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The Lostfinders Guide to  
MIRE END

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BY SEAN K. REYNOLDS

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## Editor's Note: Feb 1, 2005

Welcome to the 18<sup>th</sup> edition of the *Silven Trumpeter*! As you may have noticed, a new year means a newly redesigned *Trumpeter*. Please feel free to send us your comments on the new design and in what we are doing in general here at the *Silven Trumpeter*.

We have a rather short issue this time around, mostly due to the holiday season and a shift in our *Trumpeter* production schedule. Even so, its packed with the usual goodies including short stories by Aaron Todd, Matthew J. Hanson, and Khaz Axson, interviews with Blue Devil Games and Bob Goat Press, and a host of reviews of new RPG games and supplements!

Happy New Year and happy gaming!

Dana Lynn Driscoll  
Editor-in-Chief  
Silven Trumpeter

# The Adventures of Starlanko the Magnificent

by Matthew J. Hanson

## Starlanko the Magnificent vs. the Bandit Emperor

or

### The Second Worst Birthday Ever

"So, are you going?" Starlanko the Magnificent (Wizard of the Year three years running) asked his long-time associate, Redreck the Fierce.

"I don't know," Redreck replied, and threw back a shot of whisky. Starlanko spent a lot of time in bars, and the current moment was no exception. Now he was the in Ambrosia Inn in the city of Mazalax. Redreck's favorite bard was playing in the nearby city of Escondole, and while he would be unable to attend, Starlanko did not want to prevent Redreck from enjoying himself.

"Don't worry about me," Starlanko said. "I'll plan to take it easy the next few days. The scariest part of my weekend is going to be meeting with Bargle, and that will be more unsettling than actually dangerous."

Bargle was a Wizard Starlanko had met a year almost a year ago when they were ransacking the same tower. It was not that Bargle was especially dislikable. He was not cruel or mean spirited. He was hardly the life of the party, but that was no reason to dislike him. It was the look Bargle had in his eyes that made Starlanko uncomfortable. Bargle looked at people the way a master criminal looked at a locked treasure chest. Now he, Starlanko and another wizard named Callan, who they met at the same time, had all decided to meet to exchange knowledge.

Callan was quite enjoyable. There was only a friendly conflict between them for their very different stylistic approaches. While Starlanko capitalized on the wizard stereotype, from his pointed hat to his shimmering robes, Callan ignored it, preferring to dress as any farmer would. Callan's fashion sense was a disgrace to the wizarding profession.

Though on the other hand Callan did have a familiar, which was more than Starlanko could say. Callan traveled with a raven named Mathue. Bargle also had a familiar, a hawk whose name Starlanko did not know.

"I won't start any trouble," Starlanko reassured Redreck, "and if any comes to find me... I've still got Candessa to protect me.

As if on cue Candessa Voliar, a wizard who studied with Starlanko during their academy days, descended the staircase. She crossed to Starlanko's table. "I'm going out," she said. "Don't wait up for me."

"I've still got Funbane to protect me," Starlanko said. He saw the fierce warrior look to Starlanko's belt. The scabbard that usually held Funbane, Starlanko's talking sword, was now empty. "Okay, so I threw him in a hay wagon. We had a disagreement. But he'll be back tonight, I'm sure." Starlanko referred to the sword's magical ability to return to its owner every night at midnight.

Starlanko inhaled deeply, and unconsciously tapped his left pinky against the oak table. Redreck lipped his glass upside down. He raised an eyebrow and leaned in slightly.

"No, it's nothing," Starlanko said. A month ago, in a battle against the drow, Starlanko had been able to wield Funbane as though he was an expert swordsman, even though Starlanko had never picked up a blade in his life. He wanted to tell Redreck about it, but somehow he felt he would be revealing a secret that the sword did not want revealed, so he bit his tongue.

Redreck looked towards the door to the outside and made a slight motion with his head.

"No, it's actually not about her. Really, it's nothing important."

Redreck leaned back into his chair.

Starlanko brought the discussion back to the real matter at hand. "If you don't want to go for yourself, which I'm sure you do, go for me. I've got the meeting I have to attend, but get me his autograph. Hold on." Starlanko rummaged around in his *bag of holding* for about a round. "Here it is." He produced a parchment containing the lyrics to *Ballad of the Dark Horse*, a song composed by the bard in question. "If you come back without his signature I'll be very disappointed."

"Okay," Redreck conceded. The warrior grabbed his belongings from upstairs, and in less than five minutes, he was on his horse to Escondole.

Later that night, Starlanko the Magnificent was awakened by a loud crash in his room. "Funbane? Is that you?" The sword always returned silently (until it started talking), but there was always the possibility that this was a first.

But there was no answer. It probably was not midnight yet.

"*Suuter-as.*" Starlanko cast a minor spell, and the room illuminated. His window was smashed and there was a brick lying on the floor. The circumstantial evidence would suggest that the latter had traveled through the former.

Around the brick was a note, which Starlanko soon retrieved. The note read as follows:

*Starlanko the Magnificent. We have Candessa Voliar. No harm will come to her if you cooperate. We want the sword and we're willing to make a trade. Come to the abandoned mill at sundown tonight. Come alone. Sincerely, the Bandit Emperor.*

"Funbane. We need to talk," Starlanko said. Right on cue, the sword returned to Starlanko at twelve o'clock midnight.

"How shalt I help thee?" the sword asked.

"What do you know about the Bandit Emperor?"

"Why dost thou think I would knowest of the Bandit Emperor? I be no bandit!"

"No, but you do know an awful lot about nobility and royalty. I though him being an Emperor and all..." Starlanko suggested.

"Nay, my knowledge is limited to legitimate nobility, not mere brigands who adorn themselves with ill-gotten titles."

"Also he kidnapped Candessa and is demanding you in exchange."

"The fair Lady Voliar hath been kidnapped!?" Funbane exclaimed. "Sir, me must sally forth and rescue her Ladyship."

"Yes, that's the plan. That's why I need to know about the Bandit Emperor."

"Oh. Yes. Now that I recollect, sir, I may recall something. Thou knowest that the brute thou rescued me from was the Bandit King?"

"Yes," replied Starlanko, "I was aware of that."

"I do believe that the Bandit King had an older, more powerful, brother who beith known as the Bandit Emperor."

"And now he wants you back?"

"Aye, it would seem so."

"Very well then. I guess I'll just have to give you to the Bandit Emperor."

"Nay sir! Prithree do not!"

"I do believe that the Bandit King had an older, more powerful, brother who beith known as the Bandit Emperor."

"Relax." Starlanko reassured the sword, "I'm not going to give you to him forever. Just to make the exchange, then we wait till midnight, and you'll be back, and by that time, we'll be halfway across the kingdom."

"It beith a nice plan, but it shall not work, for if I am given freely, then the one accepting me shall become my new master, and it shall be to him that I return each night."

"I guess we'll have to just figure out something else then," Starlanko said. He thought for a minute. "Are you sure you wouldn't like to live with the Bandit Emperor? He is an emperor after all."

"I am quite certain sir," said Funbane. "Maybe he's asking for another sword?"

"I doubt it."

"As do I."

Starlanko slept lightly through the rest of the night. He awoke early, and ate a light breakfast in the common area of the Ambrosia Inn. Just as a Starlanko was finishing his toast with marmalade, a large golden eagled swooped through the door and landed on Starlanko's table. The eagle was soon followed by his person.

"Now here's a sight you don't see everyday. Starlanko the Magnificent eating a meal by his own self. And the day before his birthday no less."

"Barret the Fox. A pleasure as always," Starlanko greeted the man. "I'm surprised you remembered."

Barret the Fox shrugged. He was a skilled woodsman, or "ranger" as they were often called. He had a strong dislike of orcs, and had a special fondness for the smell of cedar. Barret usually worked alone, but he and Starlanko

had teamed up once before to battle a small hoard of orcs. "Is Redreck still asleep?" Barret asked.

"No, he's gone across to Escondole for a few days. I've got a meeting..." Starlanko recalled his meeting with the two other wizards. "Good grief, I've got a meeting I have to go to." He knew he probably would miss the meeting.

"Is something wrong?" Barret asked. "Can I help?"

"Yes, there is something wrong. I doubt there's much you could do. Besides, I think I owe you a favor already."

"Starlanko, you owe me more favors than you'll ever be able to repay. What's one more?" They both laughed.

An elf, dressed in what appeared to be armor made out of leaves, approached the table. She was sturdily built (for an elf), and had pale blond hair.

"Oh, Starlanko, this is Illestar. Illestar this is Starlanko the Magnificent."

"A pleasure."

"It is mine, I am sure," Illestar replied.

"Seemed some orcs had found their way down to Bardon forest, you know how I feel about orcs. Anyway to make a long story short, Illestar decided she wanted to tag along with me for a while. So her parents gave me their blessing and this sword." He unsheathed a finely crafted longsword.

"It looks like a nice sword."

"+2 keen orc-bane. I'll say it's nice." Berret the Fox sheathed his sword. "So how's Winifred?" He asked Illestar

"She is physically well, but I do not think she likes being apart for so long."

Janna, the innkeeper's daughter and the one currently running the common room overheard Illestara's last comment. Starlanko guessed that was the elf's intent. "It's not my rule," Janna said. "If you don't like it talk to the man in charge." Janna pointed to a sign, which clearly stated the policy: *Familiars and animal companions capable of eating the patrons are strictly prohibited.*

"Say," Barret said to Starlanko, "Didn't I hear you were traveling with a fine lady? What happened to her?"

"Candessa Voliar you mean? Oh... well... she was kidnapped by the Bandit Emperor, who is demanding a ransom that really isn't mine to give. I suppose, in response to your earlier question, there is really a lot you could do to help."

"You're late," said the man who Starlanko assumed must have been the Bandit Emperor. He was seated on a makeshift wooden throne. To his right (the Bandit Emperor's right, Starlanko's left) was a bald man in crimson robes holding a wand in his right hand. To his (the Bandit Emperor's) left was a large armored humanoid that Starlanko believed to be a bugbear. Bugbears, incidentally, were neither bugs nor bears. They were more like very large goblins. Starlanko had magically scanned the mill before entering, so he knew there were about a half dozen more people inside, probably hidden and/or invisible.

"You know sunset is a very imprecise measurement of time," insisted Starlanko the Magnificent. "I wasn't sure if it was when the sun first hit the horizon, or when the sun had gone down completely. I decided to split the difference."

"Actually," the robed figure said, "The official board of wizarding standards and measurements has declared that sunset shall be defined as the exact moment that the sun reaches the horizon."

"Really? I didn't realize that. You are very well informed. You know, you look like the sort of man who likes a good spell. Did you know that most wizards are not getting the most they can out of their charms and compulsions?"

"Gentlemen. Please," the Bandit Emperor interjected. "The sword?"

"Yes, of course. I will want to see the girl first, you understand."

"Naturally. Kronk?"

The bugbear went into the back room. He emerged carrying a chair with Candessa bound to it. She seemed a little bruised, but mostly unhurt.

"The sword?"

"Of course," Starlanko reached into his *bag of holding*. "Here it is. Isn't she a beauty? Genuine elven craftsmanship, mithril blade, ironwood hilt wrapped in genuine dire faun skin. I hate to part with it, but if it means her life."

"That's not the sword."

"What do you mean? It's a great sword. Not a greatsword. It's a longsword obviously, but it's a great longsword. +2 *keen orc-bane*."

"That's not the sword I want!"

"But I don't... unless... you don't want the talking sword do you?"

"Yes!"

Starlanko chuckled. "The talking sword?" Then he laughed out loud. "You want the talking sword?" Then he rolled on the floor with laughter. "He wants the talking sword!"

Starlanko composed himself and stood up. "I'll be glad to get rid of that thing. It's always whining, "Blah, blah, blah. Don't steal that. Help the old lady. Give the little girl back her candy." I tried to sell it once, you know? The shop owner wouldn't take it. I can't even throw the thing away, some sort of curse. I don't have it on me at the moment, it being highly obnoxious and all, but I'll go run get it. It will just take a jiff."

"No, I'd rather you didn't go anywhere. I know how the

sword works. We'll just wait here until midnight, and the sword will appear."

"Okay. Fine with me," Starlanko said. Half a round after he said so, Starlanko dashed to Candessa, he put one arm around her and cast a spell that should have teleported them to safety. Should have.

An arrow pierced Starlanko's side. It came from one of the hidden men, but that had not been what prevented the teleportation.

"Don't you think I've thought of that?" said the man in crimson robes. "But it was a nice try. Tie him up."

"Excuse me," said the Bandit Emperor. "I will give the orders here."

"Of course, your Imperialness."

"Tie him up."



Starlanko the Magnificent had gotten out of worse predicaments before. So he was bound to a chair. So he was being watched by the Bandit Emperor. And his hired bugbear goon. And his hired wizard goon. And yes there were also the half dozen or so goons hiding in the shadows, but it didn't worry Starlanko the Magnificent. Once he had escaped from the very belly of the legendary Tarrasque itself.

Though really, that was a dream. And Starlanko had not escaped, as much as he had woken up.

So Starlanko had not been in a comparable situation before. It would have worried him, had he not had a brilliant plan. Well, he had a plan.

"You shouldn't have come," Candessa said. The chairs they were tied to faced back to back.

"Nonsense. I'm having a lovely time," Starlanko replied. "We should do this every year."

"I'm not worth risking your life over."

"Or course you're not. Not everything is about you. How



many chances to you get to meet the Bandit Emperor, a man renowned the world over for his fairness and generosity?"

"Kronk, stab him," the Bandit Emperor commanded. The bugbear plunged a jagged dagger into Starlanko's gut. Starlanko decided to refrain from talking for a while. "How long, Vazzer?" the Bandit Emperor asked.

The crimson-robed wizard, who was presumably named Vazzer, examined a nearly empty hourglass. "About a minute or so." Starlanko watched as, slowly, the last of the sand drained out of the top of the hourglass. "There. It should be here." The Bandit Emperor and his Bandit Court look around the room.

"Well?" the Bandit Emperor inquired.

"It should be here."

"Maybe your measurements are off," Starlanko suggested.

"My measurements are not off." Vazzer sneered.

"I want that sword!"

"Ohhh... you know what?" Starlanko said. "I didn't want the sword to mess up our little meeting. You know, yell out something silly about how we should go to the authorities, that sort of thing. So I gave the sword to my friend for safekeeping. But if the sword thought I was giving it to my friend to keep, then it would think he was the sword's new master. And so it would be my friend that sword returned to every midnight."

"Kronk, stab him again." This time the blade went into Starlanko's shoulder. "Does this friend have a name?"

"Barret, Barret the Fox. I know, why don't you untie me, and I'll... right. The stabbing. I know. Why don't you just throw a brick through his window? He's staying at the Ambrosia Inn. Room 2B I think."

The Bandit Emperor nodded to some unseen figure.

"Of course he will want to see us alive before he gives over the sword," Starlanko mentioned.

"Of course. They always want to see them alive first. Kronk, put them in the back."

The back was dark. The only light came through the cracks in the door. Starlanko guessed that it was probably also cramped: a large closet or a small room at best, but he only caught a glimpse of the room as he was entering, and after the door closed, he was immersed in the aforementioned darkness.

Starlanko was not sure how long he sat in the uncomfortable chair, just that it was a long time. Despite the discomfort of the chair and the ropes binding him, Starlanko managed to drift in and out of an uncomfortable sleep.

"Starlanko?" Candessa's voice snapped him back into full consciousness.

"Yes?"

Candessa held in her words for a long time. Then she quickly spat out, "Do you know any farmers?"

"I've met a lot of farmers in my travels. Why do you ask?"

"At one of the bars I visited last night there was a farmer asking around. I thought I heard him ask for Redreck. The bartender got upset with him because his sheep were bothering the customers. They were the biggest sheep I ever saw."

"He didn't perchance have a masterful looking hoe did he?" Starlanko asked.

"Yes, I think he did."

"Huh. I think that just might be Neddit. He's just a normal farmer who miraculously helped to slay an ancient red dragon. From that he gained enough power to become the greatest farmer I've ever know. A while back Redreck and I gave him the courage he needed to stand up to his evil landlord."

"Starlanko?" Candessa said.

"Yes?"

## 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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She held the thought in, just as she had earlier. This time when she spoke, she spoke slowly, as if making a confession. "I meant what I said earlier. You shouldn't have come for me."

"Nonsense. I couldn't just abandon you to the kidnappers. Besides, I have the situation completely under control."

"How's that?"

"I'm choosing to be here, of course. You don't think Starlanko the Magnificent would allow himself to be captured unless it was part of some devious plot."

"Then why don't you get us out of here?"

"I'm just waiting for the right time," Starlanko said. "How did they catch you anyway?"

"Well... the Bandit Emperor.. that's not really the issue at hand. The issue is that you're doing the big hero thing, when I am certainly not a damsel in distress."

"I'm not sure this quite qualifies as 'the big hero thing.'"

"Starlanko. I know what you've said before. I know that you've denied it, but I notice things, the way you look at me when you think I can't see you, or the—

"Oh, get over yourself. I had a crush on you at the

academy, that's all. I'm not foolishly blinded by my love for you. You think you're the only person I'd go out on a limb for? If it had been Redreck who had gotten kidnapped, I'd be here in a flash. Even if Barret got captured."

"Who's Barret?"

"Just an old acquaintance. He's the one that's babysitting Funbane."

"Speaking of Funbane, why didn't you just hand it over?"

"I guess I'm even willing to risk my life for Funbane," Starlanko said.

"I don't think I've got what it takes to be a hero."

"It's not heroics. It's good business sense that's all. Adventurers help each other out because we know that one day we'll be the ones needing help. Reciprocity, one of the oldest and most time honored economic tools. Besides, I have life insurance."

Candessa was quiet for a long time, but it was a filled sort of quiet. The quiet that made Starlanko believe Candessa's mind was hard at work. Eventually she spoke, "Starlanko, I think that perhaps I've made some mistakes. About a lot of things really, but mostly about how I've seen you. I think, if we get out of this alive, I might want to do things differently."

Just then the door swung open, and pair of powerful hands grabbed the two chairs. Starlanko and Candessa were plunged back into the light.

"Nothing to be alarmed about," Starlanko whispered, "Just waiting for the right time, that's all."

