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DRAGON August 2010

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Off to Gencon ... or Not.

It's Gencon week, which means that for the next six days, the R&D Department is going to be only about half full. I'm one of the sad few staying behind, exercising my stiff upper lip and pretending that I have so much work to do that even if I'd been put on the travel list, I couldn't possibly afford the time away from my desk (which is true, by the way, but I'm hardly unique in that regard). Really, I'm looking forward to using this quiet, meeting-free time to gain ground on some of the tasks that have piled up on my desk since I stepped into this job, like answering email and reviewing article pitches.

Even without a trip to Indianapolis, August promises plenty of other excitement to keep my spirits up!

It starts off with today's fiction, "Lord of the Darkways," by Ed Greenwood.

We have our customary assortment of "Class Acts" and "Winning Races" entries, this month covering drow, gnomes, eladrin, bards, and sorcerers.

Bill Slavicsek and Mike Mearls reveal more of what you can expect from D&D *Essentials*. They'll be talking about this in Indianapolis, too, of course, but D&D Insiders will get information that won't be covered there. With four installments of "Ampersand" and three of "Design & Development," we can traverse a lot of ground: the fighter (slayer), *Rules Compendium*, *DM's Kit*, and *Monster Vault* all get detailed treatment.

But the really big news is Dark Sun, which hits the street (and the dealers' shelves at Gencon) running with the *Campaign Setting*, *Creature Catalog*, and *Marauders of the Dune Sea*, a terrific adventure by Bruce Cordell. We're backing that up with articles on playing Athasian templars and slaves, plus another Dark Sun adventure for everyone who just can't get enough of heat and trouble. One unofficial, seat-of-the-pants method for predicting the success of an upcoming product is counting how many friends ask for free copies. If that metric is at all reliable, then Dark Sun is going to be hot. I hope I can come up with enough books to satisfy everyone.

Finally, here's a loosely Dark Sun-related movie plug. I'm a sucker for adventure movies from the 1930s, with their lost worlds, nefarious villains and cults, stoic heroes, and monumental sets. Just recently on Netflix, I ran across the 1935 version of *She*, based on the classic story by H. Rider Haggard and produced by Meriam C. Cooper, who made the original *King Kong* just two years earlier. In *She*, a small team of explorers heads for the Arctic in search of a fabled 'flame of everlasting life.' The lost culture that they discover in a secret valley ringed by unscalable cliffs of ice isn't much like Athas in most ways. On the other hand, its art deco style is wonderfully alien and weird. The palace guards are daunting in their animal headdresses and leather harnesses. The high priest is both imposing and tragic. And of course, Queen Hash-A-Mo-Tep, "She Who Must Be Obeyed," is an early prototype of the all-powerful sorcerer-queen who achieves everlasting life at the cost of a portion of her humanity and sanity.

The acting is stiff, the choreography is flimsy, and the story is entirely familiar. Yet you should watch this movie for the amazing sets and costumes, the way it portrays a savage, alien culture, and the sheer adventure of it all.

Steve

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Templars of the Sorcerer-Kings

By Robert J. Schwalb
Illustration by David Rapoza

Civilization rests in the bloated city-states scattered across the only inhabitable lands left on Athas. In all but one metropolis, power rests exclusively in the hands of the tyrants known as the sorcerer-kings, each an ancient being of nearly godlike power whose command over his or her subjects is absolute or very nearly so. Although some sorcerer-kings are worshiped as gods and seem as immortal as the deities long lost and forgotten, sorcerer-kings are no more divine than are any creature in the world. They are subject to the same limitations, errors in judgment, and whims other creatures face. They might teach their subjects they can be in all places at once, but the truth is these powers are neither omniscient nor omnipotent. It is in their interest to dispel any doubts about the power they wield and to ensure those people living under their rule remain obedient and loyal subjects, because as powerful as these individuals are, the death of King Kalak in Tyr proves they are neither invulnerable nor eternal.

The insurance all sorcerer-kings have comes from the templars who serve them. These men and women, who are usually human, are selected from the masses to act as the tyrant's eyes and ears and to represent his or her interests in the city-states and manage the affairs of government. Templars free the sorcerer-kings to pursue their own secret agendas and indulge in the fruits their exalted station affords. To the templars it falls to lead the armies, negotiate trade agreements with the merchant houses, and manage resources while also enforcing the laws and controlling the slaves. Much responsibility falls onto the templars' shoulders, but much wealth, status, and power goes to them too.

The authority invested in the templars might be enough to keep the nobles and common folk in line, but the templars have more than just a writ to enforce the monarch's will. Sorcerer-kings invest magical power into their prized subjects, lending them the tools they need to keep the city-states secure. Many templars learn just enough magic to protect their masters' interests and perform in whatever capacity they are assigned, but a few possess true power, gained through profane rituals and dark ceremonies wherein the sorcerer-king makes available the magical source from which he or she draws power. These warlocks are the most dangerous of a sorcerer-king's retinue because they can call up their master's might without fail and without fear of ever losing it. It is these individuals who deserve the most scrutiny and who are the subjects of these pages.

In Evil's Service

Templars are the sorcerer-king's agents, and although some sorcerer-kings might be loved, admired, respected, or feared, all are evil's agents in the world. The ruin and hardship gripping the lands rests solely at their feet. The abuses folk endure and the hopelessness and despair reflected in the common citizens' eyes all find their source in the magnificent powers who have carved up the world's corpse into tiny, competing empires. So no matter the reason for the templar's service, whether he or she came to this occupation out of free will or through conscription, they represent the most dangerous and wicked powers known in the lands.

As one might expect, sorcerer-kings attract those of dubious morals to their service. Most templars are cruel, malicious, and ambitious, acquiring the worst traits embodied by the masters they serve. Although evil runs rampant through their ranks, it would be false to say they are all without virtue. Many become templars for status, wealth, and excess, but others shoulder the responsibility as an obligation—a service to which they are called for the good of all—even if their masters exhibit troubling behaviors. Some templars are idealistic, hopeful reformers seeking to change a terminally corrupt system. A few harbor treasonous thoughts and ingratiate themselves to their masters as a means to destroy them, either ending their tyranny for good or to claim their place.

Becoming a templar means standing apart and facing distrust on all sides, with your companions questioning your motives and loyalties. You might have unimpeachable morals and a wholesome aspect, but you are sullied through your association with the sorcerer-king, who saw something in you that enabled your master to set aside any doubt and reveal to you the power he or she wields. You must decide how to reconcile the darkness fueling your power with the goals and objectives your companions might pursue. Do you hide your allegiance, working from within the heroes' midst to serve your master by opposing other sorcerer-kings? Do you regret your pact and seek redemption through great deeds and noble efforts? Or does it even matter?

Choosing a Sorcerer-King

As a templar, you serve or once served a sorcerer-king. The choice you make can help shape your character's history, personality, and motivations. All sorcerer-kings use templars to secure their thrones, but the expectations placed on them and the power they bestow vary from city-state to city-state. Some templars have more freedoms and can adventure more freely, while others are expected to devote their time in the city in which they were raised and are restricted in their movements. Talk with your Dungeon Master to find the sorcerer-king that best fits into the campaign and whether continued service to a particular tyrant is appropriate to the story. Since a sorcerer-king can't strip you of your powers once given, you might very well be a fugitive from a city-state, hunted throughout the lands as a traitor.

Sorcerer-Kings in Other Settings

Plundering material from sourcebooks to use in your personal campaigns is not only expected but is encouraged. Elements from Dark Sun work well in other worlds (such as Forgotten Realms and Eberron), but you might find the story concepts sometimes challenging to divorce from their associated mechanics. The sorcerer-king pact, for example, expects that beings of godlike power run the show. Such figures probably do not exist in your campaign setting. Rather than shoehorn the sorcerer-kings into your campaign setting, these figures might be powerful arcanists from antiquity—beings not necessarily evil, and who offer great power to those who study their lore. They could be archmages who have merged their essence with the cosmos or some other icons of arcane power. Although the organizational details described here might not be relevant, the feats associated with each provide further customization for warlocks who chose this pact and might reflect the particular styles the sorcerer-king equivalents embody.

Andropinis of Balic

"As the Dictator attained his august position eons ago, so too do our praetors follow in his steps. They assume authority's mantle by the people's will."

Balican politics distinguish the remote city-state from all others. The city's leaders, from the patricians who represent the noble's interests all the way up to the sorcerer-king, attained power and prestige through the people's will. According to legend, Andropinis was called to lead the city-state as its Dictator for Life, and under his wise leadership, he has passed on the custom of election to every office in his government. Thus Balican templars, called praetors, attain their positions through popular election just as does every other city official.

Recruitment: The elections are a sham, of course, and only those individuals favored by sitting praetors and the sorcerer-king are allowed to win these contests. Should an inappropriate candidate win, an accident often befalls that person, forcing another round of voting to fill the vacancy with a more favorable candidate. Praetors are elected for ten-year terms and no limits exist on the number of terms they can serve.

Balican Templars

Templars in Balic are drawn from every race, and though most templars are members of the warlock class, there is a military element to serving Andropinis. Consider using multiclass feats or the hybrid rules to pick up fighter powers and class features.

Training: Would-be praetors are groomed for their positions from birth. Children drawn largely from landowning and noble families attend special institutions to determine and foster magical or psionic talent. Those with some ability learn the political system, hone their public speaking skills, and make contacts they can later use to secure power.

Duties: Although the methods by which they gain their positions are far different from templars in other city-states, Balican templars fulfill many of the same duties. They enforce the laws, manage the city's resources, and command the city's famous legions in battle. Praetors gather in the Praetorium where they debate legal matters and address concerns pertaining to the city, and where they also determine which matters are worth bringing to the Dictator's attention and which they can attend to themselves.

Advancement: The more terms a praetor serves, the greater the standing and power within the Praetorium. Praetors who have served three or more terms wield the greatest authority and can shape policy in the city-state, influence elections, and might win the favor of the sorcerer-king. Losing an election does not always mean an end to service. The Dictator often takes powerful praetors into his personal retinue to act as his advisors and agents.

Adventuring Templars: Trade is Balic's paramount concern, so adventuring praetors might find excuses to leave the city-state to negotiate trade agreements in distant emporiums, set sail on silt skimmers to find islands holding new resources useful to the city-state, or travel south to expand the sorcerer-king's influence. Elected praetors might be more limited in their freedoms since they must attend to the day-to-day work of governance, but important missions might see a praetor install a proxy to act in his or her place while undertaking a mission abroad.

Templar Feats

Pact feats, also included under each entry, provide further methods for distinguishing your warlock from others by gaining benefits tailored to the responsibilities and cultural considerations associated with the city-state of origin. Each city-state receives two feats.

The lesser pact feat grants a constant benefit, usually a feat bonus to a particular skill check, and also grants an alternative benefit to the *hand of blight* power for when you enhance it with your Fell Scorn pact boon.

The greater pact feat requires you to have the associated lesser pact feat and grants more powerful and distinctive benefits. Each one adds to your pact boon and includes a list of warlock powers for which you also gain a Sorcerer-King Pact rider to broaden your power choices beyond those described in the *Dark Sun Campaign Setting*.

Each power associated with a pact feat is accompanied by an abbreviation to indicate its source: *Player's Handbook* (PH), *Arcane Power* (AP), *Forgotten Realms Player's Guide* (FR), or *Dragon Magazine Annual 2009* (DR).

You can choose only one lesser pact feat and one greater pact feat. The limitations reflect the connection you forged with a particular sorcerer-king and, because they are jealous masters, the exclusivity such service demands.

Balican Praetor [Lesser Pact]

Prerequisite: Warlock, Sorcerer-King Pact class feature

Benefit: You gain a +2 feat bonus to Diplomacy checks.

When you spend your fell might on *hand of blight*, you can forgo the extra damage to instead grant the target vulnerability to all damage equal to your Intelligence modifier until the start of your next turn. Each time the target takes damage while it has this vulnerability, reduce the vulnerability by 1 (to a minimum of 0).

Balican High Praetor [Greater Pact]

Prerequisite: Warlock, Sorcerer-King Pact class feature, Balican Praetor feat

Benefit: Whenever an enemy you have cursed drops to 0 hit points, you gain the following benefit in addition to regaining the use of your fell might. The next ally you can see that hits with a damaging attack before the start of your next turn subjects its target to your Warlock's Curse. If the target is already under your curse, the ally's attack instead deals extra damage equal to 3 + your Intelligence modifier.

You can enhance powers associated with this feat with your fell might. When you hit an enemy with an enhanced power associated with this feat, each ally adjacent to the target can either shift 1 square as a free action or gain a +2 power bonus to all defenses until the start of your next turn.

Finally, you can use Charisma instead of Constitution for attack rolls and damage rolls with any power associated with this feat.

Level	Associated Encounter Power	Source*
3rd	Fortune binding	AP page 76
7th	Hero's arrow	AP page 78
13th	Skirmisher's volley	AP page 81
17th	Life force reclaimed	AP page 83
23rd	Awaken the dragon	AP page 85
27th	Shattering of the sword	AP page 86

** Arcane Power*

Tectuktitlay of Draj

"What have we to fear when a god walks among us? Ral and Guthay bestowed unto us, of all the people in these bitter lands, their only son. Should He, great Tectuktitlay, demand a sacrifice, who are we to deny him, when he visits such abundance and prosperity into our lives? And should the moon priests make of us sacrifices, we should not question, for they and they alone know the mind of our god."

The belief in Tectuktitlay's divinity depends on the propaganda spread by his templars, those religious fanatics known as the moon priests. The Master of Two Moons stands on the backs of those devoted servants who exalt his name and make sacrifices to saturate the lands with the vital ichors needed to continue the bountiful crops and good fortune Draj has known for so long. They are figures of great respect and wisdom, but they are feared because they decide who lives and who dies.

Recruitment: The moon priests are an insular society. New templars are chosen from the offspring of the previous generation. Thus the office passes from parent to child as it has since Tectuktitlay blessed his favored servants with his power. Not all children are raised up; only those with unwavering devotion to the Master of Two Moons and with a near homicidal commitment to the rituals and ceremonies demanded are ever raised up to the exalted office, and even then they might be sacrificed by the sorcerer-king should they displease him.

Training: All moon priests begin as initiates, when they are taught the sacred rites required during fertility festivals marking the seasons' passage. These initiates are taught to read, to work magic, and to navigate the intricacies of Draji governance. Initiates who lag behind or show disinterest in their studies are eliminated before they can weaken the institution. Others, especially those from families fallen out of favor, might have similar fates. Students must recall the most complicated myths and their meanings at a moment's notice, while being forced to watch or participate in sacrifices performed by the ordained moon priests. The final test is the sacrifice itself, when the initiate must choose a slave and perform the rite before the moon priests to demonstrate both piety and dedication.

Duties: Moon priests attend every aspect of Draji life, from managing agricultural production to overseeing the fertility rites to enforcing the sorcerer-king's laws. Lowly templars have a rice field as their homes

Draji Templars

Templars in Draj are human with other races permitted only in the most exceptional cases. Moon priests master arcane magic as warlocks, but many also dabble in the martial classes by becoming rogues, rangers, and warlords.

and have slaves in their charge. Ranking templars leave the fields for the excess and decadence afforded to those who gain the sorcerer-king's favor. They attend Tectuktitlay as advisors or consorts, manage the city's affairs, and overseee the arena games.

Advancement: Caprice determines who rises and who falls, because the moon priests are a treacherous lot. Death awaits any who fall from favor; the altars are always in need of new sacrifices. Most rank-and-file templars live little better than the slaves. These priests have few opportunities to distinguish themselves, and most avoid attention lest they be singled out for execution. Still, opportunities for ascension exist and those with the cunning and determination can carve out a place for themselves, usually at the expense of their betters.

Adventuring Templars: Tectuktitlay covets land and resources, and it falls to the moon priests to acquire them. The sorcerer-king is also hungry for magical power, and those who discover secret caches might be rewarded by speedy advancement. Many Draji templars embark on raiding missions wherein they strike caravans, villages, and primitive tribes to round up raw materials, including slaves. These expeditions are the perfect opportunities for moon priests who develop a conscience to slip away, though doing so means death if ever captured.

Draji Aspirant [Lesser Pact]

Prerequisite: Warlock, Sorcerer-King Pact class feature

Benefit: You gain a +2 feat bonus to Intimidate checks.

Once per encounter when you enhance *hand of blight*, you can forgo the extra damage and instead cause the target to shift its speed away from you along the safest, fastest path.

Draji Devotee [Greater Pact]

Prerequisite: Warlock, Sorcerer-King Pact class feature, Draji Aspirant feat

Benefit: You gain the following three benefits.

In addition to regaining the use of your fell might, whenever you drop an enemy you have cursed to 0 hit points, you push each enemy adjacent to you 1 square.

You can also expend your fell might to enhance any power associated with this feat. When you hit an enemy with an associated power enhanced by this feat, each enemy adjacent to the target takes a –2 penalty to attack rolls until the end of your next turn. The triggering power gains the fear keyword if it doesn't have it already.

Finally, you can use Charisma instead of Constitution for attack rolls and damage rolls with any power associated with this feat.

Level	Associated Encounter Power	Source*
3rd	Frigid darkness	PH 133
7th	Infernal moon curse	PH 135
13th	Coldfire vortex	PH 136
17th	Despair of Zhudun	AP 82
23rd	Starless void	DR 54
27th	Banish to the void	PH 139

** Player's Handbook, Arcane Power, Dragon Magazine Annual*

Lalali-Puy of Gulg

"The Oba teaches us to respect and love the forest but to fear the beings it harbors because the spirits dwelling in the trees and rocks, who sigh with winds and dance in the morning dew, are no friends to us. Thankfully, the nganga are watchful guardians who shield us from any threat the forest might make."

Gulg's templars are divorced from common society and relegated to the fringes as watchers and mystics. Called the nganga, they are strange figures of frightening aspect and occupation because they treat with the forest's spirits, enslaving them and taking their powers for themselves. The nganga are also vigilant protectors, defending Gulg from enemies without and also those from within its own bounds.

Recruitment: All children undergo a difficult initiation to mark their passage to adulthood. Each child ventures into the forest with no food or water. They are expected to wander until they receive a vision from a spirit who will serve them. Most endure the experience, associating themselves with a particular beast, return to their village, and carry out their lives in accordance with their custom and station. A rare few demonstrate the necessary power to overpower the spirit and bend it to their will. Those who do walk the path to becoming nganga.

Training: Nganga sever ties to family and friends, because their family is that of the Oba and the other templars who serve her. Many initiates watch as their families perform funeral services to grieve the loss and formally release the new templar to continue his or her studies. Training to become an nganga is no easy task, because the initiate must overcome his or her fears when dealing with the spirits and mastering the magic passed down through the generations.

Gulg Templars

Gulg templars have a powerful connection to primal spirits. It is not a relationship between equals but rather one of slaves to masters, with the nganga as the latter. To dominate the spirits, some nganga dabble in primal classes, with shamans being the most common.

Many initiates do not survive to become templars and those who do seldom emerge with their innocence.

Duties: The nganga are mystics, seers, and witch-doctors. They attend the sick and injured, watch for division or disloyalty among the people, and advise the warriors in matters of battle. They are also murderers who slip through the night to eliminate anyone who offends the social order or who is suspected of plotting against the sorcerer-queen.

Advancement: Power defines status. Age, experience, or social standing have no bearing on the nganga's standing. Gulg's templars recognize potential in their peers and defer to those who can wield greater magic. Thus it is possible for a strong youth newly risen from an initiate to attain a position of honored elder by dint of his or her mastery over the Oba's magic.

Adventuring: Being relegated to Gulg's fringes, the templars are free to roam the Crescent Forest and surrounding lands, to safeguard the ancient wood from Nibenese exploitation, and to combat the horrors sometimes arising from the forest's depths. Since it is customary for templars to continue their spiritual journeys, many templars vanish for weeks or even months at a time, though all are expected to resume their duties on returning.

Missions can also carry templars from the city-state. Such ventures could involve expeditions to sabotage Nibenese logging operations, gather information about the Shadow King and his intentions in the surrounding land, or pursuing anything that might aid the Oba in seizing even greater control over the primal spirits in the Crescent Forest.

Spirit Talker of Lalali-Puy [Lesser Pact]

Prerequisite: Warlock, Sorcerer-King Pact class feature

Benefit: You gain a +2 feat bonus to Nature checks.

Once per encounter when you enhance *hand of blight,* you can forgo the extra damage to instead teleport the target a number of squares equal to your Intelligence modifier to an unoccupied square adjacent to an ally you can see.

Spirit Master of Lalali-Puy [Greater Pact]

Prerequisite: Warlock, Sorcerer-King Pact class feature, Spirit Talker of Lalali-Puy feat

Benefit: In addition to regaining the use of your fell might, whenever you drop an enemy you have cursed to 0 hit points, you slide that enemy and each enemy adjacent to you 1 square. No enemy can be slid more than 1 square by this effect.

You can also expend your fell might once per encounter to enhance any power associated with this feat. The first enemy you hit with a power enhanced by this feat, the target makes a basic attack against a legal target you choose.

Level	Associated Encounter Power	Source*
3rd	Eldritch rain	PH 133
7th	Mire the mind	PH 135
13th	Bewitching whispers	PH 136
17th	Thirsting tendrils	PH 137
23rd	Thorns of venom	PH 139
27th	Curse of the fey king	PH 139

* *Player's Handbook*

The Shadow King of Nibenay

"It is the greatest honor for a young woman to catch the Shadow King's eye and to be wed to his immortal glory and reap the rewards such station affords."

Nibenay's sorcerer-king is a mystery, because he rarely emerges from the guarded inner city. The only contact the Nibenese might have with their Shadow King is through his brides, the templar-wives who govern in his stead. Only these powerful women are permitted in the Naggaramakam to witness the splendor and excess defining his microcosm, but even these lucky servants rarely glimpse their powerful master.

Recruitment: The women filling out the templar ranks are awarded the special invitation for a variety of reasons. Magical talent is a factor, but candidates are more often chosen based on their standing in the city, the bloodline from which they descend, and what the templars stand to gain by welcoming the aspirant into their ranks. Since the templars attend nearly every aspect of Nibenese society, there is a place for even those templars who have no skill in magic and serve better as soldiers, administrators, or spies.

Nibenese Templars

The Shadow King's templar-wives include representatives of nearly every race. Many templars broaden their magical study by dabbling in other arcane, shadow, and psionic traditions to grow their power and versatility.

Training: None can refuse an offer to wed the Shadow King, but before the ceremonial wedding can take place, the bride-to-be spends a year or more in the inner city attending to the sacred rites and rituals while being also tested to discover her particular talents. During this time, the bride is sorted into the temple in which she will serve for the rest of her days. For most templars, the marriage is symbolic only—an event not even the Shadow King attends. A rare few are singled out, due to great beauty, cunning, or magical aptitude, and are attended by the sorcerer-king, whereby they receive special training and the Nibenay's investment of his own arcane power.

Duties: All templars work within one of five temples and receive their assignments during their initiations. The Temple of the House and Temple of Trade deal with mundane matters; those wives who lack the necessary skills to wield magic to any great effect are in these departments, where they attend to the necessary functions of keeping the city running. Examples include collecting revenues, overseeing grain and lumber production, and maintaining good relations with the trade houses. Those with a knack for battle can serve in the Temple of War, overseeing the troops and leading military expeditions. The Temple of Law also has a martial bent, but instead of dealing with armies and foreign relations, the department keeps the peace and enforces the law.

The most powerful institution is the Temple of Thought, where templars with psionic potential hone their talents and master them. The Temple also schools templars in higher magical forms, revealing the secrets of defiling, necromancy, and other traditions. Those working in this temple can become teachers for the nobility, special operatives for the Shadow King, or act as his spies.

Advancement: The five temples are equal in standing and import, though certain temples obviously have greater influence depending on the political climate and developments in the city-state. Aspirants, or brides, occupy the lowest rungs, where they are subject to every whim and command from their superiors. Upon undertaking the ceremony, the new templar-wife holds a lowly position until she has experience and has earned a place among the higher echelons. Older and more experienced templar-wives and those whom the sorcerer-king has chosen to fill out his personal entourage command the upper tiers and decide the fates of all who serve them.

Adventuring Templars: Templar-wives have great freedom. While they are bound to the sorcerer-king as members of a large family, the templars number in the hundreds, and many undertake missions for the city-state that can carry them far from Nibenay to nearly anywhere in the region. Missions relate to the temple in which the templar-wife is installed. Thus a templar who claims membership to the Temple of Trade might travel to distant cities to negotiate trade agreements with governing merchant princes, while those in the Temple of War can scout enemy territories, raid and plunder client villages, track down slave tribes, and so on.

Nibenese Bride [Lesser Pact]

Prerequisite: Warlock, Sorcerer-King Pact class feature

Benefit: You gain a +2 feat bonus to Bluff checks.

Once per encounter when you enhance *hand of blight*, you can forgo the extra damage to instead weaken the target until the end of your next turn.

Nibenese Favored Wife [Greater Pact]

Prerequisite: Warlock, Sorcerer-King Pact class feature, Nibenese Bride feat

Benefit: In addition to regaining the use of your fell might, whenever you drop an enemy you have cursed to 0 hit points, one enemy cursed by you takes psychic damage equal to your Intelligence modifier.

You can also expend your fell might to enhance any power associated with this feat. When you hit an enemy with a power enhanced by this feat, you gain insubstantial until the start of your next turn.

Level	Associated Encounter Power	Source*
3rd	Shared agony	AP 76
7th	Death's commands	FR 37
13th	All must sacrifice	FR 38
17th	Devouring death	AP 82
23rd	Blades of vanquished armies	FR 40
27th	Inevitable undercut	FR 40

* *Arcane Power*, *Forgotten Realms Player's Guide*

Abalach-Re of Raam

"They are a frightened few—a herd of sycophants and hangers-on who dare not reveal their connections to Abalech-Re lest some noble put them to the sword."

Raam's templars are as rare as peace in the chaotic city-state. They have fallen far from their former glory and influence in the city. Thanks to the erratic and decadent Grand Vizier, few templars emerge from their personal estates, and those who do either go under guard or find a swift and brutal death. Attrition combined with the sorcerer-queen's waning influence keep the templars' numbers small in Raam. Lost agents are replaced only when Abalach-Re can be stirred to search out a worthy candidate.

Recruitment: Abalach-Re has long been more concerned with feeding her appetites than seeing to the needs of her beleaguered people. Sequestered in her fabulous palace, her thoughts rarely drift toward the challenges Raam faces, let alone sharing her immense magical talent with worthy students. When fancy strikes her, she might cast out her senses, using divination rituals to seek out a viable candidate. She then sends her guards round to bring the favored to her, where she instructs these new students in the magical arts until some other pursuit captures her attention.

Training: Those called to serve the Grand Vizier face their new responsibilities with a mix of apprehension and dread. Abalach-Re can be generous with her gifts and bestow onto favored servants fabulous riches and power, but such blessing is often met with derision and hatred from the citizenry, who exact revenge by any means they can, even if it means striking out against the templar's family and friends. Most templars discard their old lives and assume new identities to insulate themselves from whatever repercussions they might face.

Training is haphazard and largely comes from existing templars who have pieced together the essential techniques needed to perform as the sorcerer-queen wills. The Grand Vizier might take a hand in this training, but one must sift through her confusing lessons to arrive at anything useful. Unpreparedness is the primary cause for templar death in Raam, since many cannot stand against the innumerable dangers arrayed against them.

Duties: The templars know they cannot move openly in the city where the danger to themselves is simply too great. Instead, templars act as spies, monitoring developments and passing their intelligence up the chain of command in the hope that their reports reach Abalach-Re on a day when she has some passing concern for their content. In addition to gathering information, templars can also influence city leaders to support the sorcerer-queen by pressuring them with threats against their lives, livelihoods, and loved ones, though few templars now have the muscle to back up their warnings.

Raamite Templars

Abalach-Re raised up people from all cultures, races, and genders to serve as templars. Given the erratic training the templars receive, many look to other traditions to supplement their powers. As a result, many Raamite templars multiclass into other arcane classes (bards), martial classes (rogues), and psionic classes (psions and ardents).

Advancement: Whimsy determines how a templar might rise or fall, because the Grand Vizier's servants come into and out of favor with unnerving regularity. Her vanity is often her only guide, and she rewards flatterers and sycophants with greater estates and gifts. She also favors those templars who catch her attention through other means. Abalach-Re delights in beautiful things, and she claims many templars as her lovers, regardless of gender or race.

Adventuring Templars: The templars' fraying structure allows tremendous flexibility and latitude for templar actions. No complete roster of templars in the sorcerer-queen's service still exists, allowing her servants to come and go as they please. Those whom the Grand Vizier does not take a personal interest in have the greatest freedom, while those she favors live almost as slaves.

Favored of Raam [Lesser Pact]

Prerequisite: Warlock, Sorcerer-King Pact class feature

Benefit: You gain a +2 feat bonus to Streetwise checks.

When you enhance *hand of blight*, you can forgo the extra damage to instead become invisible to the target until the end of your next turn.

