party could be fighting an uphill battle just to win an apology from them, much less compensation.

If you want more of a traditional adventure, put the party in the pit, earning some ale money in a dry spell. An explosion happens all around them, knocking them down to single hit points. They are lost in the dark, surrounded by corpses and a bowing roof, and have to get to the surface before the mine claims them. Then the corpses – men with unfinished lives and business – start to move...

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by “Dregg” Carpio

## Lights, Camera, Action! Sharing your Vision: The Ins and Outs of Indie Publishing, Part II

Greetings and welcome to the November installment of *Lights, Camera, Action!* This month I will finish my segment on Indie game design and publishing and try to give you a better view on what it takes to get your bit of gospel out to the masses. Having done some web publishing of my own material, contributing to group projects, and finally publishing my own RPG, I have gained much experience about the ins and outs of the publishing game. Last month I touched on game design, play testing, finding and using artwork, and getting an editor to make your words easier to swallow. This month I will take you from the near-finished project to handing it over the printers for proofing and finally, publishing.

First and foremost, I cannot stress enough to visit the boards at “the Forge” to see what others in the indie-RPG industry are doing. As I have mentioned I am currently ushering my game “Pulp Era” out the door and this article is a compilation of my experiences through the years of getting the book into press.

### Promotion

This article begins at the “almost-finished” stage. “Almost finished” implies that you have the product ready to go into layout stage—you have all of the revised rules, text, and artwork. The first thing to do after you have an almost-finished product in your hands is to promote yourself. This may be the hardest thing you may ever do, especially if you do not like dealing with large groups of people and a lot of criticism. Promotion can come in many ways shapes and forms, expensive or inexpensive. It is really up to you and your pocketbook and your time.

One of the best places to get your word out is the gaming convention; this is the only place on earth you are going to find a huge number of gamers in one spot. Sign up to run events using your game, and I don’t mean just one session—run 6 or 7 of them. You want to get your game in people’s faces and give them something to remember, because they are either going to see your game so many times that they are going to give it a spin, or hate seeing the write-up so much the game will be burned into their memories. Either way you made an impact! Here is where you truly want to sell your product; show the gamers every special feature and convince them why your creation should be on their shelves instead of the “other guy’s” game. This takes a bit of the old used car salesman tactics, but it does pay off in the end when people rave about the great time they had at your demo.

Contrary to popular belief, an RPG demo does not have to be a full 4-8 hour session. Most companies now are going for the ADD fix for RPGs: a quick 1 to 2 hour combat demo with some showcasing of the skills rules set up. The RPG industry has been falling towards the “Quick fix RPGs” these days (*QUAGS*, *1PG*, *Fudge*, *WuShu*), so if you are writing the next *Rolemaster* be prepared to come up with a quick fix version of your game to get the people hooked. One of the more popular methods of getting your ideas across to potential buyers is the “Quick Start” rules method. Using this method, you write up a watered-down version of your rules and release it for free. This way people can basically playtest your game for you and with the feedback you can do tweaking. Although the practice of quick start is better done after the release, it still might be a good idea to see if you mini

### About the Author

“Dregg” aka James Carpio is a native of San Francisco, California who now lives in the wilds of Suffolk County, NY. James has written for the likes of Eden Studios, Fuzion Labs, random gaming E-Zines and is currently designing games for his own gaming company Chapter 13 Press ([www.chapter13press.com](http://www.chapter13press.com)). James can be found at most Northeast conventions and game days with his family doing demonstrations for other gaming companies he supports and running promotional support for I-CON, Gotham Gamers Guild and Wild Gazebo Productions for whom he is affiliated with.

game attracts any players. Once you have the players hooked on your concepts and mechanics, it is time to attack.

At a convention a multitude of ways exist to getting your audience’s attention, but I will focus on three of the most common and successful methods that I have seen in the past 20 years of convention hopping.

### Method One – “Burning Wheel”

If you are ever at a convention on the east coast where the *Burning Wheel* crew is appearing you must watch the designer Luke Crane in action. The *BW* method essentially involves you exerting massive amounts of energy and letting every passerby know that you are there for the sole purpose of changing the way they game with your system. In my opinion, it is the most pure and effective way of advertising your product; it is based on pure merit and passion. Luke, if you are reading this, kudos to you my friend.

### Method Two – “Trick or Treat”

This method involves designers putting out free candy, bobbles, flyers, and more to draw people over to his demos. Once they come close, like a fly in a web they are stuck (for good or bad). “Trick or Treat” is a little on the underhanded side because you are playing on a common gamer weakness of “free” stuff, but hey, when in Rome...

## Method Three –“Hollywood”

Simply put, you have one impressive table set up with props, masks, minis, girls in skimpy nighties and more just waiting for the masses to come and stare at the eye candy. It is not a cheap way to go, but damn, it draws gamers like flies to molasses. Once you have your mojo going then you can run 15-hour sessions and people will fill the tables.

## The “Give Away”

Another great promotional avenue for cons is the “give away”; this can be anything from DVDs to stickers and pins with the game logo on it. Again this is totally based on your budget for such things, but gamers are suckers for shiny bobbles and free goodies to stuff into their dice bags or backpacks. For example, when I’m at a convention running demos of *Bad Muthas* or my Pulp game, I give away *Blaxploitation* DVDs or tapes.. Also if I have the cash, I print up some business cards and the like, even flyers to plaster the walls or leave on the freebie tables. You are your own crier, so let your name be heard.

## Favorite Local Gaming Store (FLGS)

Outside of conventions, the FLGS (favorite local gaming store) should be your next target. Talk to the owners and ask if they have gaming space. If so, set up some demos. Gaming store demos can be tricky, but honestly if you bring in several bags of chips and some generic soda, people will flock and give your game a try.

## Online Promotions

Other forms of promotion? Message boards are a great way to meet other gamers and give your self a nudge. By all means, don’t spam the list with mindless drivel but giving yourself a plug from time to time lets others across the world to find out what you are doing. Also, this method of promotion allows you to talk with other players and game designers and exchange ideas or even get some help on other

aspects of your production like art, layout, or printing.

Below are some great boards that you might be interested in joining to get your word across.