The Bandit Emperor's council was as it had been before, but now Barret the Fox stood before them.

"See? They're alive. Now, could I please have the sword?" the Bandit Emperor demanded.

"Well it looks like them alright, but how do I know they're not just some sort of doppelganger?" Barret asked.

"AHHHHH! How hard can it be to get one foolish little sword!?"

"Sir," a figure slipped out from the shadows, "there seems to be an elven woman with a large bear outside. I think she's waiting for something."

"Oh, that's just Illestar. She's a sweet heart."

"I thought I said come alone!"

"I came into the mill alone. She's just waiting for me to get done."

"I meant *alone* alone."

"I beg you pardon, Your Imperialness," the mage Vazzer said, "but I do believe we're being scryed upon."

"Scryed upon? Why? By whom?"

The bugbear Kronk's nose twitched. "Something smell like sheep," he said.

"I don't know why," Vazzer explained, "but it seems like we're being scryed upon by at least three people."

"Smell like dire sheep!"

It was hard to tell just order everything happened in, but some things were certain. The bear did not come until later, that is for sure. Whether the sheep came before the wizards or the wizards before the sheep is anybody's guess.

The sheep were the largest sheep anybody other than Kronk had ever seen, six feet tall at the shoulders, with

massive curled horns. Atop the largest of the sheep rode the world's greatest farmer, swinging his might +10 *hoe of hoeing*.

At the about the same time that the sheep busted in, two wizards teleported onto the scene, one wore a gray robe and had a hawk on his shoulder, while the other wore peasant garb and carried a raven. The both radiated power, and immediately focused their spells towards Vazzer.

Also, at about the same time, an unconscious body tumbled out from the shadows. Presumably it was one of the unseen goons, and presumably Starlanko had allies lurking the shadows as well. While everyone was distracted by the *magic missiles* and flying fleeces, Starlanko whispered a few magic words, and the ropes binding him to the chair untied themselves and fell to the ground. "I was just waiting for the right time." He smiled at Candessa.

Starlanko turned to the Bandit Emperor, who peered around like he was watching a hurricane from the eye of the storm. The Bandit Emperor's eyes met Starlanko's and he drew his sword. Starlanko the Magnificent flicked his wrist, and the Bandit Emperor's sword melted. The Bandit Emperor ran.

That's when the bear came in. It was a very large bear, and the Bandit Emperor ran directly into its fearsome claws. What happened next was not a pleasant sight to behold. Sufficient to say that the Ambrosia Inn had good reason to deny the bear entrance.

"I must say," Starlanko did say, after the situation had been cleaned up. "That was the most impressive rescue operation I've ever been privy to." The rescuees and most of the rescuers had gathered at the Three Legged Mule Tavern, which did allow large carnivores (or omnivores as bears really are).

"Eh, it was nothing special," said Barret the Fox.

"I don't really remember you well," said a woman named Ennorra, "but Callan told me what you did, and insisted that we come." After they looted the tower together, Starlanko had helped Callan save Ennorra's life.

The sheep were the largest sheep anybody other than Kronk had ever seen, six feet tall at the shoulders, with massive curled horns. Atop the largest of the sheep rode the world's greatest farmer, swinging his might +10 *hoe of hoeing*.

"I would hate to pass up the opportunity to repay the favor, Mr. the Magnificent," said Callan, the wizard who dressed like a commoner, who incidentally was madly in love with the aforementioned Ennorra.

"I don't recall *you* owing me any favors though," Callan said to Bargle, who had a glass of mead in front of him that had not been touched.

"No, I did not owe you any favors," Bargle said, "but now you owe me one, and you seem like the sort of man who it's good to be owed a favor by."

"Well, I don't know much about it," said Neddit, the world's most powerful farmer. His dire sheep were across the street decimating a sickly patch of grass. "But after what happened with the old Lord Laziaer, people started calling me a hero. Now that seemed as natural to me as a cat dancing on a fiddlehead, but my pa always used to say 'Son, when you die, all that's left of you's your bones and what crazy gossip Old Nanny's been spouting off this time.' Well Old Nanny's dead now too, but I think his meaning's still right the same."

"There was somebody else working with me in the shadows," Ennorra said, "but I don't know what happened to her. A female elf. She seemed like she might moonlight as a thief."

"Huh. That sounds like Vox," said Starlanko. "I never would have hoped to get her help. How did you manage it Barret? I would have been grateful if just you'd shown up."

"It weren't me," the ranger admitted. "Really the credit belongs to Redreck."

"Redreck organized the rescue?" Candessa asked.

"Well he didn't so much organize it," Barret explained, "as he put us in touch with each other. You see..." Barret chuckled to himself, but didn't finish his sentence.

"He wanted to throw you a surprise birthday party," Bargle said. "Happy birthday."

"Happy birthday," the rest of the table said, and they clanked their glasses together.

"It's not the worst birthday ever," Starlanko admitted.

A pause followed, then Callan broke the silence, "So, Ms. Voliar, how long have you and Mr. the Magnificent known each other?"

"Oh," Candessa replied, "we both trained at Dalphithius, but didn't really see each other much after that. We've only traveled together for a few months."

"I don't mean to pry or anything," Ennorra said, "but are you two...?"

Starlanko looked at Candessa. She looked back at him and smiled. She winked.

Starlanko the Magnificent took a deep breath. He shook his head. "No... no, ours is a strictly business relationship."



# → GETTING STARTED IN GAMING

By Matthew Conion

Many people have heard about role-playing games (RPGs), and quite a few have seen them in action. You may be one of the many people who have never played, but are interested. I have two messages for you. First, allow yourself a taste! Second, do not to give up too quickly. In this article, I will attempt to explain how you will develop as a player, and I will talk about what you can expect to see when you start playing. While this article refers specifically to the d20/*Dungeons and Dragons* system, you can apply many of the areas discussed to other role-playing systems.

## Your First Experience:

The first game you play may seem like a hurdle, especially if you are unfamiliar with the other players. For the best scenario, try to get close friends or family members in your gaming group. As the new player and new group member, you may feel intimidated, especially when it comes to asking questions. Do not let that stop you! You will really improve your experience if you ask lots of questions.

You will start by generating a character. This process can seem difficult because you have to make decisions about so many things. The most prevalent factors to consider for your character are race, class, attributes, skills and feats. Character generation sometimes seems challenging because your decisions about these things will dictate most of what your character can do, and if you have no idea yet what you would like to play, you may worry that you will end up disappointed. Never fear! Your friends and/or group members will help to get you through this process. Just make sure to ask a lot of questions. Another good source of advice is the [silven.com](http://silven.com) forums. Many people belong to the Silven community, and they will be eager to make your introduction to role-playing as smooth as possible.

Once you have your character's basics completed, you are almost in the clear (although I find now that the most difficult part for me is coming up with a name!). Next, you should think about the equipment that your character needs. There are many different ways to determine your character's wealth, mainly depending on the gamemaster (GM) who runs the adventure. Some GMs like to use strict limitations set in a particular game's literature, while others give their players free reign to buy anything from any source. Your GM might give you an amount of in-game "money" (usually gold pieces) to spend or save as you please, or, alternatively, the GM might tell you start with equipment, but no money.

When picking out equipment, find out from the GM what type of setting the game takes place in. Will your character work in a city, in the wilderness, underwater, or in the future? What types of enemies will you fight? These types of questions will help you to determine what your character needs. If your game takes place in the city, chances are your character will not need to do much farming, and therefore may not need to own that pitchfork . . . unless, of course, you just happen to like them.

Now that you know how your character fits into the world, you can start to think about where she fits in the group. Will your character leader the group, making all of the big decisions, or will she mostly follow? Will your character be the keeper of the gold or the cook? Try not to stress too much if you do not have an answer to these questions. Groups do not usually set down these roles on paper before the gaming begins; more often the party structure just tends to develop over time.

Now that you have a character, you can look forward to your first gaming session. As a first time role player, you will notice that there are many activities going on around

the table. One activity you may notice: stacking of dice. Sometimes, when the story line has little or nothing to do with your character, you will have to spend some time on the sidelines of the game. To keep themselves occupied, many players have little side activities, such as stacking their dice as high as possible until the stack collapses and the player has to start over again. Sometimes a player might bring along a magazine or some other reading material to entertain him or herself during game down-time. In addition to passing the time, distractions like these can help players to roleplay more accurately, because they can avoid overhearing (and acting on) some of the information that their characters would not have heard.

Another thing that you will notice around the table is that the people in the group do different things to "get into" their characters. A player might wear a certain piece of clothing, or even a piece of armor. The person might talk with a particular voice that they only use for their character.

You may also notice that your fellow players' personalities may conflict with those of their characters. One of the wonderful things about role-playing is that you can be anyone you want. If you usually shy away from conflict, for example, then you can play as someone who always gets in the face of anyone who crosses your path.

For your first game, though, do not worry too much about your player's personality. The easiest (and most common) thing to do for your first game is to play yourself as far as personality goes. If the situation would make you afraid, then let it make your character afraid. As a player, you have to learn to pay attention to a lot of things going on at the table. First, concentrate on rolling the dice, accumulating experience, keeping up with all of your combat abilities, and other such game mechanics. Once you feel comfortable with the mechanics of the game, then you can think about how to make your character's personality unique.

## Your Second Experience:

By now you should have at least a fair grasp of the game's mechanics: things like how to deal with combat and what to do with your experience points. Depending on the campaign, you may even have risen a level or two. Now that you understand the game a little bit better, you

can think about making some changes. Your GM might allow you to change your current character or substitute a new one. This would be a good opportunity for you to try a different character class—perhaps trading a spellcaster for a fighter, or vice versa. Alternatively, you might make the same type of character, but distribute the numbers differently: trade a higher strength, for a lower constitution, perhaps. This would make for lower hit points, but a more damaging swing of the sword.

Watch what happens when your fellow gamers change characters. Watch for changes in their new characters' personalities, tendencies, habits, etc. The player might have a different voice, or different shirts she wears, or perhaps a different set of dice. [*A quick note about dice:* Many players are *very* superstitious when it comes to their dice! Be careful about touching that "Golden d20 of Troll-Hating That Never Misses As Long as I Make It Roll Over Twice," lest your fellow player accuse you of altering its extra-special mystic balance of luck.]

At this point you have your second character or maybe a second shot at the same character, and you understand the game relationships between the player-characters, the non-player-characters, and the rest of the campaign world. Now you can think more about the personality issues that I discussed above. Start by trying to add some personality quirks. Pick something that does not conflict with the group or hinder gameplay. For instance, giving your character an aversion to clothing might draw a *lot* of attention to your group, most of it negative. You do not want your character to get his or her group in trouble with the local authorities. An example of something minor that can add to your character's personality is a musical instrument. If your character plays the flute or harp, it adds a dynamic to the character's personality, and it just might earn you and your group a free room at the local inn or a little extra spending money.

You might also want to experiment with adding a small character flaw. Again, avoid choosing something that would hinder your group or the gameplay—something like a missing limb or a severe allergy to sunlight. You want your character to seem unique, not annoying. Make the flaw something small: a minor stutter, a slight nervous tick, maybe a fear of heights. Be creative.

## **Beyond the Basics:**

Soon you will have a solid handle on the mechanics of the game and a decent understanding of your character's station in life. At this point I suggest thinking about some larger undertakings, such as generating a background for your character and developing a more dynamic personality.

## **Generating a Background:**

You can generate a background in many ways. Many players generate a background by starting with character class. Just as you have done in your real life, your character has chosen a path. Many factors would have played into the character's decision. For instance, you may have decided to play a thief. What kind of thief would you want to play? Does your character like to steal jewels and treasure, or does he or she steal only as necessary for survival? The first kind of thief could have a motivation as simple as greed. Maybe he came from a family who did not have a lot of money, and he grew tired of it. Perhaps, he was seduced by the idea of having the things that his family never did. By contrast, if your character just steals to survive, perhaps she was orphaned or ran away from an abusive family, and she steals because she has never known any other life.

Generating a background story for your character can do several things. In addition to explaining your character's personality, likes, dislikes, and origin, a background story gives your GM something to work with in the game. For example, a character might have chosen the paladin's path because an evil cleric killed his father. That character might have dedicated his life to avenging his father's death and ridding the world of this evil religion. This gives the GM a chance to draw you into the game by allowing your character to face the person who killed his father.

## **A Dynamic Personality:**

No character is perfect; they all have advantages and disadvantages. To accurately represent the pros and cons of a character, you can use your attributes. Pick a below-average attribute, and create a personality quirk based on it. If your character has a particularly low wisdom score, you could start attacking monsters with a little less caution than you would ordinarily exercise. A low dexterity score might make your character drop things

a lot or act a little bit clumsy and accident prone. This will bring a third dimension to your character, make him or her more memorable, and thus add to the game. Just try not to overdo it. Your fellow players will remember a character who acts clumsy; they will dislike a character who drops something and awakens the dragon. At first glance this may all sound like a lot of work, but the rewards are great. You now have a firm grasp of what to expect. You also have your greatest ally: your imagination. These tools will help you to find the missing chest of gold, slay the king's daughter to save the evil dragon (or maybe I have that backwards . . .), and anything else that the game master may throw your way. Good luck, and happy hunting!



# Interview with Justin D. Jacobson, Blue Devil Games

Interviewed by Dana Driscoll

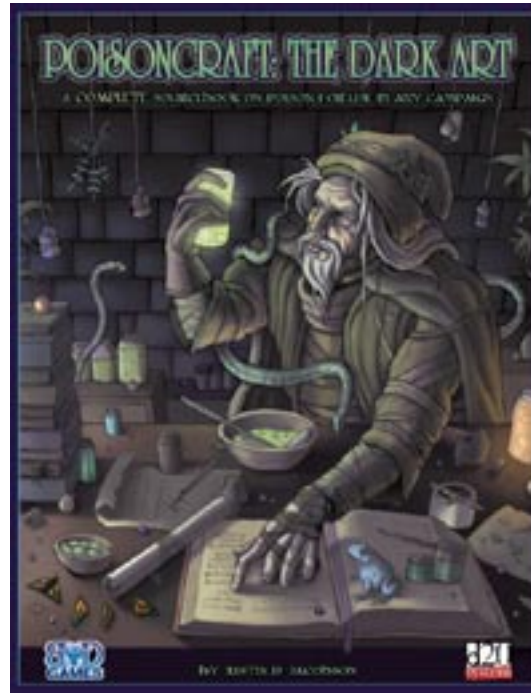
We recently were able to catch up with Justin D. Jacobson of Blue Devil Games. Blue Devil Games is a recent, but powerful entrant to the RPG publishing market with their premier product *Poisoncraft: The Dark Art*. This interview was conducted in late December via email.

## Can you start off by telling us a bit about yourself and your company?

I'm 34 years old, born and raised in South Florida. I started playing RPGs around 25 years ago and played almost all the way through high school, where I gave it up for a time. I attended Princeton University and graduated cum laude with a degree in philosophy. From there, I went to Duke University for law school before moving back down to Florida. Shortly after moving back, some friends from high school and I got together and started playing *Dungeons & Dragons* again. As much fun as I had "back in the day," I found it much more rewarding this go around. That's when I decided to start up Blue Devil Games (an homage to my law school's mascot). I'm the sole owner of Blue Devil Games, and we have two other part-time employees, Michael Ruiz and Mark Rickard. Our first product was *Poisoncraft: The Dark Art*, released in May of 2004, but we have since branched out into RPG books for *Mutants & Masterminds*, *Monte Cook's Arcana Evolved*, and *d20 Future*, among others.

## How did Blue Devil Games get its start?

It's something of a cart-before-the-horse plan. I started working on *Poisoncraft* before I ever dreamed of starting up a game company. After I finished the manuscript, I toyed briefly with the idea of shopping



it to other companies. PDF supplements generally and RPGNow.com specifically were starting to really take off. I already had all of the necessary software through my law practice, and candidly I have some financial resources. So, I figured I'd give it a go myself. As I'm sure every new company says: I wasn't prepared for all of the work that goes into a project like *Poisoncraft*. On the plus side, the work is fun. Buoyed by *Poisoncraft's* success, both critically and financially, I decided to continue the process.

I'm happy to report that Blue Devil Games is doing great and ready to explode with some major projects this year.

## Your *Poisoncraft: The Dark Arts* has gotten rave reviews in the time it is out. How did you come up with the idea for this book?

Where else? One of the players in my *D&D* group played an amoral rogue who liked to dabble in poison. The rules in the DMG are, well, lacking. As any good DM would do, I crafted a free-form poison creation system. That was the cornerstone of the *Poisoncraft* book. Once I had the system and the new poison-related feats in place, the other components flowed freely.

## What is your philosophy when it comes to RPG game design?

My business model is quite different from most other companies, owing principally to the fact that I make a comfortable living as a lawyer. Therefore, my products are designed to make a tidy profit but not required to make the mortgage payment. This affords me a lot more latitude than most other companies enjoy and enables me to strive for the highest quality possible. As far as actual game design goes, my philosophy is simple: Keep it fun! The hardest part about that principle is that one man's meat is another man's poison (pun fully intended). I think my tastes are fairly mainstream, though, so I usually just design to my own sensibilities and hope for the best.

## Do you have any advice for aspiring RPG writers?

Work on your writing. By that, I don't mean rules design; I mean the actual writing. I receive quite a few submissions by writers that don't have complete mastery of the English language. That may sound like a high standard, but if you intend to be successful at freelancing, it's something you should work hard at. This is really as simple as getting yourself an MLA handbook or similar resource, reviewing it, and practicing. Ask for and take criticism. Finally, my recommendation is to inquire with and submit to smaller publishers. There are many more of them and, by extension, many more opportunities.

## What do you see as the upcoming trends in the RPG industry?

I'm happy to be involved in one of the more exciting new trends: Indie Press Revolution ([www.indiepressrevolution.com](http://www.indiepressrevolution.com)). This is a new organization dedicated to quality products from small-press publishers like myself.