Champion of Raam [Greater Pact]

Prerequisite: Warlock, Sorcerer-King Pact class feature, Favored of Raam feat

Benefit: In addition to regaining the use of your fell might, whenever you drop an enemy cursed by you to 0 hit points, you can shift a number of squares equal to your Intelligence modifier.

Once per encounter, you can expend your fell might to enhance any power associated with this feat. When you hit an enemy with a power enhanced by this feat, the target cannot include you as a target in its attacks until the start of your next turn.

Level	Associated Encounter Power	Source*
3rd	Otherwind stride	PH 134
7th	Sign of ill omen	PH 135
13th	Dark reach of Xevut	AP 80
17th	Strand of fate	PH 137
23rd	Dark transport	PH 138
27th	Envoy of Nihal	DR 54

* ***Player's Handbook***, ***Arcane Power***, ***Dragon Magazine Annual***

Kalak of Tyr

"Kalak may be dead, but the old king is very much alive in the templars who survived him."

Even when Kalak the Merciless still lived, the favor he once showered onto the templars had faded until they themselves were little better than slaves. Kalak's desperation to complete his dark ritual of apotheosis turned all under his command to his tools, and he destroyed any who could not or would not serve his needs. In this way, he demonstrated his utter disregard for his subjects and also the extent of his derangement.

With his death came questions about what roles the templars would fill in the city-state—questions quickly answered when the templar Tithian claimed his throne. The templars survived the transition, but no longer would they serve as enforcers and slavers. Instead they became bureaucrats—cogs in the city's governmental engine that were stripped of their power and consigned to life as public servants.

Recruitment: Templars in Tyr have lost much of their standing and influence thanks to the dwindling numbers of those who had originally served Kalak. The ones remaining husband their magic, never sure if the spell they cast will be the last, and the new individuals raised to their sides have little to no magical capability whatsoever. While Kalak lived, templars were drawn from the noble families, particularly from those children with a talent for the Way or who passed the initiation tests to qualify for templar training. Now, anyone with a head for sums and bookkeeping can find a place among these diminished administrators.

Training: In the past, Tyr's templars numbered among the most dangerous in the seven cities, armed with power strong enough to crush slave uprisings and to make any aggression against the city-state costly enough to dissuade any effort at conquest. Apprentices were cloistered in the Templar District, where resources such as food and clothing were scarce, forcing the students to fight and vie for their shares. The best and most vicious students acquired better living conditions as they were groomed for higher office upon completion.

Now, training is far less competitive and students are taught numbers and letters, then are later sorted into their respective bureaus.

Duties: Templars who complete the training receive posts in one of twelve bureaus, ranging from Administration to Water and everything in between. Eleven of the original twelve have survived, with the missing bureau being the enforcers who kept the peace in the city. Templars no longer have the authority to arrest or pass judgment. Those important responsibilities now fall to the city watches and appointed judiciaries.

Advancement: High office has long been awarded to those cunning and bloodthirsty enough to seize it. Assassinations and betrayals remain the norm for Tyrian templars, and an individual can rise high quickly only to fall with equal speed when they lose favor and protection from the high templars leading the bureaus.

Adventuring Templars: Active templars are tied to their offices and have few opportunities for undertaking adventures that do not specifically concern their bureau. An office can find cause to mount an expedition, however, even in the most unlikely departments. For example, a templar in the Bureau of Administration might be selected to hunt down a missing or stolen document, while the Bureau of Mines sends templars and soldiers into new tunnels and chambers to clear out unfriendly infestations.

Many templars from Kalak's time have severed ties to the new government and thus can come and go as they please. They might retain connections in the bureaus, but they are free to embark on any adventures they choose.

Tyrian Bureaucrat [Lesser Pact]

Prerequisite: Warlock, Sorcerer-King Pact class feature

Benefit: You gain a +2 feat bonus to Streetwise checks.

Once per encounter when you enhance *hand of blight*, you can forgo the extra damage to instead daze the target until the end of your next turn.

Tyrian Ascendant [Greater Pact]

Prerequisite: Warlock, Sorcerer-King Pact class feature, Tyrian Bureaucrat feat

Benefit: In addition to regaining the use of your fell might, whenever you drop an enemy you have cursed to 0 hit points, each enemy cursed by you takes a –2 penalty to attack rolls against you until the end of your next turn.

You can also expend your fell might to enhance any power associated with this feat. When you hit an enemy with a power enhanced by this feat, you also knock the target prone.

Finally, you can use Charisma instead of Constitution for attack rolls and damage rolls with any power associated with this feat.

Level	Associated Encounter Power	Source*
3rd	Fiery bolt	PH 133
7th	Acrid decay	AP 78
13th	Harrowstorm	PH 136
17th	Warlock's bargain	PH 138
23rd	Spiteful darts	PH 139
27th	Hellfire curse	PH 139

* ***Player's Handbook*, *Arcane Power***

Hamanu of Urik

"The yellow cloaks signify service to the Lion of the Desert, and though the templars wear them with pride and none else are permitted to wear similar attire. One look at the similarly hued walls tells you in what way Hamanu views his 'chosen' servants. They are as the rocks quarried from the lands and serve as building blocks in Hamanu's great society."

Hamanu expects much from his templars, demanding they master the complex legal code, enforce the laws it sets out, collect revenue from taxes and tariffs, maintain order in the city, lead his armies, and secure the city against all enemies. With such a daunting task set before them, it should come as no surprise that the templars and their servants, which include scribes, researchers, and attendants, represent a sizeable portion of Urik's population. They, like everyone in Urik, are chattel to the sorcerer-king, an expendable commodity whose sole purpose is to serve the sorcerer-king.

Recruitment: Urik recruits heaviest from the noble classes, plucking the most talented among them for use in Hamanu's grand temples. Individuals demonstrating battle prowess, psionic potential, or some ability in the arcane arts might be whisked away to study in those institutions set aside to transform ordinary citizens into useful servants.

Training: Selection to become a templar is no guarantee of a place within the esteemed community, but all who are given the chance to study in Urik's superior schools can benefit from the experience and might yet find some other place in Hamanu's service. Propaganda is an important element in the training programs; All templars are taught to revere the Great

King as if he were a god. Instructors screen students for irreverence and blasphemy and punish anyone who displays these tendencies with a brutality that approaches abuse. Initiates learn to hide their doubts deep inside.

Duties: Urik's templars are religious figures first and foremost and are expected to teach the coming glory promised by Hamanu to his people. These teachings reinforce the old beliefs that the sorcerer-king is in fact a god who is destined to usher the world into a new and glorious age. Templars are to quash discord wherever they find it and execute ringleaders to ensure a person's devotion never wavers. Templars also act as law enforcers, sweeping the city for perpetrators who violate Hamanu's Code. In this capacity, they judge the accused and dispense justice to any they deem guilty. In addition to these major duties, templars can serve as record-keepers and lawyers. Most templars also serve as military leaders commanding the famed legions as they secure not only the city, but also the surrounding countryside.

Advancement: Given the strict parameters in which they are expected to operate, there is little room for treachery and backstabbing to attain higher positions. In fact, many templars approach advancement with no small measure of apprehension since the higher one climbs, the closer the templar gets to the sorcerer-king. All templars wither in his presence, because he does not suffer fools nor tolerate failure. Templars climb in station based on their performance, and with their advancement comes greater rewards such as estates, slaves, and vast wealth. This said, high templars do not sit easily in their fortunes, for Hamanu turns to them first when he is displeased and looking for someone to blame.

Adventuring Templars: Urikite templars concern themselves with keeping the city in the same state in which it has existed for well over a thousand years, but Hamanu is a greedy liege and he looks beyond his yellow walls, eager to expand his empire across the region. His templars often venture into the wilds to recover lost relics and gain intelligence about neighboring city-states as well as hunt down slave tribes who disrupt trade or trouble the client villages in the verdant belt. Templars also oversee obsidian extraction from the Smoking Crown, though few relish this duty given the inhospitable environment and the frequent slave revolts.

Yellow Cloak of Urik [Lesser Pact]

Prerequisite: Warlock, Sorcerer-King Pact class feature

Benefit: You gain a +2 feat bonus to History checks.

Once per encounter when you enhance *hand of blight*, you can forgo the extra damage to instead immobilize the target until the end of your next turn.

Golden Lion of Urik [Greater Pact]

Prerequisite: Warlock, Sorcerer-King Pact class feature, Yellow Cloak of Urik feat

Benefit: Once per encounter, when you drop an enemy you have cursed to 0 hit points, each enemy cursed by you can choose to either fall prone or become weakened until the start of your next turn. This is in addition to regaining the use of your fell might,

Once per encounter, you can expend your fell might to enhance any power associated with this feat. When you hit at least one enemy with an associated power enhanced by this feat, one ally within 5 squares of you makes a basic attack as a free action and deals extra thunder damage equal to your Intelligence modifier.

Finally, you can use Charisma instead of Constitution for attack rolls and damage rolls with any power associated with this feat.

Level	Associated Encounter Power	Source*
3rd	Frigid darkness	PH 133
7th	Howl of doom	PH 135
13th	Soul flaying	PH 136
17th	Unholy glee	FR 38
23rd	Awaken the dragon	AP 139
27th	Manipulating thunderbolt	AP 86

** **Player's Handbook**, **Forgotten Realms Player's Guide**, **Arcane Power***

About the Author

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Sweating Under a Dark Sun
Slaves of Athas

By Matthew Sernett

Illustration by William O'Connor

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The *Dark Sun Campaign Setting* introduces the concept of character themes. With this new mechanic, players can add an extra layer of depth to their characters and have that reflected in the powers their characters use. The *Dark Sun Campaign Setting* introduces ten great character themes, and the theme presented below adds an option to that list.

Choosing a Theme

The *Dark Sun Campaign Setting* more fully explains how themes work, but here's a quick primer. You can have only one theme. To select a theme, all you do is choose one at the time you create your character. You don't need to select a theme if you don't want to do so.

Once you select a theme, it grants you the following benefits:

- ✦ You automatically gain the theme's granted power.
- ✦ You can choose to take additional theme powers when you reach the appropriate level.
- ✦ You unlock feats or paragon paths that use the theme as a prerequisite.

Escaped Slave Theme

"No one is my master—not anymore. You think you're free? At least I had bonds to break. You can't even see the prison that surrounds you."

The cities of the sorcerer-kings crouch upon the backs of slaves. Slave bones litter their alleys. Slave blood makes mud in the dust of their streets. Almost everywhere you go in the city-states you see someone with a yoke around the neck and eyes cast toward the ground. Tyr presents the only exception, but Tyr has depended upon the labor of slaves just as much as any other city. Even it sells criminals into slavery beyond its walls. How long can such "freedom" last?

Slaves have always been a part of Athasian society. A harsh world calls for harsh justice. Those who cannot obey the laws that protect all or who are not smart enough to bow before those stronger than themselves do not deserve the water it takes to keep them alive. People become slaves by angering or offending those more powerful than themselves. A slave might have owed a debt, stolen a crust of bread, or not bowed low or fast enough when a person of importance passed. Citizens are declared slaves for owning items desired by nobles, for being captured instead of killed during war, and for knowing information above their station. Those born to slaves are slaves owned by the mother's master. After all, the master lost work from the mother during pregnancy and must pay for the child's care. Such a child owes the master labor equal to the period of time until it can do the work of a full adult, and by then it has no doubt done something to warrant its continued slavery. Even the kindest master realizes that a child raised in slavery is ill equipped for freedom and would likely die shortly after release. Though a slave lives a harsh life with no security, a master must provide for a slave's needs or accept the loss of that investment.

Once declared a slave, a person becomes property. Slaves change hands like money. They are won and lost in bets, sold at auction, and brought to market. Slave owners with slaves that have specialized skills or unusual attributes seek out buyers with particular needs. A slave owner can do what he or she likes with a slave, and it's no concern of anyone else. Masters expect slaves to work incredibly hard to earn their

Slave to Whom?

When making an escaped slave character, consider from where and whom you escaped. Ask your DM for options or glance over the Atlas of Athas section of the *Dark Sun Campaign Setting* to find some inspiration.

Most slaves can be found in the urban centers, but people keep slaves all over Athas. Did you bear burdens for a group of nomadic elves, toil over the dry fields outside Draj, mine in the Black Spine Mountains, languish in a noble's harem, or sweat on a ship that sailed the Silt Sea? Your choice of location and the tasks you performed should influence other choices for your character. Perhaps your life with the fleet elves is the reason you have the Fast Runner feat. Maybe you learned the rudiments of wizardry by working in the secret chambers of sorcerer-king Nibenay.

Consider your owner and what kind of person he or she was. Your owner might have been overbearing and cruel, lazy and inattentive, or even kind and merciful—up to a point. Was your owner a common citizen, a merchant lord, a noble, a tribal chieftain, or a sorcerer-king? How many other slaves did your owner hold? What was your owner's profession? Did he or she have any unusual interests or particular hobbies?

How did you escape? Did you slip away or fight your way out? Did someone help you escape? Did you leave any friends or family behind? Are you still being sought by your owner's agents? How do you evade detection?

keep or face death in the arena, a quick execution, or whatever other cruelty the master dreams up.

Few slaves even dream of escape. The declaration of slavery is like a death sentence in its finality. Even if the leather and bone manacles are broken, even if the guards are evaded or killed, the rest of the world hates and fears an escaped slave. Those who aid an escaped slave—even unwittingly—can expect to become slaves themselves. Those who turn them in often receive a reward worth as much as half the slave's value. Only Tyr offers a slim hope of sanctuary, and if a slave has angered the master enough, many ways exist to take someone from that city.

An escaped slave's only hope is to see freedom as a rebirth. Old haunts, one-time friends, even family—all need to be avoided for fear of being recognized and turned in. Hide the brand, disguise the tattoo, cover up the scars, explain the calluses away—successful escaped slaves do all this and more. Escaped slaves must take up a new name, a new history, and if one can manage it, a new appearance. Some escaped slaves do all this, but the strong will and sharp mind such a life requires often drives successful escaped slaves back toward their former owners, exchanging one master for another: revenge.

Building an Escaped Slave

Some slaves are sent to the arena as gladiators, but escaped slaves likely served their owners in some other capacity. Some toiled beneath the burning sun while others groaned in the shade as they bore fat masters on palanquins. An escaped slave might have belonged to a merchant, a noble, or even a sorcerer-king. An escaped slave might have fled from the watchful eye of an artisan who owns no others or from the vast retinue of a plantation owner.

Rogues, bards, assassins, and others with a penchant for deceit make good choices for an escaped slave. The theme powers present useful abilities for melee combatants, but those who seek to hide their skills and avoid melee attacks, such as arcane casters or bow-wielding characters, might find the escaped slave theme useful. As a heroic escaped slave, your character might have learned the abilities of his or her class powers after escaping. Alternatively, your character's class might represent who he or she was before becoming enslaved. Perhaps your character hid these talents while owned by another, or maybe you put your abilities to use for your former master.

ESCAPED SLAVE TRAITS

Secondary Role: Striker
Power Source: Martial
Granted Power: You gain training in the Bluff skill, and you gain the ***hidden strike*** power.

Escaped Slave Powers

The following powers are available to any character with the escaped slave theme.

Hidden Strike — Escaped Slave Feature

You disguise your movements so that no one suspects you are at fault.

Encounter ✦ Martial
Free Action
Trigger: You make an attack
Effect: Make a Bluff check. If your result exceeds the passive Insight of creatures observing you, they believe something or someone else was the source of the triggering attack and treat you as invisible until the start of your next turn.

Level 2 Utility Exploit

No Bonds Can Hold — Escaped Slave Utility 2

You were imprisoned once. Never again.

Encounter ✦ Martial
Immediate Reaction **Personal**
Trigger: You are affected by a grabbed, restrained, immobilized, or slowed effect that can be ended by an escape attempt or saving throw
Effect: You make an escape attempt or saving throw (as appropriate) to end the triggering effect, with a +2 power bonus.

Level 3 Encounter Exploit

Repel the Siege — Escaped Slave Attack 3

With the fury of a caged beast, you lash out at those who would hem you in.

Encounter ✦ Martial, Weapon
Immediate Reaction **Close** burst 1
Trigger: An enemy moves to a square to flank you
Target: Each flanking enemy in burst
Attack: Primary ability vs. AC
Hit: 2[W] + ability modifier damage, and you push the target 1 square.
Effect: Until the end of your next turn, being flanked doesn't cause you to grant combat advantage.
Level 13
Hit: As above, but 3[W] + ability modifier damage.
Level 23
Hit: As above, but 4[W] + ability modifier damage.

Level 5 Daily Exploit

Turn the Tables — Escaped Slave Attack 5

You feign vulnerability and suddenly turn the tables on your foe, putting it in a terrible position.

Daily ✦ Martial, Weapon
Immediate Interrupt **Melee** weapon
Trigger: An enemy makes a melee attack against you.
Effect: You shift 1 square. If you are prone, you instead stand up in an unoccupied adjacent square. The triggering enemy is pulled into the square you vacated and is knocked prone. You make the following attack.
Target: The triggering enemy
Attack: Primary ability vs. AC
Hit: 2[W] + ability modifier damage, and you gain a +2 bonus to all defenses against the triggering attack.
Level 15
Hit: As above, but 3[W] + ability modifier damage.
Level 25
Hit: As above, but 4[W] + ability modifier damage.
Miss: Half damage.

Level 6 Utility Exploit

Wary Defense — Escaped Slave Utility 6

You remain light on your feet as you eye your foes.

Daily ✦ Martial, Stance
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: Until the stance ends, you gain a +1 power bonus to AC, and the first time any enemy moves adjacent to you on its turn, you can shift 1 square as a free action.

Level 7 Encounter Exploit

Astonishing Wound — Escaped Slave Attack 7

Your weapon appears to come from nowhere and stops your shocked enemy in its tracks.

Encounter ✦ Martial, Weapon
Standard Action **Melee or Ranged** weapon
Target: One creature
Effect: Make a Bluff check. If your result exceeds the target's passive Insight, then the target grants combat advantage to you for the following attack.
Attack: Primary ability vs. AC
Hit: 2[W] + ability modifier damage, and if the target grants combat advantage to you, it is immobilized until the end of your next turn.
Level 17
Hit: As above, but 3[W] + ability modifier damage.
Level 27
Hit: As above, but 4[W] + ability modifier damage.

Level 9 Daily Exploit

Who Is Master Now — Escaped Slave Attack 9

You use your weapon to draw your foe in close and then entrap it in your arms, where you command its actions like a puppeteer.

Daily ✦ Martial, Weapon
Standard Action **Melee** 1
Target: One creature that is your size, smaller than you, or one size category larger.
Attack: Primary ability vs. Fortitude
Hit: 1[W] + ability modifier damage, and the target is dominated (save ends). The only attacks you can force the target to make are weapon attacks. The target is also grabbed. If the grab ends, the domination also ends. Until the grab ends, you have a +2 power bonus to all defenses against melee attacks and ranged attacks.
Level 19
Hit: As above, but 2[W] + ability modifier damage.
Level 29
Hit: As above, but 3[W] + ability modifier damage.
Miss: Half damage, and the target is grabbed.

Level 10 Utility Exploit

Opportune Distraction — Escaped Slave Utility 10

You draw the attention of your foes elsewhere and make the most of the opportunity.

Encounter ✦ Martial
Free Action **Personal**
Effect: Make a Bluff check. If your result exceeds the passive Insight of creatures observing you, they cannot make opportunity attacks against you until the end of your next turn.

Freedom Fighter

"Every slave is a knife held close to the master's neck. All you need is the courage to press your advantage. He thinks that your chains deprive you of your strength when in fact, they are the weapons with which you fight. Use those shackles to serve freedom!"

Prerequisite: Escaped slave theme or warlord

Power alone is not reason to rule. One should earn obedience and loyalty, not force or buy it. The people need to understand that slavery serves no one. It is merely the strong stealing from the weak, and while that might suit the odious scavengers that sup on dusty carrion in the deserts, it's no way for people to live. They need someone to pull the veil from their eyes and break the bonds that restrict their thinking. Even the slaves need someone to show them they can be free. They need inspiration. They need an example—someone like an escaped slave.

You are a rarity in Athas: You believe in freedom. You fight not just for yourself but for others. Anyone who seeks to escape the master's whip deserves your help—as long as they don't wish to turn the lash upon others. The slave masters, the corrupt nobles, the rich merchants, and the sorcerer-kings—they have the power, but slaves outnumber free people ten to one, and that means the odds are in freedom's favor.

Freedom Fighter Path Features

Fight For Your Freedom (11th level): When you spend an action point to take an extra action, all allies within 10 squares of you that are marked or grabbed by enemies can make a basic attack as a free action.

If an ally's basic attack hits a target that is marking or grabbing that ally, the mark or grab ends. If no ally within range is marked or grabbed, you can instead choose one ally within 5 squares of you to make a basic attack as a free action.

Comrade's Help (11th level): You can use the aid another action as a move action when aiding a skill or ability check. If you are aiding an escape attempt or a skill or ability check to break bonds or find escape (Thievery to open a lock on chains, Strength to break down a door, Perception to find a way out, and so on), the bonus you grant equals 4 instead of 2.

Freedom Requires Vigilance (16th level): You and any allies within 3 squares of you gain a +2 power bonus to initiative, Perception, and Insight checks.

Freedom Fighter Exploits

Self-Sacrificing Strike — **Freedom Fighter Attack 11**

You dive to your friend's rescue and then rise up in revenge.

Encounter ✦ Martial, Weapon
Immediate Interrupt **Melee or Ranged** weapon
Trigger: An ally within 6 squares of you is the target of a ranged or melee attack.
Effect: You shift up to 5 squares to end adjacent to the triggering ally, slide the ally 1 square, and shift into the square the ally left. You make the following attack.
Target: The creature that made the triggering attack
Attack: Primary ability vs. AC
Hit: 3[W] + ability modifier damage, and you gain a +2 power bonus to all defenses against the triggering attack.
Eeffect: You become the target of the triggering attack.

Inspiring Example **Freedom Fighter Utility 12**

You're not giving up, and your fortitude renews your friends' hope.

Encounter ✦ Martial
Minor Action **Personal**

Effect: Make a saving throw against an effect that a save can end. If you succeed, allies who can see you can make a saving throw as a free action against any single effect that a save can end.

Vicious Guardian **Freedom Fighter Attack 20**

You strike a vicious blow against your foe to let it know that you are the only enemy worth facing.

Daily ✦ Martial, Weapon
Standard Action **Melee or Ranged** weapon
Target: One or two creatures
Attack: Primary ability vs. AC

Hit: 4[W] + ability modifier damage, and the target is marked (save ends). Until the mark ends, you can make a basic attack against the target as a free action each time it makes an attack that does not include you as a target.

Miss: Half damage, and the target is marked by you until the end of its next turn.

Escaped Slave Feats

The following feats are available to any character with the escaped slave theme.

Master of Escape

Prerequisite: Escaped slave theme

Benefit: You gain a +4 feat bonus to Thievery checks to open locks and use sleight of hand, and you also gain a +4 feat bonus to Acrobatics and Athletics checks to escape from a grab or from restraints.

Slave Sympathy

Prerequisite: Escaped slave theme

Benefit: You gain a +4 feat bonus to Streetwise checks in any settlement that has a significant population of slaves. You also gain a +2 feat bonus to Bluff, Diplomacy, Intimidate, and Sense Motive checks when using these skills upon a slave.

Slave to None

Prerequisite: Escaped slave theme

Benefit: You gain a +2 feat bonus to saving throws against effects that dominate, immobilize, or slow.

About the Author

Matthew Sernett is a writer and game designer for Wizards of the Coast who splits his time between Dungeons & Dragons® and Magic: The Gathering®. Recent credits include *Player's Handbook Races: Tieflings, The Plane Above: Secrets of the Astral Sea,* and *Magic: The Gathering: Zendikar.* When he's not making monsters or building worlds, he's watching bad fantasy movies you don't realize exist and shouldn't bother to learn about.

Bardic Items
Closing the Magic Treasure Gap

By Rodney Thompson
Illustration by Wayne England

Bards, like some other classes, need to split their treasure allotment between weapons and implements. Some, such as the *songblades* and *songbows*, present an option to combine the two into one. This article presents a number of new magic items that bards might find useful, including new *songblades*, *songbows*, and some wondrous items that can be used as bard implements as well. You can find more *songblades* and *songbows* in *Adventurer's Vault 2*.

New Weapons

Bard's Songblade — Level 1+

This simple blade whistles as you whip it through the air, creating melodic tones with every swipe.

Lvl 1	+1	360 gp	Lvl 16	+4	45,000 gp
Lvl 6	+2	1,800 gp	Lvl 21	+5	225,000 gp
Lvl 11	+3	9,000 gp	Lvl 26	+6	1,125,000 gp

Weapon: Heavy blade, light blade
Enhancement: Attack rolls and damage rolls
Critical: +1d6 damage per plus
Property: Bards can use this weapon as an implement for bard powers and bard paragon path powers.

Bard's Songbow — Level 1+

This simple bow produces beautiful sounds when you pluck its string.

Lvl 1	+1	360 gp	Lvl 16	+4	45,000 gp
Lvl 6	+2	1,800 gp	Lvl 21	+5	225,000 gp
Lvl 11	+3	9,000 gp	Lvl 26	+6	1,125,000 gp

Weapon: Bow, crossbow
Enhancement: Attack rolls and damage rolls
Critical: +1d6 per plus
Property: Bards can use this weapon as an implement for bard powers and bard paragon path powers.

Howling Songbow — Level 2+

The projectiles you let fly with this weapon howl as they lance out at your foes.

Lvl 2	+1	520 gp	Lvl 17	+4	65,000 gp
Lvl 7	+2	2,600 gp	Lvl 22	+5	325,000 gp
Lvl 12	+3	13,000 gp	Lvl 27	+6	1,625,000 gp

Weapon: Bow, crossbow
Enhancement: Attack rolls and damage rolls
Critical: +1d8 thunder damage per plus
Property: Bards can use this weapon as an implement for bard powers and bard paragon path powers.
Property: When you hit a target with this weapon, any creature granting the target cover from your attack takes thunder damage equal to the weapon's enhancement bonus.

Tuning Songblade — Level 4+

As your blade strikes the enemy, it rings out with a perfect note that echoes.

Lvl 4	+1	840 gp	Lvl 19	+4	105,000 gp
Lvl 9	+2	4,200 gp	Lvl 24	+5	525,000 gp
Lvl 14	+3	21,000 gp	Lvl 29	+6	2,625,000 gp

Weapon: Heavy blade, light blade
Enhancement: Attack rolls and damage rolls
Critical: +1d8 thunder damage per plus
Property: Bards can use this weapon as an implement for bard powers and bard paragon path powers.
Property: When you hit an enemy with this weapon, that enemy takes a penalty to its next saving throw against ongoing thunder damage. The penalty equals this weapon's enhancement bonus.
Power (Daily ✦ Thunder): Free Action. *Trigger:* You hit an enemy using this weapon. *Effect:* The target takes ongoing 5 thunder damage. While the target is taking this thunder damage, you get a +2 item bonus to attack rolls against that target.
Level 14 or 19: Ongoing 10 thunder damage.
Level 24 or 29: Ongoing 15 thunder damage.

Venomous Songblade — Level 3+

Like the words you whisper to your enemies, this weapon is filled with poison that saps their strength.

Lvl 3	+1	680 gp	Lvl 18	+4	85,000 gp
Lvl 8	+2	3,400 gp	Lvl 23	+5	425,000 gp
Lvl 13	+3	17,000 gp	Lvl 28	+6	2,125,000 gp

Weapon: Heavy blade, light blade
Enhancement: Attack rolls and damage rolls
Critical: +1d6 damage per plus
Property: Bards can use this weapon as an implement for bard powers and bard paragon path powers.
Power (Daily ✦ Poison): Free Action. *Trigger:* You hit an enemy using this weapon. *Effect:* One target you hit is weakened (save ends).

Venomous Songbow — Level 3+

The arrows that fly from this weapon are laced with poison that lingers in the target's system long after your attack.

Lvl 3	+1	680 gp	Lvl 18	+4	85,000 gp
Lvl 8	+2	3,400 gp	Lvl 23	+5	425,000 gp
Lvl 13	+3	17,000 gp	Lvl 28	+6	2,125,000 gp

Weapon: Bow, crossbow
Enhancement: Attack rolls and damage rolls
Critical: +1d6 damage per plus
Property: Bards can use this weapon as an implement for bard powers and bard paragon path powers.
Power (Daily ✦ Poison): Free Action. *Trigger:* You hit an enemy using this weapon. *Effect:* One target you hit takes ongoing 5 poison damage (save ends).
Level 13 or 18: Ongoing 10 poison damage (save ends).
Level 23 or 28: Ongoing 15 poison damage (save ends).

Wailing Songbow — Level 2+

The arrows launched by this weapon scream out a note, even while embedded in your foes.