[www.indie-rpgs.com](http://www.indie-rpgs.com)

[www.rpg.net](http://www.rpg.net)

[www.gamingreports.com](http://www.gamingreports.com)

[www.silven.com](http://www.silven.com)

The top link is for Indie Forge, one of the biggest online collectives of game designers around. The list is ran by Ron Edwards (of *Sorcerer* fame) and has had some of the greatest of the indie game designers spring from that forum like Jared A. Sorensen (Memento Mori Theatrix) and Luke Crane (*Burning Wheel*).

Lastly, a good website with an easy to remember domain is another excellent way to show your wares, keep your public updated, and even post little freebies in PDF for gamers to chew on while they await the main course. Try not to use free accounts like Tripod or Geocities as the pop-up content on those pages is hideous.

So now you have the hype for your game. People know about it, they may have played it at a convention or at a playtest session, and you know that if it appeared for public consumption you could not keep enough copies on hand... now what?

## The Final Edit

Just when you think that your work was all done and ready to print, you again find out that you were far from correct. Granted that your book may be all nice and formatted in a prepress PDF or Word document, but remember what people see once they pick up the book is going to sway their hand in the direction of purchasing the game or putting it back on the shelf. Bad grammar, punctuation, run on sentences, horrid spelling, and badly placed art will destroy you quicker than sin.

Give a copy of the prepress work to a few people; let them read over it and see if it makes sense to others. At this point it does not matter if it makes sense to you because it is your game, but people who buy this may not have had the honor of playing in one of your playtests and will have to learn the game by reading it. This is where taking criticism will be an asset and being able to make a few corrections to your game will save you time, reprints, and face.

Next, your game takes one final trip back to your editor. I mentioned in last month’s article your editor is going to be a silent partner in crime. Have your editor look over any changes you made and explain why the changes are in place. Sometimes we think we have such a brand new concept and all we are doing is rehashing old information. Once you have all the corrections back from your editor, it is time to have your graphics/layout person do the final touches and spruce up the character sheet. (Yes a good character sheet will also be a make or break factor). At this point you will have a nice large file ready to be put to paper and seen by the gaming community at large.

## The Onramp to Publishing

Publishing is a rite of passage for the indie game publisher; it is what separates the amateurs from the pros. Publishing was easy up to this point; you wrote, playtested, had a few laughs, etc. Now you have to step up to bat and get all the legal stuff out of the way. Once you are at this point, you are playing with the big boys and these big boys would sue you for every red cent they can if you step on the wrong toes. The following are a few of the important things you will have to do before coming over to the big time.

## The Incredible Power of ISBN

If you ever plan on getting you book into global distribution or have an interest in selling it through Internet outlets like Amazon.com, you are going to need an ISBN (International Standard Book Number). Simply put, **the ISBN is a unique machine-readable identification number which clearly designates your book.** It is a 10-digit number that identifies books published internationally.



The ISBN establishes and identifies one title or edition of a book from one specific publisher and is unique to that edition, allowing for more efficient marketing of products by the publisher. If you are planning to do your own sales via the web or conventions, then the ISBN is unnecessary. In fact a good 80 percent of indie published games do not have an ISBN, so before you spend the money think hard about what you really want out of you publishing. If you are web publishing or self-distributing, you don't need an ISBN. If, however, you want to have your book in stores, you should seriously consider getting one.

A copy of the application and all other important information can be found at [www.isbn.org/](http://www.isbn.org/) when you are ready to get started. Allow 10 business days for non-priority processing from the time an ISBN application is received at the agency. Priority processing is two business days from the time an application is received at the agency. Express processing is 24 business hours and can be *really* expensive so try and give yourself ample time to get this all together. If you are cutting applying for an ISBN too close to the deadline for printing, you might be disappointed. An ISBN is not a cheap investment; the service fee to process the ISBN application can run you 200.00 + depending on what path you take to obtain it. Also remember that the processing service charge is NON-REFUNDABLE!!!

The ISBN should be assigned to each of your books and projects, including any forthcoming titles. Each binding must have a separate ISBN (i.e. hardcover, paperbound, e-book format, etc). A new ISBN is required for a revised edition, which is another good reason to do that final edit and proofread because once the number is assigned, the ISBN can never be reused.

Your ISBN should also do what you paid for it to do, but keep in mind receiving just your ISBNs does NOT guarantee title listings. To ensure your titles get in the *Books in Print* database you must submit your title information. Your book titles should be registered with Books in Print at [www.bowkerlink.com](http://www.bowkerlink.com)

The ISBN is printed on the lower portion of the back cover of a book above the bar code and on the copyright page. Which brings us to the next little diddy...

## The Barcode

This next step is only if you are going for the ISBN route and want to have your game stocked on the shelves of a major chain or bookstore. In general don't worry about the barcode if you are going for the web sales or con sales approach.

Basically a bar code is a way to encode data using a series of bars and spaces. Special machines are calibrated to interpret the bars and spaces and read the bar codes. Barcodes are required by most bookstores as they are a way to alleviate entry error and inventory control. At the point of sale, the cashier scans the book. The barcode number is transmitted to the store's computer, which transmits the price and name of the book back to the register and the computer automatically deducts the item from the store's inventory.

Now for those of you out there who think you can just make up barcodes, think again. One cannot make up any number for the first part of the bar code—this is the manufacturing code. A manufacturing code is a six or eight-digit code assigned by the Uniform Code Council (<http://www.uc-council.org/>). The Uniform Code Council is the governing agency for the assignment of manufacturing codes, and they make sure that no duplicate numbers are issued. You the publisher assigns the second part of the UPC/barcode number, which is called the product code. It is very important to take the time to come up with a system of product codes that makes sense and doesn't throw you into further chaos. Also get used to bookkeeping because if you don't keep track of your inventory and number schemes you will be lost.

## E-Book, POD, or Printer

Ok, are you still there? Still interested in publishing your game? There are some who would have run away by now. At this point you have now already invested about a good 500.00 in your DBA "Doing Business As" license: ISBN, barcode, graphics, promotion, etc. After understanding the costs, paying 40.00 for a d20 book is not that unreasonable, huh? With all of this behind you, one of the last steps is trying to decide how to get your word across to the gamers across the land. To my knowledge there are three methods to making your book a reality. Each one has its pros and cons and its marketability. I will touch briefly on each one in hopes to give you an idea of what course your mighty pages can take.