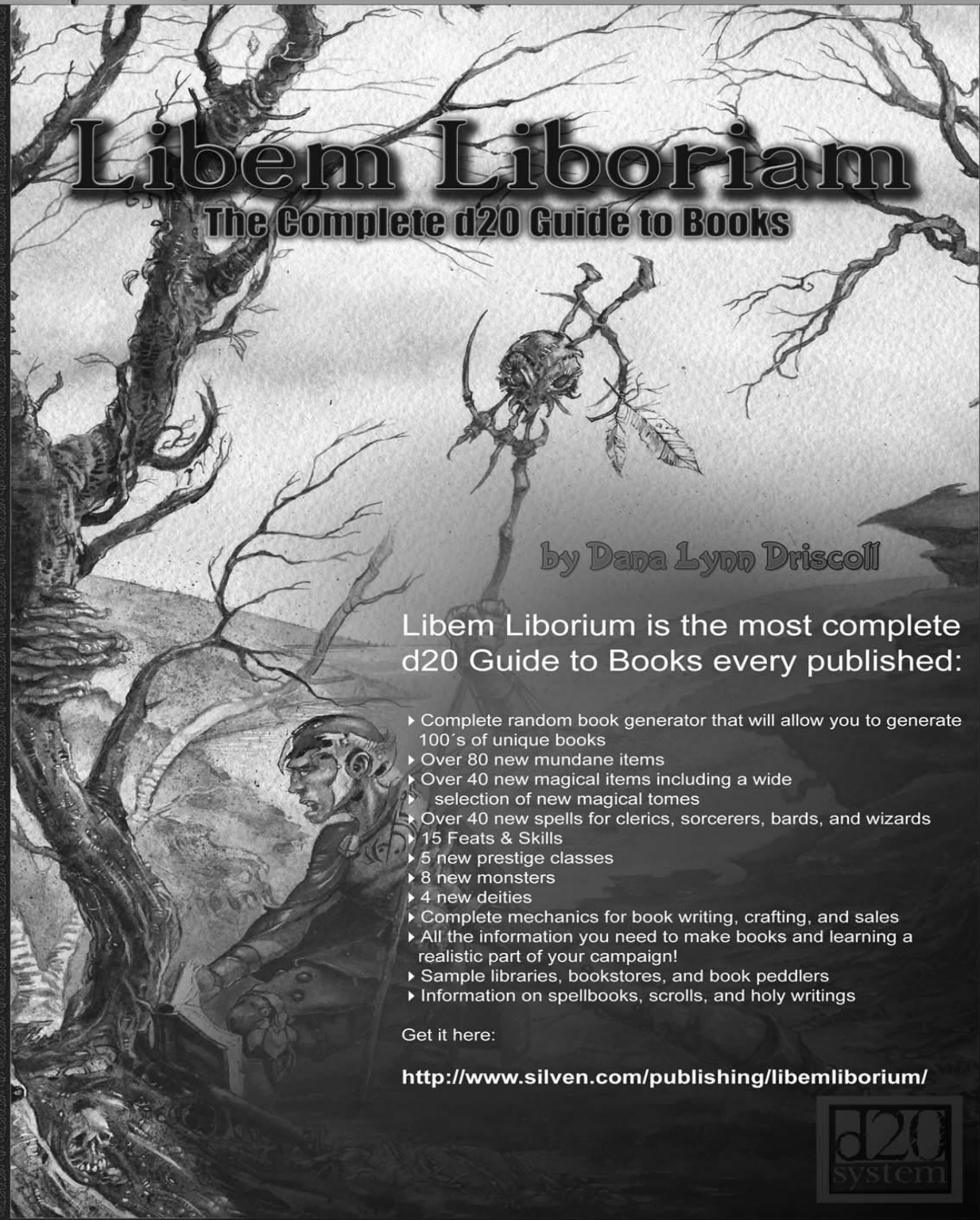
It serves as a fulfillment house principally, but also provides a lot of information and support. For gamers, it offers a one-stop shop for "indie" RPG's (and free shipping on orders over \$25 to boot). Since they exercise quality control over membership, customers are assured that the products they buy there will be good. It's a very novel concept, and I think it could foster a steady growth among third-party publishers.

I see a divergence coming, with major publishers (excluding Wizards of the Coast, of course) continuing to tend toward licensed products and small-press publishers pushing the envelope of game design.

**Do you have any new projects on the horizon you can discuss with us?**

Blue Devil Games has two big projects on the horizon: *Dawning Star* and *Thrilling Passages*. *Dawning Star* is our science-fiction campaign setting built on *d20 Modern* and powered by *d20 Future*. The full campaign setting should be released shortly and will be followed up by a host of support products. *Thrilling Passages* is a bit harder to describe; I usually go with a cross between *Quantum Leap*, *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, and *Time Bandits*. It is based on *d20* but uses a greatly simplified system to foster role-playing aspects. The adventures are based on some of the greatest stories in history: *Through the Looking Glass*, *The Jungle Book*, *Treasure Island*, and many more. We expect to release *Thrilling Passages* at GenCon Indy 2005.

We thank Justin for his time and eagerly await new Blue Devil Games productions! For more information you can visit the Blue Devil Games website at <http://www.bluedevilgames.com/>.



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by Dana Lynn Driscoll

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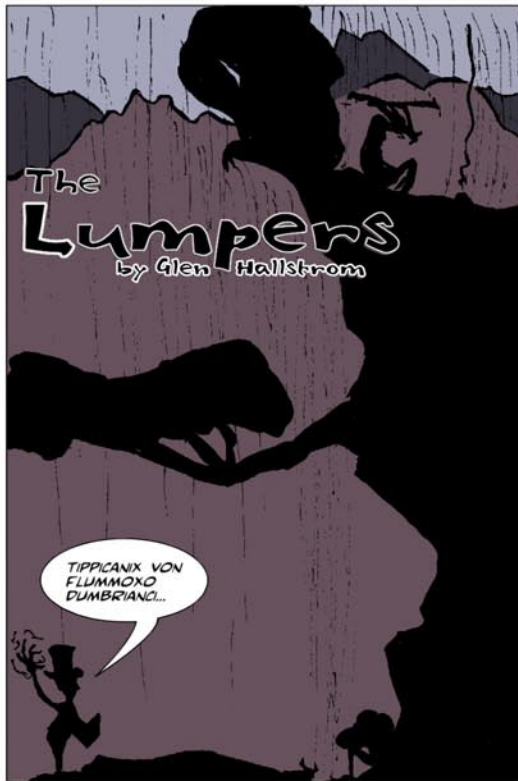
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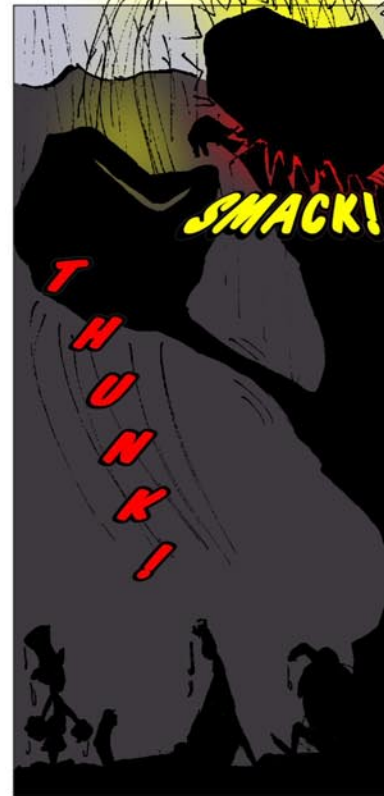
<http://www.silven.com/publishing/libemliborium/>













# *An Eagle Warrior's Death*

by Khaz Axson

Thousands of years ago, the elven lords of Thantwilanoria fought alongside humans and dwarves against the demon lords of the southern wastes. A great battle ensued, and the armies of the demon demigod Zaranoth were defeated. Zaranoth was banished from the material plane, back to the hell from whence he came. In this war, one group of brave elven fighters cut deeper into the tainted demon lands than any other: the warrior legion of House Timbor, led by their patriarch, Sarel Timbor. Even after the war was over, these demon hunters tracked Zaranoth's remaining minions far to the south and east, all the way to the great pyramids of the Ikpycgen desert and the spired cities of the sultans.

Three years after the war was won, the warriors of House Timbor returned home to Thantwilanoria, where they received a hero's welcome. Some believed the returning heroes were changed somehow. It was just exhaustion, most said. Still, there were murmurs that House Timbor had been tainted by the very evil it hunted. A few whispered of demonic possession. Despite these rumors, House Timbor was raised to noble status, and Sarel Timbor was given a seat on the elven council of nobles.

Over the next few centuries, House Timbor grew in power. To others, they seemed normal, worshiping nature and Illunar, god of the sun and creator of the elves. But behind closed doors, House Timbor guarded a dark secret. Some of the rumors were true. Under the cover of darkness, the noble Timborians indulged in depravity and worshiped the goddess of the blood red moon, Zareesha, mother of the banished demon lord Zaranoth.

At this time, Thantwilanoria was open to all the free races of the world. Its markets were open to outside trading, and visitors explored its museums, libraries, and amphitheatres. On occasion an outsider would mysteriously disappear. There was sporadic finger pointing, but little came of it. As House Timbor grew bolder, the disappearances became more frequent, and the rumors returned. The ruling houses refused to believe that the Timborian war heroes were anything but upstanding, productive members of elven society. It was true that they were a bit reclusive and taciturn, but they had endured such horrors during the war that was it to be expected.

Eventually the whispers turned to shouts too loud for the ruling council to ignore, and they called for Sarel Timbor to answer the accusations leveled at his noble house and its members.

Sarel Timbor answered with spears and swords, and a bloody coup attempt ensued.

Elves fought elves in the streets until the ruling house of Dalinora forced House Timbor to retreat to its walled compound in the northern quarter of the city. To avoid any further bloodshed, House Dalinora agreed to allow Sarel Timbor and his followers to leave the city under order of exile, never to return. The following night, under the full red moon, the patriarch of House Timbor and two thousand of his followers rode forth from Thantwilanoria. Stripped of nobility and cursed with mortality by the elven arch wizards, House Timbor and the followers of Zareesha went into exile.

Most headed northwest across the wilds of Brynhalla and through Graode Pass, skirting the then small human trading outpost of Ravenholt. Legend has it that many in Ravenholt awoke to find their loved ones missing.

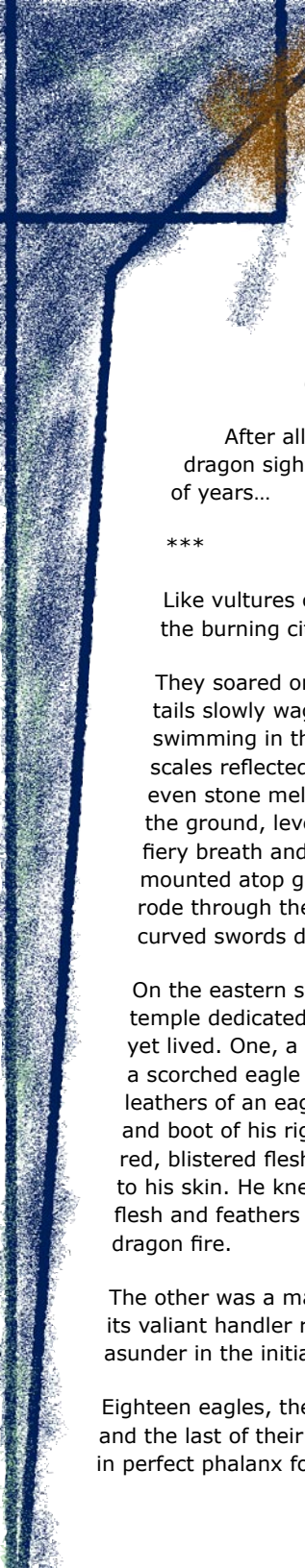
Five hundred of the outcasts, led by Sarel's nephew, Gilperion Timbor, headed south through the southern wastes and the great Ikpycgen desert to return to the lands of the sultans, where their deviance was more acceptable.

Sarel led his exiles far to the north and east, where they eventually settled in the Black Pine Forest, on the edge of the Frostbite Mountains. There was an abundance of small human fishing villages and fur trading towns to the south upon which they could prey, and the Timborian elves used their magic, stealth, and mastery of nature to become the scourges of the northeastern coast of Ta-Teharun. They took human slaves for their unspeakable rituals, and over the years their elven blood became tainted. Only the immediate Timborian family kept their bloodline pure, becoming insane and depraved from generation after generation of inbreeding. The humans of the region called them frost elves, not only because they made their homes in the northern climes. Hiding from the daylight, the Timborian elves became pale, taking on an ice-blue hue, while more and more of them were born with snow-white hair.

One day, deep within the Frostbite Mountains, the frost elves stumbled upon a slumbering white dragon atop a clutch of unhatched eggs. Seeing this as a gift from Zareesha, Sarel's descendant Garel Timbor and his sorcerous warriors fell upon the dragon's lair. Many of the elves lost their lives in the process, but the dragon was enslaved, her eggs were nurtured, and her knowledge was extracted by frost elf sorcerers. When this was done, they sacrificed the wyrm to their dark goddess. The dragon hatchlings were raised to serve the frost elves. Timborian lords kept this secret not only from the rest of the world but from most of their own people. Until the wyrmlings reached maturity, it was a secret known only to their handlers and to those of pure Timbor blood. Those who remembered the fight in the dragon's lair who were deemed untrustworthy were silenced, permanently.

Outside the Timborian realm, there were only rumors. Once in a great while a frost elf renegade would escape from the Frostbite Mountains, but who would believe





the insane ramblings of a frost elf? Most were hunted down and lynched for the crimes perpetrated by their people, and their warnings went unheeded. Sightings of flying creatures were passed off as wayward eagle rider patrols out of Ravenholt, which had grown over the centuries to become the largest open city north of Brynhalla.

After all, there had not been a confirmed dragon sighting north of Kothopia for thousands of years...

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Like vultures circling a carcass, six dragons circled the burning city of Ravenholt.

They soared on the early spring currents, spiked tails slowly wagging behind them as if they were swimming in the chilly pre-dawn air. Snow-white scales reflected the roaring fires that burned so hot even stone melted. Two leviathans remained on the ground, leveling buildings with their tails and fiery breath and feeding at will. Frost elf warriors, mounted atop great saber-toothed polar bears, rode through the ruined north gate unchecked, their curved swords dealing death. They spared no one.

On the eastern side of the city, in a partially collapsed temple dedicated to the nature goddess Trinia, two yet lived. One, a human named Bron Straker, wore a scorched eagle feather cloak and the black riding leathers of an eagle warrior. The leather breeches and boot of his right leg were burned away, exposing red, blistered flesh. In places, the leather had melted to his skin. He knelt before his dead avian mount, the flesh and feathers of its underside and tail scorched by dragon fire.

The other was a magnificent male eagle called Screech, its valiant handler ripped from the saddle and torn asunder in the initial attack.

Eighteen eagles, the pride and joy of Ravenholt's military and the last of their ancient breed, had taken to the skies in perfect phalanx formation. They had sped north to

gather information on the advancing frost elf army, giving Ravenholt's militia time to prepare the city's defenses.

Led by three woolly mammoths with huge tusks, the invading force had been easily spotted as it thundered across the tundra. Fierce, white-haired elves and their polar bear mounts were scouting the land ahead of the horde and protected its flanks.

## Like vultures circling a carcass, six dragons circled the burning city of Ravenholt.

Aiming for the Timborian royalty and frost elf generals riding the great mammoths, the eagles and their warrior handlers had swooped in for the attack.

They never saw the dragons coming.

Cloaked by dark magic and guided by their warlock riders, the dragons had descended from the clouds at break-neck speed, slamming into the unsuspecting eagles, killing seven of the giant raptors instantly.

Giant eagles have fought dragons since before recorded history. Instinct took over as the remaining eagles regrouped and went on the offensive. Their riders drew enchanted swords, their rune-covered blades harder than dragon scales. These weapons were handed down from generation to generation of eagle riders.

Sentries atop Ravenholt's walls and watchtowers had cheered as the eagles quickly brought down two of the dragons in their counter attack. The overcast night sky was lit with fire and sparks as swords and iron-shod talons impacted dragon scales.

The jubilation was short-lived. The dragons' superior size, savagery, and fiery breath won out over speed and agility.

Several dragons broke away from the fight and turned their attention to the city below. They leveled the north gate, creating access for the charging frost elf army. This done, they eliminated the resistance, incinerating soldiers and civilians alike. They had sought out ballistas and catapults and set them ablaze before turning to feed ravenously on the terrified population.

Bron's grievously injured mount had spent the last of its energy carrying its injured rider to safety, closely followed by the riderless Screech and a hungry dragon. The two birds had winged their way through the ruined city streets, using the thick haze from the roaring fires and their smaller size and agility to navigate their way through avenues too narrow for the hulking wyrm to follow. Its wings and tail had battered and destroyed buildings in the effort keep up with its intended prey.

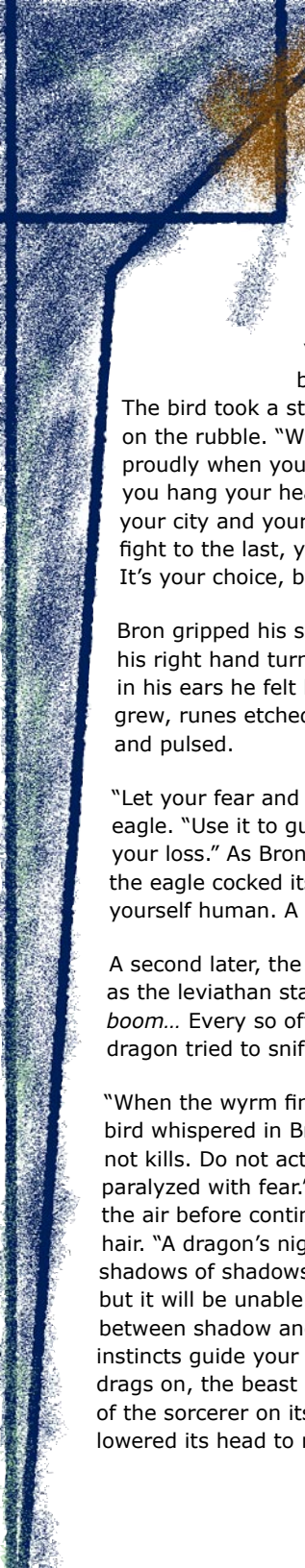
Now Bron's back arched as he sobbed in grief and agony. His long brown hair hung down around his head, obscuring his face. Screech hopped over debris toward the grieving human, nudging him with its beak before speaking in its own, clicking, cawing language that was understood by all eagle riders.