Lvl 2	+1	520 gp	Lvl 17	+4	65,000 gp
Lvl 7	+2	2,600 gp	Lvl 22	+5	325,000 gp
Lvl 12	+3	13,000 gp	Lvl 27	+6	1,625,000 gp

Weapon: Bow, crossbow
Enhancement: Attack rolls and damage rolls
Critical: +1d6 damage per plus
Property: Bards can use this weapon as an implement for bard powers and bard paragon path powers.
Property: When you hit a creature with this weapon, the target takes a penalty to Stealth checks equal to this weapon's enhancement bonus until the end of your next turn.
Power (Encounter): Minor Action. You ignore all concealment penalties to your next attack roll made with this weapon if you have already hit the target once with this weapon this encounter.

New Wondrous Items

Lyre of Supplication — Level 29

This beautiful lyre is said to produce music so appealing that it could bend the wills of the gods.

Wondrous Item 2,625,000 gp
Property: Bards can use this item as an implement for bard powers, bard paragon path powers, and this item's power. As an implement, it grants a +6 enhancement bonus to attack rolls and damage rolls, and it deals 6d6 extra damage on a critical hit.
Power (Daily ✦ Charm, Implement): Standard Action. You make the following attack:
Standard Action **Ranged** 10
Target: One creature
Attack: Charisma vs. Will
Hit: The target is dominated until the end of your next turn.

Mesmerizing Harp — Level 9

This harp emits soothing tones on its own, and it can continue to play itself even after you have stopped.

Wondrous Item 4,200 gp
Property: Bards can use this item as an implement for bard powers and bard paragon path powers. As an implement, it grants a +2 enhancement bonus to attack rolls and damage rolls, and it deals 2d6 extra damage on a critical hit.
Power (Daily ✦ Charm): Standard Action. Until the end of your next turn, enemies take a -2 penalty to Will while within 5 squares of the harp.
Sustain Minor: The effect persists until the end of your next turn. You can sustain this effect even if you no longer hold the harp and as long as the harp is within your line of sight.

About the Author

Rodney Thompson is an RPG designer at Wizards of the Coast. Originally from Chattanooga, TN, his credits for Dungeons & Dragons® include *Monster Manual 3*, the *Dark Sun Campaign Setting*, *Player Essentials: Heroes of the Fallen Lands*, *Player Essentials: Heroes of the Forgotten Kingdoms*, and *Monster Vault*.

Class Acts: Sorcerer

The Shivs of Sorcery

By Claudio Pozas

Illustration by Wayne England

"With your blade, you cut only flesh. I cut reality."

–Almates, Vistani guide and knife fighter

The dagger has long stood as a symbol of the sorcerer's magical power. Although the swordmage also learns to cast spells with bladed weapons, only the sorcerer knows how to instinctively focus his or her magical energy to the knife's edge. But a rare breed of sorcerers is not content with that innate talent. They travel the length and breadth of the Nentir Vale and beyond, into the ruins of lost Arkhosia and dark Bael Turath, seeking to expand and improve their techniques. But these travels steer clear of libraries, temples, and other centers of academia. Instead they go to the seedier parts of towns and villages, to shadowed back alleys and damp cellars, where the true masters practice their bloody craft. There, among ruffians and thugs, these sorcerers fight for cash, honor, revenge, or bloodlust. They are the shivs of sorcery.

Far from being a formal guild or association, the shivs of sorcery are a loose assortment of like-minded individuals. The name was coined almost 300 years ago by the eladrin bard Lynadallin, a native of the Feywild city of Mithredain who came to the world fascinated by the grimier and darker aspects of mortal life. Lynadallin traveled alongside and

recorded the exploits of a wild-blooded, adventure-seeking sorcerer named Almates. This human Vistani was not the first sorcerer to become proficient as a dagger-fighter, but he was the first to become widely renowned for his dagger-wielding skill, thanks to the songs and lays of Lynadallin. The recent rise in popularity of knife fighting among sorcerers can be attributed directly to Lynadallin's collected stories about Almates and his legendary bouts.

Almates disappeared from the world while still undefeated among the bloody dueling circles in which he traveled. No one, not even Lynadallin, knew Almates's fate. In the centuries since his' disappearance, more and more sorcerers have taken inspiration from the stories of his exploits. Most hail from humble, downtrodden backgrounds and are associated with thieves' guilds or assassin circles. Shivs of sorcery aren't necessarily friendly toward one another, but it is rare enough to meet another arcane caster in a circle of cutthroats that they treat each other with at least a measure of professional courtesy. Matches between two sorcerers always warrant a frenzy of bets from the spectators—from a healthy distance, of course. A sorcerer can rise to quite a celebrity status among the riff-raff with his or her dagger-wielding skills alone.

The sorcerers that follow the path of the shivs of sorcery are consummate strikers, as usual, but instead of focusing only on ranged attacks and bursts of elemental energy, they weave their spells to enhance their fighting prowess. The result is that the shivs of sorcery have more in common with rogues and barbarians than warlocks or archers. They tend to fight as skirmishers, mixing melee attacks and area spells liberally. They are among the first to volunteer for single combat, especially if the opposing champion wields weapons. Shivs of sorcery get along well with swordmages, who like to mix it up in melee as much as they do, but shivs of sorcery often seem all too eager to match their skills against rogues, specifically daggermasters.

When not displaying their skills in a knife-fighting circle, shivs of sorcery often take work as bodyguards or enforcers. Those who pick up adventuring instead look for quests that involve remote locations in far off lands, in hopes of learning new techniques from exotic masters such as drow or githzerai. In fact, grandmaster training (*Dungeon Master's Guide 2*) is a perfect reward for a shiv of sorcery.

BACKGROUNDS

Here are background elements for shivs of sorcery.

Back Alley Bravo: You have long settled scores at knifepoint. Did you work for a thieves' guild as an enforcer, or did you fight to repel those same thugs from your neighborhood? How did you come across your fighting skills? Were you taught by an aging master, or did you learn it the hard way? How do you view these activities now? Do you have a grudge against criminals and take on quests to put bandits down? Or is there bad blood between you and your former associates? You have learned to remain unseen when pursued and to stand your ground when you have nowhere to turn.

Associated Skills: Intimidate, Stealth

Knife Enthusiast: You earned your living through knife fighting matches in the seedier parts of town. Were you raised into this life by your relatives and friends, or did you fall on hard times and decide to put your skill with the blade to use rectifying your misfortunes? Do you plan on leaving this life behind for more honest work, or is the bloody sport too enticing for you to abandon entirely? In the tight circles of dirt you have learned to read your opponent's moves and mislead them.

Associated Skills: Bluff, Insight

Wandering Master: You have improved your fighting skills with techniques from far off lands. Did you learn from expatriates from those lands, or did you travel there yourself? Has this worldly experience imbued you with a controlled demeanor, scoffing at the posturing of novice brawlers? Do you favor quests that take you to the far corners of the world, or is there some place to which you dread returning? You have learned the ways of the world, and you're ready to take to the road at a moment's notice.

Associated Skills: History, Nature

Associated Languages: Any one, except for Infernal and Supernal

Feats

The following feats provide a Shiv of Sorcery character with flavorful options for combat situations and more.

Heroic Tier Feats

The following feats are suitable for any character who meets the prerequisites.

Armored Sorcerer

Prerequisite: Sorcerer, proficiency with leather armor

Benefit: When wearing leather armor, any resistance you gain from your Spell Source class feature increases by 2.

Champion of the Bloody Circle

Prerequisite: Sorcerer

Benefit: You gain training in Streetwise.

You also gain a +2 feat bonus to Intimidate and Streetwise checks.

Cosmic Blade Channeling

Prerequisite: Cosmic Magic class feature, Sorcerous Blade Channeling feat

Benefit: Once per round, when you hit with an attack made using Sorcerous Blade Channeling, you gain a benefit based on your current phase:

Phase of the Sun: You push the target 1 square.

Phase of the Moon: You slide the target 1 square to a square adjacent to you.

Phase of the Stars: You roll a saving throw.

Mastery of Knives

Prerequisite: Sorcerer

Benefit: You gain proficiency with the kukri and katar, and you can treat them as daggers for the purpose of casting sorcerer spells.

Storm Blade Channeling

Prerequisite: Storm Magic class feature, Sorcerous Blade Channeling feat

Benefit: Once per round, when you hit with an attack using Sorcerous Blade Channeling, you can shift 1 square as a free action.

Wild Blade Channeling

Prerequisite: Wild Magic class feature, Sorcerous Blade Channeling feat

Benefit: When you use Sorcerous Blade Channeling to make a melee attack using a sorcerer attack power that has a variable energy type, you can roll twice and choose either result for the energy type.

Paragon Tier Feats

Feats in this section are available to any characters of 11th level and above who meet the prerequisites.

Blade Channeling Mastery

Prerequisite: 11th level, Sorcerous Blade Channeling feat

Benefit: When you deliver a sorcerer ranged attack as a melee attack using Sorcerous Blade Channeling and the attack has an effect that a save can end, the target takes a -3 penalty to the first saving throw against that effect.

Bloody Channeling

Prerequisite: 11th level, Sorcerous Blade Channeling feat

Benefit: When delivering a sorcerer ranged attack as a melee attack using Sorcerous Blade Channeling, you gain combat advantage against enemies taking ongoing damage.

Sorcerer Spells

While wielding daggers, shivs of sorcery can use several flashy powers against those who oppose them.

Ensorcelled Blade — Sorcerer Attack 1

Your blade flashes into action in a painful riposte as your innate magical power flows into it.

At-Will ✦ Arcane, Weapon, Varies
Standard Action **Melee** weapon
Requirement: You must be wielding a dagger.
Target: One creature
Attack: Charisma vs. AC
Hit: 1[W] + Charisma modifier damage. If the target hits or misses you with a melee attack before the start of your next turn, it takes damage equal to the extra damage from your Spell Source class feature. This damage is of a single type to which you have resistance arising from your Spell Source class feature.
Increase damage to 2[W] + Charisma modifier at 21st level.
Special: You can use this power in place of a melee basic attack.

Teleporting Strike — Sorcerer Attack 1

You stab your enemy, then teleport around it and stab it again to hamper its actions.

Encounter ✦ Arcane, Teleportation, Weapon
Standard Action **Melee** weapon
Requirement: You must be wielding a dagger.
Target: One creature
Primary Attack: Charisma vs. AC
Hit: 1[W] + Charisma modifier damage.
Effect: You teleport to a square adjacent to the target and make a secondary attack.
Secondary Attack: Charisma vs. AC. If you hit with the primary attack, you have combat advantage for this attack.
Hit: The target is slowed and weakened until the end of your next turn.

Lightning Cuts — Sorcerer Attack 3

Your dagger is enveloped by electricity and you move with blinding speed, delivering a dozen shallow cuts to your opponent before it can even blink.

Encounter ✦ Arcane, Lightning, Weapon
Minor Action **Melee** weapon
Requirement: You must be wielding a dagger.
Target: One creature
Attack: Charisma vs. Reflex
Hit: 2[W] lightning damage.

Blinding Blade — Sorcerer Attack 5

Light flashes brightly from your blade, burning your opponent's eyes even as you lunge into another attack.

Daily ✦ Arcane, Weapon
Standard Action **Melee** weapon
Requirement: You must be wielding a dagger.
Target: One creature
Attack: Charisma vs. AC
Hit: 2[W] + Charisma modifier damage, and the target is blinded (save ends).
Miss: Half damage, and the target takes a -2 penalty to attack rolls until the end of your next turn.

Dweomer Dagger — Sorcerer Attack 7

Your dagger pierces more than the target's flesh, opening its aura to your magic.

Encounter ✦ Arcane, Weapon
Standard Action **Melee** weapon
Requirement: You must be wielding a dagger.
Target: One creature
Attack: Charisma vs. AC
Hit: 2[W] + Charisma modifier damage, and the target takes a -2 penalty to all defenses until the end of your next turn.

Force Daggers — Sorcerer Attack 9

You sheathe your dagger in a field of force, which then shatters into a dozen floating replicas all over the battlefield, mimicking your moves.

Daily ✦ Arcane, Force, Weapon
Standard Action **Close** blast 3
Requirement: You must be wielding a dagger.
Target: Each enemy you can see in blast
Attack: Charisma vs. AC
Hit: 2[W] + Charisma modifier force damage. If only one target was in the blast, you deal 3[W] extra force damage.
Miss: Half damage.

About the Author

Claudio Pozas is a hybrid artist/writer multiclassed as a jack-of-all-trades. In the past 10 years, he worked on dozens of RPG products, usually doing both text and art. His credits include *Fiery Dragon's Counter Collection* and BattleBox series. He lives in his native Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, with his wife Paula, son Daniel, and their pet dire tiger Tyler. His art can be seen at www.enworld.org/Pozas.

Class Acts: Warlord

Uncommon Commanders

By Robert J. Schwalb
Illustration by Wayne England

"They killed my family. They burned my village. My people are scattered and the enemy revels in their slaughter. I may be crude. I may be simple in your eyes, but I am fierce and without fear. I come to you to learn, to master your ways, so I can bring this knowledge to my people and lead them to the vengeance my enemies demand."

In all things, there are those who follow and those who lead. On the battlefield, a strong leader can make all the difference between victory and defeat. A leader need not be a hulking tyrant commanding through fear. A leader can be a brilliant tactician, a wily and resourceful commander, or a shining symbol whose presence fills all who follow with the nerve needed to meet any challenge.

Leaders can be found in all traditions. The courageous bard beguiles his foes to create new opportunities or fills allies with confidence through his songs. The devout cleric inspires through her unwavering faith by calling forth the power of the gods to light the way to victory.

In those who depend on arms and armor, who master the ancient fighting forms passed down through generations, the burden of command falls to the warlord.

It takes courage to claim leadership's mantle and strength to hold it, from the commoner who finds within him the iron needed to muster his fellows and repulse the goblin raiders to the foot soldier who lifts a fallen banner to rally the broken ranks. The ability

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to lead is not something that can be learned. It is a virtue, sometimes hidden, but a gift one is born with and a power that can be used for good or ill.

Within every power source, there are those who can lead. As with the arcane and divine, the martial power source is no different, and those who lead are the warlords. The *Player's Handbook* and *Martial Power* present four builds to demonstrate different techniques a warlord might adopt. The inspiring warlord leads by example, heartening allies with his presence alone. The tactical warlord possesses keen insight and the battle acumen needed to seize the advantage in combat and embolden allies to reach farther and fight harder. The bravura warlord takes dangerous risks for the sweet rewards it gains when his uncertain tactics play out, while the resourceful warlord always has a trick up his sleeve.

These warlords are but a sample of those who come to this class, a smattering of techniques and approaches representing the most common and most successful methods available. But these are not all. Like any characters, warlords can dabble in other classes. Doing so broadens their capabilities and gives them new assets to use in the thick of battle. Since warlords may come from any background, from savage warriors to decadent nobles schooled in military history, warlords can arise in other places too, even in other classes. A warlock may find the power she bargained with places greater demands which turn her mission to the purpose of war. A paladin might lead a crusade against a dark god's servants, while a barbarian could master his enemies' techniques to turn the tables against them. These are but a few of the possibilities available.

Warlord Paragon Paths

Just as characters from any background might become warlords by fate or circumstance, adventurers may also find themselves answering battle's call by exploring the warlord's exploits. The following paragon paths present different expressions for this idea, showing how the warlord's tactics change when a character blends two traditions into one that is entirely unique.

Several paragon paths here require two classes. The easiest way to meet the prerequisite is to be a member of one class and multiclass in another. Alternatively, you can qualify by choosing the appropriate hybrid classes (see *Player's Handbook 3*). For example, the warpath berserker paragon path requires both warlord and barbarian. You could choose this class if you are a warlord with the Berserker's Fury feat, a barbarian with the Student of Battle feat, a barbarian/warlord hybrid character, or a hybrid character with either barbarian or warlord hybrid classes and one of the two aforementioned feats.

Battle Champion

"These scars tell you all you need to know about my experience. Follow my lead and you'll get your victory."

Prerequisite: Warlord and fighter, *inspiring word* power

You have seen more battles than you can count. The clash of weapon against armor, the bitter screams of dying soldiers, the creaking of saddle leather, all of this and more are as much a part of you as the blood in your veins and the heart that pumps it. No training could prepare you for the atrocities you witness. No drill simulates the life and death struggle between enemies. You may have learned the fundamentals from your mentor, but the battlefield was your true instructor.

You combine tactical genius with practical application, blending your talent for maneuver with your mastery over fighting techniques and weaponry. You lead from the front, charge into battle, and smash through your enemies. You can direct your allies to positions where they can be most effective. Those who fight on your side learn much from your techniques, and by following your example are better able to respond to the enemies arrayed against you.

The battle champion paragon path is best suited to tactical warlords and guardian fighters. Your path features improve your allies' performance, giving them a powerful edge when using action points and the ability to match your attacks when you spend an action point. Your powers work best when you are engaged with an enemy while allies are nearby.

Battle Champion Path Features

Champion's Presence (11th level): Whenever an ally you can see spends an action point to make an extra attack, the ally makes two attack rolls on its first attack and uses the higher result. The attack scores a critical hit on a roll of 19 or 20.

Defensive Word (11th level): Any ally that regains hit points from your *inspiring word* also gains a +2 bonus to all defenses until it makes an attack.

Veteran Action (16th level): When you spend an action point to make an extra attack, one ally adjacent to you may also make a melee basic attack as a free action.

Battle Champion Exploits

End This — Battle Champion Attack 11

You send your enemy onto a waiting ally's weapon with a mighty swing.

Encounter ✦ Martial, Weapon
Standard Action **Melee** weapon
Target: One creature
Attack: Strength vs. AC
Hit: 1[W] + Strength modifier damage, and you push the target up to 5 squares to a square adjacent to an ally you can see. That ally can then make a melee basic attack against the target as a free action. The ally has combat advantage for this attack.

Vigilant Defense — Battle Champion Utility 12

A harsh command sharpens your allies' focus so no enemy can get past them.

Daily ✦ Martial, Zone
Minor Action **Close** burst 1
Effect: The burst creates a zone that lasts until the end of the encounter. The zone moves with you, remaining centered on your space. Allies in the zone gain a bonus to opportunity attack rolls equal to your Intelligence modifier.

Decisive Stratagem — Battle Champion Attack 20

Even as you press your attack against your opponent, you bark commands to your allies to ensure a swift and final victory.

Daily ✦ Martial, Weapon
Standard Action **Melee** weapon
Effect: Before the attack, you can slide each ally within 5 squares of you 1 square.
Target: One creature
Attack: Strength + 2 vs. AC
Hit: 2[W] + Strength modifier damage.
Effect: Each ally within 5 squares of you can shift 1 square as a free action, gain 5 + your Intelligence modifier temporary hit points, or make a melee basic attack as a free action.

Sainted General

"I have seen the face of my god. Can you say the same? How, then, could your cause be greater than mine own?"

Prerequisite: Warlord and paladin, *divine challenge* power

Faith is a powerful ally in battle, but sometimes it is not enough. Religious leaders may demonstrate incomparable knowledge of heavenly matters, but such lore is of little use when battling on a blood-soaked field. Divine servants who find themselves embroiled in grinding battles or drawn into vicious wars over matters of doctrine or politics may turn to secular leaders to command their armies. While any general friendly to the temple will serve, most prefer allies who share their beliefs and uphold their doctrines. Finding such an individual ensures loyalty to the righteous cause and reaffirms the temple's role in the lives of those recruited to fight on its behalf.

You may have come to this path through an uncommon devotion to one or more gods or served as a divine champion until your faith transcended your capability and drove you to master tactics and warfare. You are a warrior of the heavens. You lead your companions into battle with righteousness, with your sword and faith as your shield. You are a beacon in combat, reminding your comrades of the worthiness of your cause and strengthening their dedication to see it to its end.

The sainted general is especially useful to inspiring warlords and protecting paladins. You can still fill the defender role if you're a paladin, but the path features and powers make you a strong team player. If you stay close to your companions, you can provide a steady supply of divine power to augment their attacks and to scorch your enemies with heavenly fire.

Sainted General Path Features

Sainted Challenge (11th level): When your *divine challenge* power damages an enemy, each ally adjacent to that enemy deals extra radiant damage equal to your Charisma modifier on melee and close attacks that include the enemy as a target until the start of your next turn.

Sacrificial Action (11th level): If you hit with a paladin or warlord power, you may spend an action point. Instead of gaining an extra action, one ally within 5 squares of you can spend a healing surge and regain extra hit points equal to your Strength modifier.

Inspired Revival (16th level): When you use *inspiring word*, all damage dealt by the target before the end of your next turn gains the radiant damage type and keyword.

Sainted General Prayers

Brilliant Corona — Sainted General Attack 11

A blinding corona blazes around your head, dazzling your enemies with punishing light.

Encounter ✦ Divine, Implement, Radiant
Standard Action **Close** burst 1
Target: Each enemy in burst
Attack: Charisma vs. Fortitude
Hit: The target is blinded until the end of your next turn.
Effect: You may make a melee basic attack as a free action against any one enemy not blinded by the attack.

Heaven's Warriors Sainted General Utility 12

Light suffuses you, giving you the power to choose heaven's warriors. Those you select are marked with a tongue of brilliant fire shining from their brows.

Encounter ✦ Divine, Fire, Radiant, Zone
Standard Action **Close** burst 3
Effect: The burst creates a zone of bright light that lasts until the end of your next turn. Any ally in the zone can choose one of the following effects:
- ✦ Deal extra fire and radiant damage on next attack equal to your Charisma modifier + one-half your level.
- ✦ Gain a bonus to all defenses equal to your Charisma modifier until the end of your next turn.
- ✦ Spend a healing surge and regain extra hit points equal to your Charisma modifier.

Radiant Crusade Sainted General Attack 20

There can be no mercy, no hesitation, for the gods have spoken: you must purge the unclean enemy with fire and sword.

Daily ✦ Divine, Fire, Radiant, Weapon
Standard Action **Close** burst 5
Target: You and each ally in burst
Effect: The target makes a melee basic attack as a free action. On a hit, the target deals extra fire and radiant damage equal to your Charisma modifier on all melee attacks until the end of the encounter. On a miss, the target instead regains hit points equal to your Charisma modifier.

Warpath Berserker

"What need have we for tactics when we have strength and audacity?"

Prerequisite: Warlord and barbarian

Tactics have their place. A cunning stratagem can give you and your fellows a decisive advantage in the opening forays, but slavish adherence to plans invites disaster. Circumstances change, and when they do, the best response is to do something your enemy would never expect.

You stand between two worlds. You have the knowledge and training of a field commander, but your military expertise is ever at odds with your reckless manner. You might devise some plan but abandon it quickly, giving in to your bloodlust and rage when circumstances change. When you do, your allies find your wrath infectious, the frenzy overtaking common sense as they smash through their opponents.

The most powerful warpath berserkers come from bravura warlords and thaneborn barbarians. Wrath burns within you, seething in your heart. Yet you can master this anger and bend it to incite your allies to find new courage and strength. Those nearest you feel your wrath and make it their own, and the longer they fight alongside you, the more intense their outbursts become.

Warpath Berserker Path Features

Awakened Wrath (11th level): Whenever an ally you can see scores a critical hit with a melee attack, you gain combat advantage against all enemies until the end of your next turn.

Inciting Action (11th level): Rather than gain an extra action, you may spend an action point to let one ally who can see and hear you make a charge attack as a free action. Your ally receives a bonus to the attack roll and damage roll equal to your Charisma modifier. If this attack misses, the ally grants combat advantage to all attackers until the end of your next turn.

Infectious Rage (16th level): Whenever you are raging or are benefiting from the Berserker's Fury feat, all allies who can see and hear you gain a +2 bonus to damage rolls.

Warpath Berserker Evocations

Crush Them Warpath Berserker Attack 11

With a slap on the back, you send your allies into battle to claim their glory.

Encounter ✦ Primal, Weapon
Standard Action **Melee** touch
Target: One or two allies
Effect: The target makes a charge attack as a free action. If at least one charge attack hits, you regain the use of this power. If no charge attack hits, you become dazed until the start of your next turn.

Test of Mettle Warpath Berserker Utility 12

You dare your companion to face its fears and overcome them.

Daily ✦ Healing, Primal
Minor Action **Melee** touch
Target: One ally
Effect: The target can either spend a healing surge and regain hit points equal to one-half its surge value, or the target can make a melee basic attack as a free action. If the attack hits, it deals no damage, but the ally can spend a healing surge and regain hit points equal to twice its surge value. On a hit or miss, the ally becomes immune to fear effects until the end of the encounter.

Warpath Rage Warpath Berserker Attack 20

A brutal smash into your enemy shatters your patience and throws you into the warpath rage.

Daily ✦ Primal, Rage, Weapon
Standard Action **Melee** weapon
Target: One creature
Attack: Strength vs. AC
Hit: 3[W] + Strength modifier damage, you push the target up to a number of squares equal to your Charisma modifier, and the target falls prone.
Effect: You enter the rage of the warpath. Until the rage ends, each time you bloody your target with a melee attack, one ally adjacent to your target that you can see may make a melee basic attack as a free action.

Witchmaster

"Relying on traditional methods is a good way to get yourself killed."

Prerequisite: Warlord and warlock

Arcane magic demands much of those who would master it. It consumes time and attention. A disciplined mind is needed to bend raw energy into useful spells. Many arcane users find that the power they attain through this pursuit is sufficient: its rewards are great and the secrets unlocked are astonishing. A taste of power leads some to look beyond their dusty tomes and ritual circles to turn their power toward temporal gains. Arcanists prove capable, if not devastating, in battle, and those who dabble in leadership, commanding servants and powers beyond comprehension, prove to be some of the deadliest warlords of all.

Marrying power drawn from your pact with the martial techniques used by a warlord, you become a commanding presence on the battlefield. You twist your spells to confound your enemies while helping allies attain the best positions they can to meet the battle's demands. Even when your foes thwart your clever plans, you have a knack for finding solutions to the thorniest problems.

Witchmaster Features

Adaptable Witchery (11th level): When you would use a warlock ranged attack power, you may make the attack as if you were in a space occupied by any ally in your line of sight. If the ally is adjacent to an enemy, your attack provokes an opportunity attack from all enemies adjacent to you. Otherwise, this attack does not provoke opportunity attacks.

Bewitching Action (11th level): Whenever you or an ally within 5 squares of you spends an action point to make an attack with an arcane power, you may slide each enemy adjacent to you 1 square.

Arcane Presence (16th level): Whenever an ally would benefit from your Commanding Presence class feature, the ally may also teleport a number of squares equal to your Intelligence modifier. You must have line of sight to the ally's destination square.

Witchmaster Spells

Eldritch Missile — Witchmaster Attack 11

You infuse dark magic into your weapon so that when it strikes, your opponent's pain manifests in a psychic storm to burn its allies' minds and embolden your allies.

Encounter ✦ Arcane, Psychic, Weapon
Standard Action **Ranged** weapon
Target: One creature
Attack: Strength vs. AC
Hit: 2[W] + Strength modifier damage, and each enemy adjacent to the target takes psychic damage equal to your Charisma modifier.
Effect: Each ally adjacent to the target gains temporary hit points equal to your Intelligence modifier.

No Wasted Opportunity Witchmaster Utility 12

One ally may have let an opportunity pass by, but your exhortation ensures that there will be some benefit.

Daily ✦ Arcane
Immediate Reaction **Close** burst 10
Trigger: An ally in the burst misses with an opportunity attack.
Target: You or one ally you can see
Effect: The target gains an action point. This action point must be spent before the end of the encounter or it is lost. Using this action point does not count against the normal limit on action point expenditure.

Eldritch Allies — Witchmaster Attack 20

A strike from your weapon calls forth apparitions to swirl around your opponent in a ghostly storm.

Daily ✦ Arcane, Weapon, Zone
Standard Action **Ranged** weapon
Target: One creature
Attack: Strength vs. AC
Hit: 3[W] + Strength modifier damage.
Effect: Center a burst 2 on the target. The burst creates a zone (save ends). The zone moves with the target, remaining centered on its space. Allies gain a bonus to damage rolls equal to your Charisma modifier on all attacks targeting creatures in the zone.

About the Author

Robert J. Schwalb is a freelance game designer with numerous design and development credits including *Draconomicon 2: Metallic Dragons, Primal Power, Dragon Magazine Annual 2009, Adventurer's Vault 2, Divine Power, Eberron Player's Guide, Eberron Campaign Guide, Player's Handbook 2, P2 Demon Queen's Enclave, Manual of the Planes, Martial Power, Draconomicon I: Chromatic Dragons,* the *Forgotten Realms Player's Guide,* and numerous articles in *Dragon* and *Dungeon* magazines. Robert lives in Tennessee with his wife Stacee and his sweet potato cats.

Winning Races: Eladrin

Beyond the Spiral Tower

By Tim Eagon

Illustration by Slawomir Maniak

To eladrin, arcane magic is Corellon's supreme gift—an art epitomized by the venerable traditions of the swordmage and wizard. However, they are not the only ways of acquiring such power, and one can find representatives of the other arcane classes throughout eladrin society. In particular, artificers and warlocks stand out, though for very different reasons due to the attitudes of the prevailing arcane culture.