**E-Book:** Probably one of the most popular mediums in the business today, electronic publishing is the cheapest and easiest of the publishing options. Even the bigger companies like Eden Studios, WotC, Atlas, and others are bringing their books to electronic publishing for ease in getting the work out there. Some of the current outlets for e-publishing are Drive Thru ([DriveThruRPG.com](http://DriveThruRPG.com)), RPGNow ([www.rpgnow.com](http://www.rpgnow.com)), and RPGmall ([www.rpgmall.com](http://www.rpgmall.com)). Each outlet has its good and bad points; the key is to research each and check out what they can offer you. If you want a great resource on e-publishing, check out the *E-Publishers Guide* over at RPGnow.com. It will give you some great tips into the art of web publishing and even some ideas that can carry over to print sales as well.

**Electronic Publishing Pros:** Very little start up cost. You just need to cover the cost of the Adobe Acrobat and the ability to email or ftp a file. The great thing about electronic publishing is as of right now you do not need an ISBN number or a barcode (granted this might be subject to change with the market being flooded.) The turn around time is very quick. Most web sites that deal with ebooks only charge you as you sell and since these sites are hit on a regular basis its almost like having free advertising.

**Electronic Publishing Cons:** Not a lot of people like reading books off of their computer screen and for those who do not own laptops, the ability to throw the tower and monitor in a bag and lug it to a game is an impossibility. Also, product theft is also a common thing. If I had a dollar for every PDF I have seen on peer-to-peer servers, I could do a publishing run with foil covers. Most people end up sharing these pdf products with their friends and that defeats the purpose of doing this in the first place. File sharing in this sense is illegal and just bad form all together. Finally, printing these files will cost you more in ink cartridges that actually buying a print book and that can lead potential buyers astray.

### Print On Demand

Print On Demand (POD) has become the popular choice for most indie publishers. POD gives you a fairly decent print book without the major investment and costs that most printers ask for these days. There are many outlets for print on demand (even Kinkos is offering the service for a decent price) but don't feel that you have to stick with the bigger POD houses to get a superior product. I personally use Lightning Source (<https://www.lightningsource.com/>) who does a brilliant job and also will put your books on Amazon.com for you as part of the service.

**Pros:** Here's how it works. You set up an account with a POD house. With most you do not have to pay a startup fee; they just fold it into the print run of the book. The POD house will give you guidelines on how to layout and prepare your book as well as how to insert the barcode and ISBN on your cover. Once you get all this done, you sent them the file, they create the book template, and then you order copies. Most POD houses do not require a minimum and your cost will usually be about 4 or 5 dollars a book. To go the extra step, some POD houses will even place your book on Amazon.com and the like. Good deal, huh?

**Cons:** As with any print run, what you do with the books you order is your doing, but the money from the books that are sold through Amazon and such goes directly to the POD house. After a certain

amount is made, they cut you a check. So if you are not planning to sell at cons or self distributing, you may not see a flat dime for some time from your books.

**Printing:** The old fashioned way is just send the book to the printers. With this method, you are assured to get the print quality you desire and have the book set up anyway you want. However, it is incredibly costly and once the books are printed they are yours (and so is the bill). \_

**Pros:** Print runs of books can be cost effective if you order in amounts of 1000 books or more. So with an initial investment of \$5,000, you can have some great quality books to line the walls of your basement. With the Printing method you can do what you like with the books and all of the profits go to you. Depending how moral you are there are a lot of great printers in Honk Kong and Taiwan that print beautiful hardcover books for about \$1.15 each, but realistically these are probably little sweatshops and you may be morally opposed to using them.

**Cons:** These are your books. If you have no way of selling them, you might as well get a taste for paper sandwiches because after spending 2-5 grand on these books it is all you are going to have for awhile. Also, printers can sometimes take a long time in getting your order ready, so by all means try and give or take a week when setting up a release date.

### Which Publishing Option?

In a nutshell, first time publishers might want to go with e-publishing. This method is the designer's right of passage; if you can gain interest in you ideas in this format, then putting up the money for a print run is going to be worth it in the long run. POD is a logical next step in the process. It allows for the author to self publish a small run of books to see if people are interested in the bigger picture of the game. This is going to be an investment, but you can usually keep it under \$500 and have a descent return if your game is marketable. If you have done well with this so far then by all means do a real print run. This will be an

<http://www.isbn.org/> ISBN number resources.

<http://www.adams1.com/pub/russadam/barcode1.html> Barcode resources.

<http://www.uc-council.org/> The good folks at the uniform code council.

<http://www.silven.com/publishing/> The link to Silven.com's great Indie publishing program

<http://dillygreenbeangames.com/MaineWritersProgram.html> Dilly Green Bean Game's Indie Publishing program

<http://www.indie-rpgs.com> The Forge, a great group of indie game designers.



investment of at least \$5000, but you will also have a more solid product that distributors can easily push to the outlets and hobby shops under their domain.

### Marketing Your Masterpiece

Marketing is like the "yellow brick road" to a degree. It is is much like an extension of all the legwork you accomplished when you were playtesting and running your pre print games at cons. You want to make your game high profile, so that means getting to conventions, showing your book around to local gaming stores to see if they will pick it up or sell by consignment, and lastly making the pilgrimage to the gamer Mecca of Gen Con. By going to high publicized and visited conventions (such as Gen Con), you will want to make yourself known in the industry, rub a few shoulders, and hope that a national distributor will pick you up and sell your game far and wide. Also, publications like *Game Trade* and *Games Quarterly* are great ways of advertising to the masses and will not put you back too much dough. One of the last thing you may want to do is send out copies of your book to known reviewers and web sites that have monthly RPG review columns. About.com, Silven.com, RPG.net, Gaming reviews.com are just some examples. Once you know your target audience, you will know who to send out some review copies to. Don't be afraid to walk up to one of the reviewers at a con, introduce yourself. and give them a copy.

Hopefully this was some help to those future Gygax and Arnesons. Above all, have faith in yourself and your product.