"Get up, human," said the eagle. "The wyrm that pursued us from the sky is still searching for us; I sense its vile presence." Somewhere in the distance a building collapsed with the sound of distant thunder, briefly drowning out the sounds of battle and the screams of the dying.

Bron looked up at the bird looming over him. Tears had cut rivulets through the soot and ash covering his face. He could not hold the eagle's piercing gaze and looked away before replying. "All is lost: my wife, my child, my kin, and my city," he said. He drew his muscled forearm across his face, wiping away tears and soot. "Leave if you wish, bird. Save yourself."

In reply, the eagle dipped its feathered head and nudged Bron again, this time hard enough to knock him over. "I do not wish to save myself, human. I, too, have lost my home, my mate, and my brood." Anger flashed behind the raptor's dark eyes as its temper flared. "I am the last of my kind, as are you, eagle warrior. I will not go down in the annals of history as a coward that died cowering like a rat in the temple of a human god," the bird hissed.

Bron pulled himself to his feet, despite the pain in his right leg. "And who is left to write this history, eh?" He



pulled his sword from its sheath and used it for support, leaning on it like a cane. "No one!" he spat through gritted teeth. "No one is left to tell the tale because we have failed them. Who will know?" His voice trailed off to a whisper.

"We will know, and when we stand before our makers, they will know."

The bird took a step closer, iron-shod talons clicking on the rubble. "Will you be able to hold your head up proudly when you meet your maker, human? Or will you hang your head in shame, your vow to protect your city and your people unfulfilled by your refusal to fight to the last, your failure ringing through eternity? It's your choice, but I choose to die in the air."

Bron gripped his sword so tightly that the knuckles of his right hand turned white. As the eagle's insults rang in his ears he felt his shame turn to anger. As his rage grew, runes etched along the length of his blade glowed and pulsed.

"Let your fear and sorrow fuel your fury," goaded the eagle. "Use it to guide your sword arm, to avenge your loss." As Bron shook with barely contained fury, the eagle cocked its regal head to the right. "Prepare yourself human. A dragon approaches," it said.

A second later, the pair felt a rumble beneath them as the leviathan stalked closer. *Boom...boom...boom...boom...* Every so often there was short pause as the dragon tried to sniff out its prey.

"When the wyrm finds us, stand perfectly still," the bird whispered in Bron's ear. "It is hunting for food, not kills. Do not act, only react. It will think you are paralyzed with fear." The eagle raised its beak to sniff the air before continuing, its soft breath rustling Bron's hair. "A dragon's night vision is so good it can see the shadows of shadows. Its day vision is equally proficient, but it will be unable to focus on us both as we move between shadow and light. When you react, let your instincts guide your actions, and be precise. If the battle drags on, the beast will incinerate us. I will take care of the sorcerer on its back." The great bird once again lowered its head to nudge Bron in the chest, this time

companionably. "Remember, human, you are an eagle warrior and a dragon slayer," it said before hopping away. It took to the air, disappearing into the deep shadows cast by the ruined ceiling of the temple.

Muscles taut, standing perfectly still, Bron waited. The seconds felt like hours.

Finally, after several agonizing minutes, the reverberations beneath his feet ceased, and the dragon's massive, reptilian head appeared above the ruined eastern wall of the temple. Its eyes, each easily as big as Bron's head, flicked back and forth between the eagle perched near the roof atop a partially collapsed support pillar and the human standing stock still on the ground.

The dragon pulled back its horned head and then slammed it against the already weakened granite and marble wall, creating its own entrance and showering the interior with dust and stone. The temple groaned in protest as its crumbling foundation threatened to topple the entire building. Through it all, Bron held his ground. The flying shards of rock nicked and cut him, and he could taste his blood as it trickled down his face and into his mouth.

As the dust cleared, the behemoth came into view, directed by an armored sorcerer seated between its folded wings. The frost elf scanned the shadows above in search of the eagle while mouthing the words to a spell. With deliberate, almost feline, ease the dragon stalked toward the motionless human, its huge head held low to the ground. Its forked, snake-like tongue flicked out of its blood stained maw, savoring the salty taste of fear that rolled off the terrified human in waves.

But the wyrm sensed something else, something unfamiliar boiling below the surface, permeating and mingling with the fear. Curious, the dragon flicked its tongue toward the human again, not noticing the deadly intent burning in its prey's eyes. As the leviathan's tongue flicked mere inches from Bron's chest, close enough for him to smell rotten meat and sulfur on its breath, he reacted.

His sword arm, sped by revulsion and adrenaline, sliced through the dragon's tongue like it was hot butter. The severed slab of meat fell to the floor with a wet plop. Surprised by this sudden burst of violence, the dragon pulled its head back as its mouth filled with blood.

Acting purely on instinct, Bron bellowed in defiance as he stepped below the beast's rising head and swung his sword upward. Sparks flew as the razor edge of his ancient blade cut through the scales of the dragon's neck, neatly slicing through the soft flesh beneath. It severed veins and opened the creature's windpipe. Blood and noxious fluids flowed from the gaping wound, igniting as they rolled across the floor like liquid fire.

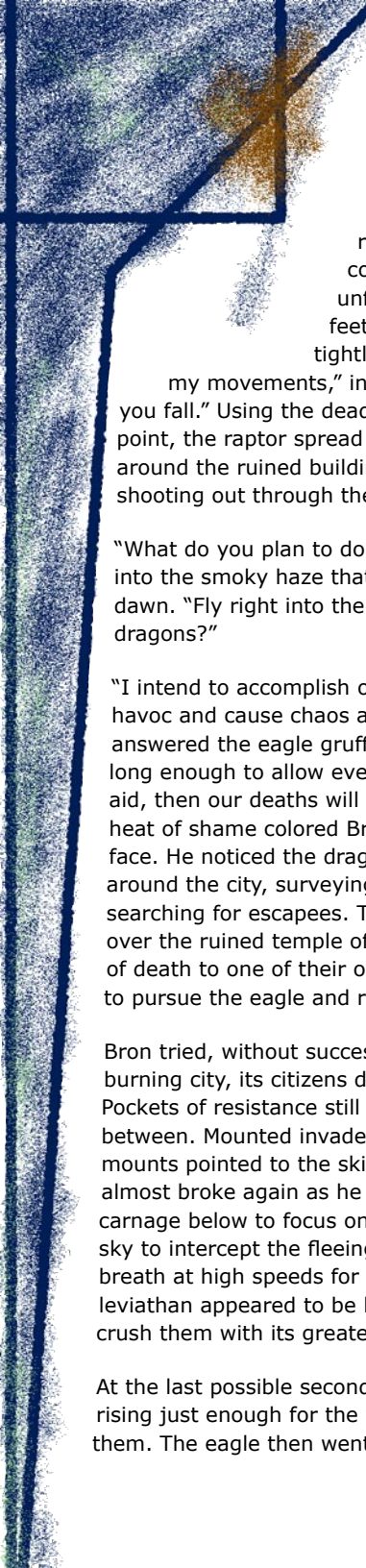
Unable to draw breath or breathe fire, the injured dragon slammed its head back down in an attempt to crush the puny human, but Bron had already stepped aside. Raising his sword over his head, the eagle warrior brought it down on the dying creature's exposed neck, cutting into the scales and bone. His blade passed clean through, ringing on the stone floor. He cut an inch deep into the granite, numbing his arms to the shoulder. The wyrm's tail lashed out one final time as the creature died, bringing down another section of the exterior wall, further compromising the temple's already crumbling structure.

Screech had not let the human warrior fight alone. As Bron's first stroke fell, the eagle had leaped from its perch. First flying around the high domed ceiling, passing in and out of shadow to disorient the dragon's sorcerous rider, it folded its wings and dove directly at the warlock.

Finishing his incantation, the frost elf cast a black bolt of energy directly at the speeding eagle. The raptor dipped its head and passed beneath the bolt, feeling the searing heat along its back. Before the spell caster could ready a defense, Screech was on him. As Bron's final stroke fell, the eagle slammed into its unfortunate target. Iron-shod talons punctured the mage's breastplate and skull, killing him instantly and tearing his broken body free of the harness that had held him to the dragon's back.

As quickly as the fight had started, it was over.

Bron stared at the dragon's lifeless body through a blood red haze. As he pulled his sword free from the stone floor, his battle madness and blood lust began to fade, replaced by the pain of his forgotten injuries and a throbbing in his head. The eagle wasted no time as it unceremoniously dropped the limp frost elf corpse to the floor and hastened to Bron's side. "We have to take to the air, now," stressed the bird. "The wyrms are aware of their brethren's demise. They have sensed their clutchmate's mental death howl."



Grabbing the pommel of the saddle, Bron painfully swung upon the eagle's back, instinctively grabbing for the absent retainer straps, ripped from the saddle and still connected to Screech's previous, unfortunate rider. "Keep your feet firmly in the stirrups, hold on tightly with your legs and anticipate my movements," instructed the bird. "I will not let you fall." Using the dead dragon's back for a launching point, the raptor spread its wings and did one final lap around the ruined building, picking up speed, before shooting out through the gaping hole in the roof.

"What do you plan to do?" asked Bron as they ascended into the smoky haze that obscured the dim light of dawn. "Fly right into the maws of several waiting dragons?"

"I intend to accomplish our original objective, to wreak havoc and cause chaos among the invaders' ranks," answered the eagle gruffly. "If we can distract them long enough to allow even one refugee to flee and seek aid, then our deaths will not be in vain." Once again the heat of shame colored Bron's soot- and gore-covered face. He noticed the dragons had widened their circle around the city, surveying the surrounding countryside, searching for escapees. Two behemoths spiraled down over the ruined temple of Trinia, investigating the cause of death to one of their own, while another broke away to pursue the eagle and rider now speeding northwest.

Bron tried, without success, not to look down at the burning city, its citizens dead and dying in the streets. Pockets of resistance still remained, but few and far between. Mounted invaders atop their saber-toothed mounts pointed to the skies in his direction. His will almost broke again as he tore his horrified gaze from the carnage below to focus on the dragon racing across the sky to intercept the fleeing pair. Unable to utilize its fiery breath at high speeds for fear of incinerating itself, the leviathan appeared to be heading directly toward them to crush them with its greater mass.

At the last possible second, Screech banked its wings, rising just enough for the winged giant to pass beneath them. The eagle then went into a nosedive, descending

on the lumbering dragon from behind before it could turn. It landed directly between the leviathan's outstretched wings, where Screech's iron claws sunk into the wyrm's hapless rider, pinning the frost elf sorcerer face down to its back.

Bron leaned forward and slashed down with his sword. He felt his weapon grind through the beast's spine as it opened a gaping wound on the dragon's back, which quickly filled and spilled over with blood. As the creature roared in pain, it swung its head toward the warrior, huge jaws snapping. Bron met the wyrm's maw with steel. Gripping his sword with two hands, he cut roughly through the creature's bony snout. His blade rang almost lyrically as he withdrew it, scraping along teeth and bone.

Disengaging its talons with a wet popping sound, Screech once again turned northwest as the grievously injured dragon tumbled toward the ground, its bat-like wings flapping furiously. "Hold on, human," the eagle said over the roar of the wind. Picking up speed, they quickly outdistanced the larger, slower dragons.

Bron held his face up to the cold, moist morning air, his hair flying wildly about his aching head and his eyes watering with the force of rushing air. The warrior's respite was short lived though, as he saw the smoking ruins of the farms and homesteads outside the city proper. Rage once again welled up inside him, as they raced closer to the frost elf royalty and military command, their silken black banners, bearing the red moon insignia, flapping in the wind.

Unchallenged, the frost elves looked down on their conquest.

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



# Through the Lens of History: Using History for Better Gaming

## Vision XV: "Latrones"

by Sean Holland

### Bandits in the Roman Republic and Empire

Looking back to the Roman Empire we usually imagine it to be an orderly and efficient place, untroubled by minor lawlessness. This was not entirely the case, though in central and northern Italy it came close. Bandits and banditry were a continual problem throughout the expansion of Rome to the collapse of the Empire.

#### Part I - The History

Rome rapidly expanded, first as a Republic and later as an Empire, building a highly efficient set of roads to facilitate military movement. These roads further promoted trade and travel, colonization and commerce. Married to this expansion was the ever present threat of the *latro* (pl. *latrones*, bandits) to the traveler.

Deaths by bandits were common enough that there was a formulaic phrase (*interfectus a latronibus*, "killed by bandits") used on Roman tombstones. Measures were undertaken to limit the predations of bandits, the building of watchtowers, guard posts and other manned fortifications for travelers to find safety within. Naturally, all of these sorts of buildings also served a military purpose by design protecting Rome from both internal and external threats.

For the Romans, *latrones* were the quintessential outlaws, by their very actions *latrones* placed themselves outside of the bounds of Roman society. Thus it was not only legal but encouraged and expected for private citizens to seek out and kill bandits. One of the reasons that private citizens were expected to do this was the Romans did not have a civil police force; there was the Roman army, which had many duties, and the Roman administrators who could call upon the army or on the resources of private citizens. This was less of a problem in the old

Latin areas of Central and Northern Italy where the people were Roman and had an interest in keeping the roads safe for travelers.

In the areas that Rome had conquered, things were more problematic. The *latrones* often had ties to both the local population, who would hide them, and the local power structure, who would protect them. The Roman administration could therefore call upon the army to suppress the *latrones*, which was difficult if they could melt into the local population. Or call upon the local elites to raise forces to fight the *latrones*, which was not be very effective because these often were the same people who were protecting the bandits in the first place. So, dealing with the *latrones* became an interesting balancing act for the Roman officials.

When *latrones* were caught, they were subject to summary execution, localized interrogation (including torture) or brought back to be savagely killed. Those bandits brought back for public execution were crucified, torn apart by wild animals in the arena, or burned alive to set an example. Anyone who helped a bandit, such as a *receptator* (pl. *receptatores*, 'receiver' or, as we might put it, a fence) was to face the same penalties as a bandit. This became problematic when it was the elite of an area supporting the *latrones*, causing the Roman officials to have to tread carefully. Bandits proved most difficult to control in newly conquered areas, especially those that shared a border with areas outside the Roman sphere of influence and in mountainous regions. The ease of escape across mountains and the multitude of hiding places made catching bandits difficult. Just as the broken terrain made travelers vulnerable by being easily cut off from the watchful eyes of the authorities that might otherwise

have protected them.

An unusual sort of *latro* that emerged in Southern Italy and Sicily was the slave-shepherd, these enslaved shepherds were allowed by their owners, who did not want to have to worry about the trouble and expense of maintaining them, to raid and pillage as long as they did not harm their owner's interests. Thus their predations fell mostly upon small farmers and travelers. The masters of the slave-shepherds, wealthy land owners all, protected their slaves from official reprisals for sometime before the practice was stopped.

*Latrones* sprung up, their numbers sometimes composed of ex-soldiers, whenever there was a collapse of authority, such as a civil war or power struggle for the Imperial throne. These groups of *latrones* would in turn have to be put down by agents of Empire to reestablish Imperial authority, which would usually last until the next civil war or breakdown of Imperial authority began the cycle anew.

#### Part II- Breaking it apart and putting it back together

I could not find any mention in my sources of professional groups of *latrones* hunters, but, if they did exist, it would be a good profession for adventurers. Either as mercenaries or as official agents, a team of professional bandit hunters could be quite interesting to play.

The characters could be agents of a government sent to govern an area who are forced into dealing with the bandit problem. Some of the bandits are just common folk trying to feed their families, while other bandit gangs are working for the elite of the country who are planning to revolt. The characters must deal with both groups,

which require very different solutions, while keeping both their jobs and their lives.

For a more morally gray campaign, the players could be bandits themselves. Perhaps they have noble reasons, to fight the invaders, or mercenary ones or some combination of the two. In any case, being outside the law will likely result in the characters being forced to deal with fairly gray areas of morality so this style of campaign will not be to everyone's tastes.

In any case, bandits are likely to be a reoccurring problem in many types of campaigns and setting, hopefully the above details will allow them to have a bit more depth.

**Supplemental d20 Material:**

New Feats

*Latro* [General]

You are a professional bandit, secure in your knowledge of the local area and of both sides of the law.

Prerequisites: BAB +1, Knowledge (local) 2 ranks, Survival 1 rank.

Benefit: You gain a +2 bonus to Intimidate, Knowledge (local) and Survival checks. Further, you have a +1 bonus to Appraise checks for determine the value of goods for your local market.

Note: You are a wanted criminal and are liable to be summarily executed (or worse) by the authorities if caught.

# The Many Faces of Gaming: Female Gamers

by Eytan Bernstein

The first installment of this column focused on the issues surrounding and involving gamers. This article will concentrate on female gamers. Women occupy a unique role in gaming. Because gaming is a male-dominated hobby, women often come face-to-face with prejudice and stereotyping. The purpose of this article is to illustrate the problems faced by (and sometimes caused by) female gamers as well as the many positive things they can bring to the gaming experience.

Gaming is often viewed as a "boy's game," one in which many young women are uninterested. Most female gamers are introduced to gaming in college, when the natural broadening of horizons of the university experience brings more women into contact with it. There is nothing inherent in gaming that suggests that men are any better or more suited to it, but due to social conditioning the majority of women do not become involved in it. Some intrepid souls manage to break out of this mold, taking a journey into unfamiliar territory.

The journey is not often a smooth one. Many male gamers have difficulty interacting with women. This may be because they inhabit marginalized roles in society or perhaps because they don't see eye to eye with mainstream expectations (which may have led them to embrace the escape to alternate realities provided by gaming). Either way, the presence of female gamers shakes up the structure of most groups.