Although eladrin artificers train in prestigious academies throughout the Feywild, their wizard counterparts often regard them as "mere" craftspeople or technicians. To them, the artificer's approach to magic lacks the requisite elegance, mystery, and sophistication of wizardry, and though eladrin artificers might resent this unfair characterization, their society provides few opportunities to prove it wrong.

Consequently, many frustrated artificers become adventurers.

Warlocks have an even worse reputation in a culture that idealizes diligent study as the proper means of attaining arcane power. Many eladrin wizards wrongly dismiss warlocks as lazy and dangerous at best or traitors and lunatics at worst (especially dark pact warlocks). Because of this cultural stigma and in spite of their often-considerable magnetism, most eladrin warlocks are loners, and while they might favor the fey pact, few find patrons among their own kind. Fittingly, this fringe existence suits many warlocks, since it affords them the opportunity to pursue their darker and more esoteric studies without interference.

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Eladrin Artificer

When an eladrin youth first exhibits a talent for arcane magic, he or she is rigorously tested and then strongly "encouraged" to attend specialized schools based on the results. Thus, although frequently overshadowed by nearby wizard colleges, most sizeable eladrin communities support at least one school devoted to training artificers (sometimes more, depending on the local demand for magic items). Typically, these institutions instill a sense of camaraderie and a fierce loyalty to the school itself, though their critics would also say that they foster inferiority complexes and pointless rivalries with other nearby academies. Because of this outlook, as well as an education emphasizing applied magic over theory, many observers have noted that academy-trained artificers seem less detached than their fellow eladrin and are more prone to join or form cooperative organizations such as professional guilds, military units, and adventuring parties.

Background

This background is suitable for eladrin artificers.

Battlefield Wonderworker: Even at an early age, your aptitude for arcane magic differed from that of your peers. Instead of pouring over dusty tomes or practicing with your blade, you tinkered with constructs of your own design or experimented with alchemical reagents. After completing your studies, you joined the military to seek excitement and test your skills. However, you quickly became disillusioned with a military dominated by haughty wizards and swordmages, and you left to pursue a career as an adventurer.

Were you jealous of the advantages typically reserved for your wizard and swordmage peers? Did you wish to emulate them or did you defiantly pursue your own interests? How did your attitude affect your studies and subsequent career? What finally prompted you to leave the military? Did you leave of your own accord or in disgrace?

Associated Skills: Arcana, Athletics

Feats

The following feats are suitable for any character who meets the prerequisites.

Academy Prodigy

Prerequisite: Eladrin, artificer

Benefit: You gain a +3 feat bonus to two skills from the artificer's class skill list.

Arcane Repositioning

Prerequisite: Eladrin, artificer

Benefit: On your turn, you can use a free action to expend your *fey step* racial power to teleport one of your conjurations or a creature that you summoned rather than yourself. If you do so, select one conjuration or summoned creature within 5 of squares of you and teleport it 5 squares. You cannot teleport a conjuration larger than 1 square or a summoned creature that is size Large or larger.

Feymind Infusion

Prerequisite: Eladrin, artificer, Healing Infusion class feature

Benefit: The target of your *healing infusion* can make a saving throw against a single charm or fear effect that a save can end. The target gains a bonus to its saving throw equal to your Constitution or Wisdom modifier.

Eladrin Warlock

Many eladrin warlocks emerge from prominent schools of wizardry (in fact, many are actually multiclass or hybrid wizards), where prospective patrons or their agents secretly search for promising candidates from among the most ambitious, disaffected, reckless, or desperate apprentices. The patron entices the warlock with prophetic visions and a continual susurrus of arcane secrets that knowing students refer to as "twilight lectures." Those who pledge themselves to a patron often find that their newfound power quickly alienates them from their fellow students and teachers, and most nascent warlocks soon leave school. Some depart voluntarily. Many others, especially those attending more conservative academies, are expelled. Those that remain either keep their pact secret or are subject to increasing amounts of scrutiny and ostracism.

Background

Here is a background element for eladrin warlocks.

Fainéant Apprentice: Despite your natural talent for magic, you never particularly cared for formal instruction, causing your frustrated teachers to brand you as lazy and glib. Nothing could have been further from the truth, as you had discovered something that broadened your horizons and set you on the true path to arcane power. Now, if they knew the truth, your teachers would probably brand you as dangerous.

What ultimately led you to forsake a more reputable arcane career? How have your choices affected your academic and personal relationships? Is anyone aware of your eldritch pact or is it still your secret? How would they treat you if they found out?

Associated Skills: Bluff, Stealth

Feats

The following feats are suitable for any character who meets the prerequisites.

Eldritch Blade

Prerequisite: Eladrin, warlock, *eldritch strike* power

Benefit: When you use *eldritch strike* and wield a longsword, you gain a +1 bonus to your attack roll.

Gifted Death Dealer

Prerequisite: Eladrin, warlock, *eldritch blast* power

Benefit: When you hit a creature with your *eldritch blast*, you deal a feat bonus to damage equal to your Intelligence modifier.

Renewed by Blood

Prerequisite: Eladrin, warlock

Benefit: Once per encounter, when you reduce an enemy under your *warlock's curse* to 0 hit points, you can regain the use of your *fey step* racial power if you have already used it that encounter instead of gaining your normal pact boon.

Elusive Hexer

Prerequisite: 11th level, eladrin, warlock, fey pact

Benefits: When an enemy takes damage from your *warlock's curse* on your turn, you are invisible until the end of that turn.

Fey Familiars

The Feywild teems with arcane spirits, and many are willing to bind themselves to promising arcanists. Though favored by the fey, the familiars presented here are available to anyone.

Fiddling Grig Familiar

This tiny sprite has the upper body of a humanoid, but the wings, antennae, and legs of a cricket. It wears a gaily colored vest and plays a miniature fiddle.

Senses low-light vision
Speed 4, fly 6
Constant Benefits
You can master and perform bard rituals as if you had the Ritual Caster feat.
The grig can act as a focus for any bard ritual that requires a musical instrument worth fewer than 100 gp.
Active Benefits
Irresistible Dance: Once per round, when you hit an enemy adjacent to the Fiddling Grig with an arcane attack power, that enemy cannot make opportunity attacks until the end of your next turn.

Coure Attendant Familiar

Sometimes, the courtiers of the Court of the Stars honor promising arcanists by serving as their squires or handmaidens. In familiar form, these noble eladrin resemble miniature versions of themselves, but with long, gossamer wings sprouting from their shoulders.

Senses low-light vision
Speed 6, fly 8
Constant Benefits
You gain a +2 bonus to Arcana checks.
Once per round, you can retrieve or store an item as a free action instead of a minor action.
Active Benefits
Feylight Form: Once per encounter as a minor action, the coure attendant can assume the form of a twinkling ball of light. While in this form, it gains a +2 bonus to all defenses and sheds dim light within 2 squares. Enemies that start their turns within the dim light shed by a coure attendant in feylight form grant combat advantage to you. It can return to its normal form as a free action.

Fey Familiar [Familiar]

Prerequisite: Eladrin, any arcane class
Benefit: When you use your *fey step* racial power and your familiar is within 10 squares of you, you can also teleport your familiar up to 5 squares.

Familiar Quirks

You can customize the appearance and behavior of your fey familiar with the following quirks.

Fiddling Grig
- ✦ Dances a jig while playing its fiddle
- ✦ Its music reflects your emotional state

Coure Attendant
- ✦ Expects deference from everyone except its master
- ✦ Desires luxury and comfort

About the Author
Tim Eagon previously wrote "Oasis of the Golden Peacock" and "Treed!" He someday hopes to write an article that does not feature any fey.

Winning Races: Gnomes

A Trickster's Arsenal

By Robert J. Schwalb
Illustration by Slawomir Maniak

Gnomes remember their captivity well. They recall each cruelty, each murder, and each wrong committed against them by their fomorian overseers. Although their time as slaves ended long ago, the darkness coloring their history still informs their attitudes and outlooks in the present. And more importantly, the techniques they used to escape their tormentors serve them as they forge ahead into the future.

Gnomes are a diminutive and inoffensive people, generally lacking the aggression and brutality found in other races. For this reason, gnomes prefer the isolation and safety afforded by their sylvan homes. They take comfort in the wards and natural cover which protect their territory. For many gnomes, the world is a friendless place filled with hideous monsters and wicked people, yet it is also a place of wonder and beauty. The latter fact is what lures the few gnomes who choose an adventurer's life from their homes and draws them onward to explore strange lands and meet new people.

It takes uncommon courage for a gnome to leave the safety afforded by his or her homeland, but this courage does not manifest as boldness or recklessness. Gnomes are cautious by nature. They use their natural talent to escape notice and redirect it elsewhere. They are cunning and clever, and they find solutions to the thorniest problems in unconventional ways. They almost never seek glory, but are content to let others enjoy their success, especially if the gnome's contributions are overlooked.

Within an adventuring group, gnomes are unlikely to take leadership positions. They prefer to lend counsel when needed and stay out of the way when not. They avoid confrontation with their companions. There's no need to test friendship's bounds with stubbornness. A gnome might defer to an unwise course of action even when they know that they put forward a better way. Should trouble break out between friends, gnomes use humor to defuse tensions and smooth ruffled feathers. In this way, gnomes can act as the glue that holds a party together, cements

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friendships, and strengthens the bonds of companionship which keep the party strong.

Like many fey peoples, gnomes have a knack for arcane magic. Gnomes profit when they devote study and effort toward developing their natural talent. They aren't troubled by the complex formulas required by spells. Many find it easy, even amusing, to grab raw magic and bend it in whatever way they wish. Given their furtive ways, however, they tend to avoid attracting attention to themselves with flashy spells. Illusions, misdirection, and psychic attacks are their favorite forms of magic.

Those gnomes who follow their own paths in the wider world still keep to their people's techniques, even when their powers might work better with different approaches. Gnomes look for ways to inject wit and deception into their tactics. A gnome paladin, for example, is not above using trickery to defeat enemies, even though doing so might be at odds with how most paladins want to be perceived. Furthermore, just as humor helps to keep a party together, gnomes find that it can also be a potent weapon. They have a talent for uncovering sensitive subjects and can use them to great advantage against those they dislike. A cutting insult from a gnome is every bit as sharp as a rapier, and few duelists can compete with a gnome's swift wit. Quips and infuriating banter can humiliate, infuriate, and incite their enemies, causing them to make mistakes that ultimately lead to their downfall.

Stealth and guile, wit and cunning are all tools gnomes use to survive in the large and intimidating world. Although they use many of the same techniques employed by other people in regard to the classes they fill, gnomes bring their own diverse and surprising talents to every situation they face. Their quick thinking, furtiveness, and inventiveness often give them the edge they need to triumph where more conventional minds and thicker muscles might fail.

Uncommon Guile

Lacking both size and strength, the gnomes stood little chance when fighting against their oppressors, the fomorians. What the gnomes did have in abundance was cunning. They quickly learned their captors' patterns, their vulnerabilities, their goals and fears. Then they found ways to exploit that knowledge, first to make their captors' lives miserable and then to throw off their servitude entirely.

The intellectual eladrin often overshadow gnomes in both reason and knowledge, which is exactly how the gnomes want it. Gnomes guard their knowledge with rustic appearance and mask their intelligence with silence or humor as needed to ensure that their enemies look elsewhere for trouble. Although they seldom showcase their smarts, they put it to good use when needed.

The following powers demonstrate several ways gnomes use guile to triumph over their enemies.

Phantom Henchman

Illusion played a crucial role in the gnomes' uprising against their fomorian tormentors. Not only did it sow confusion in their enemies' ranks, but it also masked the gnomes' numbers and casualties. *Phantasmal henchman* illustrates one method gnome artificers used to keep their enemies guessing.

Phantasmal Henchman **Artificer Attack 3**

What relief your enemy might have found in evading your ally's attack is suddenly dashed when it notices an identical figure standing nearby.

Encounter ✦ Arcane, Conjuration, Illusion, Implement, Psychic
Immediate Interrupt **Ranged** 10
Trigger: An ally within 10 squares of you misses an enemy with an attack.
Effect: You conjure a phantasmal henchman in an unoccupied square adjacent to the target of the triggering ally's attack. The phantasmal henchman remains until the end of your next turn. Your allies can flank with the phantasmal henchman. As a move action, you can move the conjuration 6 squares. Once before the end of your next turn, the phantasmal henchman can make the following attack.
Minor Action **Melee** 1
Target: One creature
Attack: Intelligence vs. Will
Hit: 2d6 + Intelligence modifier psychic damage, and the target grants combat advantage to all attackers until the end of its next turn.

Insidious Doubt

Perhaps it was proximity to the strange energies welling up from the Feydark's depths, or maybe it demonstrates an innate knack for psionic power, but many gnomes developed psychic abilities while they endured captivity. *Insidious doubt* makes an enemy think twice before pressing its advantage.

Insidious Doubt — Psion Attack 7

You fan doubt's fire in your enemy's mind until indecision blocks every action it would take.

At-Will ✦ Fear, Implement, Psionic, Psychic
Standard Action **Ranged** 10
Target: One creature
Attack: Intelligence vs. Will
Hit: 1d8 + Intelligence modifier psychic damage. Until the end of your next turn, the target takes psychic damage equal to your Charisma modifier the first time it uses an opportunity or immediate action.
Augment 1
Hit: As above, but the target also takes the damage if it uses a move action.

Vanishing Blade

Vanishing blade finds its origins with the gnome swordmages who offer sacred oaths to Sehanine to protect their land against invaders. Rather than stand toe to toe with their opponents, they strike from all directions with ambush and subterfuge to drive off their foes.

Vanishing Blade — Swordmage Attack 1

Your sudden departure after striking your foe leaves the enemy casting about to anticipate your next attack.

Daily ✦ Arcane, Illusion, Teleportation, Weapon
Standard Action **Melee** weapon
Target: One creature
Attack: Intelligence vs. AC
Hit: 2[W] + Intelligence modifier damage, and the target is marked until the end of your next turn.
Miss: Half damage.
Effect: You teleport 5 squares and become invisible until the end of your next turn. Until the end of the encounter, whenever you hit an enemy with a melee attack, you may teleport 3 squares as a free action.

Cutting Wit

Many dismiss gnomes as pranksters and trouble-makers, sometimes funny, though often feckless, companions kept around for their comic relief. A few might live up to the stereotype, but most gnomes are simply not that obvious. Humor is a tool. It can cut to the quick of any situation, revealing truths no one wants to admit. It can gird against despair, defuse tensions, and raise spirits.

Wit is an obvious asset to gnome bards, but it can also come into play with other classes too. Gnome sorcerers, paladins, and warlocks all find ways to incorporate their sense of humor into their various attacks, often to great effect.

The following powers explore several different ways gnomes incorporate wit into their attacks.

At Your Expense

A witty bard can use humor to unravel his enemies' attacks as expertly as a warrior uses sword and shield. With *at your expense*, you identify another's mishap and use magic to make the situation comical. The more laughter you create, the more your foe suffers.

At Your Expense — Bard Attack 7

A well-timed quip in response to an enemy's misfortune causes its companions to erupt in demoralizing laughter.

Encounter ✦ Arcane, Implement, Psychic
Immediate Reaction **Ranged** 10
Trigger: An enemy within range misses with an attack
Primary Target: The triggering enemy
Effect: The target takes a -2 penalty to attack rolls until the end of your turn. Make the following secondary attack.
Secondary Target: Each enemy within 2 squares of the triggering enemy that can hear you.
Attack: Charisma vs. Will
Special: If you are a gnome, you gain a +2 power bonus to this attack.
Hit: The target grants combat advantage to all attackers until the end of its next turn, and the primary target takes psychic damage equal to your Intelligence modifier.

Mocking Smite

Mocking smite diminishes the enemy by pointing out its flaws for all to see. Although it is viewed dubiously by most paladins, the divine energy which powers this smite ensures that the enemy cannot bear to face the truth you reveal.

Mocking Smite — Paladin Attack 3

You use divine energy to call out your foe, then mock it for its ineffectiveness until it cannot bear to look at you.

Encounter ✦ Divine, Illusion, Psychic, Radiant
Free Action **Personal**
Trigger: You target an enemy with an at-will weapon attack power.
Effect: The target takes psychic and radiant damage equal to your Charisma modifier. If the triggering attack hits, you become invisible to the target until the end of your next turn.

Everywhere and Nowhere

Everywhere and nowhere could not have come from anywhere but the gnomes, because the gains it grants are particularly suited to the diminutive people. Not only does the spell conceal the sorcerer, but it also punishes the foe whenever it presses its attack.

Everywhere and Nowhere — Sorcerer Attack 5

You burn your presence from the enemy's mind so that when it tries to find you, you are gone, always one step out of reach.

Daily ✦ Arcane, Illusion, Implement, Psychic, Teleportation
Standard Action **Ranged** 10
Target: One creature
Attack: Charisma vs. Will
Hit: 2d12 + Charisma modifier psychic damage, and the target treats you as invisible (save ends).
Miss: Half damage, and you are invisible to the target until the end of your next turn.
Effect: Until the end of the encounter, whenever the target makes an attack while you are invisible to it, it takes 5 psychic damage and you may teleport 5 squares as a free action.

Confounding Laughter

A target under *confounding laughter's* effects hears and feels as though it is being mocked by the creatures around it. The effect is so intense that the target explodes in blind rage, lashing about wildly to silence the noise.

Confounding Laughter — Warlock Attack 7

You create haunting, maddening laughter about an enemy. The noise drives it mad with frustration, causing it to lash at anyone nearby.

Encounter ✦ Arcane, Illusion, Implement, Psychic
Standard Action **Ranged** 10
Target: One enemy
Effect: You slide the target up to 2 squares.
Attack: Charisma vs. Will
Hit: 1d10 + Charisma modifier psychic damage. The target then makes a melee basic attack as a free action against an enemy you choose. If this attack misses, the target takes 1d6 extra psychic damage.

About the Author

Robert J. Schwalb is an award-winning game designer whose work can be found in numerous roleplaying sourcebooks and accessories. His most recent work can be found in the *Dark Sun Campaign Setting*, *Dark Sun Creature Catalog*, *Monster Manual 3*, and *Player's Handbook 3*. Robert lives in Tennessee. Find Robert on the web at www.robertjschwalb.com.

Winning Races: Drow

by Arnie Franke and Rachel Cirricione
Illustration by Slawomir Maniak

To be born a drow, one of the feared and hated dark elves, is to be born into bondage. From the high to the low, all who dwell under the uncertain coruscation of the crystalline spires will in time cringe under the lash of their master, be it wielded by a lowly taskmaster or by the hand of Lolth. In the tenebrous light of the Underdark only one law exists: Crush as many as you can beneath your feet before you are crushed.

Despite their worship of the chaotic evil Spider Queen, drow society is built upon a strict caste system. The lowest of the low are slaves who perform all the manual labor of farming, building, and cleaning. Slaves can be other Underdark denizens such as svirfneblin and goblinoids, captured surface dwellers, or even other drow who have displeased the ruling matriarchy in some way. Just above the slaves are those unhappy drow who are not fortunate enough to be born into a noble family. These wretched commoners are foot soldiers, merchants, overseers, and explorers. Most own at least one slave, and the overwhelming majority die in service to a noble house. With a little luck, a great deal of scheming, and the occasional dagger slipped between a superior's ribs, a commoner can rise to a position of command in one of the matrons' armies or serve as a low-ranking priestess of Lolth.

No matter how high a commoner scrambles up the social ladder, however, he or she will always be subordinate to the drow nobility. Nobility is not a title bestowed upon a drow; it must be inherited. Carrying the ancient and potent blood of one of the noble houses gives a dark elf special powers that commoners could never hope to emulate. In the fiercely matriarchal drow society, the females strongly oppress the males—only female drow may serve the Spider Queen—but a male drow can aspire to become a powerful weaver of magic, a staunch and deadly martial commander, or even to fill the influential seat of consort to a ruling matron. The matrons live under the belief that they are the pinnacle of the caste system. Each matron rules over the drow with wickedness and Lolth-given powers, but in truth even a matron is a mere pawn in the cruel and immortal games of the Goddess of Spiders.

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Drow Education

To be a noble drow is also to receive an intense, decades-long education—some would say indoctrination—at the three academies that all drow cities support. If they have not already learned it from their deceitful and arrogant families, the drow learn at these academies to trust no one. Any show of compassion or honor is brutally punished, while sadism, treachery, and outright assassination are either overlooked or, more often, actively rewarded. At the forefront of the curriculum is the racial superiority of the drow, followed closely by the brutal and dynamic methods used by all drow to gain advancement over their peers.

The first academy attended by all noble drow, male and female alike, is the martial academy. Each city has its own particular name for these institutions. Here they spend years learning the proper usage of traditional drow weapons, how to handle and launch attacks from the backs of the cave lizards ridden as mounts in the Underdark, and basic strategic and tactical theory. Toward the end of their martial instruction, the young drow are permitted to go on scouting excursions away from their city and even to partake in raids and small skirmishes if circumstances allow. If a drow shows particular promise in this arena, he or she is earmarked for further instruction from the weapons master of their house after graduation.

The second phase of a noble drow's education is at the arcane academy. There they are apprenticed to an accomplished spellcaster who teaches them to cast cantrips while they hone their innate magical abilities. Levitation, casting *faerie fire* and *globes of darkness*, even basic evocations and potions are all part of the curriculum. Male drow with an affinity for sorcerous power often return after graduation to continue their training.

Finally, all drow spend at least half a year at the Academy of Lolth. Female drow picked to serve the Spider Queen stay there for decades and learn the rudiments of instruction in the tenets of their dreadful religion. At the end of the training, they receive a final chance to be tested by their masters for any lack of faith in or dedication to the established order. Failure means death or worse, but a passing grade enables the young drow to take her place in the pecking order of her house and immediately begin cajoling, poisoning, stabbing, and slandering her way to the top.

Because of centuries of civil war and intrigue, the learning centers of drow society have changed hands more times than their libraries record. Each time this happens, a new headmistress takes up leadership of the school, which in turn often leads to a murderous but efficient rotation of the faculty. Given the astronomical rate of attrition among instructors, the academies of the Underdark often "inherit" the possessions of some of drow society's most fearsome and ambitious members, and many of these are items of great power. Detailed below are four such items. Though wielding these instruments is a matter of great honor for instructors at a drow academy, it often becomes their undoing by drawing the eyes of jealous subordinates while they grow fat on the hubris of their new power.

The Surface

Some drow choose or are forced to escape from their bondage. Troubled youths might discover a spark of virtue in themselves that was not wholly crushed by their upbringing, while others flee for various reasons of self-preservation—their house might face destruction by a rival, they might have earned the disfavor of Lolth, or possibly they ran afoul of a matron whose insane brutality became too much for even the callous drow. Some drow even leave on good terms with their kindred (as far as that is ever possible), departing the Underdark to scout the surface for upcoming invasions.

Despite (or possibly because of) their feared and hated heritage, these dispossessed drow have few options open to them on the surface. Many become highly paid bodyguards to unscrupulous merchants who wish to impress their rivals. Others turn to assassins' or thieves' guilds to make the best use of their natural stealth and guile. The remainder tend toward a mercenary's life, since many a warlord will happily pay for such deadly and terrifying troops in their army.

Heirlooms of the Drow Academies

The Clutch of Lolth — Level 12+

Inside this silken orb, the candled shadows of Lolth's slowly maturing progeny writhe ceaselessly while awaiting the chance to pour forth from their gestation and engulf the enemies of the Demon Queen of Spiders.

Lvl 12	+3	13,000 gp	Lvl 22 +5	325,000 gp
Lvl 17	+4	65,000 gp	Lvl 27 +6	1,625,000 gp

Implement (Orb)
Enhancement: Attack rolls and damage rolls.
Critical: +1d6 poison damage per plus

Power (Daily ✦ Implement, Poison): Standard Action. Make an attack: Close burst 2; targets each enemy in burst; Intelligence vs. Reflex; on a hit, the target takes ongoing 10 poison damage and grants combat advantage (save ends both).

The Fearcatcher — Level 13+

This grotesque mockery of a traditional dreamcatcher is framed with the bones of sacrificed children and intricately webbed with cord made from the stretched and tanned viscera of an angel.

Lvl 15	+3	25,000 gp	Lvl 25	+5	625,000 gp
Lvl 20	+4	125,000 gp	Lvl 30	+6	3,125,000 gp

Implement (Holy Symbol)
Requirement: You must worship Lolth.
Enhancement: Attack rolls and damage rolls
Critical: +1d6 psychic damage per plus
Property: Each time you use this item to hit an enemy with an attack that has the psychic keyword or successfully intimidate an enemy while holding it, the *fearcatcher* gains a charge. The *fearcatcher* can hold up to 5 charges at one time. You gain a cumulative +2 item bonus to your Intimidate skill for each charge the *fearcatcher* holds. The number of charges the *fearcatcher* holds is reset to zero after an extended rest.

Power (Daily ✦ Implement): Standard Action. Make an attack: Close burst value equal to the number of charges held by the *fearcatcher*; targets each enemy in burst; Charisma vs. Will; on a hit, the target is dazed until the end of your next turn, and it gains vulnerable 10 psychic against attacks you make with the *fearcatcher* (save ends). After this attack, the number of charges in the *fearcatcher* is reset to zero.

The Skinsplitter — Level 5+

Used by the disciplinarians of the drow academies, this wicked weapon symbolizes cruelty.

Lvl 5	+1	1,000 gp	Lvl 20	+4	125,000 gp
Lvl 10	+2	5,000 gp	Lvl 25	+5	625,000 gp
Lvl 15	+3	25,000 gp	Lvl 30	+6	3,125,000 gp

Weapon: Scourge, triple-headed flail, whip
Enhancement: Attack rolls and damage rolls
Critical: +3d6 ongoing damage per plus (save ends)

Power (Daily): Free Action. *Trigger:* You hit an enemy with this weapon, and the enemy is taking ongoing damage. *Effect:* One type of ongoing damage on the target (your choice) increases by 5.
Level 15 or 20: Increases by 10.
Level 25 or 30: Increases by 15.

About the Authors

Once every five hundred years, the dark and unnatural clouds vigilantly shrouding the towering heights of **Arnie Franke**'s third-story apartment dissipate. On these nights, the peasants of Seattle's northlands gather in fearful speculation: "He's a designer!" "No, copywriter!" "Nay, 'tis written that he toils endlessly as a freelance art director!" Too late these simple folk realize that Arnie Franke, looking down upon them in smug majesty, is all of these things and more.

Much like the dreaded illithilich, **Rachel Cirricione** has now been proven to be terrifyingly real. The Seattle writer and event consultant spends her days alternately tormenting the locals with foul necromancy and traveling abroad to sample exotic brains. When not penning baleful tomes for Wizards of the Coast, Rachel can be found delivering social media training to local businesses and pursuing a variety of freelance writing opportunities.

Power Play: Divine Dead Gods

By Pierre Van Rooden
Illustration by Alexey Aparin

What does it take to conquer a god? Immortals can live forever. But gods *do* die—by fate, due to choice, or through the hands of others who are jealous for their power. When gods die, their temples fall. Worshipers scatter and the faith dwindles. Many gods disappear entirely. For a few, a remnant of belief survives. Cults and lone evangelists delve into secrets of the past in search of the divine power of dead gods.

The *Player's Handbook* does not provide rules for worshiping dead deities, nor does it explain what happens when a deity dies. Since divine characters are imbued directly with a deity's power, they keep the ability to cast spells after their deity's death. A few deities—all of them evil—fear followers rising up against them, and therefore these deities might have contingency plans that allow them to rob their servants of the imbued power. The death of such a deity can play havoc with its worshipers. Deities that a character might worship never use such plans.

The priests of dead gods still have the ability to ordain new priests through a ritual of investiture. Your DM might decide that, for a dead deity, investitures have additional requirements. Some possible requirements are:

- The investiture ritual must be cast by a paragon level priest.
- Investiture needs to take place on a site holy to the deity.
- Investiture requires a relic of the deity to be present.
- Investiture must occur at a specific time of year or when certain stars are aligned.

Incorporating such elements in a divine character's background sets that character apart, and it allows the character to worship and serve an unusual deity.

Character Backgrounds

The worship of a dead deity is not always motivated by religious devotion. Here are some alternative backgrounds for characters who enter a dead deity's faith.

Faith Leech: Some people put faith in these powerful creatures that call themselves gods. You are more down to earth. Ever since learning that gods can die—that their corpses drift in the Astral Sea—you started to believe that they are much more powerful

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than you. That must change. To gain power, you need to take it. And while it is tricky to steal power from those that might fight back, how hard can it be to steal from those already dead?

You desire power. Not wealth or arcane or martial might, but true divine power. You hope to steal it from a dead deity. You disguise your studies as worship and try to act devout—but you know it doesn't matter. You keep up a show to throw off suspicion, though people give you odd looks for clinging to an abandoned faith. Once you take the deity's power, the scorn you receive now will be worth it.

Why do you choose this path to power? Why did you select the dead god you chose? Do you let your friends know your true motivations? What do you plan to do with the power once you gain it? How close is the connection between you and this deity? How far are you willing to go?