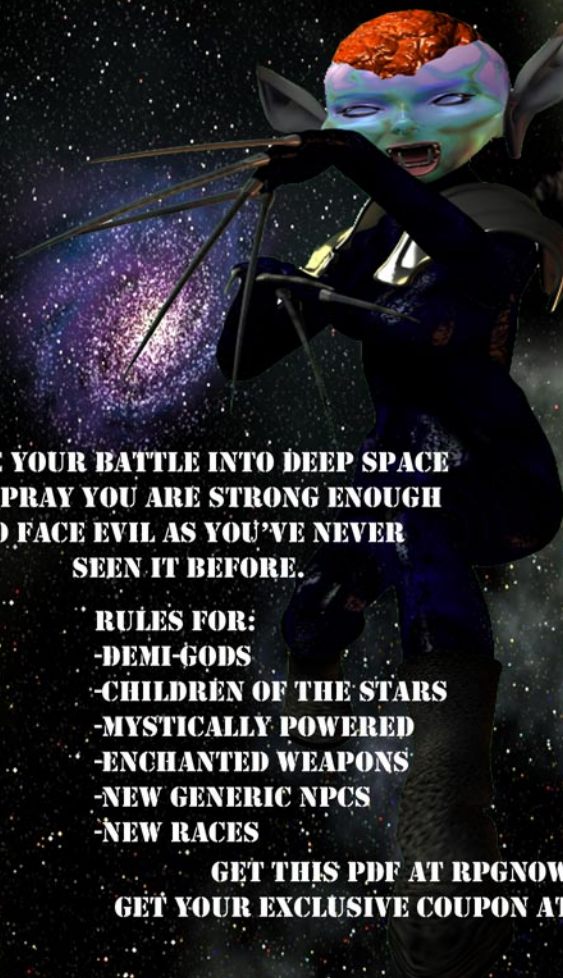
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by Sean Holland

# Through the Lens of History: Using History for Better Gaming

**Vision 13: AGold and Silver Pieces? Exactly. @**

## Money, Part I

*The best things in life are free*

*But you can give them to the birds and bees*

*I want money*

-AMoney (That=s What I want)@ by the Flying Lizards

Money is such an interesting concept, yet we rarely think about it. Pieces of printed paper and minted coins have been imbued with a value far exceeding the material or artistic value of the items involved. But it is only recently that the value of money has become divorced from the value of some item; usually the precious metal that the money either was made from or represented. For example, silver dollars were once made of silver, and the value of a coin was usually relative to the amount of metal it was made from. As a note, bullion is bulk metal, valued by weight alone.

This Lens will take a brief look at the origin of coins, coinage and some other monetary systems. Money and coinage is a subject the Lens will return to.

## Part I - The History

The use of valuable metal as a medium of exchange dates back to the third millennium BCE. Copper, silver and gold being the primary metal of exchange, these metals were rare enough to be valuable but durable and useful as decoration. The earliest money

consisted of nothing more than pieces of valuable metal. These pieces were sometimes shaped into rings or drawn into wire to set them at rough weights for ease of use. Larger ingots of metal would have pieces cut or shaved off as needed. The purpose of using money is as a shorthand for value; it is much easier to carry around half a pound (quarter kilo) of silver than it is to carry four chickens and a bushel of grain.

The earliest use of silver as money is in ancient Mesopotamia around five thousand years ago. The temples of Mesopotamia maintained the system of scales and weights allowing the value of silver to be standardized. The Mesopotamian legal code assessed fines in weights of silver. For example, biting a man's nose was punishable by a fine of a *mina* (about half a kilo/a little over a pound) of silver, while a slap to the face was only valued at 10 *shekels* (a sixth as much). Weights of grain, as well as silver, were used to value food stuffs, while silver alone was used for a wider variety of goods. For those who did not have silver, grain was an acceptable payment as well.

Egypt had no domestic source of silver, so the Egyptians used gold and copper in the same way. By the later New Kingdom (roughly 1295-1069 BCE) standard weights were the *deban* (91 grams/3.2 ounces) and the *kite*, one tenth of a *deban*. The Egyptians were happy to use silver when they could get it and their word for silver, *hedj*, became used very much as we use the word money.

The *mina* and *shekel* became the common unit of exchange through the ancient Middle East and were even accepted in Greece by the first millennium BCE.

## About the Author

Sean Holland is a gamer with 26 years of experience. He currently DMs one D&D campaign and plays in two others. He has a BA in History (minor in Philosophy) from the University of Portland, Oregon, and is working on a MA in History at the University of Georgia. He does writing and play-testing for the game industry. If you look at any of AEG's recent One Word series of books for the d20 system you will find his name in there somewhere and he has had other writings published over the years as well.

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The next evolution of money was to come from the Kingdom of Lydia in Asia Minor (modern Turkey) in around 700 BCE (about the same time proto-money was being produced in China). The Lydian Kingdom was fortunate in having a source of electrum, a natural alloy of gold and silver, which they minted into small ovals in regular weights. Most of these proto-coins had a design of some sort stamped onto one side. But neither the size nor the symbol immediately indicated the purpose or value of these electrum units, limiting their usefulness as coinage.

It is not until the mid-fifth century BCE that real coins appear, starting in Lydia, possibly during the reign of King Croesus, c. 560-547 BCE. The innovation of coins is not to be underestimated. A coin was both a guarantee of weight and purity of metal, facilitating trade by allowing both sides to know what was being offered. Coins were first used within cities for small trades and their use slowly expanded to external trade, though coins often had a higher value than their weight would indicate in their issuing lands. These first coins were almost uniformly made of silver and production soon spread throughout the lands on the Mediterranean basin. Electrum, as a mixture of gold and silver, soon fell out of favor as the ratio of the metals was unpredictable, making valuing the coins difficult. Using bronze for low value coins as it was hard wearing, and inexpensive, seems to have originated in southern Italy in the late fifth century BCE but quickly spread throughout the Greek world.



These coins were made by setting a weighted amount of metal (a blank) on a bronze or iron die and striking it with a hammer or stamp with another mold on it. This stamped images into both sides of the coin as once, but led to the occasional mis-struck, off center or double struck coin. Some of these dies were works of art in their own right and even signed by their makers. Early coins featured gods and symbols of the cities that made them. Later coins would also be stamped with images of rulers, starting with the Successor Kingdoms to Alexander the Great who put Alexander on their coins to emphasize their link to him. Coins of rulers often used the symbols of gods or pictured gods on the reverse side to associate the ruler with the aspects of the god depicted (such as Nike, goddess of victory, or Zeus, king of the gods).