While this can have numerous positive effects, there is certainly the possibility of trouble. Some gamers are unable to separate their own personal desires and feelings from that of their characters. Male

gamers frequently develop feelings for female gamers – idolizing them or even worshiping them to a lesser degree. While this can cause in-character problems, its more serious effect is out of game. When a female gamer joins a gaming club or group, it is rarely with the primary intention of finding a spouse. Unfortunately, some gamers cannot cope when their romantic advances are ignored or unwanted. This may not only create an awkward and unpleasant atmosphere for the female gamer (and sometimes the other male gamers), it can also lead to jealousy and serious tension. Thus, it can be very difficult for women when a great deal of attention – often conflicting between multiple sources – is thrust in the way of their general enjoyment. Some lucky couples did meet through their mutual gaming hobby, due to similar interests, personal chemistry, and a variety of other reasons. As gamers are human beings – despite what some may wish to believe – romance certainly can and does develop between them. The very presence of a female gamer does not however, mean that she is interested in dating any of her gaming buddies. If she is, that's fine, but it can become very uncomfortable for everyone if sexual advances get in the way of the game. This can manifest in any number of ways. Frequently, romances between players in the game – especially when rocky – can result in tension between the characters. Similarly, those that are rebuffed in their advances may play rather coldly (or aggressively) towards female gamers.

Another issue that female gamers face is sexism, often in the form of misogyny. Just as some male gamers will feel the need to hit on female participants, others harbor deep seated resentment towards them. There are a number of possible sources for this resentment, but it always results in an unwelcome atmosphere. Some men

view women only as sexual objects; others see them as child-bearers and mothers with no other purpose in life. Many male gamers are used to role-playing being a boys club. They may revel to a certain extent in their geekdom, and the presence of a female gamer can make them uncomfortable and make them question their self-esteem. It shouldn't, and this is not the intention of the vast majority of female gamers, but it frequently does.

While there is no denying that a certain degree of tension will be evident any time men and women are involved in any pursuit that exposes their emotions, this does not mean that male gamers have a license to be jerks. It also means that female gamers should not use their unique status to pit people against each other. This may seem ludicrous to some, but it is not an uncommon occurrence. Some female gamers have been known to use the jealousy of the male gamers in a group as a tool. In general, it would be best if both male and female gamers checked their sexual issues at the door. During the game is not the appropriate place to deal with these problems. Female gamers should be treated the same way (and act the same way) as everyone else in the group. Like all members with individual strengths, weaknesses and perspectives, their interests should be honored and perspectives utilized, but anything beyond this is bound to lead to trouble and dissatisfaction.

While people cannot completely ignore their desires and tendencies, it is best to try to treat female gamers like everyone else. Of course, men and women have their differences and these should not be ignored, but it is better to view the presence of a female gamer as an asset to the game. If her presence is consciously or subconsciously seen interfering, this conflict can and will play itself out in the game.

If these problems can be dealt with, the presence of female gamers can work to advantage of traditionally male-oriented groups. While they sometimes make male characters, women more often play female PCs. This is creates a unique opportunity for other gamers. Even though male players play female characters, their portrayals will never be as accurate or genuine as those by having a female gamer. Also, while female gamers do not necessarily have any romantic interest in other gamers, their presence opens up a role-playing opportunity. Many male gamers are uncomfortable with the idea of in-character romantic involvement

with another male gamer's character.

If the female gamer is willing, romantic relationships between characters, families and legacies can all be integrated into the game with less discomfort than usual. Women also provide a new lens through which a typically male-clouded pursuit can be viewed. While men and women are generally capable of the same things, their brains do function somewhat differently. The simple infusion of a different sort of thought process into the gaming environment is a beneficial occurrence. The dynamic of gaming becomes more complete with different intellectual thought patterns are brought into the gaming group.

Female gamers, like any other gaming minority group, face a number of challenges. If approached properly, a more diverse gaming population is beneficial to all gamers. If viewed through the lens of prejudice and bias, it will only lead to conflict and dissatisfaction. It is up to each gaming group to decide how to approach this issue. Like any other group, female gamers should be treated with respect; their differences should be seen as matter of enhanced perspective, not a reason for discrimination and harassment.



# Interview with Keith Senkowski, Bob Goat Press

Interviewed by Dana Driscoll

Recently Silven Crossroads was able to catch up with Keith Senkowski of Bob Goat Press to discuss recent products and future possibilities. This interview was conducted via email in late December.

**Can you start off by telling us a bit about Bob Goat Press? How did you get your start? How long have you been in business?**

Bob Goat Press was originally spawned for the purposes of giving my freelance graphic/web design business a face. As I moved away from doing that kind of work on a freelance basis, it only made sense to use the name for my RPG company. So, as far as RPGs go, Bob Goat Press has only been in business for six months.

**Your company's primary product is the Conspiracy of Shadows RPG. Can you give us an overview of the game; how it works?**

*Conspiracy of Shadows* is essentially the *X-Files* meets a fantasy world based upon medieval Eastern Europe. The game is heavily inspired by my personal interest in Polish history, the writing of Henryk Sienkiewicz, the *X-Files*, *Millennium* TV shows, *Hellboy*, and a list of other books and movies a mile long.

In the game, the characters are a part of a Cell (which the players create together) of individuals who know the truth about a sinister conspiracy (which the GM creates with a tool-kit). There are also rules for mystical bloodlines (called Witchblood), Ritual Magic, goon mechanics and a tool-kit for creating supernatural threats.

The game mechanic that allows all this fun stuff is pretty simple. You add two appropriate Traits plus 2D6 and roll over either an opposed roll or a

target number. This roll can be modified with what is called Descriptors which grant a bonus or penalty die to the roll based upon the situation. There is a little more to it, but basically it is that simple.

**If you had to sum up Conspiracy of Shadows in one word, what would it be?**

Only one word? Paranoia...

**What is your philosophy in RPG design?**

Find a premise and stick to it. Originally, the game was just another fantasy game with all sorts of horror and even pulp overtones. Luckily I took a fresh look at it after getting a hold of a copy of *Over the Edge* and being exposed to other Indie RPGs like *Sorcerer*, *Donjon* and *My Life With Master*. They gave me a new insight into my design and helped my shape my belief that a game should have a stated goal and stick to it, be it "one size fits all" or "finding out if you can handle the truth."

**What are the top three things you value in RPGs?**

Like I said above, a clear premise is key. Clean and simple to understand rules are also important. And most importantly is it fun to play in the manner in which it was intended to be played?

**What do you consider to be the greatest RPG of all time? Your personal favorite (if they differ)?**

Oooh, loaded question. I would have to say *Over the Edge* by Robin D. Laws and Jonathan Tweet is the greatest RPG of all time. I came to it late and

only played it a few times, but each time I see it on my shelf I get the urge to play it. However, I also get that urge with quite a few games on my shelf...

*Over the Edge* is probably also my personal favorite when all things are said and done, but my current favorite is *The Shadow of Yesterday* by Clinton R. Nixon. I got to play-test it and found it to be brilliant. So much so that it has impacted my own game design.

**Do you have any upcoming products we can look forward to? Any other news?**

I have a couple of things in the works right now. The first is my monthly e-zine, *Exposing the Shadows*. I write at least one every month and sometimes two on special occasions. Each issue includes an article supporting *Conspiracy of Shadows*.

In the summer I will have my follow-up book, the *Conspiracy of Shadows Game Master's Guide*. It is a mouthful, I know. It will include tips on creating atmosphere for the game, on running the game, constructing episodes and seasons, new tool-kits and more. Oh so much more...

After that comes *The Lost South*, which is spawned from my love of *Lawrence of Arabia* (both the movie and book). It is all about leading the fight against the enemy when the war has already been lost. It will be a self-contained game, but tied to the same world as *Conspiracy of Shadows*.

Finally I will be doing illustrations for hire for a few publishers. I don't need to make a career of it so I like to work cheap for other indie publishers. Decent artists are hard to find at an affordable price for a lot of small publishers.

We thank Keith for his time and look forward to future Bob Goat Press products! For more information on *Conspiracy of Shadows* and Bob Goat Press, you can visit their website here: <http://www.bobgoat.com/>.



# Xeniform Invasion:

## Mngwa & Nandi Bear

By Jerel Hass

### CSX Case File #1: MNGWA

This month marks the start of my monthly "Xeniform Invasion" column at Silven. Xeniform Invasion will present one or more new *d20 Modern* and *Future* monsters each month for your own gaming enjoyment. First for all, those of you who have yet to pick up a copy of the *d20 Future* book, "Xeno" means "stranger," "foreigner," and sometimes "alien." So a Xeniform is a creature or being that is strange, foreign, or alien. In other words, a Xeniform is to *d20 Modern* as a monster is to *D&D*; it is just a much cooler word.

Only one more topic needs to be covered before the presentation of the monsters, and that is the CXS (Center of Xenological Studies). Each of the monthly Xeniforms will be presented as a case file from the CXS.

#### Center of Xenological Studies

The CXS was established in 1960 by the US government to deal with the sudden explosion of Cryptid and Xeniform sightings. In the prime of its creation the CXS was the hot bed for Xenological research. Through the use of cutting-edge technology and top-notch scientists, the CXS made revolutionary breakthroughs in Xeniform genetics and many extraterrestrial technologies. However, this boom was not to last forever. In 1965 a second US agency, AFT (Agency of Foreign Technology), was created to explore and investigate all things "alien." In the beginning the AFT and CXS worked congruently, each complementing the other. Both agencies had descended into the realm of black ops, each depending on a portion of the US black ops budget. However, by separating the work load, AFT handled all things Extraterrestrial and the CXS handled all things Terrestrial, the two agencies were able to make leaps and strides into bringing the US into an understanding of what existed between heaven and hell.

#### True Mngwa

Large Outsider  
Hit Dice: 26d8+182 (286 hp)  
Initiative: +8  
Speed: 50 ft.  
Defense: 18 (-1 size, +4 Dex, +5 Natural) touch 13, flatfooted 14  
Base Attack/Grapple: +26/+40  
Attack: Claw +35 melee (2d4+10)  
Full Attack: 2 Claws +35 melee (2d4+10) and Bite +30 melee (2d6+5)  
Face/Reach: 5 ft. by 10 ft./ 5 ft.  
Special Attacks: Pounce, improved grab, rake 2d4+5  
Special Qualities: Scent, low-light vision, traps\*, Displacement (At Will), DR 10/-, Fast Healing 5  
Saves: Fort +13, Ref +17, Will +12  
Abilities: Str 30, Dex 18, Con 24, Int 14, Wis 15, Cha 12  
Skills: Hide +13\*, Jump +15, Listen +12, Move Silently +12, Spot +10, Swim +11  
Feats: Improved initiative, Dodge, Mobility, Spring Attack, Combat Reflexes, Endurance, Diehard  
Climate/Terrain: Shadow Plane  
Organization: Single  
CR: 16  
Alliance: Chaos  
Advancement: None  
\*The Mngwa can spot traps just as like a Rogue  
\*Racial Bonus +8, at night the bonus becomes +16

#### Clone Mngwa

Large Outsider  
Hit Dice: 13d8+91 (143 hp)  
Initiative: +8  
Speed: 50 ft.  
Defense: 18 (-1 size, +4 Dex, +5 Natural) touch 13, flatfooted 14  
Base Attack/Grapple: +13/+27  
Attack: Claw +22 melee (2d4+10)  
Full Attack: 2 Claws +22 melee (2d4+10) and Bite +17 melee (2d6+5)  
Face/Reach: 5 ft. by 10 ft./ 5 ft.  
Special Attacks: Pounce, improved grab, rake 2d4+5  
Special Qualities: Scent, low-light vision, traps\*, Displacement (At Will), DR 5/-, Fast Healing 2  
Saves: Fort +13, Ref +17, Will +12  
Abilities: Str 30, Dex 18, Con 24, Int 14, Wis 15, Cha 12  
Skills: Hide +13\*, Jump +15, Listen +12, Move Silently +12, Spot +10, Swim +11  
Feats: Improved initiative, Dodge, Mobility, Spring Attack  
Climate/Terrain: Shadow Plane  
Organization: Single  
CR: 6  
Alliance: Chaos  
Advancement: None  
\*The Mngwa can spot traps just as like a Rogue  
\*Racial Bonus +8, at night the bonus becomes +16

*"I do not dally in the towns but press into the forest to be devoured by the Mngwa!  
And if the Mngwa seizes me, devouring my flesh, that is the fortune of the hunt!" --an  
old Swahili war-song.*

This partnership was not to last—by 1975 the black ops budget was not as lucrative as it once was, and many new agencies had sprung up all struggling for a large piece of the pie. It was the AFT that broke the truce first by sending agents into CXS controlled investigations. But even a violation of jurisdiction could be over looked. What started the actual battle was that the AFT always seemed to produce results. It was Research Lead Lesse Ies of the CXS, who first started to notice some inaccuracies in the AFT reports. It also did not take long for the AFT to have Lesse silenced.

During the 80's, many top CXS agents began to lose their lives, even during routine missions; this high casualty rate cost the Chief Administrator Scot Agape his position. His replacement, Sam Yen, was drawn from the now highly successful AFT. Ever since the placement of Sam Yen as Chief Administrator, the CXS has become little more than a prison of Xenology. The CXS budget barely covers the necessary security measures for the overwhelming CXS Xenological sample collection. Today, the main branch of the CXS is located only a mile from Dupont Circle, Washington DC, in a nonchalant brown brick building. Nothing distinguishes it from the half a dozen other nearby brown brick buildings, except for the high level security and armored cars that occasionally make drops. The CXS only has 23 employees with which to conduct and file their research.

Even with all these failings, the CXS manages to produce something unique: the *Annals of Xenology*. This annual distribution is edited and put together by the CXS Research Lead Anna Momyer. This Annual release has a surprising amount of accurate and useful Xenological research contained within its few pages. Each delivery to its 529 clearance approved subscribers is done personally.

Not the fearsome lion, nor the voracious appetite of the leopard, but rather the Mngwa that strikes fear into the hearts of the villagers along the East African coast. Hunters who would use sticks to route out a hungry lion and tackle a leopard with their bare hands quake with fear at the thought of the feared Mngwa.

### Combat

Before combat a Mngwa normally uses stealth to approach within change range. After charging, a Mngwa stays within melee combat and fights to the death unless subjected to direct sunlight.

### Adventure Hook

During an African adventure, the PCs will be lucky enough to witness a grand solar eclipse. However, it is unlucky for them; the Mngwa has been waiting for this big chance. He has been gathering tormented jungle cat spirits lost in the shadow plane. He plans to launch an attack against a major African city. Can the players survive the slaughter? Or find a way to prevent it and finally send the Mngwa to its final resting?

**Pounce (Ex):** If a Mngwa charges a foe, it can make a full attack, including two rake attacks.

**Improved Grab (Ex):** To use this ability, a Mngwa must hit with its bite attack. It can then attempt to start a grapple as a free action without provoking an attack of opportunity. If it wins the grapple check, it establishes a hold and can rake.

**Rake (Ex):** Attack bonus +35 melee (true); +22 melee (clone), damage 2d4+5

**Displacement (Su):** All ranged and melee attacks directed at the Mngwa suffer a 50% miss chance.

### Description

Weighing in at over 700 lbs, 7ft long, and 5ft tall at the shoulder blades, the Mngwa is easily the largest feline predator to stalk the modern world. Almost identical to the African Lion in appearance, the Mngwa has three very noticeable physical differences. The first is that the Mngwa like a leopard does not have a mane. Second, the Mngwa has two distinct black blotches or spots like a Civet that spoils its thick gray hide. Finally, the Mngwa has a thick furry tail.

### Encounter

It is suggested that all CXS agents avoid encountering a Mngwa; even a single Mngwa may be too much for a full squad of agents. The Mngwa is only encountered at night when the moon is darkest; this is due to the Mngwa's severe allergy to bright light. A Mngwa has a sixth sense about traps and snares, so it is best not to fall in to the habit of treating a Mngwa like a typical jungle cat. A Mngwa is immortal; you can shoot it, watch as its body dissolves into the shadows, and even take a moment to catch your breath. However, after a months worth of time the Mngwa will be back and even if it wasn't after you originally, now it will be. The Mngwa only fears one thing and that is sunlight. Any bright light can hurt it, but it fears only sunlight.

### Weakness

So you've enraged the wrath of an immortal, hyper-intelligent kitty cat. What do you do? Well, it happens

that the Mngwa does have one severe and exploitable weakness, bright light.

For every round a Mngwa is exposed to light brighter than a candle, the Mngwa takes 4d6 points of damage. A Fortitude save can be made by the Mngwa to reduce the damage by half; the DC is based of the light intensity (Moderate light (flashlight) 18, Severe light (car headlights) 23, Extreme light (spotlight) 28). If the Mngwa is in direct sunlight, it does not receive a fortitude save, and the sunlight deals 8d6 damage. A Mngwa killed while in sunlight can never return to the Shadow Realm and its essence is lost forever.

### Habitat/Society

The Mngwa was originally brought to this plane at the request of Sultan Majnun by a yet unknown spirit (Djinn) to whom the Sultan gave shelter and solace. Majnun wanted the most powerful and beautiful of all felines for a pet. In granting the Sultan's wish, the spirit summoned from its own dimension the Mngwa. Unknown to the Sultan was that the Mngwa had an intelligence comparative to that of his own. It did not take long for the Mngwa to tire of its existence as a pet. The Sultan soon became aware of his pet's discontent and sought out a mate that would settle the Mngwa down.

From the greatest of the felines, the Mngwa chose a spotted leopard as its mate. After the birth of its child, the Mngwa attempted to escape from the Sultan to raise his family in the African jungles away from captivity. Enraged by the attempt, the Sultan ordered the Mngwa and his family killed. After many years of hunting, the Sultan's own son finally killed the original Mngwa.

Not being a creature of this world however, the Mngwa's spirit became trapped. The Mngwa's spirit was able to enter the Shadow Realm in exchange for bartering its soul with one of its most powerful residents, the Troll King. In exchange for its soul, the Mngwa would be able to use the Shadow Realm's connection to the material realm to return during times of the new moon. However,

the Mngwa's ghostly form did not suit it so it agreed to another bargain. In exchange for producing offspring for the Troll King, the Troll King would forge a shadow body the Mngwa could use when returning the material plane. This shadow body would also regrow within one month's time if it was ever destroyed. The Mngwa uses its new abilities to slake its thirst for vengeance, while the Troll King uses his Mngwa clones as a personal strike force. The Mngwa has no love for its clones, seeing them as just another means to his vengeance.