Adventurers with this background often come from arcane traditions. Warlocks, especially vestige warlocks, have a natural inclination toward leeching power from others. Martially trained characters sometimes feel slighted at the apparent 'ease' with which the divine obtain their powers, while they have to work hard to receive theirs. Leeches seek out adventures that promise quick gain for little effort, though they realize that, once in a while, they need to make an effort if they wish to achieve their goal.

Associated Skills: Bluff, Stealth

God Hater: Whether it is one god or all, you have turned against the powers of divinity. You feel the world does better without them. You found out that gods can—and do—die. You seek out dead gods to find out how gods die so you can rid the world of their presence forever. Dead gods also leak power, which you believe can be turned against the other faiths. You have found that hate and love are closely paired, and your quest against the gods is a belief as strong as that of any priest.

Why do you hate the gods? Do you hate all of them, or only one? How deep does it go? How does the dead god whose power you seek relate to that hatred? How do you see others who worship gods? How do you make sure you can work with them? Do you pity them, or despise them for their foolishness? Do you fear death and the fate some tales spin for those who die faithless? How do you see the primordials? Are they beings better fit for worship, potential allies, or creatures as bad as or worse than the gods?

Adventurers with this background seek out fellow adventurers with care. They avoid conflict by finding ways to accept divine characters, despite philosophical differences, even if it is only a temporary truce. As can be expected, god haters are rarely divine characters. Primal characters, as the world's wardens, have a great motivation to be god haters. However, some divine characters can become god haters after being disillusioned. Knowing the ways of the faith, these are perhaps the most fanatic and dangerous god haters.

Associated Skill: Intimidate

Associated Language: Primordial

Resurrectionist: You are truly devoted, to the point that you actively seek to bring back to life the powers to which you pray. Returning a dead god to life is an epic adventure, and your initial aim is to gather power and lore to achieve it. Depending on your deity's nature and cause of death, you might seek alliances with other deities in a hope they will aid you in your quest.

Why do you want to bring back this deity? Do you hope for a reward? Do you seek salvation? Do you see a need for that deity's return? How will you bring him or her back? Do you seek apotheosis or powerful necromantic rites? How do others feel about your quest, and how open are you about it? What do you intend to do if people oppose it?

Most adventurers who follow this path are divine characters. Invokers, and especially devas, have a strong investment in a deity and might follow this path out of a sense of duty. Other races might be drawn to a deity's specific qualities and seek to bring it back as a patron to their race. Resurrectionists often fulfill a leading role. They are strong traditionalists, fighting to maintain and protect what they know and love.

Associated Skills: Diplomacy, Heal

Theologist: You are driven by sheer curiosity. The desire to *know* is all that is needed for you to turn your faith to a dead deity. You are curious about when or how your deity died, but especially, why. Are gods as mortal as other beings? What happens with gods that die? How does it affect their faithful? You joined the faith of a dead deity out of a desire to know. Even as you go about fulfilling your deity's former goals, you never forget that the only reason you are in the faith is to learn.

You are too curious for your own good. You have to know, even if it would be bad for you. You question the reason behind events and the reasons behind the reasons. You question faith—even your own. Despite that, you follow the edicts of your deity as best as you can, and you do so in the name of 'research,' of course.

How did you come to your knowledge? How did you find the dead faith you now follow? Did you have a mentor, or did you have to find out everything by yourself? How do your peers look at your studies? How far would you go to acquire knowledge? Is your interest in your dead deity really purely academic?

Adventurers with this background enjoy seeking out old and forbidden places—temples by preference—hoping to uncover more knowledge. Quests for ancient relics or artifacts, or delves into uncharted territory, also appeal to them. The farther the better, though any quest that requires pouring over old and forbidden texts is worth the trouble.

Associated Skills: History, Religion

Deities

Below are a few dead deities that may still be worshiped in various regions of your campaign world.

Aurom

The Shattered One
Unaligned Dead God or Goddess of the Cycle of Life
Symbol: A broken or unfinished rune

Aurom was an early god—or, in some records, goddess—of the dead. Since he was a tribal god, he held sway over a broad spectrum of subjects. Many deities were less than pleased with Aurom's claim on so many subjects. Aurom was slain by Nerull, a powerful mortal necromancer seeking divinity. Nerull took only the portfolio of death from the dead deity and left Aurom's other portfolios to be divided among the other deities, thus securing a place among them.

Aurom's existence was long hidden, since Nerull erased any knowledge of his predecessor that he could track down. Those who taught that Nerull had not always been the only god of the dead met horrible fates. The truth finally came to light when the Raven Queen slew Nerull and saw a benefit in weakening that god's original hold by revealing the truth of his origins.

Little is known of Aurom despite the Raven Queen's revelations, and few people agree on what he or she was really like. Various sects have sprung up, each with radically different ideas. Most sects survived for only a short while. The only sect to have persisted for more than a few decades now is the Enclave of Dust. Most members are dry and bookish, dispassionate folk who see death as a necessity. They renounce the importance of the soul. Their particularly morose outlook means their cult has been small over the years, but also has kept them from becoming important enough to be a target for elimination.

The Enclave of Dust today speculates that Aurom taught the following:

- Everything is part of the cycle. We are born. We live. We die. Respect life, and know death to be a part of it.
- We are created from the elements and return to the chaos when it ends. The primordials are our enemies. They seek to undo the cycle, refusing to be part of it.
- Undeath is a punishment and trial. It should be ended for those who do not deserve it, and it should be prolonged or inflicted on those who do.
- Do not fight death. Do not seek to be more than you are. We are all dust.

Haramathur

The Guardian in Stone, the Eternal Watcher
Lawful Good Dead God of Guardians
Symbol: A tower shield behind a halberd

Haramathur was a guardian god who was tasked during the Dawn War with the protection of the Astral Sea against incursions of creatures from the Elemental Chaos. He had no enemies among the other deities, who recognized him as a force whose power protected them.

In the last years of the Dawn War, Io's violent death caused a rift between the planes. Haramathur realized the only way to prevent the primordials from using the rift to invade the Astral Sea was to close off the way with his own essence. He sacrificed himself by turning himself and everything around him to stone to seal the rift. Few individuals know Haramathur's role in these events. The deities try to limit any knowledge of what happened because they fear that someone might seek to restore Haramathur to his original form, and hence restart the war.

Haramathur's body exists in two different locations, with one in the Astral Plane and one in the Elemental Chaos. In the Astral Plane, his essence is interwoven with the realm now known as Erishani (described in *The Plane Above*). Here, Haramathur's remaining power holds in stasis an ancient primordial. Few are aware of his influence there, and other deities leave this realm alone. Only a few key people in the settlement of Rhym Katal know the truth.

In the Elemental Chaos, Haramathur's stone body drifts in a calm area that exists in a twenty-mile wide maelstrom of rock, ash, and molten lava. The area is called Mael Arn'dreygh, or the Sealed Way. The stony form holds only one settlement: a fortresslike githzerai monastery hewn from the rock. The githzerai monks, who call themselves the Disciples of Stone, are rumored to communicate with stone, and they are led by Asaerte Nedanar, a powerful psion. Asaerte knows the full history of Haramathur and Mael Arn'dreygh, but he has not yet passed this knowledge along to a successor or allowed anyone into the monastery's inner sanctum. The monastery is also the

only place that possesses written records of the event, which are chiseled in the stone walls of the inner sanctum.

Some say that those who become lost in the maelstrom around Mael Arn'dreygh might end up in the bogs of Erishani, and vice versa. So far, none who have disappeared in the maelstrom have ever returned alive.

When still alive, Haramathur taught the following:

- Protect those for whom you care, as well as those who cannot protect themselves.
- Patience is a virtue. Wait for your enemies to move. Stay ever vigilant.
- Do not fear the darkness. Train yourself to be aware of your enemies with all your senses.
- The earth is your friend. Use it to protect yourself and trap your enemies.

Laeris

The Trickster
Unaligned Dead God of Trickery and Deceit
Symbol: A featureless white porcelain mask

Laeris was the god of trickery and deceit—a playful god who was quick to draw the ire, if not open hostility, of his fellow deities by his frequent pranks and his lack of personal boundaries. Laeris's true form is unknown. He did not have a favorite avatar form, and instead he used various races of either gender—whatever suited him best at the time. His origins are shrouded in mystery, and so is his death.

The story says that Vecna killed Laeris when the trickster attempted to steal the Final Moment, a powerful draught that can imbue the imbiber with a most profound insight into his own destiny. Laeris entered Citadel Cavitius, Vecna's stronghold, but Vecna destroyed Laeris in the same moment the trickster recovered and drank the Moment.

Some say the story is fabricated. They believe Laeris fled with the Moment, and now lays low, fearing Vecna's wrath. Whether Laeris is truly dead or whether it is all a ruse is unknown. His followers tell both tales—and various others—which only adds to the confusion. And, of course, Vecna never revealed what happened.

As a result, cults to Laeris still exist, though priests are few and far between.

When still alive (or, at least, active), Laeris taught the following:

- Truth does not exist. Everybody lies. Don't trust anyone.
- Law is a crutch. Only those who can do as they want are truly free.
- Property is an illusion. Take what you need today, but do not hold on to it tomorrow.
- Hide your activities from others. Lie about your motives. Never reveal your goals. Only those who can see through your deceits are worthy to discover your true goals.

Nusemnee

The Dread Maiden, the Horned Daughter
Good Dead God of Heroism and Redemption
Symbol: A serpent, curled around a kukri

Nusemnee was the daughter of Zehir and a powerful devil. A scaled, lean woman with burning eyes, her fangs dripped with poison. She was originally an assassin for her father, supporting his schemes by murdering his opponents. When she failed to assassinate a high priest of Pelor, she was abandoned and then mortally wounded by a paladin's holy blade. Expecting only death, she was surprised when the high priest healed her, showing her compassion and forgiveness. Intrigued, she decided to honor a promise to the high priest and aid him in his holy quest until a time that she could save his life in turn.

Nusemnee thus became a symbol of redemption. When she finally died at the end of the high priest's quest, she rose again, this time as a minor goddess. In this form, she opposed her father by offering redemption to all who would turn away from evil.

Nusemnee was later killed by a poison that could kill anything—even a deity—that was distilled from Zehir's blood. Her body, a scaly withered husk, drifts in one of the darkest portions of the Astral Sea, where it is sought out by redemption seekers. Some say that Nusemnee's blood still holds a poison strong enough to kill even Zehir. Vicious devils and a force of yuan-ti abominations guard the body in Zehir's name. So far, nobody has drawn a single drop of blood from her dehydrated corpse.

Since Nusemnee died relatively recently, a number of cults and priests still exist today. Their numbers dwindle as people turn their worship to other deities. Temples to Nusemnee exist in twilight places, city slums, and the upper Underdark, where those most in need of redemption can be found.

When still alive, Nusemnee taught the following:

- It is never too late to seek redemption.
- True heroism does not come from good deeds. It comes from doing good when it matters.
- Nobody is perfect. Those who seek to be perfect will fail. It is not a shame to fail, and it is not a waste to try.
- Open your heart to possibilities. Never give up hope.

Sagawehn

The Winged Mistress, the Hive Mind
Unaligned Dead God of Vermin
Symbol: A circle of marching ants

Sagawehn was the goddess of insects. Where other deities relied on the prayers of intelligent beings, the Winged Mistress took her power from creatures that did not have individual thoughts. All insects, no matter how mindless or seemingly insignificant, belonged to her. Although a single individual from the intelligent races offered more power than a lonely insect, Sagawehn's flock came in much larger numbers.

Sagawehn was a passionless deity who valued the community—the hive—above all else. She sought to crush individuality, perceiving it as a danger to the whole. She aimed to expand always; those she met either joined the hive or were crushed by it. Understandably, she was never popular among humankind, though some thri-kreen tribes paid her homage.

Sagawehn originally resided in Arvandor, but her expansionism soon came into conflict with other beings on that plane, especially the fey that worshiped Corellon. Faced with either assimilation or war, the fey, backed with powerful divine magic, attempted to stop Sagawehn and drive her back.

After a long war, several powerful eladrin heroes sought out Sagawehn to either stop the invasion or slay her. She appeared as a mass of beetles, spiders, and other vermin. In an epic battle Sagawehn was slain—but not before many eladrin fell, among them the priestess whose last magic spell took Sagawehn's life.

No astral corpse remains of Sagawehn. Some say she is not truly dead, but that her legacy continues on in the lamia that spawned from the high priestess who fell to the vermin that devoured her.

The priests in Sagawehn's cults are called hive masters. Each has a fascination for vermin. Insect colonies form the model for a life that is much more structured than that of most other races. They either teach such order and community feeling to their people—or force it upon them.

When still alive, Sagawehn taught the following:

- The community is the greater good. Sacrifice all for the whole.
- A community thrives if those within it do their jobs well—specialize and allow others to benefit.
- Strength is in numbers. Power comes with growth and expansion.
- Seek to expand. Conquer those who oppose you.

The following feats are suitable for any character who meets the prerequisites.

Feats

Ancient Lore of the Dawn War

Benefit: You have studied the lore of old deities and the history of the Dawn War. You gain a +2 feat bonus to History and Religion checks, and you gain Supernal as a language.

Nusemnee's Atonement

Benefit: You gain a +2 feat bonus to saving throws against charm effects.

You have resist 5 against damage taken this way. You can choose to take the damage even when you are dominated. This resistance increases to 10 at 11th level and 15 at 21st level.

Feat Lore: Nusemnee's Atonement

Nusemnee granted her blessings to those who either showed true selfless heroism or who turned their backs on a former life of evil. Even in this age there exist holy sites, infused with the dead goddess's energy, where those who seek redemption can pray for salvation and, if true of heart, receive her blessing.

If you take this feat for your character, your character has visited these locations and gained certain lingering benefits.

Passage of Mael Arn'dreygh

Benefit: When you are blinded or in darkness, creatures within 2 squares of you have concealment rather than total concealment, provided you have line of effect to the creature's space and it is not invisible for a reason other than darkness or blindness.

Feat Lore: Passage of Mael Arn'dreygh

The passage of Mael Arn'dreygh is a rite created by the githzerai of Mael Arn'dreygh, and it is devoted to Haramathur. Participants are entombed in Mael Arn'dreygh's rocky surface, where they remain in utter darkness for a full day. Those who do not panic or go mad develop a closeness to dead Haramathur, and they are imbued by his fearlessness and patience. They become exceptionally resilient when in the darkness of confined places.

If you take this feat for your character, your character has participated in this rite.

Epic Destiny: Dead God Avatar

Dead does not mean forgotten.

Requirement: 21st level, must worship a dead deity, divine power source

When you follow this destiny, you begin to transform into an avatar of your dead deity, but at a price. As you leech power from your deity, your soul slowly dwindles and rekindles glimmers of the deity's consciousness. You gain considerable power and mental resilience but sacrifice some of your life force to earn that power.

As this connection grows stronger, you also become more attuned to the lingering echoes of your deity's feelings and thoughts. You come as close to being one entity as is possible, and this brings the realization that you must surrender your individuality to ever bring your power to the next level and achieve the return of your deity—or, if you prefer, your transformation into a deity.

Immortality?

Upon completion of your final quest, you disappear, leaving only dust, as you are entirely absorbed by your deity. You become part of it, aware of what happens in the world around you, but unable to participate while your deity is still dead.

Perhaps your sacrifice rejuvenates the dead deity, or it might increase the activity of the deity's cult, giving it a chance at resurrection in the future. If your deity is brought back, you return as its avatar. As its most loyal servant, you might yet play a role in the future of the faith.

Dead God Avatar Features

By Divine Command (21st level): You gain resist 10 psychic and are immune to charm effects.

Divine Insight (21st level): Your Wisdom or Charisma score increases by 2.

Astral Corpse (24th level): Your spirit is accustomed to plumbing the depths of the Astral Sea, and it returns there when death beckons. With its last flicker, your spirit can gather the dissipating essence of your dead deity and fuse it into the spark of life. While this process appears to take only moments to your friends, to you it feels as if you were adrift for days or weeks. When you make death saving throws during an encounter, any successful saving throw has the same effect as if you had rolled a 20. If you have no healing surges, you regain hit points equal to your healing surge value. Once this feature is used, it can't be used again until after you have taken an extended rest.

Sacrifice (30th level): As a minor action, you can spend a healing surge. Instead of regaining hit points, you regain an encounter power. Once per day, instead of regaining an encounter power in the manner described above, you can regain a daily power.

Summon Divine Presence — **Dead God Avatar Utility 26**

Your god's essence infuses the world around you. Its astral might burns away your enemies' defenses.

Encounter ✦ Divine, Zone
Minor Action **Close** burst 5

Effect: The burst creates a zone that lasts until the end of your next turn. While within the zone, enemies gain vulnerable 10 radiant and vulnerable 10 necrotic to your attacks. Depending on the deity you worship, the power creates an additional effect:

Aurom: The zone is filled with a mind-numbing gloom. Enemies that begin their turn in the zone are dazed until the start of their next turn.

Haramathur: Those within the zone take on the semblance of stone. While within the zone, allies gain a +2 bonus to AC and Fortitude. Enemies treat the zone as difficult terrain, and enemies that begin their turn in the zone are slowed until the start of their next turn.

Laeris: The zone is filled with a magical mist. Enemies treat the zone as heavily obscured to all senses, including blindsight and tremorsense.

Nusemnee: Pulsing light illuminates the zone. While within the zone, allies gain a +2 power bonus to saving throws and can use second wind as a minor action (or as a free action if they can use second wind as a minor action normally).

Sagawehn: The zone is filled with buzzing insects. While within the zone, enemies have a -2 penalty to attack rolls and to all defenses.

About the Author

For the last decade, **Pierre van Rooden** has done bits and pieces as author and editor for the RPGA and proofreader for TSR Inc., going by such fancy titles as 'Writing Director' and 'Continuity Constable'. Online, he earned the nickname 'gomez', due to an Addams Family quote. He earns coin as webmaster for a Dutch broadcasting company, which helps him maintain a wife as well as two pet cats, Noripi and Max.

Groups and Guilds

The Circle of Smoke and Whispers

By Daniel Jones
Illustration by Chad King

Vast armies vying for global dominion, violent spells cast by mages of staggering power, fiendish bargains made in the inky shadows of human hearts—the ancient war between Bael Turath and Arkhosia touched on so many dramatic themes that it acquired legendary status almost immediately after its fateful last battles. The characterizations of noble dragonborn and dastardly tieflings became proverbial, if occasionally unfair. As these two great empires fought to the death, they shaped culture and history for centuries to come.

Some, however, believe that the true war never ended, and that the Arkhosian triumph was as fleeting as the empire's short lifespan after it. They look at history and find a subtler hand at work—a hand with less obvious concerns than armies and battles. Why would the devils involve themselves with Turathi nobles, they ask. Why make pacts with an empire only to watch it ultimately fall? The answer might be as straightforward as devilish lust for mortal souls, but the immortal races have time for patience, for scheming, and for countless misdirections. Underestimating them is never wise.

The Circle of Smoke and Whispers discovered this fact firsthand and remains determined not to repeat the mistake.

Historical Development: Bane of a Rumored Foe

During their war with Arkhosia, agents of Bael Turath seldom felt the obligation to fight overtly. As often as open battles ravaged the countryside, hidden battles permeated the logistical and political landscape. Subterfuge and sabotage endangered nobles and peasants alike, small villages and vast cities, armies and even occasionally the whole war effort. These tactics became all the more spiteful and insidious as Arkhosia gained the upper hand.

Just a few short decades before the war's end, as part of a sweeping scheme to destabilize their rival power's agricultural heart, Turathi agents infiltrated and destroyed a small druid circle. Most attributed the event to collateral damage from indiscriminate conflict. Haziah, the sole surviving druid, suspected otherwise and, as she recovered from her injuries, her watchful eye discerned a pattern of delicate machinations within the seeming chaos of events. She found the objectives of these intrigues more alarming, though. While altogether destructive, they didn't

necessarily coincide with the interests of Bael Turath. Another enemy was acting: the devils.

Unfortunately, Haziah's temperament forbade her from being circumspect. As she endeavored to alert potential allies to the concealed threat, which she called the Shemathi (the "rumored ones"), she drew the attention of the one who was behind the intrigues. Even as her organized response took shape, the subtle machine of her devilish adversary moved to crush it with ruthless efficiency. This time the devils made sure to eliminate her as well.

For a decade, her secretive opponents assumed they'd dealt with Haziah and her efforts to bring their plots to light. Not all of Haziah's allies had been killed, however. A ferocious dragonborn warden named Rhagash, longtime friend and confidante of the fallen druid, harbored thoughts of vengeance within his calculating breast. Having bitterly learned from Haziah's forthrightness, he instead watched and planned throughout the long years. He carefully marshaled his resources, mustered what allies he could from among those he trusted, rigorously prepared his response, and then struck.

That precise blow unwound twenty years of hellish scheming. Rhagash drove back the Shemathi so decisively that they didn't again dabble in terrestrial affairs until after Arkhosia had won the war. No single victory could satisfy Rhagash, however. Staking all of the honor endemic to his race, he vowed that never again would the Hells have such liberty in mortal affairs. When the Shemathi finally did return, the vigilant group he founded stood prepared to engage them on any front: the Circle of Smoke and Whispers.

Current Disposition: A Single Hand, a Thousand Weapons

In the intervening period, Rhagash's haggard network has blossomed into a significant organization. Its purpose remains unchanged, while its emphasis is on acquiring members who are familiar with primal sources of power. Wherever devils lure mortals into action, however the fiendish plots of the Nine Hells might manifest, the circle will discover them and fight them.

In any given region, the circle's presence is composed of a dozen members. Each might have operatives or allies of their own, but the circle itself remains vital through anonymity. Particularly contested areas might see a larger presence temporarily, but all in the circle understand the vulnerability of consolidation. As long as its members are dispersed, no single strike or even campaign can destroy it.

Local operations are directed by a chief elected from within that region but approved by the circle as a whole. In honor of Rhagash, the circle has traditionally favored wardens for these positions but without any blinding prejudices. Primal heroes of every sort have become leaders at one time or another, always without objection, and sometimes members who lack primal power but who have skills at subterfuge join.

The regional chiefs regularly communicate to coordinate their knowledge and actions, and members willingly travel vast distances if one area needs reinforcement. The result is a singularly unified perspective, in spite of the group's diffuse structure. This in turn allows them to effectively combat complex threats across a tremendous and diverse territory.

Essential Philosophy: Wrestling with the Devils

After Rhagash's initial defeat of the Shemathi, as he began efforts to ensure the circle's perseverance, he explained his vision simply: "We must remain as hidden as our foes, determined to do what is necessary to defeat them, and ready for their inevitable return." Over time this imperative grew into the three tenets that the circle still follows:

- **Remain Elusive:** An enemy can't destroy what it can't find. The circle relies upon secrecy to survive, but uses that secrecy for advantage as well. Its clandestine efforts leave few clues, cause crippling fear, and are generally effective.
- **Remain Unflinching:** No healer ignores poison in a wound because its removal might hurt, nor does one stop after removing most of that poison. The circle understands the consequences of inaction, and it pursues its mission against the devils without hesitation, compunction, or moderation. They feel that nothing short of complete destruction can cure the Shemathi canker.
- **Remain Vigilant:** Immortal races have the advantage of time and can exploit any laxity that inactivity causes in their opponents. The circle realizes the tenuousness of the mortal position: If they remain on the defensive until a threat becomes apparent, they've likely already lost the battle. Early detection of such threats is frequently the world's only hope, so they actively seek out sources of threats and deal with them.

Exclusive Membership: Finding and Joining a Rumor

Few have ever successfully sought out the circle; more commonly heroes are approached before they even know of the circle's existence. Members always remain alert for the rise of a potential ally. Most frequently, such recruits are vetted through a series of missions before a member approaches them. Sometimes members notice a rising star within their usual cadre of informants and agents. In any event the examination is rigorous before the circle finally reveals itself.

Once accepted by the local chief, the new member immediately joins whatever local operations he or she might benefit. At any given time, such operations are likely numerous. Members frequently perform such tasks as recruiting more members, uncovering enemy agents, intercepting or redirecting communications, or staging tactical assaults to disrupt enemy activity or acquire valuable intelligence. Legend speaks of certain champions infiltrating the Nine Hells to challenge Shemathi leadership.

The war is likely as immortal as the enemy. Opportunities for important involvement are limitless.

Requirements

The following process is used commonly by members of the Circle of Smoke and Whispers.

Auditioning: Before being brought before the circle, any potential recruit is given numerous opportunities to demonstrate guile, prowess, and dedication. This usually takes the form of small missions to scout enemy positions, eliminate minor threats, or retrieve valuable information. Typical recruits are subjected to five such "auditions," but in desperate situations the circle has approached particularly capable recruits after only two or three.

Approach: After successfully completing any missions given by the circle as tests, the most involved member of the circle approaches the recruit and offers him or her the chance to join. This approach almost invariably emphasizes the hardship new members will face and the likelihood of gruesome death after only a short time.

Judgment: If the recruit still expresses interest in membership, he or she is brought before the local chief for judgment. This adversarial process requires the recruit to defend his or her own worth before the chief, who rigorously and candidly critiques it. Chiefs steadfastly refuse to reveal whether their harshness during an interview is sincere or an affectation.

Benefits

Although the Circle of Smoke and Whispers can offer little to its members in the way of money or equipment, it has information in abundance. Also, while its numbers are far too few to muster any sizeable force, the members it has are both skillful and eager to assist each other. Aside from the free flow of information and assistance, however, individuals try to remain aloof from each other to minimize the threat of discovery. Many have labored for years without seeing another member, only communicating in secret to report progress and receive instructions. Discretion is required to determine whether the need for numbers warrants the danger of gathering.

Heroic Tier: Once per week the member can request information from the circle, which makes its own Streetwise or Knowledge check at the DM's discretion. Once per level the member can request the aid of one or two other members for a particular mission, again at the DM's discretion.

Paragon Tier: The member has significant access to all circle information, and he or she can request aid once each day in the form of a Streetwise or Knowledge check. Once per level the member can request the aid of up to five other members for a particular mission. The specific form of the answer to each request is subject to DM discretion.

Epic Tier: The member has a constant supply of information from the circle and can request it up to three times each day. Once per level the member can request up to ten other members for assistance on a particular mission.

New Paragon Path: Champion of the Vigil

"The devils don't know me, but they see me in their nightmares."

Prerequisite: Membership in the Circle of Smoke and Whispers

You haven't been through Hell. Not yet.

Ever since you joined the Circle of Smoke and Whispers, the Hells have been trying to work through you instead. With countless painstaking maneuvers, through endless waves of vicious engagements, you have driven them back each time. If even a fraction of your sacrifices were known, they would move the most hardened veteran to tears. Secrecy is part of the price you pay to do what you do so well. You don't claim the honor of your victories or boast of your accomplishments; you can't mourn for fallen friends either or pay the tribute due them. Only the Circle of Smoke and Whispers knows your worth and your burdens. In the world you've sworn to protect, through the people who depend on you, you walk unseen and anonymous.

In this you emulate generations of your predecessors. You have studied and mastered the tenets that grant your success. You watch from the background, strike from the shadows, and disappear without a trace after you eliminate a threat. The Vigil remains; you keep it. Thanks to your dedication, a safer and brighter day will dawn soon.

When you've been through Hell, though, the world will know it.

Champion of the Vigil Path Features

Disappearing Action (11th level): When you spend an action point to take an extra action, as a free action before the end of your turn you can shift your speed and make a Stealth check to hide, ignoring the penalty to your Stealth check for movement.

Violent Emergence (11th level): Whenever you make an attack against a surprised enemy or an enemy from which you are hidden, your attack can score a critical hit on a roll of 19–20.

Attack with Care (16th level): When you are hidden and miss all targets of an attack, you can reroll the attack and use the second result.

Champion of the Vigil Evocations

Remain Elusive — Champion of the Vigil Attack 11

Your vicious counterattack distracts your foes long enough for you to vanish.

Encounter ✦ Implement, Primal, Psychic
Immediate Reaction **Close** burst 20
Trigger: An enemy within 20 squares hits you with an attack
Target: The triggering enemy
Attack: Wisdom or Charisma vs. Will
Hit: 2d8+ Wisdom or Charisma modifier psychic damage.
Effect: You become invisible until the end of your next turn or until you attack, and can move half your speed.

Remain Unflinching — Champion of the Vigil Utility 12

The purifying flames of nature destroy your enemies completely, increasing your own ability to remain hidden.

Daily ✦ Primal, Zone
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: Until the end of the encounter, whenever an enemy drops to 0 hit points within 2 squares of you, its body is consumed by flames. This produces a zone of obscured terrain in a close burst 1 centered on a square in that enemy's space. Each zone lasts until the end of the encounter or until dismissed by you as a minor action. As a move action, you can move one zone a number of squares equal to your Wisdom or Charisma modifier.

Remain Vigilant — Champion of the Vigil Attack 20

The land around you warns you of danger, allowing you and your allies to strike immediately.

Daily ✦ Primal
Free Action **Close** burst 5
Trigger: You roll initiative
Targets: You and each ally in burst
Effect: Each target can make a Stealth check as a free action and only requires partial cover or partial concealment to become hidden. Each target can then make a basic attack as a free action against an enemy from which he or she is hidden.