The bankers of ancient Greece usually ran small operations acting as something between pawnbroker and moneychanger. Some moneychangers did business in the *agora* (central marketplace) from behind tables. Even today the modern Greek word for bank, *trapeza*, also means table. Moneychangers weighed and exchanged coins, kept money on deposit and made loans (usually at a reasonable twelve per cent yearly interest rate), but these were all private matters, one person to another.

There was no state bank in the Greek world. Excess money was stored in the temple of the city's patron god (such as the Acropolis in Athens) where the god or goddess, or fear thereof, would protect it from thieves. In times of crisis, the city would borrow the money from the temple, planning to pay it back later. In dire times even the statues of the gods were melted down and sold. Some temples even lent money out to the citizens of their city-state.

By the 4<sup>th</sup> Century BCE, coins had entirely displaced bullion in most areas. This is known because recovered hoards of money found from those dates onward consist almost entirely of coins. With the wide spread of coinage, counterfeiting and doctoring

coins became a problem. In Athens, it was forbidden to pass fake coins and a law of 375 BCE instituted the checking of coins by public slaves.

There are a variety of ways to fake coins or otherwise reduce their value. Debasing, mixing in base metals to reduce the amount of precious metal used while keeping the weight roughly the same, was most commonly used by those who minted coins. Governments often debase their coinage to boost apparent wealth. Plating false coins made from base metals with more valuable metals, such as plating copper or brass with gold was another method of debasing currency. Shaving and clipping, both of which cut small pieces of metal away from the coin to be re-used as bullion or recast as coins, was also favored.

## Part II- Breaking it apart and putting it back together

A group of adventurers might travel to another part of the world where their money is only valued by the weight of the metal it contains and discover that value is less than the adventurers would like. The adventurers might even find that the coins that they have are debased and are worth far less as bullion than the characters expected.

Coins, coinage and counterfeiting are all good sources of materials for adventures. Characters might be hired to escort, or find, an artist to make new dies for a special occasion, such as the coronation of a new ruler. A set of dies may be stolen, requiring their retrieval before someone uses them to undermine the currency. Counterfeiters need to be tracked down and dealt with.

Considering how much most games revolve around money, it is surprising that the issue of coins, coinage and counterfeiting do not show up more often. As such, these are subjects that the Lens will look at again.

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by *Melissa Piper*

## Modern Gaming: Customizing Fantasy

### Characters for the Modern World

In the July 2004 edition of the *Modern Gaming* column, I discussed how to incorporate fantasy characters (elves, gnomes, and goblins, for example) into a modern campaign. In that article, I mentioned five theories that the game-master (GM) can use to explain the existence of these races in the modern world:

- Introduction of new races through mutations from experiments
- Evolution
- Dimensional conversion
- Time travel
- Assumption that these races have always existed alongside humans.

Although my previous columns were intended for the GM, this month's column is written specifically with the player in mind. What I intend to discuss this month is how players can tailor their fantasy characters to fit practically any campaign that takes in the modern times. Not only will I share some of the tips and techniques that I have utilized in my own campaigns, but I will also discuss how to customize aspects of your character from his personality to occupations and even to how he should dress. For simplicity, I am going to limit my discussion to four common non-human races: elves, gnomes, dwarves, and half-orcs. By keeping in mind the ideas and examples that I provide throughout this article for these four particular races, you should be able to easily adapt your own fantasy character to your GM's modern campaign.

If you really want your fantasy character to work well within the boundaries of a modern campaign, then you cannot simply throw him smack dab into the middle of this new world. Let's face it; fantasy characters are not the norm in many modern excursions, so it will be necessary for you to do a bit of research prior to character creation in order to make the best out of your character. But don't worry! I'm here to help you reduce your research and act as your modern character guide.

Before you use any of the tips in this article, it would be helpful to know what type of character you are planning to role-play. If you already have a mental image of the character you want to develop or even just an idea of the race you'd like to play, then it will be easier to use this article as a step-by-step checklist as you go through the character creation process.

So, if you are ready to adapt and develop your fantasy character, then let's get started!

#### Why am I in this Handbasket?

If your GM has permitted you to role-play as a fantasy character, then she more than likely has a theory in mind that will explain how such races came to exist in the modern world. I provided some of my own theories in the July column, but your GM may have her own ideas. Therefore, the first step in developing your fantasy-modern character is to ask your GM how she plans to explain the existence of non-human characters. Keep the answer to this question in the back of your mind, as it will help you tailor your character later on down the road.

#### About the Author

Melissa Piper is an artist, writer, and computer programmer from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She enjoys creating webcomics and websites in her spare time, in addition to role-playing. Melissa got her first taste of role-playing from Baldur's Gate, and she has been hooked ever since. In fact, she praises Baldur's Gate as her main influence in her choice to major in computer science in college. She would someday like to pursue a career in game programming and development so that she can produce and manufacture her own RPGs.

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#### Know your Roots

The second, and most important, step in developing your character is to research the race's generalized personality traits. By taking a look at the d20 System Reference Document (SRD), you can find the pre-established personality traits for each race. I like to refer to this description as the race's "typical personality," since it defines the typical behaviors and attitudes of a certain race. Of course, there are always exceptions, but the typical personality holds true for the majority of the race. If you are a seasoned D&D/d20 veteran, then you probably already have a solid knowledge of the typical personality of the race you are looking to role-play.

As an example of typical personalities, here are some notes on the personality descriptions that I found for the four races mentioned in the beginning of the article:

- Elves:** Amused and curious creatures. Slow to make friends and enemies. Love poetry, music, and fine art. Protectors of the woodlands and environment.
- Gnomes:** Technicians, inventors, and engineers. Love animals, gems, and jokes of all sorts. Known as jokers and tricksters that love a good laugh. Curious and, at times, reckless.
- Dwarves:** Skilled in warfare. Knowledgeable

of earth's secrets. Great stonecutters. Slow to laugh, but have a strong sense of justice.

- **Half-Orcs:** Short-tempered barbarians. Love feasting, drinking, boasting, and fighting. Practically no love of the arts.