## CSX Case File #2: Nandi Bear

Large Animal  
 Hit Dice: 8d8+32 (68 hp)  
 Initiative: +2  
 Speed: 40ft., Climb 30 ft.  
 Defense: 17 (-1 size, +2 Dex, +5 Natural) touch 11, flat-footed 14  
 Base Attack/Grapple: +6/+22  
 Attack: Claw +13 melee (2d4+8)  
 Full Attack: 2 Claws +13 melee (2d4+8), Bite +11 melee (2d6+4)  
 Space/Reach: 5 ft./10 ft.  
 Special Attacks: Neck breaker  
 Special Qualities: DR 3/-, scent  
 Saves: Fort +10, Ref +8, Will +3  
 Abilities: Str 26, Dex 14, Con 19, Int 2, Wil 12, Cha 4  
 Skills: Listen +5, Spot +5, Climb +18, Hide +10  
 Feats: Improved Grapple, Multi-attack  
 Environment: Deep African Jungles  
 Organization: Solitary unless during mating season  
 Challenge Rating: 5  
 Alignment: Always Neutral  
 Advancement: 9-12 HD (Large)  
 Level Adjustment: ---

*"I snatched my rifle and took a snapshot at it as it was disappearing among the rocks, and, though I missed it, it stopped and turned its head round to look at us ... In size it was, I should say, larger than the bear that lives in the pit at the 'zoo' and it was quite as heavily built. The fore quarters were very thickly furred, as were all four legs, but the hindquarters were comparatively speaking smooth or bare. The head was long and pointed like that of a deformed bear. I have not a very clear recollection of the ears beyond the fact that they were small, and the tail, if any, was very small and practically unnoticeable. The color was dark..."*

-- Auckyand Blurst

Nandi Bears are commonly thought to be an African order of bears or hyena hybrids. They are known most commonly as *dubb* (Arabic for *bear*) or *dubbah* (Arabic for *hyena*.) In other parts of east Africa, the animal has been called *chemosit*, *kerit*, *shivuverre*, *koddoelo*, *ikimizi*, *sabrookoo*, or *kikambangwe*. However, its official name comes from the Kenyan tribe that first encountered it.

### Combat

Neck Breaker (EX): If a Nandi Bear successfully hits with its claw attack during a surprise round, the victim must make a Fortitude save DC 22 or become paralyzed for 1d4 rounds. The save DC is Strength-based.

### Description

The Nandi Bear is neither hyena nor bear as once thought, but rather the Nandi Bear is a species of giant baboon. The Nandi Bear stands 7 ft. tall and is covered with a dark black to brown hair. Its head appears to be remarkably small compared to the rest of its bulky body. Its appendages are primate with longer forearms and a fifth thumb like claw on each paw. The Nandi's hide is remarkably thick giving it the ability to pass through even the sharpest of African thorn growth, without even a scratch, thanks to its damage reduction.

### Encounter

Nandi Bears have been known to become extremely aggressive when their territory is violated. Nandi also become violent around mating and birthing season, when they are known to leave their territory and hunt and gather. Other than on the two special cases Nandi Bears are intelligent enough to avoid contact with anything it deems not food. While hunting Nandi will choose trees capable of holding their weight and wait for unaware prey to travel under it. Using its long and powerful arms, the Nandi will snatch up the prey usually snapping the poor creature's neck in a single and powerful movement.

Unconfirmed as of yet, Nandi Bears are believed to be openly hostile to other Xenofoms. Increasing numbers of reports have been brought in detailing entire teams of Sandmen and Kinori ripped to shreds, while passing within Nandi territory.

### Habitat/Society

Nandi's are omnivores and will consume nearly twice their weight in a single sitting. This gorging, however, causes the Nandi to enter a coma-like state for weeks at a time. Nandi choose territory only in the densest part of the African jungles favoring the thick plant growth and thick thorn bushes as their nesting grounds. Like most animals, Nandi mating seasons falls during the spring at which time Nandi are most active and likely to be encountered by Jungle agents. After mating Nandi are monogamous to their mates. Once born the Nandi child does not leave its parents side for an entire year. After which, the parents leave the child to forge its own life. From the limited information collected on the Nandi, it is believed that the Nandi is not a natural creature. It is still yet unknown to which stranger spawned the Nandi. However, whichever did imbedded in them a hatred for Ekimmel, Kinori, and Etoile.

### Adventure Hook

While investigating reports of bipedal lizard attacks on an African tribe in Kenya, HI investigators come across what they believe to be a decimated Kinori encampment. While reporting their findings in the following night, the Institute investigators are attacked by an unknown force. Was it the fabled Nandi Bear that assaulted the Kinori camp? If so why? Was it also the Nandi Bear who attacked the HI team or is something else terrorizing the African jungles?

# Travinara – pt 4

by Aaron Todd

The two halflings packed their shoulder bags after nature's morning wake-up call roused them out of sleep. The beginnings of their year-long Travinara had brought them to this busy town and luckily, they found work quickly. Marco had provided some difficult work at the barn, but good work meant good sleep. They hoped that the men at the bar last night were wrong about the horses being of the Mist, because if things went the way they feared, they would not be returning to the Dupaal inn tonight. They would have to move along to the next town, letting Travinara take them where it decided they should go next. Maybe Chukra would visit them again and help them find another place to go.

The barkeep looked surprised when they came down to get some breakfast before they left for their day of work. Indicating the bags with the bar rag in his hand, he asked, "Ye boys goin somewhere?"

"We're not sure if we'll be back tonight, so we just want to make sure we have our things." Parto responded for the pair. "But we may be back for some stew. That sure is good."

"Well, ye boys be careful out dere. I'll welcome ye back if ye return for the night, and remember, just a few more nights and ye'll get a night free."

"Thanks. We'll keep that in mind." Droito and his brother had no intention of staying the week, but it was always wise to be polite. They were in a hurry this morning to get to Marco's, but they didn't want to arouse any suspicion.

The twins got some cheese and some fresh-baked bread to have for breakfast. They would keep the flatbread they already had for the unknown travels that Travinara had in store for them in the days ahead. If their plan to free the Mist horses this morning worked, they would have to leave Dupaal and not return.

Once outside, they walked along the edge of the Inn. As they skirted the building they passed a narrow alleyway between the inn and the neighboring building. Something unseen took hold of and wrapped around Parto's leg.

"Stay, boys. Stay the week and you'll stay forever. Stay and join me in my luxury."

It took Parto a moment to realize that the claw-like hand that wrapped around his leg extended from a pile of rags that spoke. Parto jerked his leg away and looked more closely at an opening to see an aged man wrapped inside the rags, leaning against the side of the inn. His sinewy fingers retreated into the tattered folds of a torn sleeve. Parto wasn't sure how they hadn't seen him before they nearly tripped over him. "What do you mean, old man?" "This town is cursed!" The man wheezed as though the words themselves caused him pain. "Stay a week and you will see. You will see that you never leave. He won't let you."

"Who won't let us? Why won't he let us leave?" Droito leaned towards the man.

The man said nothing more and turned away from the halflings, drawing his legs up against his chest, letting layers of threadbare clothing conceal his entire form. The boys waited a moment for his reply, but no more words came. His face disappeared as he turned back into the rags. It was again a lifeless pile at the side of the road.

"Please, sir, what do you mean he won't let us? Who is this you speak of?"

The pile of rags remained silent and still. Parto and Droito couldn't afford to waste any more time. They wanted to make certain they arrived at Marco's in good time, hopefully before Marco even came out to the barns. They planned on leaving town today, anyway. Glancing back as they walked away, Parto hoped for another clue to what the old man could have meant.

They ate their breakfast as they walked again this morning, but they kept as brisk a pace as their short legs could carry them without running. The morning was damp. There hadn't been any rain the night before, but a light fog hung just a few inches above the ground.

The urgency of their task brought them to Marco's much faster than the previous day. Heading straight to the older barn, they were careful to make as little noise as they could. They didn't even speak as they approached the property.

Inside the barn, the four horses were alone. Marco must not have finished his breakfast yet. The two young men went straight for the stall where the red horse was kept. He had been the most responsive yesterday, so they hoped he'd give them the least amount of trouble when they got into the stall with him.

The floorboards underneath Parto creaked as he gave his brother a boost over the door and into the stall with Red. Red didn't mind and even stepped to the side as Droito came over. Fortune let Droito land softly on a small pile of hay and Parto went back over to the barn door to keep an eye out for Marco.

Red was very responsive to Droito's touch and didn't to mind the company in his stall. Droito petted Red to make sure that the horse was calm and that it wouldn't kick him when he started pulling at the bindings on Red's lower leg. Once satisfied that the horse was calm, Droito got down on one knee and took the horse's lower leg in one hand while he started to work at the bindings with the other. They started just above the hoof, covering the pastern and the fetlock. The leather bindings on Red's leg were securely fastened with buckled straps. Droito pulled at the buckles, but as he worked, Red reacted, pulling back his leg in obvious discomfort. The unexpected resistance caused Droito to lose his balance and fall on his backside, but he quickly scrambled back to his position by Red's leg. Droito knew time was short, so he had to find out what was under the bindings.

The rustling of hay in Red's stall caught Parto's attention, "Brother," he whispered, "What are you doing in there? How's it going? Can you tell anything?"

"Not yet," Droito whispered back. "I think it hurt him a bit when I pulled at his leg. I think I've almost got it, though."



# Bursting with renewed freedom, the horses ran toward the open fields surrounding the farm.

"It's alright, Red. I just want to get these things off you is all," Droito stroked his hand along beautiful animal's side.

With the horse relaxed again, Droito returned to his position and got the first buckle undone. Red still resisted, but Droito was prepared this time and had his leg set to brace himself. The next two buckles came easier and Red resisted less with each.

With the third buckle undone, the leather bindings fell away from Red's leg as a small wing slowly stretched out from underneath. As brilliant a color as the rest of Red's coat, the wing was distinctly made of feathers. Once fully released, the wing extended itself nearly a foot behind the leg. Red moved the wing about for a few seconds, he then drew it back up against the length of his leg.

Droito was expecting to see wings but he could still barely believe his eyes. His brother broke the silence, "Did you get it off? Is it what we thought it would be?"

"It is, brother." Droito spoke just above a whisper now. "These *are* Horses of the Mist. We've got to get them out of here."

"Right. You get to work on the straps on his other legs. I'm going to go keep a look out for Marco."

Parto walked towards the main barn door that faced the house, but he didn't make it all the way there before Marco opened the door himself.

"Ahh, good, ye're early dis morning. I like dat. Where's yer brahther?"

"Oh, he's around somewhere," Parto knew that he sounded nervous, but he had to do something to distract Marco. "You know, nature call. Had to go."

"Oh, of course, yes," Marco sounded to be in particularly good spirits this morning.

"I had a question for you in the other barn. I wondered if you could show me something?" Parto didn't know what he would ask Marco, but he hoped something would come to him before they got there. He immediately started heading out the door, hoping Marco would follow him. The walk over would buy him just a little bit of time to think as well as a little time and space for his brother to free the Mist horses from their bindings.

"So what did ye need to know? Parto, is it?" Marco asked as they were still walking towards the new barn.

"Yes, I am Parto. Very good, sir. Most people can't tell us apart until they've known us awhile. Little tricky being twins and all." Parto was a bit relieved that Marco had already provided a small delaying tactic.

"Yeah, I've got a good eye for that sort a thing. Now, what was it ye needed ta know?"

"Well, it's in the barn," Parto hoped that his brother was working quickly.

The two of them walked into the newer barn and Parto looked around for anything he could use to distract his boss. There were piles of hay, blankets, and bridles; nothing that he could use to give his brother more time. Before Parto had finished his brief scan, a loud crashing noise came from the other barn.

Parto turned back toward the old barn. Marco was already halfway there. When Parto caught up with Marco, he saw what had made the noise. The door to Red's stall hung from one hinge. The latch and lock dangled from the doorpost. Two of the other stall doors were broken as well and their occupants freed. Droito was clinging to Red's back as the horse brought his front hooves crashing down

against the door of the stall that held the gold stallion.

Marco tried to grab one of the freed horses as they trotted by him, but couldn't get his hands on either of them. Then he stopped in the middle of the barn, just as Red and Droito released the gold stallion. Calmness spread over Marco's face as he raised his hands out to his sides. A light began to form around him just as one of the horses collided with him from behind and knocked him to the floor.

All four Horses of the Mist wheeled in unison and headed for the barn door. Gaining momentum, they plunged into the open. Red stopped just long enough for Droito to reach down and help Parto mount.

Bursting with renewed freedom, the horses ran toward the open fields surrounding the farm. They only got a hundred yards from the barn when they all stopped as though they had run into a wall. Parto looked back to see Marco walking unhurriedly toward them.

"Ye din't think I was just going to let ye leave, did ye?" Marco called out.

Confused, the halflings didn't know what to do. The horses had been running as though their lives depended on it just moments before. Now they milled about as if an unseen fence kept them confined to a small area. They were in no hurry to go anywhere.

"Those horses are gonna make me a lot a money," Marco said, louder, as he continued to get closer.

The horses were growing restless, but were still not doing anything to get away. The boys kicked at Red's flanks, but he continued to do nothing. His small wings might as well still be bound for the use he was getting from them right now.



"Kick 'em all you want. They're not going anywhere. I've got a hold spell on 'em. How do you think I caught 'em in the first place?" Marco was getting closer.

Droito sat atop the horse waiting for it to run, but Red's urgency to flee was gone. When Marco had reduced the distance between them by half, Droito heard a song. At least it sounded like a song. It was definitely musical and it was getting louder. It sounded like a woman singing scales.

Droito looked around for the source until his eyes came across the siren coming out from behind a tree. Droito was as confused as he was sure his brother was. *What did she have to do with all of this?*

"Marco, that's enough," she called out and resumed her scales.

The horses calmed down and stopped pacing about as the music drew closer.

"This isn't yer business, wench. Now git outta here and leave me ta mine." The anger in his voice was clear.

"I can't let you do that. These horses belong in the wild. You know that, Marco. You can't cage up animals like these, it will kill them." Her song continued, growing louder, even as she spoke. She walked towards the mounted halfings now, too. She was a little closer to them and looked like she would arrive at the horses first.

"I've had my suspicions about you being a wizard for years, but I never thought you would do something like this." She ignored the boys and dealt directly with Marco. The scales she sang got louder again. They remained very soft and soothing, but continued to get louder.

"Why do you care? These ain't yer animals! Just git back to serving yer drinks. You don't owe nobody nothing."

"That's exactly why I care. These animals don't belong to anyone. They were meant to run free. Surely you can see that? I was once as much a part of nature as these animals. I felt the disharmony among the local animals for weeks. I'd been wondering where some of them had disappeared to." She still hadn't acknowledged the young men.

"They can run free, jus' as long as they do it fer me. I'll keep anyone in this town I want to, ya hear me? I kept you here, didn't I?" Marco was sounding less like the man they thought had hired them with every passing second.

"Why do you do it Marco? Why do you keep people in this town? What could they possibly have to offer you?"

"Just business, wench. Same as you. I keep em in town so's they spend money. Half the businesses in town pay me ta keep em here. Those horses are worth GOLD ta me! Now leave me ta my business I tell ya!" His voice rose in crescendo to the end of the statement and the glow that they had seen forming around him in the barn formed again.

"No!" The siren screamed back at him. Her song turned into a screech far too loud to come out of a person.

The arguing pair was very close to the young halfings now, but the siren's screech had impacted the horses. They started running again, away from both incoming sides of the argument. In seconds, the horses had traveled far enough away from their former captor that they slowed down.

In the distance, Parto and Droito could hear the siren screeching out and the light from Marco periodically flashed. Soon the boys noticed that the noise and light had stopped. They weren't sure who had won.

The twins slid down from Red's back and quickly removed the wrappings from the other three horses' legs. The Mist Horses made strange purring sounds as they nuzzled their heads against the two who had released them from their enslavement.

"You're free." Droito whispered and patted Red on the hindquarters.

The four Mist Horses began to run.

There was a heavy dew on the grass this morning and a light fog drifted just inches above the ground. Droito and Parto watched the horses as they ran across the mist. They had heard the legends, but now truly understood where the animals got their name.

# Reviews, Reviews .....reviews!

This month we take a look at...

## d20

### The New Argonauts

*The New Argonauts* is a book for running d20 campaigns in mythic Greece. The author, Sean K Reynolds, takes the time in the introduction to explain what the book is and what it is not.

### The Shardsfall Quest

*The Shardsfall Quest* is the introductory adventure for the *DragonMech Campaign Setting*. Joseph Goodman, owner of Goodman Games, produces the *DragonMech* line while *Sword & Sorcery* serves as the publisher.

## d20 Modern

### Slave Drivers

*Slave Drivers* is a stand-alone modern adventure by The Game Mechanics that also serves as an introduction to the Bronze Head Campaign Setting. In this *Urban Arcana* (modern fantasy) adventure, the heroes begin their investigation into an automobile accident involving one of Metro Cab's taxicabs. During the inspection, the heroes learn that the undead are being forced to drive the city's cabs. It is then up to the heroes to put a stop to this new slave labor and learn more about the organization behind this abuse.

## Non-d20

### The Forge: Tooth and Claw & Squeam 3

Two short games from The Forge are reviewed within - *Tooth and Claw* & *Squeam 3*. These are two very different and original games. Are they right for you and your group?

### Contested Ground Studios - The Lostfinder's Guide to Mire End

Contested Ground brings us the first supplement for *A/ State*. It may only weigh in at 32 pages but it packs a serious punch!

## How we rate

### Scoring definitions for d20 products:

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.*

### Scoring Definitions for non-d20 products:

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.*

read on...