About the Author

Daniel Jones has a loving and beautiful wife, they're expecting their first child, and he's written for the Dungeons & Dragons® game. Dreams do come true.

Lord of the Darkways

By Ed Greenwood
Illustration by Kekai Kotaki

Deadly Success

Flickering glows shaped two doors out of empty air, at either end of the large, dark room. The warrior strode through the one at the far end of the room, vanished in midstep—and reappeared stepping through the nearer glowing portal.

Where he stiffened in midstride to topple, spasming and thrashing helplessly—a strangled scream whistling through his working jaws—and crash face-first to the floor. His eyeballs burst, spattering the flagstones with a foul wetness that hissed into racing wisps of smoke, even before a larger flood spilled out of his mouth to join it.

The tall, slender man in black nodded in satisfaction. Six strong Zhentilar warriors had all found the same swift death.

Consistent results. His new spell was a success.

Smiling, he walked away.

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*

Another Stormy Night

"My superiors at the temple? They think I'm trying to induce my brother to kiss the Holy Lash, of course. Which reminds me: you *will* embrace Loviatar before all other gods, won't you, Handreth?"

The wizard across the table gave her a mirthless half smile.

"I'll consider it," he said dismissively—then grinned, the bright, boyish flash of teeth Ayantha had known forever. She found herself grinning back.

"So, what brings a high-spells wizard from Waterdeep to cold, uncultured, mage-hating Zhentil Keep?"

"Coins, of course. Lots of them. And by 'mage-hating,' I presume you mean Manshoon and his magelings don't welcome wizards other than themselves?"

"I do. They don't. Walk warily, Han." She laid a long, barbed whip of many leather strands on the table, murmured a nigh-soundless prayer over it, then raised her eyes to his again and asked, "Who's your patron?"

"A merchant hight Ambram Sarbuckho—if you don't dissuade me from showing up at his doors by what you tell me of him."

Ayantha shifted in her seat, supple black leather and tight strands of chain moving in ways meant to catch the eye, and gave him another smile. "So you sought out your little sister to learn how things lie here in the keep before taking service. I like that."

Handreth shrugged. "To rise to become a dark-lash of Loviatar—nay, just to survive this long, in service to the Maiden of Pain—takes wits. Wizards soon learn how hard it is to trust. You have wits, and I trust you. So here we are, in this vastly overpriced excuse for a highcoin drinking club, spending my gold. Speak."

His sister sighed. "We're not noble, so this is the best Zhentil Keep can offer us. Sit with your hands on the table, palms up. Please."

"So you can . . . ?"

"So I can lash you across your palms if someone comes into the room, to make them believe a dark-lash of the pain goddess is meeting alone with an outlander wizard for the right reasons."

Handreth put his hands on the table, palms up. "I believe I paid for a private room."

"You did. In the keep, there's 'private' and then there's 'private.' Again, we're not noble. Or Zhentarim."

Handreth nodded to signal he'd taken her point. Outside the leaded windows, the wind rose with a sudden whistle. Winter hadn't thrust its talons into Zhentil Keep just yet, but it was fast approaching, and bringing its cold with it. A time of whirling falling leaves, chill winds, and short, violent, icy rains. Puddles would form brittle skins of thin ice by night but melt every morn, for about a tenday. Then the snows would come, long before the Year of the Blazing Brand found its end.

"Ambram Sarbuckho is one of the wealthiest keep merchants," Ayantha told him, dropping her voice to a whisper. "He'll be given a lordship only if he joins the Zhentarim, though, and thus far he shows no signs of doing so. He's a glib schemer, always spinning little plots and swindles—and, I should warn you, he has hired an endless succession of serve-for-a-month wizards, rather than trying to buy the loyalty of one or two he keeps at his side for many seasons."

"So he's difficult?"

"*All* successful keep merchants are difficult, Brother. This one is open in his mistrust of everyone; he probably hires more informers than anyone in the city—after Manshoon, of course. He's . . . just as untrustworthy as he judges everyone else to be."

"I've done business with his factors in Sembia and Waterdeep, a time or ten; what's he known for, here at home?"

"A dealer in sundries, and importer of curios from afar."

"Huh." Handreth Imbreth grunted. "Someone a city ruler'll be suspicious of, right there."

His sister smiled thinly. "It's been a bare few months since Manshoon became First Lord of Zhentil Keep, his toady Lord Chess was named Watchlord of the Council, the priests of Bane started acting as if they were the watch, and we had eye tyrants lecturing us in our own streets. In Zhentil Keep, *everyone's* suspicious of everyone else. Watch your back, Brother—and never stop watching it."

"I thought Manshoon was yesterday's tyrant," Handreth muttered, "and some Lord Bellander or other is kinging it now, here in the keep."

His sister shook her head. "Folk in the streets believe that, and about half the merchants; the rest of us have wits enough to know Bellander's coup was staged by Manshoon himself. He's enthroned Bellander to be the target of those enraged by the new taxes and what's done by all swordsmen now making the lord's rule—*Manshoon's* rule, in truth—a thing of teeth, offering instant obedience or death. Bellander's a handsome, lecherous fool whose brains are about up to the task of outwitting yonder bowl of flower petals."

"Ah." Handreth nodded. "I'm familiar with the tactic; Waterdeep has seen it work a time or three, too."

Ayantha took up her lash, cracked it in the air, and brought it crashing down across the table. Handreth deftly plucked up his goblet before any wine could spill from it.

"We all know Manshoon's up to something, and that he will move fast when he strikes," she announced, lashing the table again as the door opened and an impassive servant brought more wine, unbidden. She held silence until the servant withdrew, then struck the new decanter of wine aside, to shatter on the floor untasted.

Handreth nodded approvingly, and she inclined her head and went on.

"We just don't know yet what he'll do. All the spies we can pay—and keep alive, once we start paying them—tell us Fzoul, who speaks for Bane in this city, is still far too furious with the First Purring Lord to aid him in any way, though they'll end up working together eventually . . . and the beholders have told him bluntly, at least once, that he's on his own for now. My thinking is that they want to see if he can really establish rule over the city before they spend any more effort backing him."

She sipped the last from her goblet, set it down, and added, "Yet that just ensures he *will* do something; he has to prove himself, and soon, before all the lords he outraged at council manage to kill him off or just fill his platter with so many plots, coups, and small swindles and treacheries that he'll have no time to do anything but fight them off. So far, he's divided his time between summoning keep lords and merchants to private talks whereat he gently threatens them, training his ever-growing bands of ruthless warriors and magelings behind wards no one can penetrate, and spending days in seclusion, no doubt crafting dastardly new spells. We keep expecting his spellchamber door to open, and golems as tall as castle towers, and undead dragons with sixteen grafted-on heads, to come bursting out and lay waste to the keep . . . but thus far, only he comes strolling out."

Silence fell.

Ayantha lifted an eyebrow. "Have I frightened you into scuttling back to the City of Splendors yet, Brother?"

Handreth smiled slowly, and his eyes began to glow red.

At the sight of that, the darklash hissed and stiffened, arching back away from him in her chair.

Then she brought her lash around with vicious skill, letting the wizard taste it, right across his face.

His smile never changed.

"This," he told her, as her lash suddenly twisted in her hands, its strands leaping to coil around her neck and throttle her—then just as swiftly dropped away, leaving her reeling in her seat, coughing and gagging, "sounds like fun."

*

The Spellchamber Door Opens

A tall, slender, darkly handsome man sat alone at the head of a long, polished table, his fingers clasped together under his chin. He was thinking, behind the faint half smile on his face that betrayed nothing.

In order to truly rule Zhentil Keep—not just lord it over the council—it would be necessary to break the power of the richest and most influential city merchants. Not to mention the hired wizards working for them.

The nobles he had already conquered, or could destroy at will. He just needed them to refrain from mustering arms against him and banding together while he dealt with the merchants.

The waylords. The sixteen men who could sway or cow all the other merchants and shopkeepers of the keep.

The sixteen who could not be throttled by surrounding their mansions and warehouses, and ruling the streets with sword and fist. The merchants whose mansions held Zhentil's Darkways, long-established magical gates linking those proud houses with certain mansions in Sembia. Allowing these sixteen to shuttle warriors, craftworkers, goods, and coins back and forth at will and in secret. Advantages that had won them all Sembian investments and Sembian backers whose aid they could easily call upon.

So "waylord" was a good name for them, even if only the Zhentarim called them by that name, or knew the sources of their power. To most citizens, they were merely the powerful merchants who dominated city life; folk to befriend and deal fairly with, who it was *very* unwise to make enemies of unless departing the city swiftly, never to return, and able to run far and fast. Sixteen men who shared a secret, but were a loose, often-feuding group, not a cabal or guild.

Yet true lords of the keep, for all that. Sixteen citizens who could quietly bring armies into the city without having to fight past the city walls or disembark at the docks.

They threatened the rule of anyone who sat on a throne in Zhentil Keep by their very existence. So they must die, and soon. The Zhentarim must seize and command their portals.

He had known this for years, but only now were his spells ready. Only now could he strike.

It was merely a matter of not putting a foot wrong in his swift, well-planned advance.

"If there is to be a Lord of the Darkways," Manshoon told the empty air around him, "let it be me."

He smiled at how much information he'd gathered by impersonating the wizard he'd just slain, Handreth Imbreth. Darklash Ayantha had screamed long and loud, and had proved every bit as tough as he'd expected. She should still be alive to scream for him a last time or two, when he was done here.

He reached out and pulled the cord that would tell his servants to open the doors and let his three most trusted underlings into the room.

*

Waylords, Waylords Everywhere

"He wants to know all you can call to mind of the waylords, so start thinking," Sneel said unpleasantly.

Kelgoran glowered. One day, Lorkus Sneel would take a step too far . . .

"Don't ever make the mistake of thinking the Brotherhood's warriors are dullards," Cadathen warned Sneel, as calmly as if he'd been discussing unchanging weather.

"I don't," Manshoon's most accomplished spy replied coldly and flatly.

"Very well then," the wizard Manshoon trusted most—because, they all knew, his Art was far too feeble to challenge the master's—replied affably, "don't make the mistake of treating them as if they are. It will only turn to bite you, when you'll least be able to afford that."

"Spare me your granddam's advice," Sneel hissed. He turned to face the warrior again. "Well?"

Ornthen Kelgoran was a veteran of many skirmishes in Thar and beyond, a hardened warrior who had become wise to the ways of the crowded stone city of Zhentil Keep, and who was Manshoon's best slayer of those who crossed him. He smiled. "Well, what?"

Sneel sighed. "Don't be—"

"A dullard? Sneel, your arrogance is only surpassed by your inability to judge others. A serious failing in a spy, I'd say."

Before Sneel could reply, the warrior swept out one brawny forearm in a florid herald's gesture, a violent movement that made the spy flinch.

Kelgoran chuckled and began to declaim. "Most important among the waylords—those the rest will follow—are five men."

He held up one hairy finger. "Srabbast Dorloun, a dealer in textiles and footwear, and a greedy, coldly calm, burly mountain of a man. I know little of his hired wizard, Tanthar of Selgaunt, beyond an impressive reputation: scruples, powerful magic, widely traveled."

A second finger rose. "The importer of smoked meats and fine wines Besnar Calagaunt, who reminds me very much of you, Sneel. Thin, apt to sneer—but unlike you, handsome and elegant. Unmarried, too, and a scourge of the ladies—but a devout follower of Loviatar who lives and works with two young priestesses of the pain goddess, Darklash Ayantha and Painclaw Jessanna. I expect he's covered with scars, under all those silken jerkins."

A third finger joined the other two. "Fantharl Halamaun, perhaps the wealthiest of the lot; he can afford *two* wizards of reputation: Ardroth Thauntan of Chessenta, and a handsome, mustache-twirling Tethyrian who styles himself Valandro the Mysterious and defends himself with three swords that fly around under his command. You can be sure the master pays special attention to *him*."

"Leave the wizards to the master," Sneel said coldly. "Tell me of Halamaun."

"Short, ugly, a glutton. Grasping and greedy; the man's a landlord and a coinlender, what more need I say?"

"His trades."

"Uh, builder. And repairer of most buildings in the keep."

"Very well. Your fourth?"

"Mantras Jhoszelbur. Trader in metals and ores, owns our biggest foundry, two weaponsmi—"

"Three. He owns three, and is busily buying out a fourth."

"Very well. *That* many weaponsmiths' shops, five ships I know of"—Kelgoran paused, one brow raised in challenge, but Sneel merely nodded, so the warrior continued—"two steadings where war-horses are bred, reared, and trained, and a smallish coster or two.

"More interesting than all of that, though: Stormwands House. His own little school of wizardry, composed of the elderly mage Paerimrel of Amn and a dozen or so students, all young. They call themselves 'the Stormwands.' Jhoszelbur's old, short tempered, and—"

"Who are the most powerful of the Stormwands, the ones we must be wary of?"

"—ruthless. There are two Stormwands to beware: Rorymrar and Jonthyn. My men and I have gone drinking with them more than once, under the master's orders. They are . . . less accomplished

than they believe themselves to be, but dangerous nonetheless."

"That's four. The fifth?"

"Ambram Sarbuckho, a—"

Four guards in full and gleaming black armor stepped through the tapestries in front of them, then drew the tapestries back and secured them with chains. The full-face helms that kept them anonymous made their voices boom; the nearest commanded, "Enough. The master is not in a patient mood. Enter."

The doors were thrust wide, revealing a thin wisp of smoke that coiled and then rose like a snake about to strike.

The three men had never seen such magic before, but they knew better than to hesitate. They strode forward, right through the smoke, and the guards slammed the doors behind them and went to their crossbows, fixed by firing ports that pierced the walls of the room beyond. Their loaded and ready bolts were tipped with a poison only Manshoon would take no harm from—for the First Lord of Zhentil Keep was a careful man.

*

The Prize of Indispensability

Manshoon waved the three to the waiting seats at the far end of the long, polished table, and regarded them expressionlessly. These were his most accomplished servants, which meant they were adept at acting loyal.

Sneel, Cadathen, and Kelgoran—useful to him in that descending order, yet utterly disposable whenever the need arose.

"As Sneel has no doubt revealed without actually saying so," he said flatly, "I have decided to free Zhentil Keep from the tyranny of the waylords. Now."

He looked to his spy. "Begin subtly spreading word through our usual mouths that Halamaun is finally sick of Dorloun, and is covertly gathering hired bully-blades to start killing Dorloun's employees, suppliers, and clients whenever they can be caught alone."

He waited for Sneel to nod then added, "You are also to start rumors that Jhoszelbur has decided to crush his longtime and increasingly successful rival Calagaunt. Further, you are to ensure that servants of all the waylords hear that the First Lord of the city is gathering power to decide who shall rise as lords in Zhentil Keep, and who shall be forced out of trade, the keep, and if need be, continued life. Then report back to me for additional orders."

Sneel nodded, but made no move to rise. The hint of a smile rose to Manshoon's lips.

"You are dismissed. Tarry not to try to overhear my orders to these two."

"Of course," Sneel replied, nodding low over the table before rising and smoothly making for the doors.

Manshoon waited for a signal—a single tap against the wall—after the doors had closed behind his departing spymaster. Then he looked at Kelgoran and spoke again.

"Gather your worst and most bumbling blades—those we need to test, and can easily afford to lose—for assaults on the mansions of Dorloun, Halamaun, and Jhoszelbur. Muster them at the warehouses, at the slaughterhouse, and at the Black Barrel; you choose which, for which. They're not to move, show themselves, or swing blades at anyone before I say so."

Kelgoran's nod was quick, and came with a pleased smile; he had already risen before Manshoon added, "Yes, you're dismissed."

The warrior's eager hastening brought a swift closing of the doors and the tap that followed them, leaving Manshoon and Cadathen alone together.

Whereupon the First Lord of Zhentil Keep drew a small, plain bone goblet from under the table, then an even smaller knife. Cadathen went pale.

"A renewal," Manshoon said calmly, drawing the blade along the outside edge of his hand. Dark red blood welled out, and he held his hand to let it run down his fingers and drip into the goblet, as he licked the knife clean, and slid it across the table to Cadathen.

Who deftly trapped it with his hand, rose and came to the goblet, gave himself a similar wound, licked the knife, and set it carefully down beside Manshoon, his hands trembling slightly.

When the goblet was full, the master's murmured word and swift gesture would enact the blood spell. After they both drank, any harm suffered by Manshoon would instantly also be dealt to Cadathen.

White-faced, he whispered, "Why is this necessary, Lord? Again?"

Manshoon smiled. "Call it a precaution that should hurt a loyal Cadathen not at all, but bestow upon a Cadathen of darker deed or intent a fitting traitor's reward. I need your silence, but also need you to know my plan, so you can adjust matters out in the streets and mansions to ensure it has the effects I desire. So heed well."

He cast the spell, they both drank from the glowing goblet, and Manshoon waved Cadathen back to his seat.

Only after the still-pale wizard was settled again did he add, "The waylords will be broken—or

eliminated—by an enchantment I have just perfected, that will very soon be cast upon all of the Darkways. Anyone who passes through those portals thereafter will die, horribly and instantly, as my spell transforms all the blood in their veins to a potent flesh-melting acid."

Cadathen looked excited, but uneasy. "But will the Darkways not prove useful, in time to come?"

"They will. As doors that open when *I* want them to, not doors standing open always that can let sellsword armies hired in Sembia flood into the very heart of Zhentil Keep whenever some greedy Sembian or other decides our gems and metals make the keep worth the trouble of plundering. Even beholders can only slay so many sellswords before they get overwhelmed and hacked apart. And should such a dark day come, wizards like me—and you—will survive far less time than elder eye tyrants like Argloth or Xalanxlan."

Cadathen nodded, wincing.

"So traversing the Darkways will be fatal except when I remove my spells," Manshoon purred. "And only I will know when those times are. Making me too valuable for anyone who cares for Zhentil Keep to slay. I *love* being indispensable."

*

Windtatter Moon Rising

Rain had stopped lashing at the windowpanes, and there was moonlight at last.

A weary but very happy Lord Bellander rose on his elbows and gazed out the window.

"Ah," he murmured. "A windtatter moon."

"Indeed," replied the senior priestess lying bare and beautiful in the bed beside him. "It's why I'm here."

Bellander lifted an eyebrow. "Oh? Not for me?"

Bride of Darkness Orlpharla sat up rather briskly. "The Dread God revealed to Lord Holy Fzoul that the next windtatter moon would bring great peril to House Bellander. I'm here to keep you alive until morning."

"And after that?"

"After that, Lord Bellander," Orlpharla said coldly, "your survival is in your own hands. Our most recent visions suggest we'll be rather busy trying to keep Zhentil Keep from erupting into civil war."

*

The Reapers Loosed

There arose heavy thuds of many staves and axes crashing against the doors, right on cue. His hired armsmen had timed matters rather well.

In response, guards shouted and came running; Manshoon smiled tightly and worked the spell that would make them *really* shout.

They did more than that. Some of them screamed and fled wildly through the mansion, crashing past tables and toppling sculptures and suits of armor.

The illusion he'd spun, of a beholder drifting menacingly forward, all of its eyestalks writhing, would circle the room he was in now.

The room where Waylord Fornlar Darltreth's Darkway flickered and glowed, now alone and unguarded.

His more important casting didn't take long; this was his tenth murmuring of the spell. When he was done, the Darkway blazed up brightly for a moment as if angered by his magic, then settled back down to glowing just as it had before.

The First Lord of Zhentil Keep gave it a sardonic salute and smile, and let his ring take him on to the next mansion.

Most of the waylords were elsewhere, gathered at Harlstrand House—whose wine cellar was the best, and feasting hall the grandest—to debate what to do about a certain upstart Manshoon and his rising power in the city. Sneel was very good at what he did; one waylord-shaking crisis, conjured up in less time than it took to eat a good meal.

He stood now in a rather colder room, hung with dark tapestries and occupied by another Darkway—and two astonished guards, who raised their spears and reached for an alarm gong.

Manshoon waved one hand and gave them slumber. His armsmen would need some time to hasten through the streets and reach the front doors of this high house; it would be best if no alarm was raised until their sudden assault on its doors.

This was all going very smoothly. He strode to where he could stand over the guards, and look to see if they had any useful magic he could confiscate.

"Let the reaping begin," he murmured aloud, "and the fortunes of the waylords wane."

*

Interlude in Innarlith

"Outlander!" the High Constable of Innarlith roared, "Come forth!"

On either side of his broad, bright-armored shoulders stood a trio of impassive constables, their armor as gleaming as his own, wands ready in their hands. When one challenges a wizard, it is best to be prepared.

High Constable Lhoreld smote the door with his mace, a glancing blow that marked but did not dent it—yet sent an echoing thunder through the bedchamber behind that door. "Elminster!" he bellowed. "You were seen to steal royal paints and brushes, and bring them to this place! Thief, stand forth!"

The door swung open.

Out of the lamplit dimness beyond strode a tall, slender, white-bearded man, barefoot and in fact—the High Constable's eyes bulged—wearing only hundreds of smears of dried paint and a lady's diaphanous nightgown pulled around himself. He leaned unconcernedly against the doorpost in what could only be described as an indolent—even jaunty—pose.

"Aye? Have ye brought wine?"

High Constable Lhoreld went a little crimson around the temples, and his nostrils flared. On either side of him, his constables went from looking impassive to looking stern, as they hastily leveled their wands at the man in the doorway.

"You stand in the Fortress Royal, wizard!" Lhoreld shouted. "In the name of the Spaerenza, Royal Ruler of Innarlith, I arrest you to face justice! You have stolen her art supplies—"

Elminster made a rude sound, and a ruder gesture. "Pah! I have *not*."

"Do—do you *mock* me, man?" The High Constable was incredulous. "The Spaerenza's paints are all *over* you, from head to toe! D'you think me *blind*?"

"Nay," Elminster drawled. "Merely stupid." He peered, to make sure none of the constables was clutching a decanter behind his back, then added, "Too stupid to bring any wine, at least."

"I'll not bandy words with you, wizard! I require your instant submission—on your knees, man, and hold out your wrists to be manacled! You'll be brought before Her Exaltedness for your punishment forthwith, and—"

"Punishment? Surely ye might want to determine my guilt, first? Or perhaps my innocence? Or has Innarlith no laws at all but the whim of its High Constable?"

Lhoreld was now purple and shaking. "Do-do you *seriously* mean to claim you did not steal art supplies, when sworn witnesses—over a score of servants and courtiers—saw you do so?"

"I do mean to make that very claim. I stole *nothing*. And *I* can produce my own witnesses to attest to my claim."

"Oh? Outlanders in your employ?" The High Constable sneered.

"No, personages that even a thick-headed windbag of a High Constable might have heard of. Let me begin with the Spaerenza herself. Then a certain Lord Wizard of the city, Uldimar Bronneth—ye may know him better as the Marquavarl; their son, Prince Hajorn, oh, and the Princesses Amaelra and Marinthra, too."

"Ah *hah*. You are aware that bearing false witness against the royal family of Innarlith is itself a very serious crime?"

"I am," Elminster confirmed, smilingly. "I believe ye'll find them happy to state my innocence in this matter."

The High Constable's utter disbelief was written very clearly across his face. "Oh? And I suppose the Lord Protector can speak for you, too?"

"No, I fear not," Elminster replied gravely. "However, both of his subordinates—the Dukes Henneth and Porlandur—were present, and can attest—"

"I'll bet they can." Lhoreld sneered. "I'll just bet they can. In fact, wizard, I'm going to wager my career on that. If you can't get any of these worthies to swear your words are true, you'll wither away to bones chained to the coldest, wettest wall in the deepest of our dungeons, down where the rats go to die! I'll escort you there myself, without delay! Stand forth from yon doorway, or my men will smite you down!"

"Really," Elminster said reprovingly, like a kindly but disappointed mother to an angry child, "that won't be necessary—"

"*Wizard*, step away from yon door!"

With a sigh and a shrug, spreading open and empty hands, Elminster did as he was commanded, the constables smoothly surrounding him—whereupon the constable directly behind Elminster was imperiously swept aside by someone else coming to the door.

The new arrival was a tall, scantily clad woman whose fine features were known to everyone in Innarlith—from the coins in their purses, if from nowhere else. She pointed a glowing scepter at Lhoreld.

"I *trust* you recognize me, High Constable," she said softly, ignoring the trembling, retreating constables to stare steadily at Lhoreld.

He went pale, fought to keep his gaze above her chin, then flushed and hastily looked away, stammering, "Y-yes, Great Spaerenza. I—"

"As it happens, Lord Elminster *did* spend the night with me. And my husband. After agreeing to my request, relayed by the Marquavarl—"

Right on cue, the Lord Wizard of Innarlith appeared in the doorway beside the Spaerenza. His nakedness was only partially concealed behind an

unfinished portrait he was carrying, of an entwined naked couple whose features—though not yet entirely limned—were unmistakably those of the ruler of Innarlith and her husband. Straightening the painting, he gave Lhoreld what could only be described as a sheepish smirk.

The High Constable swallowed, looked at the floor, and firmly turned his attention back to what the Spaerenza was still saying.

"—to paint us, something that was overheard and applauded by all three of our royal offspring, and the Dukes Henneth and Porlandur, just as the Lord Elminster has informed you. I *trust* you will believe me, despite your reluctance to extend the same courtesy to him?"

"I—ah—uh—*yes*, Your Exaltedness! I—ah—most humbly apologize for—"

Lhoreld's clumsy attempt at groveling was interrupted by a soundless thunder that smote every brain and stilled all sound for as long as it took a bright blue mist to arise out of nowhere and wash through the Fortress Royal.

Everyone trembled from the sheer force of magic rolling through them, as lightning raced through the mist.

Hair stood on end, all over everyone's body, as the awed constables went to their knees, followed by Lhoreld and the Lord Wizard . . . and then, weeping in ecstasy, the Spaerenza herself.

They were all staring at two eyes in the mist, eyes the size of warriors' shields that were drifting nearer in the air, heading unblinkingly for the paint-smeared man who was still on his feet.

Elminster, you are needed urgently in Zhentil Keep.

"Goddess," Elminster murmured, going down on one knee.

The force of Mystra's divinity had driven the constables face-down on the floor, as the royal couple of Innarlith gaped at the great face now shaping itself out of the air.

Manshoon has altered the Darkways, making passage through them fatal. The dead include many of the Art, including accomplished mages like Ardroth Thauntan, Hoal of the Stormwands, and Handreth Imbreth of Waterdeep, the latest of Sarbuckho's hirelings. Mend this crime, El.

"Lady, I will," Elminster promised, rising and reaching a hand toward the bedchamber door. His robes, clout, boots, and belt of many pouches raced to him.

Wizards must not be slain out of hand, be they the cause of this or not—yet destroy not the gates.

Elminster nodded, boots in hand—as blue light flared around him, and he was gone.

And with him went mist, lightning, Mystra, and all.

Leaving the folk of Innarlith blinking at each other across a suddenly empty passage.

Rising unsteadily, tears still raining from her chin as if from a downspout, the Spaerenza gave her High Constable a rather rueful grin.

"I'd say it's a good thing you didn't actually arrest our guest, Lhoreld. It makes it far easier for all of us to forget any of this happened, don't you think?"

*

An Unlooked-For Messenger

The alleyway was thankfully deserted, but the cold and the distinctive reek—an unhealthy mix of smelting, woodsmoke from a thousand-some chimneys, and rotting fish—told him he'd arrived in Zhentil Keep.

"Thank ye, Mystra," Elminster murmured, hastily pulling on his boots. The goddess was, after all, why he had a deserted alley to dress in.

Right behind Fantharl Halamaun's mansion, too.

He went round to the front as he cast a hasty spell to make his garments smarter and darker, to go with the younger and more prosperous face he was giving himself. After all, a messenger from Halamaun's Sembian backers would either come through the Darkway, or seek entrance at the front doors.

The waylord's guards were expecting trouble; two mountainous hulks in full armor overlooked by four crossbowmen who looked more than ready to fire.

"Emrayn Melkanthar, from Sembia, to see Fantharl Halamaun. Immediately," Elminster made crisp reply to the guards' challenge.

"The lord is not at home," was the flat reply.

"I'll await him in his forehall," he responded, just as flatly.

"We are to admit no one—"

"You will make an exception, or your master will be far less than pleased."

One of the crossbowmen vanished from the balcony above the doors, and returned with a handsome, richly dressed man with a styled and curved mustache.

"Valandro!" the Sembian greeted him, before the wizard could say a word. The Tethyrian frowned.

"I know you not, saer. Who are you, and how is it you know me?"

"I am Emrayn Melkanthar, and I am come from certain men in Sembia Halamaun does business with. Men who like to know with whom they deal—wherefore I was shown your likeness, and told you were Valandro the Mysterious these days, though I know you of old as—"

"*Enough*," the Tethyrian said sharply. Drawing two wands from his belt, he leaned over the balcony rail, and said curtly to the guards below, "Let him in. I'll be responsible."