As you can see, each of these races has typical personality traits that set them apart from the others. Just by taking some simple notes on the race you are considering, you can get a feeling for your character's behavior before you roll a single die. Creating a short profile like this is a great way to organize your thoughts while developing your character.

## A "Modernized" Racial Profile

Once you understand the typical personality of your character's race, the real work begins. Instead of merely using this pre-generated personality and attaching it to your character, consider how this race has adapted to the modern world. As with humans, it is likely that non-humans have changed their points-of-view or adapted their behaviors to fit the times. This is where you must consider how the GM plans to explain the non-humans' existence in the modern world, as it will help you understand how much time your character or character's race has had to adapt.

One of my favorite theories of existence to use as a GM states that the days of magic and fantasy (the common setting of *Dungeons and Dragons*) were our world's past. If this is the case in your GM's world, then non-human races have simply grown and developed alongside humans for hundreds of years. Therefore, fantasy races would have shared the same experiences as humans and would have equal knowledge of the world. At this point, you must consider how world events would have been viewed by the race you intend to role-play, and how these events may have changed the race altogether. Look at the profile you assembled earlier, and then consider if something may have come into conflict with that race's typical personality traits throughout the years. Do you think there is anything that would change the race's outlook on the world? Did the race make new

enemies because of world events? Here are a few ideas on how the non-human races could have been impacted:

- **Elves:** Since elves are defenders of the environment, elves and humans came into conflict many times over issues such as deforestation, pollution, and drilling for oil. With the continuous development of cities and depletion of natural environments, elves lost hope and became mistrusting of the other races. They haven't held the same aloofness and curiosity since their homelands have been destroyed.
- **Gnomes:** Being skilled technicians and engineers, the gnomes have thrived in the modern world. Their skills cannot be beaten when it comes to technology. Because of this, the gnomes are one of the most successful and richest races in the world today. Gnomes have become close friends with humans because of their status and skills.
- **Dwarves:** As the opportunities for skilled stonecutters disappeared, dwarves found themselves resorting to one their other skills: warfare. Although most dwarves will only fight when they believe the cause is justified, some dwarves have resorted to fighting any chance they get just to make ends meet. To this day, dwarves are known as great warriors who are usually still committed to justice and fairness.
- **Half-Orcs:** Many members of this race are in the same position their ancestors were in many years ago. Always outsmarted by the wiser races, half-orcs must still work hard to gain the population's trust. Some half-orcs have become notable celebrities, but most hold minimum-wage positions or work in positions that require strenuous physical labor. The successful minority of half-orcs are often athletes.

Although these are just some thoughts about how time could affect the non-human races, they will help in sparking ideas for your own race's history. While some races may suffer because of what has taken place in the world, others may thrive, and yet others may retain the same beliefs and values as their ancestors. Do not be afraid to write down any ideas that come to mind. By doing some brainstorming, you will be able to create a "modernized" racial profile for your character similar to those I provided above.

If your GM has decided to use a theory assuming that non-human characters have not existed in the modern world for an extended period of time, you can still create a "modernized" racial profile for your character. Instead of considering what world events would have changed the race's personality, imagine what aspects of the GM's world that the character might find shocking or impressive, while still keeping the race's typical personality in mind. For example, a character transported from a medieval-type setting would be astounded by cars and elevators, to say nothing of the internet! Races developed through mutation or evolution may be subject to prejudice and legally-endorsed racism. Compose a "modernized" racial profile according to how you believe that particular race would be impacted by the modern world.

The main thing to do here is to inspect how the race's personality traits have changed as a whole, if they have changed at all. Don't be afraid to write down anything that comes to mind, since you never know what might come in handy as you continue to develop your character. Keep your notes, since this is now your "modernized" racial profile and will be used through the rest of the development process.

## Occupational Hazard

Now that you have an idea about how your character's race has adapted to the modern world, you are actually finished with most of the work. The next step after developing a modernized typical personality for a race is to decide what type of occupations your character's race is most likely to succeed in. This should be an easy task, since you already have most

of the necessary information in your notes. When you think of occupations for your character, try to keep the categories broad. You do not want to limit yourself during the creation process any more than you have to. Here are a few examples of some likely occupations for our four common races:

- Elves:** Environmentalists, Musicians, Artists
- Gnomes:** Computer Scientists, Engineers, Comedians
- Dwarves:** Law keepers (lawyers, judges, police, etc.), Soldiers, Craftspeople
- Half-Orcs:** Athletes, Blue-Collar Labor

Just by listing a few broad occupational titles for your character, you have now opened the doors to hundreds of occupations for her. Many of these categories include more specific occupational subdivisions, but choosing a broad category at the beginning makes it easier for you to narrow your choice of occupation down when it's time to fill out that character sheet.

Of course, any race can work in any field, but there are certain occupational categories that your character will naturally have greater success in. For example, a slender and peace-loving elf can strive to play in the NFL, but it is unlikely that he will be a match for a larger, more aggressive half-orc.

## Dress for Success

Although some players may not consider attire to be a crucial part of character development, I tend to take the opposite view. Knowing how your character dresses is an important part of rounding out your character's personality. Just as we are judged by how we dress, your character will be judged by his attire in the game. You can choose attire for your character that will reflect his status in life and personality, or

you can give him clothing that is merely functional.

Two things I like to consider about a character's style of dress (aside from status and personality) are where the character lives and the general hardiness of the race. Obviously, if your character lives up north, she will generally wear thicker clothing than someone who lives closer to the equator. Also consider the build of your character's race. A petite elf, for example, may need to wear a sweatshirt on a cool fall day, while a dwarf may be comfortable wearing a t-shirt that same day. Select a wardrobe for your character that you feel best represents her, and use your judgment with regard to where she lives and how hardy the race is.

## Customize & Personalize

The final step in developing your character before you roll his stats is to decide what your character does to make him stick out. The individual aspects of your character can range from physical differences to a strange manner of speech. I personally believe that some of the most enjoyable physical aspects of a fantasy character rely on the race's prominent features. For example, a daring male dwarf may choose to dye his beard, or shave his beard altogether. A creative gnome may choose to get her nose pierced. Really, this last step is all up to you, the player, since this is where your own unique character is born. Just be creative and don't be afraid to create a character that is different. After all, those are the characters that everyone remembers the best.