## The New Argonauts

**About:** 64 pages, PDF format

**Price:** \$7.00

**Authors:** Sean K Reynolds

**Publisher:** Sean K Reynolds Games

**Reviewed by:** Rodney Lucas

**Review date:** 1/2/05

*Reviewer's Bias: I'm always interested in checking out new campaign worlds and ideas. I received a review copy of this product. This is not a playtest review.*



### From the Introduction

*The New Argonauts* is a book for running d20 campaigns in mythic Greece. The author, Sean K Reynolds, takes the time in the introduction to explain what the book is and what it is not. This is actually very important and helpful information for the DM who is considering running a campaign in mythic Greece. Importantly, this book is not a comprehensive history of ancient Greece. It is also not an attempt to insert popular fantasy conventions such as elves, dwarves, and tons of monsters into the mythic Greek world. The book is intended to present enough information for a DM to run a short campaign (defined as 8-12 sessions) set in mythic Greece. The book calls this a *New Argonauts Campaign* (NAC). Because the book is based on the myths and beliefs of the ancient Greek world, the DM running a campaign using this book must

realize that many of the conventions of a normal fantasy campaign are not appropriate. The author has taken this into account and has gone to great lengths to describe what is appropriate and what is not. The most important thing to consider when getting ready to run a campaign in mythic Greece using this book is that there will be very little magic. But fear not, there's plenty here to whet the appetite, even if your characters won't be slinging *fireball* and *lightning bolt* spells.

### Chapter One: Characters

In the first chapter the author lets the reader know what is and is not appropriate in an NAC. It may be obvious, but it's very easy to overlook that if you are playing in ancient Greece there will be no elves, halflings, dwarves, or other races. The only playable race is human. Though this may seem confining, there is plenty of variety for characters, provided by what the author calls bloodlines, which are described later in the chapter. Heroes in ancient Greece were usually descended from the gods, so it makes sense that your heroes would have the chance of being descended from gods also. If the DM allows it, choosing a bloodline provides the character with special abilities, based on the god that he chooses to be descended from. There are three different bloodline power levels and it is up to the DM to decide what level will be allowed during character creation. Each level of power allows varying degrees of skills to choose from. As an example, a player may choose that his character is descended from Zeus. If the DM has allowed only Minor bloodline powers, the player can choose two skills from Zeus's skill list for his character to get a +3 bonus. At the Minor level, Zeus represents the skills Diplomacy, Knowledge(nature), Spot and Survival, so a player can choose two of those skills and receive the +3 bonus to all skill checks for those skills. If the DM allows the Greater bloodline (Lesser bloodline is the third type, coming in between Minor and Greater) then the character would get to choose one of two options provided by Zeus. In this case the player could choose from being able to perform *heroism* once per day or *thundering smite* once per day (a new supernatural ability). Considering that there are over 25 gods listed, a player can really make his character unique and exciting to play.

The book details each character class and whether or not it is appropriate for an NAC. It also details the NPC class types and whether or not they should be included when

playing. Prestige classes are detailed also, taking the guesswork out of character creation. One nice touch in this detailed book is the addition of sidebars that explain the history or mechanics related to decisions made when creating the book. For example, in ancient Greece there was no true *heavy* armor. This can lead to lower armor classes than what may be seen in a traditional FRPG. This is accommodated for by giving characters skill or feat bonuses to even out the game play. Skills and feats are also discussed in the book, with changes noted for existing d20 skills and feats, and several new ones added for use specifically in an NAC.

One new class is included in the book to make up for the loss of the spellcasting classes inherent to D&D. The Hellenic Sorceress is an arcane spellcaster who relies on her knowledge of strange drugs and magical herbs to perform her craft. Although the Hellenic Sorceress can not use *high level* spells (due to the nature of an NAC), she is given special abilities that augment her spellcasting. The class is very well thought out and a pleasure to read. The chapter finishes up by covering the basic equipment that is available to characters in an NAC. This exhaustive chapter is a great read for not only the DM, but also for the player.

### Chapter Two: Variant Rules

The second chapter of *The New Argonauts* goes over some variant rules for use during the campaign. A more realistic approach to poison is covered first. In our real world, when someone is poisoned, the effects can sometimes last hours or days before that person either dies or recovers. The book delivers a formula for determining how long the poison will last inside the body, and what effects will be sustained by the poisoned person over time. The role of the *delay poison* and *neutralize poison* spells are covered as well. Next, rules for donations (sacrifices) and divine intervention are described. The book gives a formula for determining if a given god will intervene when an adventurer is in peril based on his most recent donation or sacrifice to that god. A divine intervention will usually be something like the god targeting the adventurer with a *virtue* spell to bring him from zero hit points to one hit point during a battle. You're not likely to see an intervention such as the character receiving a *wish*. This wouldn't fit well with the *low magic* setting of the campaign. The last variant covers the rules for dying. In a normal D&D campaign a

character who is reduced to -1 hit points actually has very little chance for his wounds to stabilize, and to live without the help of others. About 40% of the characters reduced to -1 hit points will not stabilize and will die once they reach -10 hit points. The book details a new formula that gives characters a better chance to stabilize, and a longer period before dying if they don't stabilize. I liked the *slower dying* rule and will probably use it in my normal D&D campaign.

This chapter is much shorter and lighter on information than the first. I like the variant rules that are included, but I feel that they could have easily been inserted into the first chapter (a minor quibble on what is turning out to be an excellent book).

### Chapter Three: Magic

The NAC may be a low-magic campaign, but that doesn't mean there's no magic to be had! The third chapter of the book covers new magic spells and items that are available in an Argonauts campaign, along with details on modified spells from the core D&D rulebooks. The Hellenic Sorceress only gets a handful of spells, ranging from zero to fifth level, and most spells that are allowed from the core D&D rules are altered to fit the campaign. There are also several new spells such as the *dragon chariot* spell. This fourth level spell allows the sorceress to call a magical chariot drawn by flying dragons that can carry the sorceress where she wishes to go, for a designated period of time (one hour/level). The spells presented here for use in the NAC are well thought out and fit the setting appropriately. There are very few flashy, high-damage spells here, but that is what you would expect if you were adventuring in ancient Greece.

Chapter three also covers a list of new magic items that can be obtained while adventuring in ancient Greece. There are ten new magic items, including some that players may recognize from myth, such as the *Golden Fleece* which can be used to heal wounds, neutralize poison, or remove disease. The items presented all have a natural, organic feel to them which I found to be interesting and appropriate for the campaign subject matter. Overall, although there is not really that much magic in an NAC, that which is available is well written and fits well into the milieu.

### Chapter Four: Culture

According to the book, Greek culture developed from elements of nearby civilizations, but developed its own distinctive identity. This chapter details the cultural aspects of ancient Greece that players and DMs should be aware of when playing. Greece was never actually united under one ruler, but the city-states shared a common language and culture. Once you read this chapter it is easy to start your campaign in any of Greece's more than 1,500 city-states, which allows you to make the campaign unique by truly making the area a creation of your own. The book gives details about common cultural themes so that you can easily keep the feel of ancient Greece while at the same time customizing the campaign to fit your needs, and the needs of your players. In Greece it was common for all people of a city-state to feel a devotion to their homeland, to the extent that wealthy people were expected to give up part of their wealth to benefit the community. So your adventurers will probably feel the same loyalties to their home. Gone are the days of a group of adventurers amassing huge hoards of wealth and using it for their own greedy needs, as is seen in most FRPGs. In an NAC your characters will feel the need, and are in fact expected, to donate a good part of their wealth to help the community. Players will gain recognition by holding banquets, sponsoring the construction of new public buildings, and helping to maintain the city-states' military equipment. Failure to do these things will result in the characters losing popularity with the people, even to the point of possibly being ostracized.

The chapter continues by describing the roles of women in ancient Greece. In many of the myths that we read, the heroes were men. A sidebar describes some of the female Greek heroes and how to easily insert a female character into the game. A female character could choose to be an Amazon or even a woman from a "barbarian" culture where the females took a more active role in warfare and the affairs of state. This makes your choice of playing a male or female character much easier and can add to the role-playing aspect if the woman is going to be from a far-away civilization.

Marriage and children, foreigners, slaves, work, religion, and athletics are all covered in this chapter also. How marriage was perceived can be important if one of the characters chooses to be married and have children.

Foreigners and slaves were treated a certain way in ancient Greece, and the feelings about them could change from city-state to city-state. Work, religion, and athletics were all very important to the people of Greece at the time. This book does an excellent job of supplying the DM and player with information that helps to make these things an important part of the campaign. For instance, since we are talking about a short campaign anyway, the entire campaign could be focused on the group of adventurers traveling to an Olympic event where they are scheduled to compete. All of the major sports that were covered in the ancient Olympics are detailed so that they can easily be included as part of the action. Instead of the group of players going out to slay the dragon and claim its treasure, they may be headed to the Olympics to compete in the name of their city-state, in hopes of bringing home financial awards and the prestige of winning. They would be crowned heroes of the land and thought of highly by the common people and the aristocracy. This could lead to other adventures, since they have proven their prowess at the games.

### Chapter Five: Deities

This chapter covers the gods, goddesses and other beings of power from Greek myth. It starts by filling us in on a little pre-history for those unfamiliar with the Greek story of creation. I won't ruin the read for those who decide to buy this book, but suffice it to say that though you may not use much of this information in your game, it is a pleasure to read and very informative for the player or DM who is not familiar with the myth of the Greek deities.

The rest of the chapter is devoted to describing the Olympian gods and titans. This information can be very helpful when deciding the bloodline of your new character in the campaign. Over 40 gods and titans are discussed, with pertinent information given for each one. Well known gods and titans from myth such as Zeus, Atlas, and Apollo are detailed as are the lesser known deities such as the titans Crius, Eris and Japet. You may or may not choose to use the deities and titans in your campaign, but if you do there's plenty of information here to make your job easier.

### Chapter Six: History

Chapter six is a testament to the devotion of the author in creating this piece of work. It would have been very



easy to just give you stats and monsters appropriate to a campaign in mythic Greece. But the author has taken the time not only to give you important information for your campaign but also to give you the chance to learn a little in the process. The book assumes that your campaign will take place around the year 700 BC, which is about one-hundred years after the end of Greece's *Dark Age*.

Running your campaign in this era allows the DM to make use of some of the more modern elements in the game while still capturing the feel of the Greek myths. The author briefly covers the Bronze Age, the Minoans, the Mycenaeans, the Greek Dark Ages, and the Archaic Age.

Armed with this information, along with the other history included in the book (such as the information regarding deities in chapter five), the creative DM is now ready to create his *New Argonauts Campaign*. The wealth of information that has been presented thus far will allow you to create as simple or detailed a world as you would like in mythic Greece. The author takes that extra step, however, presenting you with even more information to use when creating the world in which your players will live their adventures.

### Chapter Seven: Running the Campaign

Your campaign in ancient Greece will not be the same as one in a typical "D&D" world. There are no elves, no dwarves, and no halflings. There are no ultra-powerful wizards commanding armies of undead creatures. There are no greedy thieves' guilds vying for power in the city. So what is a group of Greek adventurers to do? This chapter gives you enough information to create adventures that are appropriate to the time and place in which this campaign will take place.

Once again I don't want to ruin the reading of the book for you by divulging the wealth of information that is presented. But I will tell you that this chapter gives you many ideas (or hooks) upon which to base adventures. The Greek myths can come into play. Your adventurers may be demanded to complete *heroic labors*, go on great journeys, face monsters from the myths, fulfill prophecies, and make great sacrifices in the name of their city-state or god. And to finish the chapter off, the author presents a sample *Argonauts* campaign that covers 9 gaming sessions (keep in mind from the beginning that an average campaign using this book will last between eight and twelve gaming sessions). The example

campaign is well written and exciting enough that if you don't have the time to create your own, you could easily use it for your first NAC.

### Chapter Eight: Monsters

Okay. Just because the campaign world presented here is based on ancient Greece doesn't mean there are no monsters. As a matter of fact there are over 35 monsters detailed here, and I mean DETAILED. Each monster is presented in common d20 format with all of the appropriate stats and combat information. But there's so much more. Each monster (though not all of the entries are actual "monsters") is described in length by the author. The history of the creature, its motivations, its purpose, personality, and many other details are given here to help the DM when creating the campaign. From Aetes' Bulls to Talos, each monster is lovingly presented in this book. And if the monsters in this book aren't enough, the author takes the time to let you know which ones from the *Monster Manual* can be appropriately used in an NAC, such as the chimera, pegasus, and many different dire animals.

Like all of the chapters before it, this is a well written, informative piece of work. By the time you've read the entire book, totaling over 60 pages, you'll not only be ready to run a short campaign in ancient Greece, you'll be very excited about preparing it and presenting it to your gaming group.

### Conclusion: What Would Zeus Say?

This book finishes up by presenting the reader with an appendix that includes the sources that the author used, along with some suggested books in case you are interested in reading more about ancient Greece and the myths that prevailed and helped to create the society of that time. This is just another example of the time and care taken to create this product. The only aspect that I haven't touched on is the art contained within the book. That which is included is appropriate to the subject matter, and credit is given to sources from which it comes. Basically it's Greek artwork, which is what you would expect in a book about running d20 campaigns in ancient Greece.

If you have any interest in the Greek mythos, Greek history, or you're just looking for something different for a

short, fun campaign, look no further. I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book, and I learned a little while doing so. The writing is consistent, enthused, and smart. Even though I received a copy of this book for review, I would honestly have gladly paid for it. My only real complaint (more of a personal concern really) is that it's not available as a hard or soft bound book. I don't mind PDFs, but when I get my hands on a book that is this informative and fun to read I really want to hold it in my hands, and be able to take in with me to read (whether in bed at night, or while on a long road-trip). But since that's not really a concern in this review I can only heartily recommend it to anyone interested in the subject matter, or in presenting their group with a great, unique, short campaign.

CLASS: Campaign Setting

STR: NA (*Physical*)Not Applicable for a PDF product.

DEX: 16 (*Organization*). Nicely organized.

CON: 14 (*Quantity of the Content*). 64 pages. Easily enough information to run the type of campaign that it is designed for.

INT: 16 (*Quality of Content*). Very nice! You won't ace your Greek history exam by using this book, but you will run a great campaign!

WIS: 12 (*Options & Adaptability*). Overall, not very adaptable to other campaigns, but that's not its goal.

CHA: 12 (*Look & Feel*). Appropriate artwork. Very utilitarian in presentation.

## "The Shardsfall Quest" (DragonMech)

**About:** 72 pages, soft cover, black & white interior, \$16.

**Author:** Joseph Goodman

**Publisher:** Sword and Sorcery (2004)

**Reviewed by:** Bradford Ferguson

**Review date:** 01/14/2005



### Introduction

*The Shardsfall Quest* is the introductory adventure for the *DragonMech Campaign Setting*. Joseph Goodman, owner of Goodman Games, produces the *DragonMech* line while Sword & Sorcery serves as the publisher. The adventure is designed for first level characters who are expected to achieve third level before the final showdown of the adventure. *The Shardsfall Quest* introduces the players to the major themes of *DragonMech* along with three of its prominent factions. But is the adventure fun? That cannot be answered conclusively as this was not a playtest review, but read further to see why it would be fun... for some. Be advised that you will need a copy of *DragonMech* if you intend to run the adventure.

### Presentation

The soft cover adventure sourcebook is 72 pages and features 36 black and white interior illustrations. The interior artwork was done by the sure hand of Jeff

Carlisle, and Sean Glenn served as the cartographer. Those of you who are observant or good at math will notice that the book averages an illustration for every other page! Not only is the quantity good, but the quality is mind-numbing and makes this the best produced adventure book that I've ever read or laid eyes on, and while I'm at it, I will go so far as to say that it tops *Dungeon Magazine* in terms of quality. The abundant art by Carlisle is just that good. His work has appeared in *Dungeon Magazine*, just not in such a great concentration. I guess this should be expected from something to which Super Unicorn lends its talents. The only thing that isn't easy on the eyes is the small font size used for the text.

So it looks good, but what about the adventure itself? Before I get there, I advise that you photocopy the illustrations to use as player handouts.

### The Adventure

Some may categorize *DragonMech* as apocalyptic fantasy since the world suffers from a deadly lunar rain every night. This gives the world a survivalist flair to it, though many of its denizens have learned to cope with this aspect. *The Shardsfall Quest* starts off innocently with a large meteorite landing on the doorstep of the soon-to-be adventurers. It should be noted that the landscape is scoured every morning for valuable metals that are used in turn to protect against lunar rain. So the player characters (PCs) start off as prospectors but that changes when they stumble upon a complex within the meteorite.

The PCs find out that another piece of the meteor crashed some distance away. They then get a lift to another faction's boundaries and are commissioned to purge the meteorite of any lunar influence. Their ride to this boundary...? A humungous city mech in which a few thousand dwarves reside. An optional side quest presents itself where the PCs end up learning a secret of this city mech. Then it's off to more adventure! Other elements to the adventure include a chase, a duel, and a mystery. The PCs also encounter the insidious skinstealers and the enormous worms that carve tunnels out of the rock itself.

Joseph Goodman does an excellent job with the writing of the adventure so that all these elements come together in an interesting and cohesive whole. It's not designed so that specific characters can shine in certain situations,

though it's helpful to have a character with some skill in piloting mechs and it's always good to have a balanced party.

### The Extras

Missing from the adventure were typical random encounter tables, but Goodman uses a combination of planned encounters and random inhabitants of shelter places (for when the PCs seek shelter at night when the lunar rain falls).

The appendix of the book has new material such as feats and monsters. The author includes a two-page designer's notes where he talks about the play test of the adventure. The notes discuss a very narrowly decided battle in the play test (one that Goodman purposely made tougher than the actual adventure).

### Conclusion

*The Shardsfall Quest* has the looks and the brains of the best d20 adventure that I've laid eyes on to date. That's right, I'm calling you all crazy if this adventure is submitted for nomination for the 2005 ENnies and you, the judges and readers, don't give it the gold. There's nothing revolutionary about the adventure--it is simply very well produced, has great pacing, and is the first long adventure I've been able to read from cover to cover without falling asleep. This book is a real treat, check it out.

**CLASS:** Setting Supplement

**STR:** 14 (*Physical*). Sturdy for a soft cover book.

**DEX:** 15 (*Organization*). Well-organized except for one of the more complex episodes.

**CON:** 16 (*Quantity of the Content*). Introduces the players to three major factions of *DragonMech* along with a fun detour in a city mech.

**INT:** 16 (*Quality of Content*). Excellent writing. Provides a good variety of challenges while maintaining the setting's mood.

**WIS:** 14 (*Options & Adaptability*). A conundrum and a side quest provide options, otherwise the adventure drags the characters along for a wild ride.