He hastened down to meet the Sembian, wands aimed and ready, but was seen to go quiet and fall into step beside Melkanthar, leading the Sembian away from the forehall and along passages toward the rear of the house.

When they reached the chamber that held Halamaun's Darkway, Valandro the Mysterious dismissed the guards there, closed the doors to keep them out and himself and the Sembian in, then stood like an impassive statue as Melkanthar strode slowly around the glowing portal, nodded, and cast a swift, tentative spell. Only to frown and cast another.

"There," he said aloud. "Manshoon's enchantment now no longer transforms the blood of users, but instead works on their minds, promoting one of the most feeble spells they already know how to cast—and making it the *only* spell they can cast. Vulnerability, but not instant death. Aye, that should do it."

He strode past the motionless and unseeing Valandro to the door, but was still reaching for its handle when it was flung wide, and four guards with leveled glaives thrust forward into the room, an angry Fantharl Halamaun right behind them.

"*Die*, foul Zhentarim!" the waylord snapped. "Not content to—"

"*Hold*!"

Magic lashed forth from the intruder with force enough to send Halamaun's guards staggering back, dropped polearms clanging and clattering.

"No Zhentarim am I," said the stranger. "I am of the Vigilant Ravens."

Fantharl Halamaun blinked. The Ravens were a powerful Sembian cabal that opposed Manshoon's rise to power, but he'd thought they'd not do anything beyond offering him bad prices and a chill welcome in Sembian markets.

"Your wizard Ardroth Thauntan died using your Darkway," the Sembian continued, "because Manshoon cast a spell on it that turns the blood of anyone passing through it to acid. I've countered his spell; it is safe to use again."

Halamaun glowered at the intruder, then nodded grudgingly. "I—I just heard from some fellow traders of their Darkways becoming deathtraps. You *know* Manshoon is behind this?"

The Sembian nodded. "By way of payment, Halamaun"—the builder stiffened, but the Sembian waved a contemptuous hand and continued—"suppose you tell me the name of one of Manshoon's worst, ah, enforcers. The warriors he sends to do his open slayings. I feel in need of some . . . sport."

Fantharl Halamaun drew his lips back from his teeth in a mirthless smile. "Ornthen Kelgoran. He won't be hard to find—he fears no man of the city who isn't his master Manshoon or an upperpriest of Bane."

"That will change," was the calm reply.

No knife nor spell tested Elminster's wards as he stalked out of Halamaun's house. He turned two street corners before he relinquished his hold over the mind of Valandro the Mysterious, leaving behind whirling confusion as to what Emrayn Melkanthar of Sembia had looked like.

Not that the Tethyrian would have much time to ponder. Unless Halamaun was far less scared than El had judged him to be, he would keep Valandro and his overdone mustache very busy spreading word to his fellow waylords of what Manshoon had done.

*

At the Drowning Hippocampus

In Zhentil Keep, richly dressed strangers attracted unhealthy attention in far safer drinking and wenching clubs than the noisome, dimly lit Drowning Hippocampus, so El altered his guise again, becoming a filthy, stooped old man in fittingly foul robes.

Besides, the Sembian's coins had served their purpose, buying the news of Ornthen Kelgoran's present whereabouts from several eager tongues. It seemed Kelgoran wasn't well loved, or was well feared, or both. Probably both.

Now, the man would either be dominating the bar with goblet in hand and tongue a-wag, or abed somewhere with a lowcoin lass. Or two.

El shuffled through the doors, into near darkness and an all-too-familiar din and reek of spilled drink, unwashed bodies, spew, and burnt cabbage. Why all of these places had to smell of scorched cabbage was beyond him, but . . .

To the owner of the first hostile glare directed his way, El mumbled, "Urgent message for Kelgoran—where be he?"

"Rutting in the back," was the reply. "Best wait for him to—"

El stumbled past, and down the hall his informant had nodded toward. At its very end he discovered a guard sitting against a door with a loaded crossbow across his knees.

That bow got aimed at his crotch with menacing speed. "Go away," its owner suggested tersely.

"Message for Kelgoran from Lord Manshoon," El growled back. "Still want me to go away?"

"How do I know you speak truth?"

"You'll know," El replied, thrusting his head forward, jaw first, "when Manshoon rewards you—either for helping me reach Kelgoran, or for being *less* than helpful."

He let two dancing flames kindle in his eyes, just for a moment, and the guard recoiled with comical speed, swallowing and trying to claw his way upright and seeking to slide sideways along the wall and out of the way, all at once. "R-right the other side of the door, S-saer Zhent!" he offered breathlessly.

"Good," Elminster replied with a gleeful grin—as he plucked up the crossbow to aim it back down the passage, and trigger it.

Its loud *clack* was followed by a groan from the Zhentarim enforcer back down the far end of the passage, as its bolt sank deep into his chest.

Then Elminster kicked the door open and whirled the door guard around in front of him as a shield in one whirling motion, his hand clamped like a steel trap on the bones of the man's elbow.

The room beyond was almost filled by a bed. It was creaking as a cursing and very hairy man scrambled out from under a hissing-in-fear woman, reaching for his sword.

He stopped when El's spell took hold of his mind.

Almost absently El flung the guard into the coinlass as she came at him furiously, her hands like claws. There'd be time enough to compel her mind later—and the guard's, too, if need be.

Right now, he had something more urgent to do. His sudden arrival in the dark and raging cesspit of Ornthen Kelgoran's mind had alerted Manshoon, just as he'd expected.

Smiling savagely, El destroyed the First Lord's "eye" in Kelgoran's mind, searing Manshoon's magic swiftly enough to leave its distant owner not knowing who'd burst into his enforcer's mind, or why.

That should bring Manshoon out of whatever bed *he* was sporting in, right now, and set him to doing things that would add decidedly more fun to the unfolding proceedings.

The guard and the coinlass were still shrieking and tumbling on the floor when Ornthen Kelgoran burst past them, sword in hand but not bothering to snatch up and put on anything more than his boots, to hurry out into the streets with the strange old man.

The Zhentarim slayer was more than a little drunk, and was a cruel, unsubtle brute at the best of times, but he knew exactly where all of the waylords dwelt.

Under Elminster's mental goading, he loped through the streets with a no-longer-stumbling old man right beside him, heading for the nearest Darkway just as fast as he could.

*

Guidance Gives Out

Elminster shuddered at the sudden burst of mental pain, then sighed. It was too late; Ornthen Kelgoran was toppling, almost beheaded, his mind dying with dazing speed.

Elminster broke contact and let the Zhentilar fall, spraying blood as his head wobbled loosely on what was left of a thick, hairy neck. Thrice he'd held Kelgoran unmoving at each Darkway, to keep the man helpless as he altered Manshoon's slaying spell to his own.

This fourth time, the guards of Torlcastle Towers had been just a bit too swift and bold. He hadn't even begun the spell, yet here they were, with Kelgoran cut down and eight uniformed slayers charging at the one remaining intruder, howling all sorts of unpleasant things as their swords sought his life.

Elminster ducked away from one, almost collided with another who'd raced around to gut him from behind, and flung himself flat on his back. The startled Torlcastle guard stumbled over him, off-balance and trying unsuccessfully to stab downward with a sword that was too long to draw back far enough to stab, and ran right into the guard who'd been hounding El.

Lying on the smooth, polished, cold stone floor, Mystra's man sighed and worked a spell that plucked all the guards off their heavy-booted feet and flung them at the ceiling high above.

They slammed into it with gratifyingly heavy thuds, swords and daggers fell from various hands—and then they all came crashing back down.

El stayed on his back amid the groans, knowing this wasn't done yet. He had to prevail swiftly, or servants and guards from all over Torlcastle's mansion would be in here, and readying crossbows, and he didn't have *time* for all of this foolishness—

Four guards came swaying unsteadily to their feet after their journeys aloft and back again; one of them even still had hold of his sword.

Elminster rolled to his feet. "Keep back," he warned them. "I have no quarrel with any of ye. Just let me be, and—"

He knew his words were wasted even before he said them, but Mystra expected her agents to wield their Art with some sense of responsibility. Four guards came charging—and a fifth was crawling toward a fallen weapon, giving El a murderous glare.

Elminster sighed, worked a simple spell, and watched as the closest guard got plucked to his death, hurled through the portal that would boil his lifeblood into acid at its far end. Well, certain Sembians *did* need fair warning of all of this.

That bought him time enough to use another spell on the others to fling them away into battering collisions with the walls of the room. Then he threw one into another, and hauled the crawler up off the floor to crash into the faces of two reeling guards.

Everyone went down, buying him enough time to circle around behind the Darkway, to where he could keep an eye on them all, and work the spell he needed to cast.

Fresh shouts came from the doors of the room as the portal flared, but Elminster's next spell had snatched him away out of Torlcastle Towers even before the crossbow bolts came singing through the spot where he'd stood.

He was in a hurry. Manshoon would be roused and at work by now, and a certain servant of Mystra had to find another Zhentarim who knew where the rest of the Darkways were.

And as every wayfarer knows, good guides are *always* hard to find.

*

Sitting Alone in Highturrets

Morlar Elkauvren was a waylord, and lived in a towering pile of stone, a great rising prow of tall windows, balconies, and spires that would look most loomingly impressive against the winking stars, to someone who had time to stand in awe.

Elminster wasn't such a someone, just now. It was enough that he knew Elkauvren and the location of his home—Highturrets, an apt name if there ever was one—and that somewhere in that vast mansion was a Darkway.

And if he knew his Zhentarim, word would have spread among them by now that some stranger was tracking down Darkway after Darkway. They would be hunting for this stranger, and massing defenders around each portal to watch for his approach—or, for the Darkways they didn't yet control, around the mansions that held such portals.

Which was why Elminster now looked not like a bearded man, but a slender, rather dirty young woman clad in a hooded cloak, high boots, and not much else.

"Warm you, saer?" she husked hopefully, to the parade of dark-armored men striding swiftly down her alleyway.

One of them whirled, sword half-grating out. "Get gone, sister!" he barked. "Well away from here, and come not back, or it'll be the last thing you ever do!"

Her reply was to duck her head, hiss angrily, and—once the Zhentilar were past—scurry hastily out of the alcove she'd been loitering in and flee the way they'd come.

"Who's yon?" someone barked, from ahead.

"A streetskirts," another man replied. "They've turned her out; let her go."

El paused for a moment at the cross street where those two Zhents stood, and murmured fearfully, "Which one of you is the wizard?"

"Why?" the first Zhent snarled.

"F-for later," she quavered. "I was told to find him, another night, so I need to know what he looks like. Then I'll go."

Cold eyes measured her for a moment, ere the second Zhent turned and pointed. "There. He's called Cadathen. Likes redheads."

The coinlass shook back her hood and opened her cloak, flouncing just enough to make it swirl. Long, unbound red hair swirled, too, though the mens' eyes sought certain other revealed features.

"Thank you," she husked, before they could do more than grin, and hurried away. She didn't bother to tell them that her thanks were to Mystra, for the fact that the magic "she" was using could shift the hue of hair even faster than it took to pull open a garment.

She had to find a Zhent in armor about the same size as Ornthen Kelgoran, before the ring forming around Highturrets got completely settled. Ah—there!

"*You're* the one," she purred, throwing off her cloak to reveal her complete lack of weapons—and all her now-buxom charms—to the startled Zhentilar trudging along the street, his head down and his mood dark.

He gaped at her. "What, by all the gods—?"

"Take me," she hissed, whirling him into a doorway. "Here and now! I've been watching you for months, I'm crazed about you, I *must* have you! 'Twill take but moments, then give me your name, and I'll find you for longer dalliances on later nights! *Please*, my lord!"

Rather dazedly the Zhentilar ran a disbelieving hand down the warm, smooth flesh offered to him, then hurriedly started to unbuckle and unfasten. "Name's Vorl, lass! Watching me for months? Who *are* you?"

"Jahanna Darlwood, of the keep; my father's Brace Darlwood; seller of roof tiles and stone, and very wealthy . . ."

"Tell me later," Vorl snarled, shoving her back against the wall as his breeches sought his ankles. "We must be quick!"

The suddenly melting mask of flesh that smothered him as he tried to kiss it retained a mouth. As he sagged into senselessness, it agreed in a very different voice, "Aye, we must. Sleep now, lusty Vorl. I'll be tying ye to the door, I'm afraid; can't have ye racing back to reclaim thy armor before I'm done with it."

A few hard, swift breaths later, a man in a cloak was bound to the door—and his exact likeness was hurrying off down the street in full armor, head down and hand on his sword.

"Vorl, you laggard," an older Zhentilar hailed him with a snarl, "where've you *been*? Rutting in doorways, all the way from the tavern?"

"Well, uh, yes," Vorl admitted, but his low mumble was barley audible, and the Zhentilar wasn't listening.

"*Get* over here, you lazy dog! We're to form a ring all around Highturrets—and your reward for being last boots in is getting to stand guard right *there*, hard by the jakes!"

"There" was an embrasure in a building's cracked and much-patched back wall, filled with rotting litter and containing a long-boarded-up door. It faced a matching alcove across the street, where a wooden bench with a hole in its seat had been placed over a large, square open shaft leading down into the infamous city sewers. Two unhappy-looking sternhelms were busy rigging up a blanket in a frame of spears, to serve as both a door and a wall for future patrons of the little seat, who might desire some privacy while they were sitting alone.

A jakes. It seemed the Zhentarim were expecting a lengthy siege.

Sternhelm Vorl growled a curse, because that would be expected, and trudged to his post, kicking aside the worst of the reeking, slimy refuse. He hoped he'd not have to wait long.

Mystra smiled on him; he'd barely had time to grow bored and cold ere the wizard Cadathen came in search of the jakes, blowing on chilled fingers and snarling some curses of his own.

If the Zhentarim mage was surprised that a Zhentilar sternhelm crossed the narrow street to hold the blanket open for him, he didn't show it.

He *was* surprised when the warrior stepped into the alcove with him, pulling the blanket closed, but only for a moment.

After that, he had no time left to be surprised about anything, ever again.

*

As The Lord Mage Commands

"Cold, hey? Sitting alone over the sewers, I mean?"

Holding the rank of battlecaptain, Galandror dared to exchange such pleasantries with Zhentarim mages. Well, he'd not do so with the Lord Manshoon, but Cadathen was very far from—

"Too cold," the wizard said curtly. "We're not waiting the night through out here. Storm the gates."

Galandror and his fellow battlecaptain, Narleth, exchanged surprised glances, then nodded in unison. "By your command, Lord Mage."

Cadathen smiled and threw his shoulders back, like a pigeon about to preen. Obviously, he liked the sound of "Lord Mage."

Narleth used the title again, quickly. "The front gates, Lord Mage?"

Cadathen shook his head. "The rear. I'll destroy them with a spell, and the doors behind them too. You get our blades in there fast, secure the chamber that holds the Darkway, then drive out everyone in that end of the mansion. I want no one creeping up on us while I set to work on it."

"Set to work on it, Lord Mage?" Galandror asked warily. There'd been no hint of this in their orders, and Lord Manshoon wanted them to be watchful for traitors everywhere. Among his magelings, in particular.

Cadathen gave both battlecaptains calm, direct looks. "I suspect our unknown foe who's seeking out Darkways is either hiding in them, or enspelling them to serve as scrying foci, so henceforth he can spy on the rooms that hold them, from afar. I need to cast a spell on the Darkway inside yon mansion, to see if my suspicions are correct. And all of us will have warmth, chairs to sit on, and whatever food and drink can be found in a waylord's mansion, rather than freezing our behinds outside on a dark street all night."

The Zhentilar nodded, reassured.

They collected their men swiftly, Narleth leading a dozen around the front to bang on the main gates and hold Elkauvren's guards there while Cadathen forced entry at the rear of the towering mansion.

"Right," the wizard snarled, when Galandror came striding back to tell him all was ready. "Let's get warm."

He raised his hands, murmured something, and the night exploded in fire.

*

Guarding Flickering Silence

"Secure, Lord Mage." Galandror's tone was almost respectful.

Narleth had just returned and made his report. Only two Zhentilar had been killed, though Morlar Elkauvren would need to replace most of his house guards and a goodly number of his household servants. The cowering lord was shut up in his own guestrooms above his front gate, with watchful sternhelms to keep him there—and not one member of Elkauvren's household was both still alive and nearer to the chamber that held the Darkway than the central feasting hall.

"Well done," Cadathen replied, turning to the glowing portal. "Now to make sure this hasn't been tainted by the foe's magic."

The two battlecaptains watched him closely, of course, but they were not to know that the spell he cast was doing no such thing, and instead was altering Manshoon's slaying spell into his own less fatal magic—just as they were not to know Cadathen was really the infamous archwizard Elminster.

Suspicion was clear on their tense, grim faces, but they visibly relaxed as nothing seemed to happen. Other than Cadathen stepping back to nod in satisfaction and tell them, "Our foe worked a magic so he could spy through this, just as I suspected. He won't be doing that now."

When nothing more happened, the two warriors relaxed even more—and soon threw daggers to see who would first go foraging in the kitchens and pantries, and who would first settle down to the tense, waiting boredom of guarding the empty, silently flickering Darkway.

*

Whispers at the Feast

Though Manshoon knew the waylords were meeting in a high house not all that far away, he kept all hint of his knowing any such thing to himself.

Here, in this grand feasting hall, he was a guest of the most powerful nobles of the city, and was taking great care not to remind them of his ruthless side or the mighty magic he could hurl. Nobles tended to dislike upstarts who threatened them—particularly upstarts who could destroy them at will. His presence was all about reassurance, building alliances if not friendships, and making common cause.

Not to mention establishing a firm alibi for himself, for when word spread of all the waylords slain or embattled, and the survivors began to hurl their furious accusations.

Manshoon smiled and thanked his host for the excellent wine.

And why not? It held not even a trace of poison, after all.

His host, directly across the goblet- and platter-crowded table from him, was Lord Syal Amandon, the callow, bewildered-by-the-world son of Manshoon's onetime nemesis, the thankfully dead old snow lion Rorst Amandon.

Syal was swiftly falling under his sway, and Manshoon was anxious to keep matters that way. The other nobles—particularly old Hael and Phandymm—knew exactly what he was up to, but had thus far done nothing about it. He saw the anger and contempt glittering in their gazes, but they continued to say and do not the smallest thing to cross the First Lord. Manshoon couldn't read them—long-established wealth bought wards and shieldings subtle spells couldn't pierce—but looked forward to any opportunity to learn what they were truly thinking.

Hopefully one would arise before they were busily trying to put swords through him.

The three younglings were another matter. Lord Thaerun Blackryn, like Syal, was the pale shell of a more formidable sire. Young, hot-blooded, quick to boast, and cunning, he spent most of his hatred and energy trying to best and frustrate his rival, Lord Mindarl Naerh. Who did the same in return. Supercilious and swift-tongued, Naerh was a decade older than Blackryn—and every whit as ignorant of the world.

Belator, now, was a very different creature. As graspingly ambitious as Manshoon himself, and thus easily understood and used. With about as much safety as one "uses" a snake.

That left only Eldarr and his ilk; as old as Hael and Phandymm, but less keen of wit and far less self governed. They were the arrogant, red-faced ranting, patrician sophisticates every minstrel lampooned, the sort of nose-aloft old growler that shopkeepers of the city thought all nobles were like. Which meant they could be ignored until it became necessary to crush them.

And Manshoon was growing adept at effortlessly crushing the Lord Murvyn Eldarrs of the world.

So it was with more than a little irritation—all signs of which were firmly kept off his face, for controlling his own face and voice were the first skills a far younger Manshoon had honed—that the First Lord of Zhentil Keep received an unexpected spell-sent message in his head.

F-first Lord?

The mind touch was wildly nervous and fearful. It was Joranthas, an aging Zhentarim too weak to be disloyal—and too weak to deal with much in the way of trouble. Which is what this missive would surely be about.

Lord Manshoon, I bring news. Joranthas was still frightened, but a little less frantic.

Yes? he thought back.

Ah, Lord, there's trouble at Wyrmhaven. I just . . . fled from there.

No doubt. Continue.

Ambram Sarbuckho returned from his meeting while our forces were still fighting his household servants to get to his Darkway. His bodyguards and hireswords had crossbows, and their quarrels were tipped with poison. Things went badly for our side.

Thank you, Joranthus. Get to cover.

Manshoon spent his flare of rage in a mental slap that both thrust Joranthas out of his mind and dealt the old fool a headache that should leave him reeling for days. He was icily calm a moment later, when he turned to beckon Sneel from where the man stood like a servant against the wall.

"Forgive me, Lord Amandon," he said smoothly to his host, ignoring Lord Hael's glower of suspicion, "but I've just remembered that the servants who usually pump my water are ill; I must send my retainer to give orders to others to do their work, or the cook will have a dry kitchen long before morning."

"Of course," Syal said heartily, even before Sneel bent his ear to Manshoon's lips.

He kept his whispers short and simple. "Trouble at Wyrmhaven; Sarbuckho's back, and his men have poisoned bows. Get Cadathen to crush them utterly. No excuses. Report back soon."

Sneel bowed low and hastened away, and Manshoon turned back to the table with an easy smile.

He wasn't smiling inside. Cadathen had to be victorious, or the Zhentarim would lose far too many minor magelings at Wyrmhaven—if they weren't dead already. More importantly, he dared not let Sarbuckho prevail, and become a clear example of successfully defying the Brotherhood. If the waylord won the night's fray, his victory would hearten many others into their own rebellions against the Zhentarim, large and small.

He ached to be racing to Wyrmhaven himself, to hurl spells to smash and rend Sarbuckho and his every last blade and servant—and instead he was stuck here, wearing an empty smile, and taking great care to use no magic at all over eveningfeast. Well, almost no magic.

Lord Belomyr Hael was starting to smile. Bane take Mystra, but the old wolf could scent his discomfort!

Hael was old, graying and growling, a worldly conservative—and right beside him, grandly adorned elbow to grandly adorned elbow, Lord Goraund Phandymm was an even older worldly and pragmatic conservative.

They were both smiling now, almost as if they could read his mind.

Could they?

But no, he'd worked spells a hundred times to check on that. They were just good at reading the smallest signs—tightness of lip, the briefest flash of an eye—but toothless old wolves for all that.

Down the table, Lord Samrel Belator helped himself to a decanter that was already almost empty. Now there was a contrast: young, handsome, athletic, an embracer of new ways and ideas . . . Manshoon's real competition.

Well, such perils could be humbled—or killed—tomorrow.

Tonight, he needed an alibi rather more.

Manshoon put on his best innocent smile, reached for the nearest decanter, and devoted himself to making empty small talk.

Cadathen would take care of things.

Cadathen would have to.

*

Orders Upon Orders

The man came through the curtains very quietly, but the two battlecaptains spun around, swords flashing.

"Halt!" Galandror barked, drawing his dagger and hefting it for a throw. Narleth came around the Darkway to flank his fellow Zhentilar, barring the intruder's path to the portal, and to Cadathen.

Then they recognized him and fell silent.

"I bring orders from the Lord Manshoon," Lorkus Sneel said, with just a trace of weariness. "Hinder me and face his wrath."

The battlecaptains lowered their swords a little.

"Cadathen," Sneel said, "you are ordered to gather all of the Brotherhood's forces you feel you need, proceed in haste to Wyrmhaven, the house of the Waylord Ambram Sarbuckho, and slay everyone there who resists you to take possession of the Darkway. Sarbuckho returned from Harlstrand House while our force was still fighting through the halls of Wyrmhaven, and his bodyguards used poisoned crossbow bolts; our force is all dead or fled."

"Take me there," Cadathen replied promptly, "so you can tell the master what decisions I make, and how I fare."

"How you begin, rather," Sneel corrected him. "My orders are to report back to the master soonest."

"Very well." Cadathen fell into step beside him, calling back over his shoulder, "Battlecaptains, remain here and guard this Darkway!"

Even before they replied, he was through the curtain with Sneel, and hastening through the empty, echoing mansion, heading for Wyrmhaven.

*

Rally and Betrayal

The handful of blood-spattered, wounded Zhentilar crouching in the cold alleyway were in pain, and angry. They snarled out a stream of curses as they told Cadathen they had fled for their lives, or been driven out of Wyrmhaven, leaving many fellow members of the Brotherhood dead inside. Ambram Sarbuckho was victorious.

Cadathen put his arms around two of the least disabled, gathered them to him, and whispered, "And you know *why* Sarbuckho defeated you? He was warned of your coming by the man who came here with me. Yes, Lorkus Sneel, the master's messenger. He betrayed you. He betrayed us all." He let go of them and strode off down the alley to find more Zhents.

Sneel strode after him—and Cadathen carefully didn't look back as a brief commotion arose behind him, a thudding and snarling that ended in a wet spattering sound.

When he did turn around, the two Zhentilar were following him, their swords dripping in their hands . . . and the huddled heap that had been Sneel lay still in the midst of a spreading pool of dark blood, in their wake.

Justice, mistaken or otherwise, was at least prompt in Zhentil Keep.

Smiling tightly, Cadathen beckoned the two men to him, as he came upon another knot of wounded Zhents. "Would you like to avoid the Lord Manshoon's wrath, and claim Sarbuckho's head before morning?"

There was a general murmur of assent. "What if I take myself into the forehall ahead of you, take down Sarbuckho's bowmen with my spells, then blast the doors open from inside to let you in? Will you be ready to charge into Wyrmhaven to finish the fray?"

"I'll say!" one Zhentilar replied.

"We're dead if we don't," an older one growled. "None of us can run and hide to where the First Lord can't find us."

That brought a general rumble of agreement, as more Zhents came trotting up to join the throng around Cadathen.

"Right, then," the wizard told them excitedly. "Charge the doors, after I bring them down. Until then, keep back."

He made two swift, complex gestures—and was abruptly gone, the space where he'd stood simply empty.

*

War in Wyrmhaven

Elminster crouched low, the moment he felt the stones of the balcony beneath his feet. Being Cadathen was a bit of a strain; thankfully, he'd soon be done playing ambitious young Zhentarim.

Right after he turned, keeping below the balcony sidewall so the Zhentilar below wouldn't see him, he made the door that led into Wyrmhaven's fourth floor quietly melt out of existence. Then he hurried across the dark, deserted room beyond. The cold night air followed him.

From all he knew of Ambram Sarbuckho, alert warriors with crossbows would be massed in the forehall and every other room that had an exterior door. Zhentish mansions sported no ground-floor windows, so defenders could concentrate where they were most likely to be needed.

Sarbuckho was a swindler from way back, and Elminster felt no compunction at all about blasting down men who fought for him.

So all he needed to do was get to the top of the great corkscrew staircase that spiraled down into the rear of the forehall, work a quiet spell, and stand well back.

As the floor heaved and shuddered, Wyrmhaven thundered and groaned all around him, a blinding flash flung a thick haze of smoke and dust into the air, and a rising roar from many Zhentilar throats told him he'd not only shattered the forehall and its defenders—he'd burst open its doors, letting them flood in.

Smiling, he waited until he thought the moment just right, and cast another blasting spell down the ruined stair, to claim Manshoon's men, this time. Then he turned and strode along the hallway, seeking a servants' stair down. He needed to get to Sarbuckho's gate and alter it, without greeting a poisoned quarrel.

In the eddying aftermath of his magics, he could feel the mounting pulse of the Darkway as he got closer to it. Thankfully, it stood unguarded, all of Wyrmhaven's guards gone elsewhere to fight the attackers.

He did what he had to do with swift ease, and teleported himself back to the alley. It was deserted, though a timid coinlass poked her head out a door to see if it was safe to emerge and seek business. At the sight of a Zhentarim mage, she hastily ducked back again.

El smiled thinly and started a careful circumnavigation of the embattled mansion, to make sure no Zhentilar got away. There should still be some poisoned quarrels left, if he knew his waylords . . .

Above all, he wanted no witnesses to tell tales about Cadathen or Sneel that would reach the ears of a certain First Lord of Zhentil Keep.

Neither his first circuit nor his second turned up anyone fleeing Wyrmhaven, where ragged shouts and the clash and clang of arms told him the fighting was still raging.

That much vigilance would have to be sufficient. There were other things he wanted to do that night.

El stopped at Sneel's body, turned it over, and looked around to make sure no one was watching. Then he conjured a little light to see by and carefully shifted his own likeness to match the unlovely looks of Lorkus Sneel.

Dragging what was left of the real Sneel to the jakes he'd earlier thrust Cadathen's body down, he tipped Manshoon's best spy down into the sewers.

The eels would soon devour it, beneath the reeking waters and drifting filth, and—

His eyes narrowed. Instead of the wet, sloppy splash he should have heard, there'd been a distinct *thud*. Hurriedly he conjured light again and looked down.

Bobbing in the waters below was a dead man, face up and palely staring, several threads of red gore trailing from him into the waters around. It wasn't Sneel, nor Cadathen for that matter.

It was Ambram Sarbuckho.

Elminster blinked. *That* fast, they'd got to him? Or was the Sarbuckho who'd come storming "back" to Wyrmhaven not the real Sarbuckho at all?

For a moment he contemplated just waving this mystery away and getting on with the business of undoing Manshoon's evil just as swiftly as he could. Then he sighed, waved that thought away instead, and teleported himself back to a certain balcony.