## Step-by-Step Checklist

Here is a quick review checklist of the steps you can take toward developing a fantasy character that fits snugly into your GM's modern world:

1. **Why am I in this Handbasket?** Ask your GM how she plans to explain the existence of non-human characters in her campaign. This is background information that will come in useful a bit later.
2. **Know your Roots.** Research the typical personality traits of

the particular race you want to role-play. Jot down notes and compose a short racial profile. The SRD is a great place to find this information.

3. **A "Modernized" Racial Profile.** Consider the span of time that your character's race has existed in your GM's world. If the race has existed on the world for a long period of time, then review your racial profile notes and consider what world events may have conflicted with or been embraced by your race's personality. If your character's race is fairly new to the GM's world, then consider what will shock or impress your character about this new world. Keep the race's typical personality traits in mind. The ways those attitudes and behaviors have changed will become your character's "modernized" typical personality.
4. **Occupational Hazard.** Decide what occupations your character would be most successful in by referring to your modernized racial personality traits. Try to keep the occupation categories broad so you do not unnecessarily limit yourself.
5. **Dress for Success.** Decide how your character will dress. Not only will this be a reflection of her personality, but it also represents your character's status. You should also consider where your character lives and how hardy the race is when selecting your character's outfit.
6. **Customize & Personalize.** Add individual traits to your character to make him unique. This is where the true character is born.

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by Melissa Piper

## Review: 22 Talent Trees

**About:** 18 pages, electronic PDF, black-and-white interior, \$3

Author: John Alger

Publisher: [Bloodstone Press](#) (2003)

Review date: 10/20/04

*Reviewer's Bias: I received a review copy of this product. I have also done some freelance illustration work for Bloodstone Press, but not for this particular product.*

### From the Back Cover

"Are you bored by the dearth of talent trees presented in the Modern core rules? Do you wish your heroes had more options? Do you pine for Offensive Driving and a little Domination?

*22 Talent Trees* presents 86 new talents (grouped into 22 trees) for the core classes. With this supplement you can play **Strong** heroes who use their Mighty Hurling talents to throw objects extreme distances. Or perhaps you prefer a **Fast** hero who can use the Quicker than the Eye talents to gain a blur or displacement effect! Or would you rather play the **Tough** hero with FX Resistance and withstand the power of magic? What about the Quick Thinking **Smart** heroes who can use their talents to take action before other characters even figure out what is going on? Maybe you would prefer a **Dedicated** hero, devoted to the service [of] others and able to donate their will power, their financial resources, and even their very life to another person in need. And finally, who could resist the pulchritudinous **Charismatic** hero with her Stunning Beauty?

These and dozens of other innovative ideas fill the pages of this supplement! "

### Introduction

*22 Talent Trees* by Bloodstone Press is just as the title implies; a character supplement containing 22 new talent trees for the d20 Modern System. All of the talents in this product were created for use with the six core d20 Modern classes (**Strong, Fast, Tough, Smart, Dedicated, and Charismatic**). The purpose of this supplement is to present the player with more choices and variety when it comes to selecting talents for his or her character. Since this product often refers to prerequisites that can only be found in the Modern System Reference Document (SRD), players planning to use this supplement should have a copy of the SRD or the *d20 Modern Core Rulebook* handy.

### Presentation

*22 Talent Trees* is an 18-page PDF product from Bloodstone Press. The front cover is in full color with a medium-brown background with a noise filter overlying it. The title "22 Talent Trees" is written in a canary-yellow font that is surrounded by a faint yellow glow. It is placed about 1 1/2" from the top of the page. The center image is a sketch of a man in a trench coat using one of his talents against a force of oncoming cars and people in the distance. The attackers are silhouettes, so it is difficult to make out everything in the image.

The interior of *22 Talent Trees* is mainly black-and-white/grayscale, with a few minor exceptions. The

### Review snapshot

**CLASS:** Character Supplement

**STR:** NA (*Physical*). This stat does not apply to PDF products.

**DEX:** 14 (*Organization*). Everything runs together without page breaks between sections, but the bookmarking and hyperlinking in the Table of Contents makes the product easy to navigate.

**CON:** 14 (*Quantity of the Content*). Decent amount of talents for only 18 pages.

**INT:** 14 (*Quality of Content*). The talents presented here were good, but the reprinted material detracted from the unique quality of the product.

**WIS:** 15 (*Options & Adaptability*). Highly adaptable to any modern campaign, but reliance on the *PC* and *BL* limit its possibilities.

**CHA:** 8 (*Look & Feel*). The product has a plain appearance. It is mostly black-and-white and does not have anything truly eye-catching.

### How we rate our reviews

#### Scoring definitions.

18 = *Superior. Best of the best.*

16 = *Very Good. Part of a Baker's Dozen.*

14 = *Good. Most gamers would like this.*

12 = *Fair. Some gamers would like this.*

10 = *Average. Most gamers would be indifferent.*

8 = *Subpar. Flawed, but not without promise.*

6 = *Bad. Most gamers would dislike this.*

4 = *Very Bad. Among the Dirty Dozen.*

2 = *Inferior. Worst of the worst.*

titles of the talent trees and hyperlinks are written in a purple font, which makes these headings and links stand out against the rest of the content. The tables also contain a dash of color, with alternating rows colored in avocado. The entire product is finished in a Times New Roman font.

The line art sketches by William McAusland are of an average quality (I have seen better and worse, but he has some great art on his personal website). There is also a grayscale illustration of a jungle girl courtesy of Mongoose Publishing in the **Charismatic** hero section, which I believe to be the best illustration in the



product. Not counting the cover illustration, there are six illustrations in *22 Talent Trees* altogether. There are no bells and whistles in this product that make it exceptionally decorative. For example, there are no margin adornments or fancy fonts.

All of the pages in *22 Talent Trees* flow together, without any physical page breaks between sections. This is not a big issue, however, since the product contains a Table of Contents on page 3 and PDF bookmarking features. I did not notice it right away, but you can actually click the name of the talent tree in the Table of Contents and jump directly to that talent tree's description in the body of the PDF. This is a very nice organizational feature.

Pages 15-17 are advertisements for other products from Bloodstone Press. Page 18 is the Open Gaming License (OGL).