**CHA:** 18 (*Look & Feel*). Filled with tons of great art from Jeff Carlisle. Best looking adventure I've reviewed.

## “Slave Drivers”

**About:** 25 pages, PDF, color interior, \$7.

**Author:** Rich Redman

**Publisher:** The Game Mechanics (2004)

**Reviewed by:** *Melissa Piper*

**Review Date:** 01/22/05



### Introduction

*Slave Drivers* is a stand-alone modern adventure by The Game Mechanics that also serves as an introduction to the Bronze Head Campaign Setting. In this *Urban Arcana* (modern fantasy) adventure, the heroes begin their investigation into an automobile accident involving one of Metro Cab's taxicabs. During the inspection, the heroes learn that the undead are being forced to drive the city's cabs. It is then up to the heroes to put a stop to this new slave labor and learn more about the organization behind this abuse.

### Presentation

*Slave Drivers* is a 25-page campaign module from The Game Mechanics for the Bronze Head Campaign Setting. The backdrop of the front cover is a full-bleed block-and-brick wall. The product title is embossed on a golden plaque that is attached to this wall backdrop. The plaque

is stained with blood on its rightmost quarter. The teaser image by Clarence Harrison consumes the bottom half of the cover. It depicts a businesswoman, who is talking on a cell phone and holding an umbrella, getting into a waiting taxicab. The entire scene appears to be a typical rainy weekday morning in a bustling city...until you notice that the cab driver is a zombie. The cab also has a California license plate on the front bumper, so we immediately get an idea of where this module takes place. This illustration really sets the mood for the rest of the product.

The side margins are a blurred version of the brick-and-block background we saw on the front cover. Sidebar notes and read-aloud GM dialogue are both presented in peach-colored boxes. Although this should not lead to much confusion between the two, it may have been helpful to use different colors for sidebar notes than was used for the read-aloud dialogue.

Aside from the maps, there is no interior artwork, which was a disappointment. The maps are simple black-and-white pieces that are good for printing and contain very little detail. There are only two maps in the entire product.

### Adaptability Abound

The principle behind *Slave Drivers* is adaptability. The game-master (GM) is given loads of flexibility in each component of the game. The author often lists possible alternatives to just about every situation that can arise. For example, if you, as the GM, do not wish to use FX in this module, the author suggests replacing the zombies with illegal immigrants that have been smuggled into the country. You are also given freedom with the module's setting, although he suggests setting it in a major American city such as New York or California. He even suggests methods of motivating the players to investigate the cab accident if they refuse at first, such as having one of the characters related to the accident victim, or having the characters in the employ of an insurance company that is investigating whether to pay a claim or not. The case that the author makes for each alternative is strong and feasible, as no attempt is made at railroading the characters into following a set path. The alternatives presented here are varied as well, so the GM does not have to stare at a list of "similar but different" options when it comes to adjusting the campaign to his or her

tastes.

This high level of adaptability and flexibility carries over into the adventure itself. Scenarios are presented in a modular fashion, so that each stage in the campaign is kept somewhat independent of the others. For example, it is assumed that the characters will report back to their employer in order to report their findings, but this is not a requirement in order for the game to progress. If the players get adventurous and decide to investigate the Metro Cab Company without alerting their boss first, the GM can easily skip to the section and map on the cab company and run the adventure without reliance on the characters' employer. In fact, the characters could skip directly to an investigation of Ogdad Research itself, but they would achieve little with this method.

While some GMs may see this high adaptability as a blessing, others may view it as a curse. There is not much meat to the adventure, as each situation is presented with as few details as possible to make the setting work. For example, the general scene of the introductory auto accident is established, including the victims and atmosphere, but there are no details on what originally caused the accident. The remainder of the adventure focuses on the investigation of the zombies as drivers and neglects to consider the cause of the accident itself. Therefore, the GM must fill in the holes if the characters decide to pursue this route.

### GMaterial

Each section of the adventure basically includes the significant events that occur there (such as the auto accident in the beginning of the adventure), and DCs to gather additional information or to avert arousing suspicion. In-depth stats are given in the cab company section for security devices such as cameras, alarms, and locks, but stat blocks for the NPCs and monsters are given in a special GM appendix. I believe that the reasoning behind this was to actively discourage a hack n' slash campaign and to promote actual role-playing where the characters must think before they act. The players are continuously rewarded when they consider their options instead of going in with guns blazing. One obvious example of this is when the players decide to infiltrate Metro Cab. If they take the time to roll Spot checks and use stealth, they will probably have little trouble sneaking past the cameras and guards. However, if the players shoot every camera and everyone in sight, they will

probably set off a ton of alarms and will be overwhelmed by enemies.

As mentioned before, all of the enemy stat blocks are presented near the end of the product in a GM appendix. Not only does this appendix include the enemies vital to the campaign (such as Zombie Cab Drivers and Annet Antczak, the necromancer behind the operations), but it also contains character sheets for six pre-generated PCs, all of which are based on the six core *d20 Modern* classes. These characters are diversified and unique, as each originates from a different background and has a different occupation. If your players are not rolling their own characters, then they should have little trouble finding a character from this list that suits their needs.

A very nice feature included in this product is "initiative cards," which is a handy way of keeping track of NPC stats. Four initiative cards are presented on one page. These cards highlight a character's six core stats, initiative, level, skills, saves, and weapons. They are more compact and smaller than character sheets, making them extremely easy to reference during combat. Arrange these cards in the order of initiative, and you have a great way of keeping track of battle stats. You get eight blank initiative cards, in addition to cards for the six pre-generated characters and all NPCs. I would be happy to see more publishers include cards such as this.

### **Bronze Head Standards**

A second PDF file, the *Bronze Head Campaign Standards*, is included with the *Slave Drivers* download. Basically, this is a System Reference Document (SRD) for GMs who wish to run *Slave Drivers* as a part of the RPGA. GMs can also use this as an aid when running a *Slave Drivers* session with his own group, but it is not vital to the campaign.

The PDF is 15 pages and lists all of the advanced and prestige classes available in the Bronze Head campaign (the product in which each class can be found is listed beside the class name). Also, you will find character stats and background information for the six pre-generated characters in this second PDF. There is also a blank version of the *Slave Drivers* character sheet, but I question its inclusion in this document. After all, the blank initiative cards were given in the *Slave Drivers* document, so why isn't the blank character sheet there as well?

The *Campaign Standards* document may be worth a look through if you want to play *Slave Drivers* purely by Bronze Head rules, but it is not essential to the *Slave Drivers* campaign. A GM with a copy of *Urban Arcana* and *d20 Modern* nearby has all that she needs in order to run an efficient *Slave Drivers* campaign.

### **Conclusion**

I was a bit concerned with the amount of material you receive when compared to the price. The adventure itself is only nine pages, with the remaining space occupied with introductory material, stats, and character sheets. Sure, you also receive the *Bronze Head Campaign* document, but many GMs will find little use for this additional document. The price is not too bad (\$7), but it seems a bit steep when compared to the small amount of adventure material.

The utility of this module is dependent on the GM's gaming style. *Slave Drivers* is more a book of ideas at times than it is a fully-padded module. GMs that prefer a lot of leg room will be pleased with this module's utility, while those who prefer to be led by the hand will probably want to avoid it. As is, beginning GMs will want to shy away from this one until they are more accustomed to the rules.

Overall, *Slave Drivers* is a well-organized and well-written module. I highly recommend it to GMs that love modern FX games, as well as those that prefer a challenge in GMing.

CLASS: Campaign Supplement

STR: NA (*Physical*). This score does not apply to PDF products.

DEX: 16 (*Organization*). Easy to follow, logical organization.

CON: 10 (*Quantity of the Content*). Not much information for \$7.

INT: 15 (*Quality of Content*). Well-written material with no obvious errors.

WIS: 17 (*Options & Adaptability*). Module is highly adaptable to just about any *d20 Modern* game.

CHA: 14 (*Look & Feel*). Nice visual presence; lack of interior art is disappointing.



## Tooth and Claw & Squeam 3

**Author:** Jared A. Sorensen

**Publisher:** The Forge

**Reviewed by:** Nash J. DeVita

**Review Date:** January 17th, 2005

*Reviewer Bias: These titles were sent to me as PDF from Jared A. Sorensen for review purposes. There are quite a number of titles available from a great number of authors at The Forge.*

This is a review of two shorter products by Jared A. Sorensen available at The Forge--Tooth and Claw and Squeam 3. While they are two different games with different focuses, I chose to review the two together is that they are both by the same author and both rather short. Finally, I wanted to illustrate how different games from the folks at The Forge can be.

### Tooth & Claw

*Tooth & Claw* is a seventeen (17) page PDF RPG book. This game lets the players take the parts of dinosaurs in the Mesozoic era of Earth. It utilizes a simple but rich, original dice system. It uses pools of varying size to determine success. That, in and of itself, is not original. The fact that successes are gained by strings of numbers instead of rolling above / below is. These rolls can be augmented further by other character stats.

Characters in *Tooth & Claw* are very different than in most other games beings as that they are no humanoid. They are animals and have animalistic behavioral patterns. This is reflected in the three primary attributes - Stamina, Speed, and Skill. Each of these is broken down into various Behaviors. These behaviors are what most players would recognize as traditional character stats. Many of them are used in a somewhat different manner than most humanoid based games, however.

Combat is an obvious issue with dinosaurs, many of them being predatory in nature. One can choose to either attack or defend. A dinosaur can either take stamina damage which will eventually recover or take a scar which will never recover and will reduce a behavior. Remember, if one ever runs out of stamina or Survival Dice, said dinosaur is dead. Personally, I'd rather take the occasional scar that die.

There are five Sub-Orders of dinosaur in *Tooth & Claw*. These are like race and class. They help determine a great number of things including size, stance (bi-pedal or quadra-pedal), and suggested advantages.

The author understands that there are really only two likely types of games for *Tooth & Claw* - heavy narrative and heavy combat. For these two things, this game is suited perfectly. It is not trying to be something it is not.

He also does not try to turn this into a history lesson. If the reader needs / wants to learn more, there are resource suggestions given.

Archetype: Core Book

Body 10 (*Game Mechanics*): Very clean.

Mind 10 (*Organization*): It makes sense.

Spirit 8 (*Look & Feel*): It works for a 17 page PDF. No images. Of course, we all know what dinosaurs sort of looked like.

Attack 9 (*Value of Content*): It is a good price for a 17 page PDF.

Defense 11 (*Originality of Content*): Highly original content!

Health 6 (*Physical Quality*): PDF. I'm not fond of them, but some people are.

Magic 7 (*Options & Adaptability*): so so.

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### Squeam 3

*Squeam 3* is a (purposefully) corny game that translates bad horror films, such as the *Scream* series, into an RPG. As the author states, of course there needed to be a 'bad' sequel. All 'bad' horror flicks seem to. Yes, this game is meant to be a bad joke. The author admits this fully!

*Squeam* is a ten (10) page narrative RPG. This being the case, there are very few stats for characters and a fairly basic system to go along with them.

The characters, as listed, are many of the familiar social groups from high school - Nerds, Jocks, Freaks, Bimbos, etc. The usual cast of adult characters are also available, however. These include the Supportive Adult, Cop, Old Coot, and others.

Yes, both you and I know that no matter how good, all of these people are DEAD. That is why the higher the stat, the worse off the character is and ALL of the points from the pool must be spent!

1d10 is rolled whenever there is a challenge. A roll below the appropriate score = success. A roll above it = failure. Roll the same as the score and things get interesting! The players get to do wacky or disgusting or whatever things as are directed by the title and the Camp Counselor (GM).

Once can survive, but the chances are slim. These foolish characters will be stepping up against the usual cast of baddies from the films - chainsaw wielding freak, creepy child, etc.

The game is meant to last no more than 90 minutes (any joke can get old). For a good laugh and a short game, this is perfect so long as the players don't mind getting personally involved sometimes.

Archetype: Core Book

Body 11 (*Game Mechanics*): Perfect for the genre.

Mind 10 (*Organization*): Perfect.

Spirit 8 (*Look & Feel*): Basic text. No pictures. Things I would expect from a 10 page PDF.

Attack 9 (*Value of Content*): Good for its use.

Defense 10 (*Originality of Content*): Never seen anything like it.

Health 8 (*Physical Quality*): PDF. I don't like them but some do. I would take this in PDF before text.

Magic 8 (*Options & Adaptability*): It's a narrow genre and a somewhat narrow game (as it should be)

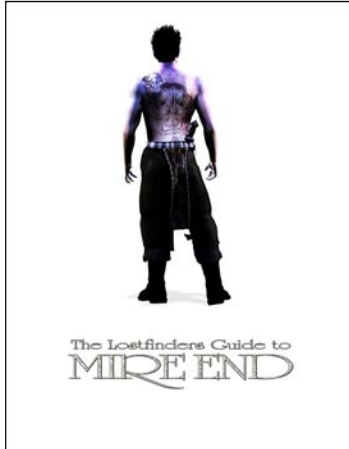
## The Lostfinder's Guide to Mire End

**Authors:** Malcolm Craig

**Publisher:** Contested Ground Studios

**Reviewed by:** Nash J. DeVita

**Review Date:** Jan 5th, 2005



*Reviewer Bias: This title was received for review purposes from the publisher. I instantly fell in love with A/ State upon reading it so I was greatly looking forward to this, their first supplement.*

*The Lostfinder's Guide to Mire End* is mere 32 page paperback. The interior illustrations are all; once again, computer generated pieces from Paul Bourne. This helps the book continue the artistic flow from the core book. Thankfully, being such a short book, it only costs \$10!

### From the Back Cover

"Welcome to Mire End..."

Come wander down the flooded lanes and dank alleys of Mire End. Meet the people and organizations who inhabit this impoverished, benighted burgh.

This 32 page book gives masses of information on the burgh: new locations, NPCs, organizations and adventure nuggets to provide inspiration for GMs.

Meet Father Guy Herbert, disgraced but honest priest of The Third Church of God The Architect and saviour of lost children...

Shoot to breeze with Carnelian Yet, political activist for

hire and man of one thousand slogans...

Browse the cluttered, labyrinthine pawn shop of Emmanuel Detseted and search for that little something...

Twist, turn and watch over your shoulder in the barrios and shanties of Redberry Park...

Come face to face with the psychotic, drug-addicted, amoral killer children of the Wastrels Lot...

Tap into the sources and archives of that paragon of local journalistic virtue, The Mire End Tribune...

With a full map of Mire End and a host of useful information crammed into its pages, the *Lostfinder's Guide to Mire End* is a valuable addition to the world of The City."

### Presentation

Once again, the lack of 'stuff' on the cover makes it quite striking. The cover features only a single young man who is facing away from the cover making his back visible. He is wearing no shirt. His back is covered in intricate tattoos, however. Also clearly visible on him is his knife hilt and his pants / boots. This image is set on a flat white background. The only thing on the cover aside from this individual is the title text and the smaller text that states that this is, in fact, an A/ State supplement. This cover is so plain that it is beautifully striking and unable to be missed when browsing titles by their covers.

Most pages feature another subtle but striking image in the border. The border is a simple line pattern. At the bottom of most pages is a distant view of The City, its radial canals and rings visible. This is the exact same boarder that was utilized in the core book.

### Content

I praised *A/ State* for its use of language. *The Lostfinder's Guide to Mire End* is no different. There may only be 32 pages but each is just as well written as the core book. I prey that there are further *Lostfinder's Guides* and the writing quality continues. I do not see that the writing would be able to lessen in quality so long as Malcolm Craig continues to write the titles.

The title opens with a piece of short fiction to help get the

reader into the world of The City and even more so into the world of Mire End. Helping keep the reader involved, the map of Mire End is drawn as if by a resident (Gregor Hutton did excellent work on this! I sure hope to see more from him in the future).

*Lostfinder's Guide to Mire End* is broken down onto four (4) major sections – the Overview, Highlighted Locations, Highlighted Personalities / Organizations, and Adventure Nuggets.

This title, having few pages, wastes little time with the overview so as not to take away from the core of this title. It consists of only two pages that briefly cover all of Mire End. There is a third page that holds a timeline for the major events in the history of Mire End. These historical items range from The Shake which occurred over 150 years ago to the more recent development of the Hohler Gang.

There are eleven (11) major areas / landmarks within Mire End that are discussed here. Most of them have associated adventure nuggets, or adventure hooks of you will. These nuggets are all located toward the end of the title. Each of these entries also lists the associated NPCs and Organizations. Being as that it is Mire End, these locations range from bad to worse. Yes, worse. Redberry Park is so filthy that most residents of Mire End don't even want to go into that district. I don't see how the shanties are discerned from the refuse piles! There are some nice (relatively speaking, of course) places within this area. The Mire End Cog Works employ a great number of people from within Mire End and produce just about every cog and gear that is found within the whole of The City.

Each section, 'good' or bad, is given a half of a page to a page in description which include some facts that only insiders would know.

There are fourteen (14) individuals and five (5) organizations described next. These are all people or groups that are found within Mire End and, more specifically, within one of the previously described areas. Each person or group is given about a half of a page of text. Each person's description also, thankfully, includes a portrait. They are so well done that one can take a glimpse inside of the person just by glancing at his (or her) face.

The proprietor of The Mire End Tribune, the local news

paper is described as well is the rest of the organization. Members of the Third Church of God The Architect are also discussed along with other individuals with and without various other affiliations within Mire End.

Finally, each of the Adventure Nuggets that were mentioned previously in the title are described fully. Each nugget contains multiple options for utilization so as to not force the story in any one given direction. Once again, each of these is given at least half of a page.

## **Conclusion**

This title is a must for any player or GM of *A/ State*. At only \$10, this is way too good a book to pass up!

Archetype: area supplement

Body 10 (*Game Mechanics*): Very nice. Many modifiers, but that adds to the realistic feel.

Mind 12 (*Organization*): Just about perfect.

Spirit 10 (*Look & Feel*): Beauty. Greatness carried over from the core book.

Attack 10 (*Value of Content*): At \$10, it is way too good for anyone who owns the core to pass up.

Defense 11 (*Originality of Content*): Familiar feel but all new detail. Relates to the core book but does not retread.

Health 8 (*Physical Quality*): Staple bound paperback.

Magic 10 (*Options & Adaptability*): The nuggets work in so many great ways.

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