## Content Summary

Since this is a fairly short and straightforward product, I will share the main details that I found to be most advantageous and most detrimental to the product. First of all, this is a product dedicated to d20 Modern talent trees. A talent, for those who are new to the d20 Modern System, is an extraordinary ability that a player can give to his or her character, depending on that character's class. Talents add variety to characters and allow them to push themselves beyond their normal limits.

Generally, the talents provided in this product follow the pattern of the talents in the SRD. For example, most of the **Strong** hero's talents in *22 Talent Trees* simply grant bonuses to specific skills or checks that stack as the player progresses down the talent tree. This was the same pattern that was developed for the **Strong** hero's talents in the SRD. I was glad to discover that there was the occasional break from this trend, displaying some ingenuity on the part of Bloodstone Press. For instance, the final talent tree for the **Strong** hero, **Mighty**, grants the character the ability to add his or her strength modifier to a different save by choosing a different talent (Morale,

Fortitude, Reflex, and Will). What sets this talent tree apart from the others in the **Strong** category is that these effects do not stack unless the player decides to take the Incredible Might talent.

The naming schemes for the talent trees and talents presented throughout this product were quite good at times. For instance, one of the talents for the **Fast** hero is titled "Fancy Footwork," which appropriately grants a character a bonus to his or her Dodge check. There is also the Speed Demon talent, which I was suspicious of at first since it shares the name with an advanced class from *Urban Arcana*. However, after comparing the talent and the advanced class, I found that the two really had nothing in common except for the fact that they enhance a character's vehicle driving speed.

I was also happy to learn that there are also some FX feats in this document for players interested in adding a touch of magic to their characters. The **Tough** hero's talent trees include the FX Resistance tree, which is another tree that stacks bonuses as the talents progress.

By selecting talents from this tree, players can build their magic resistance up to their **Tough** hero class level +20. This is pretty much the only FX talent tree in the product, unless you want to count the **Dedicated** hero's Oracle talent tree (which I consider to be more of a psychic ability than magic and FX). The limited number of FX talent trees was somewhat of a disappointment. I would have preferred an FX talent tree for each class, since it would have proven beneficial to those involved in FX campaigns.

Even though the talent descriptions throughout the product are relatively thorough, there are a few occasions on which I believe there could have been a few more clarifications. For instance, the Cross Training talent for the **Smart** hero allows the character to pick any three cross-class skills to become permanent class skills for the character. Although the text states that *any* cross-class skill can be selected, I cannot help but wonder if this also includes skills that are designated as trained-only. If I

was the game-master (GM) of a campaign where one of my players wanted to convert three trained-only skills into three permanent class skills, I know that I would be hesitant to permit this. To me, such rules throw off the balance of the game and tip the scales in the **Smart** hero's favor.

The **Dedicated** hero in this supplement has the ability to call and control wild animals, resembling a modern *Dungeons and Dragons* **Ranger**. The animals that the **Dedicated** hero can summon through the Animal Friendship talent tree are listed in tables on page 9. One thing that caught my eye is that although some of these animals are taken from the SRD, others are taken from the *Primal Codex (PC)* and the *Bane Ledger (BL)*. I am usually not a fan of products that rely on several other products for information, but since only eight of the 24 listed animals are from these other two sources, it is not much of a hindrance. One part that I was pleased with, however, is that there are two FX-type animals (namely the Dire Wolf and Dire Ape) that can be summoned in addition to animals that inhabit our world.

One aspect that disappointed me about this product came at the end in the **Charismatic** hero's Efficacious talent tree. Two of the talents, Charm and Favor, are repeats of the talents of the same name in the Modern SRD. Also, the Domination talent is a spin-off of the SRD's Captivate talent. Therefore, most of the Efficacious talent tree is just a reproduction of the Charm talent tree found in the SRD. In addition, I found great similarities between Razor Tongue and the SRD's version, Taunt. Another interesting point is that the Charm talent can be found again in the Pulchritudinous talent tree. Finding these reprints and similarities for the **Charismatic** hero made the book lose some steam near the end, especially since the previous sections contained such great talents.

Finally, I should mention that the Treat Injury skill has been modified at the close of this product to allow for transplants and blood transfusions. Because of this revision to the skill, the Transplant Surgery feat has been added to the feat list (a description of which is provided on page 14). This skill revision and new



feat is essential to the **Dedicated** hero's Life Support talent, making this a talent that is extremely GM-dependent. I am iffy about including this in a product about talent trees, especially since this change does not allow the talent tree itself to be completely compatible with the SRD. However, it is easy enough to omit this talent from the list if the rule change is not desired, since no other talents in the tree are dependent upon it.

## Talents by the Numbers

Some of you may be wondering just how many talents you get within those 22 talent trees. The breakdown goes as follows:

The **Strong** hero has five talent trees and 17 talents altogether. The **Fast** hero has been given four talent trees and a total of 16 talents. The **Tough** hero was severely shortchanged, since he is only given two talent trees and 7 talents. The **Smart** hero, although deprived in the SRD, has three talent trees and 13 talents in this product. The **Dedicated** hero has the greatest number of talents, with four talent trees and 19 talents. Finally, the **Charismatic** hero has been awarded four talent trees and 14 talents.

Altogether, you receive 22 talent trees (just as the title promises) and 86 talents (83 if you do not count the reprints from the Efficacious talent tree and the repeated Charm talent). Personally, I do not think that is too bad when you consider the price of the document.

## Conclusion

Overall, I enjoyed reading through *22 Talent Trees*. It is a nice little supplement for players that are looking for more variety when it comes to choosing class talents. The editing on this product is well done, as I only counted three minor formatting discrepancies and no typos. Also, the product is extremely adaptable to any Modern campaign, past, present, or future.

Even though I had some issues with the reprinting of talents from the SRD, there is still a decent amount of talents available in this product. I feel that the talents do a good job of bringing variety to characters and truly enhance the game-play experience. If you are a player that is satisfied with the talents available in the SRD, then this product is probably not for you. Also, if you tend to role-play a lot of **Tough** heroes, then *22 Talent Trees* may not be for you since there are so few **Tough** talents presented here. However, if you are like many players and like to differentiate your character from the others as much as possible, then I recommend giving *22 Talent Trees* a try.

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