The room it opened into was as dark and deserted as before. Cautiously he stepped out into the hallway beyond. No guards, no one lurking with a crossbow . . .

Here deep in Wyrmhaven, things had quieted down. A lot of the shouters and sword-clangers had, it seemed, perished, and the survivors were running out of foes to loudly fight with.

Up on this high floor there were no signs of life—or any evidence that the fighting had ever reached this far.

El stood against a wall like a thoughtful statue for a breath or two, pondering. If he had been Ambram Sarbuckho, where would his grand personal bedchamber be?

High in the mansion, probably on this floor—for the levels above must be smaller expanses, broken by the separations of turrets and towers rising apart, and it seemed only wizards preferred such smaller, rounded privacies—and most likely toward the back of Wyrmhaven.

In other words, right this way . . .

As he went, El turned one of the rings he wore, to call up a protective mantle that would make him like smoke to metal weapons, and turn back many magics too. He moved along the hall as quietly as he knew how.

It made a right-angled turn, to meet with the end of a parallel hallway running down the other side of the main bulk of the mansion—and in the center of that cross passage was an alcove, whose back wall was a pair of high, rounded, ornate doors.

Trapped and guarded or not, they were what he'd been seeking. On the far side of them . . .

He drew off Sneel's boots, thrust his hands into them, and took a door handle between them, turning it. Locked, of course.

As he let the handle quietly return to its former position, he heard something he'd been expecting: faint feminine sobbing from the far side of the door.

Stepping smoothly to one side of the doors, he asked firmly, "Lady? Lady Sarbuckho? Are you in need of aid?"

The sobbing caught in a great gasping of breath and sniffling, then became a choked and tremulous voice replying in the negative—and furiously ordering him away.

Elminster frowned. Making no reply, he moved along the passage to its far corner, where he found what he'd hoped there would be there: a much smaller, plainer closed door.

It was locked, too, but a swift spell seared through it, leaving the lock holding a half-moon of door separate from the larger rest of it. El gently pushed that larger panel open and stepped inside, finding himself in a dark robing room lined with wardrobes. The weeping was louder now, coming from a gap in the wardrobes along the side wall, where a curtained archway obviously led into the main bedchamber.

Elminster peered through the gap where the two curtains met, satisfied himself that there was only one person—hunched over on the floor at the

foot of a gigantic canopied bed, and trembling—in the room beyond, and glided soundlessly through the curtains.

His first act was to kick away the bloody knife in front of the sobbing woman, his second to do the same to a black gem the size of his palm that positively *crawled* with magic, and his third was to kneel swiftly and take her by the arms.

She raised a tear-streaming, bleeding face of misery to him, staring in fear. "S-sneel? *Here*?"

"No, I merely wear his shape. I'm not of the keep, Lady. Ye *are* Lady Sarbuckho, are ye not?"

She nodded, drawing her head up but spoiling the proud movement by sniffing like a young lass getting over a tantrum. "Yavarla Sarbuckho I am, saer. Are you here to kill me for what I've done—or for my jewels, or for who I am?"

"I'm not here to slay ye at all. But tell me now, what have ye done?"

By way of reply, she shook her head and looked away, trying to jerk free of his grasp.

"Ye sent your lord husband down dead into the sewers, did ye not? Using yon knife, aye?"

Yavarla Sarbuckho went rigid in his arms, then sagged limply and whispered, "Y-yes."

"Why?" El asked, as softly as any comforting mother, gathering her against his chest.

She burst into fresh tears, in a flood of uncontrolled weeping, and struggled incoherently to say something through it. Elminster daubed at the blood on her face—one eye was swollen almost shut, and she might have a rather piratical scar down the line of her chin, if she lived long enough for things to heal—and murmured wordless comfort, rocking her like a child.

Eventually words came to her. "He-he—he burst in on me, in a rage . . . beat me! He'd learned . . . what I'd done!"

"And what have ye done?" El murmured into her ear, holding her tight.

Yavarla drew in one shuddering breath, and then another, fighting for control. "L-lord Manshoon came to me . . . alone. He was very kind, comforting, the very sort of lord I wanted—ohhh, kind gods deliver me!"

She burst into tears again, sobbing wretchedly, and Elminster rocked her and murmured, "Ye and the First Lord lay together, and he was kind and understanding and tender, and ye talked. He asked questions, like a kindly friend, and ye answered them, and he learned much about the Darkways, and Lord Sarbuckho's dealings in Sembia, whom he traded with, and who else in the city used their Darkways in like manner . . . am I right?"

She managed a nod as she shuddered her way through hard breathing again, fighting her way out of weeping once more.

"Just now, thy lord husband burst in on ye in a rage, and tried to force ye to—what?"

"G-go straight to Manshoon, and touch him with the gem."

"Did he say what would befall then?"

"N-no. I knew. We both knew. He got it years ago from adventurers who plundered a Netherese tomb. When awakened, you touch it to the one you named when awakening it, and it will explode."

"With force enough to turn Manshoon—and ye—and probably most of whatever tall keep ye're standing in—to dust."

"Y-yes. It's awake now."

"So ye both knew he was sending ye to death. Ye refused, and he beat ye, and ye snatched out his own belt dagger and stabbed him . . . and he died. So ye stuffed him down yon garderobe."

"I did." Yavarla was past tears now. She stared at him almost defiantly. "And I regret it not at all. I have hated him for a very long time."

Elminster nodded. "With good cause, I have no doubt. Come; time is running out for us both." He pointed at the robing room he'd come through. "Choose thy two most favorite coverings—everything, from toes to top of head, mind; gems and underthings, main garments, and the cloaks and wraps ye wear when stepping out into snowstorms—and thy least favorite wear; three entire outfits. Bring it all in and toss it on thy bed. Be swift and quiet, and run right back in here if anyone sees ye through the ruin I made of thy robing room door. Do *not* flee out into the house beyond, or ye'll surely be slain. Brutally, by Zhentarim who have invaded thy halls, not by me."

Yavarla stared at him for a moment, then rushed into the robing room. Elminster went straight to the gem and sent it somewhere far away and safer. Then he plucked up the dagger, wiped it on a white fur rug that was already spattered with much of Ambram Sarbuckho's spilled blood, then kept the dagger and sent the rug on the same journey that the Lord of Wyrmhaven had recently made.

By then, Yavarla was done, and standing anxiously by the bed.

"Find thy most precious jewels, and all coins ye can lay hand on, that are in this room," El told her.

She held up a small coffer already in her hands. "No-no coins would he allow me, and his are locked in vaults down below, not here."

El nodded and waved at her to drop the coffer on the bed with the rest. She did, and he gathered up the thick coverlet, with its glossy shimmerweave skin around overlapped and sewn-together thick wool blankets, around all she'd gathered. The bundle was nearly as large as she was.

"Fight me not, now," he murmured, settling the bundle on one hip and sliding his other hand around her waist. "Hold very still."

She obeyed, and that gave his hands freedom enough to work a teleport spell, and whisk them both to an alley that was becoming all too familiar.

*

We All Wear the Masks We Need

El looked up and down the gloomy alleyway. Seeing no one, he swiftly spread his bundle out on the filthy stones underfoot, in a spot where a shaft of moonlight fell fair upon it.

"Stand on that, strip, and get dressed in thy best," he ordered, hurriedly unfastening his own garments.

Yavarla was trembling as she stared at him, eyes large with mounting fear. "What—who *are* you?" she whispered.

"A friend," Elminster replied, his face and body melting and shifting under her stare, Sneel's rippling garments falling away or hanging limply.

Yavarla fought back a scream. A moment later, she stared at a woman of very much the same size and build as herself, a rather plain woman she'd never seen before.

"Is . . . is this . . . am I seeing who you really are?" she blurted out.

"Nay," the unfamiliar woman told her flatly. "We all wear the masks we need."

At that moment, Yavarla felt her own flesh beginning to creep and crawl . . .

She did scream and try to flee, then, but deft hands whirled her around, carried her back to the midst of the moonlight, and tripped her.

She landed hard on her knees, grunted in fresh pain, then shivered. It was *cold*, out here in the night . . .

"Hurry," her rescuer—captor?—said in her ear. "I'll help; what need ye first? Clout? Dethma?"

Feeling dazed, Yavarla gave in, getting dressed in greater haste than she had for many a year. She scarcely noticed that whenever she made a choice of garment, the woman—or was he really a man, as he'd first appeared?—donned one of the two like garments she'd not chosen. It was all done in panting haste, and she'd barely gained steady breath before she was fully dressed, cloak and all, and being towed firmly by the hand along the alley by her strange escort, who now carried a rather smaller bundle.

They came out into a street, and turned right. Despite it being deep night, quite a few quiet, furtive folk were walking purposefully along, hands on weapon hilts, or meeting side by side with their backs to a building wall, where they could look this way and that while they muttered whatever business they were transacting. A few cloaked and hooded women silently parted their cloaks to show bare leg or hip at their approach, but made no reaction when they hastened on past.

The noblewoman shuddered, perhaps wondering if her future included becoming a desperate streetskirts. Elminster gave her no time to ponder; the lamps of the inn he sought were only a block away.

He tugged her close for a moment, to murmur in her ear, "For now, ye are *not* Lady Sarbuckho. In fact, Yavarla, ye have forgotten how to speak at all."

She made no reply, but went meekly with him and stood hooded and silent as the unlovely woman her escort had become briskly took a room for them both, snapping that they'd been forced to flee the place they'd been staying after it was "invaded by men fighting each other, with wizards and spells, too!"

They were behind a locked door and inside a warding spell stronger than any she'd ever seen cast before ere Yavarla caught sight of a mirror—and caught her breath, feeling herself on the verge of tears again. The face staring red-eyed back at her in the feeble light of the lone lamp was not hers.

"You have stolen my very self from me," she gasped.

"Only for now," the woman murmured from behind her, taking her under the arms as if to keep her from falling. "Sleep now, Yavarla."

And Yavarla fell down a great dark shaft into an endless rushing abyss of hatefully shouting, then gasping in pain and horror Ambrams, a plunge from which there was no escape . . . ever . . .

*

New Lives, and Strangers to go with Them

When Yavarla came awake, the light flooding through the filthy window told her it was near highsun, and she was lying in an inn bed answering questions. Whispering long, detailed, involved answers about every Darkway she knew of, and their owners, the names of the high houses that held those gates, and the names and whereabouts within the mansion walls of the chambers that

held the flickering portals. Not that she knew much, but she heard herself eagerly spilling forth every hint and rumor and scrap of half-heard possible truth she remembered, and far more than she ever knew she'd remembered.

"You—you are using me," she gasped then, coming fully awake and staring up into the eyes of . . . yet another stranger.

A bearded man whose eyes were sometimes as blue as a clear day's sky, and at other times as silver-gray as a sword drawn in a fog, and most of the time somewhere in between.

"Aye, I am," he replied gravely, "for it is needful. In return, I offer ye a new life, far from cold Zhentil Keep and its cruel lords and crueler wizards. Somewhere will ye'll never have to face death for slaying thy husband, or feel the sting of Manshoon's betrayal—before that betrayal kills thee."

"I . . . I—" Something welled up in Yavarla then and burst out of her, leaving her weeping as she thrust herself up and bawled at him, "No! *Never*! I am *of* the keep, this is my *home*, this is—Manshoon will never—"

Even as she said it, she knew otherwise. That cold and gently smiling man would break her in an instant if she stood in the way of his most idle whim. He had used her already, far worse than this man she did not know had used her, and—and—

Tears overwhelmed her again, and she covered her face with her hands and fought to cling to herself through them, fought until rage made her beat her fists on the bed sightlessly and cry, "I know how to do *more* than weep, damn all Watching Gods, I *do*!"

"Easy, lass," the man murmured, touching her cheek gently. The pain that had been there since Ambram's ring had laid it open vanished, and so did her grief, under a vast wave of weariness followed by lighthearted cheer, a euphoria that came out of nowhere with the scent of lemons and vague visions of green trees and dappled sunlight and laughter . . .

"Magic," she said calmly. "You're using magic on me."

"I am. I want ye calm, Yavarla, and happy. Clear-headed to choose."

Yavarla drew in a deep, tremulous breath and said firmly, "I am calm. I can choose. And unless you intend to be my jailor, I tell you again: Zhentil Keep is my home. I want no new life far from here. I know full well how dangerous it will be, I know I love the First Lord and he loves me not . . . but I wish to stay. Even if it means my death, I am of the keep."

"So be it. Ye shall stay. Or rather, return to Wyrmhaven—if there's still a Wyrmhaven to return to—in a day or two, after I'm done causing a storm that may well sweep ye away, if ye are not kept safe. Think of this, then, as a vacation."

The light around Yavarla changed, and the bed beneath her became the cold flagstones of a stone floor somewhere in a forest under the open sky, with great old trees looming in a ring around her and stretching off into vast green distances beyond. The bundle of her shimmerweave coverlet lay on her shins, and a tall, beautiful, silver-haired woman was laying aside a harp to rise from rocks and bend over Yavarla in pleasantly surprised greeting. She wore foresters' leathers, and had none of the wrinkles of age that should go with silver tresses.

"Well met, Lady. I am Storm Silverhand, the kettle is just boiling, and there will be hot buttered biscuits very soon. Will you take tea?"

Which was when Yavarla discovered she was ravenous.

As she tried to smile and find words of answer, the woman bending over her was hearing other words in her own head.

Storm, this is Yavarla Sarbuckho, of Zhentil Keep. She just slew her husband, with good reason. Give her gentle slumber with thy spells and herbs, and keep her that way for this day and mayhap the next.

Storm smiled, inside her head. *Of course, El. If you decide what to do next for once, rather than just rushing out and doing it.*

Fair enough, Stormy One. Fair enough.

And it was. Moreover, the biscuits were delicious.

*

Done by Next Highsun

Thus far, this highsunfeast had gone better than he'd expected. Fzoul Chembryl's eyes told Manshoon clearly how furious the priest of Bane still was over Manshoon's seizing of power, but the First Lord's guest had obviously decided to be civil. For now, at least.

"I've never had any intention of deciding everything, and ruling the Brotherhood," Manshoon said carefully. "I want you to be—*need* you to be—a full partner in all decisions. So we are met not just to gorge ourselves on this superb cheese and harberry jelly—pray have more, won't you?—but to decide how to proceed next."

"In all matters of governance over the keep and the Zhentarim?" Fzoul asked calmly. "Or just in your—pardon me, *our*—war upon the waylords?"

"All, of course, but let us leave those decisions to later meetings, which I agree to hold at your behest and not mine, when this matter of the waylords is

done with. First upon our mutual platter: Sarbuckho, and his defeat of our men at Wyrmhaven."

"You lost more than a dozen wizards, I've heard," Fzoul commented to the cheese he was slicing. "Let us begin by your trusting me enough to unfold clear truth about all of our losses. How many mages—and just how many warriors and spies can we add to that?"

"Ten and four wizards," Manshoon said quietly. "Five of accomplishment, the rest ambitious magelings or aging hedge wizards. Three or four spies—I'm still waiting for a certain man to report back to me. Almost twoscore warriors; the total depends on whether or not some recover. Sarbuckho's men used poisoned quarrels."

"Lorkus Sneel being that certain man?"

Manshoon nodded. "Do you know something of his fate?"

Fzoul shook his head. "Nothing. Truly. Well, I am for the utter destruction of Sarbuckho *and* his mansion. Present an example to anyone else contemplating any sort of challenge or resistance to the Brotherhood. Muster all we have for a very public assault in which Wyrmhaven is dashed to rubble. We hurl all our keep-shattering spells, and leave all loyal citizens thinking."

Manshoon's sudden smile was as bright as it was genuine. This was precisely what he'd been planning to do, priests or no priests. He liked the entire might of the temple behind it far better than otherwise.

They swiftly and easily agreed that Wyrmhaven's fall should be accomplished "by next highsun." Fzoul offered to set his upperpriests on rooftops to smite armsmen sent out to fight the Zhentilar—as well as any of the pitiful remnants of the city watch unwise enough to presume to challenge the authority of the Zhentarim.

It took but a few words back and forth for them to further agree to then sit back and wait for the cowed surviving waylords to suffer the effects of their portals becoming deathtraps. They would, of course, destroy any independent wizards who approached any waylord mansion, not wanting the waylords to be able to hire anyone who might be able to make the Darkways safe again.

"The waylords will fall, we'll rebuild the watch as ours, outright, and the council can meet as often as they like and say whatever they like," Fzoul gloated, over his sixth flagon of wine. "Zhentil Keep will be ours."

He was gratified by Manshoon's eager smile, and they clinked flagons together.

Fzoul Chembryl was enjoying this.

For this first time in far too many days, Manshoon really needed him.

Which meant no sly or savage attack would fall on him, here or elsewhere, for days to come.

More than that, the ever-mounting death toll among the Brotherhood magelings would give the Rightful Hand of Bane real say in the Zhentarim for some time to come; Manshoon was fast becoming one man, standing almost alone against all the might of the temple.

Alone indeed. Last night a beholder had come floating into Fzoul's private chapel, turning aside the guardian spells with contemptuous ease, to hiss a private message.

"Expect Manshoon to receive no aid from any of my kind in this fray over the Darkways," the eye tyrant had said. "We regard this as a test of Manshoon's strength and fitness to lead the Brotherhood. So fear not, Fzoul Chembryl—if Manshoon calls on us to crush you or your temple underlings, we shall not hear."

*

A Spell of Simple Remedy

"Keep back!" Elminster snapped, as guards pounded up, glaives lowered and reaching for him. "I'm undoing Manshoon's evil, so all can safely use this Darkway again. Harm me, and you doom him, and all your livelihoods."

"*Back*, men!" a deeper voice rolled out, from behind the guards. "Who are you, wizard?"

"Elminster," the bearded wizard replied—as the floor rocked under their feet, and distant thunder made glass lamps tinkle and the entire mansion shudder around them.

"What's going on?" the waylord demanded. "That's been happening most of the day, now!"

"Ambram Sarbuckho killed many Zhentarim last night. Manshoon is now busily destroying Wyrmhaven as a warning to all the rest of you."

"Meaning?"

El shrugged. "He intends to crush all who don't kneel to him. So, some of ye may elect to use thy gates to flee the keep, with all thy riches and retainers. Yet ye're Zhents, so most of ye will probably vow to fight Manshoon to the death. Me, I must use the time while Manshoon's indulging himself at Wyrmhaven to undo the fatal spells he worked on every last Darkway, to make them all safe again. So I'm off to the next one now. Lord, ye have a decision to make."

*

A Warm Welcome

Yavarla swam up out of a pleasant slumber to find the sun warm on her face, and herself snuggly wrapped up in her own shimmerweave coverlet. Storm had put her coffer in her hands and produced a soft pillow from somewhere to cradle her head. Yavarla could hear the beautiful, liquid swirling of her harp from off to her right, not too close, and smiled to herself.

She did not let that smile reach her face. Nor did she open her eyes.

This was all very pleasant, but it was a trap.

The man who'd snatched her out of Wyrmhaven last night was keeping her here, away from the keep, for reasons of his own.

She had to get back—to Manshoon—before any more time passed.

If this silver-haired harpist hadn't robbed her as she slept, she had the means to do it, too. Under the coverlet, Yavarla opened the coffer a crack with her thumbs, feeling carefully for the ring with the sculpted wing thrusting up from it.

There it was, amid everything else. Her wealth was untouched.

The harp music swirled, rising and falling. Storm Silverhand was strolling around the glade as she played.

Eyes shut, Yavarla worked to get that ring on her finger. She knew what she'd see if she looked over at the harpist. Those long, long silver tresses would be swirling and coiling like lazy snakes or stretching cats, curling leisurely in time to the music. The harpist's magic must be strong—so she, Yavarla, would have to be fast.

There! It was on, and snugged up against her knuckles. Close the coffer, think of the street in front of Manshoon's house, for it would be foolish to try to teleport into a wizard's home, with all the wards he'd have, and—

—Faerûn whirled around her—

—she was blinking in the bright sun of the keep, standing on the cobbles outside Manshoon's gates, her coffer in her hands. Grim guards were already lowering great glaives to menace her.

"I," she told them calmly, "am expected. Conduct me to First Lord Manshoon. Without delay, if you please."

The nearest guard inclined his head. "Lady, your name?"

"I am Lady Yavarla Sarbuckho. Wife to the Lord Ambram Sarbuckho, of the keep."

"Admit her," a young wizard's voice called down from somewhere above, and the great gates opened.

Yavarla kept a serene smile on her face as she was whisked up stairs and across polished marble halls and up more stairs, climbing ever higher. Twice her skin tingled, the ring on her finger burning her like fire, as unseen spellcasters probed her for magic. The second time, a man she'd never seen before stepped out of a door to bar her way and demand, "Remove your ring. No such magic in the presence of the First Lord."

"You," she replied coolly, "are not the First Lord. I have seen him—*all* of him—and I know."

Unimpressed, the man reached out for her coffer. After a moment, she put it into his hand.

"This shall be returned, unopened by me," he told her, his other hand still out. "The ring."

Silence fell between them, until she sighed, removed the ring, and dropped it into his palm. He bowed, indicated the door he'd come through, and glided away, murmuring, "Lord Manshoon awaits you."

Yavarla opened the door. The room beyond was a richly paneled study full of books and a massive table and highbacked chairs, like many she'd seen in the mansions of the mighty. Standing by the table was—her heart leaped anew at his dark, handsome looks, and the smile growing on his face—Manshoon.

"Lord, I came to tell you my husband is dead. I killed him last night, after he came to me wanting me to slay you. He—"

"*Yavarla*," Manshoon said warmly, opening his arms to welcome her.

As she rushed into them, fire kindled in his eyes.

With that same widening smile still on his face, he drawled, "Your usefulness is past."

Fire coalesced out of the air around her, binding her like chains—and then started to sear her.

"And you bore me," he added, as she tried to scream . . . and fell to ashes, instead.

His second spell kept even the smallest of them from reaching the carpet.

From a chair on the far side of the table, Fzoul Chembryl watched as the ashes roiled, then spiraled in the air like dark water going down a drain, and vanished.

Then he nodded approvingly.

A ruler free of entanglements is a leader free of weaknesses. He'd do the same thing.

He smiled crookedly, thinking of certain rather eager priestesses back at the temple. He might soon have to.

*

The Time of Reckoning

At least this, Elminster thought rather wearily, was the last.

He'd told a seemingly endless succession of angry waylords what he was doing to their Darkways, and why—and now here he was in the luxurious black marble rear hall of Swordgates, looking up into the frightened face of Mantras Jhoszelbur . . . and he was done at last.

He straightened with a yawn, dusted his hands together, and told this last waylord, "I'm done here. If ye'd be rid of First Lord Manshoon, hounding him out of the keep is thy work to undertake. If ye prefer a life of slavery, let him proceed down the path he's chosen, and ye'll enjoy that status soon enough!"

Before Jhoszelbur could think of something suitably testy to snarl, El was through an archway and back along the passage that led to the rear door he'd come in by. He wanted to get clear of Swordgates before Manshoon finished destroying Wyrmhaven and came looking for other foes to reduce to rubble.

Guards scuttled hastily out of his way. El gave them a reassuring smile—no sense in having a few spears hurled at the back of your head, even if you did have a mantle to stop them—and then opened that door and ducked out into the alley beyond.

And the world exploded.

When he could see again, he knew what had happened. His mantle had returned half a dozen hostile magics to the various Zhentarim who'd first hurled them, then failed, overloaded by the onslaught.

Those backlashes were still causing various buildings where Manshoon's mages had been to slump or topple, up and down the alley—and the flood of still-rolling rubble had just swept him right back into Swordgates.

Thankfully, Jhoszelbur's guards were fleeing in all directions, not throwing spears, and there was no sign of any of the Stormwands.

Elminster fought his way free of all the stone—and then stiffened, as Mystra spoke briefly and firmly in his head.

Not that way, El. 'Tis time to teach Manshoon a lesson.

He sighed, looked longingly at the last Darkway he'd altered, then murmured, "As ye wish, Great Lady of Mysteries," and started walking briskly through Stormgates.

He strode the length of that sprawling, many-pillared stone mansion, raising a new mantle around himself as he went, to the front doors of Swordgates.

Jhoszelbur's house guards threw them wide at his approach, and Elminster strode out into the sunlight—and the welcome he'd been expecting.

Zhentilar javelins cracked and shivered on the descending flight of steps in front of his boots, and behind the massed black-armored horde of warriors happily hurling them, El saw baneguards advancing, upperpriests of Bane commanding them. More priests stood on roofs and balconies all around, and there were Zhentarim, too, some of them in the saddles of foulwings flapping and circling overhead like great black bat-winged toads.

The tripled-jawed aerial steeds of the Brotherhood croaked and hissed harsh unpleasantnesses to each other, their red eyes burning, eager to enter the fray.

Swordgates occupied a corner where two streets met, and similarly grand mansions lined both of those routes—high houses whose streetfront windows and balconies were crowded with priestesses of Loviatar, presumably aiding the Brotherhood to gain Manshoon's favor.

Manshoon? Ah, *there* he was, standing with Fzoul Chembryl on a high mansion balcony right across the road, ready to gloat as the lone wizard on the steps got destroyed.

The Rightful Hand of Bane held two dark rods in his hands, and Manshoon hadn't forgotten to bring a long, fell-looking staff.

"Oh, *dung*," Elminster said sourly, clawing in a pouch for his least useful enchanted rings, so as to feed his mantle with *something*. This was going to hurt.

"Care, lords, I beg of you!" the owner of the mansion whose balcony Manshoon and Fzoul were standing on shouted then, from the room behind them. "If much magic is unleashed here, the destruction will be *ruinous*! Zhentil Keep's fairest houses could well be—"

Manshoon lifted one hand and made a lazy signal, without even bothering to turn around. The wealthy merchant gurgled in midprotest as his throat was slit, the ugly sound lost in Fzoul's thunderous, "*Destroy him*!"

The priest of Bane brought his arm down with a flourish, pointing right at Elminster.

Zhentarim, Banite priests, and priestesses of Loviatar all unleashed deadly spells, hurling them with glee, all wanting to be part of obliberating that lone figure on the steps.

Elminster's world became roiling flame, tongues of fire that swirled like white snowflakes in a roaring, purple-black darkness as the Weave was torn, Faerûn

shrieked aloud, and he was plucked off his feet, shaken like a doll, and hurled–

Nowhere at all, as Mystra manifested all around him in an armor of eerie blue light, dancing sparks that dazzled the eyes with their hue.

Two huge and long-lashed eyes opened behind Elminster and drank in the darkness, and nine silver stars blossomed out of those sparks. Two of those stars darted into Mystra's eyes, and the other seven began to circle her slumped, pain-wracked Chosen.

Gathering all the magic hurled at him . . . and slowly, one spell after another, sending it all back whence it came.

The huge floating eyes of the goddess swept across the shouting Zhentarim army, regarding them with something like sorrow, then lifted to meet Manshoon's astonished and outraged gaze.

As he stared at Mystra, and Mystra stared back at him, the First Lord of Zhentil Keep began to scream in terror.

Beholders appeared, rising menacingly into view over rooftops with their eyestalks writhing, gliding forward with fell intent–only to melt away in an instant. A moment later, every last foulwing faded to nothingness, spilling shrieking riders out of the sky.

The balcony where Manshoon and Fzoul stood broke off the front of the mansion it adorned and fell to earth, slowly and soundlessly. Clinging to it, the two mightiest of the Zhentarim bawled like babies, clawing at the stones.

It came to rest very gently, with no crash at all, but the two men pitched forward onto their faces, trembling in fear. Fzoul fainted, and Manshoon hid his face in his hands, daring only to peek between them.

He saw Mystra bend her will and power on the army at the foot of the steps. Baneguards vanished in bony silence, black armor was suddenly gone from hairy and horrified men, and spears and swords were swept away from their hands.

As they broke and fled, pelting away down the streets as fast as they could run, moaning and trampling each other in their fear, the goddess roared up into a spire of blue flame.

That great tongue of fire rose with a thunderous snarl, to tower high over Swordgates, to loom into the sky above Zhentil Keep and catch distant, awed eyes–then flashed, blinding many watchers, and–vanished.

On balconies and rooftops, down alleys and in windows, every last priest and priestess collapsed, all dashed senseless at once.

Silence fell. Mystra was gone.

Leaving Manshoon weeping and trembling, and a weary and wincing Elminster regarding him with disgust.

Stumbling in obvious pain, and trailing a scorched smell, El came slowly down the steps. Over the rubble, over the bodies of the trampled, over fallen weapons and spilled blood, across the street to where the First Lord of Zhentil Keep cowered.

Citizens were watching, peering from windows and alleys, from doors and from atop carts down the streets, as Elminster came up to Manshoon.

"For years, ye have owed thy life to a promise," he told the leader of the Zhentarim quietly. "Ye almost threw that life away this day. *Try* to learn some wisdom."

On his haunches, Manshoon spun around and covered his ears, turning his back on the bearded Chosen.

Who rolled his eyes, drew back one dusty-booted foot, and gave the First Lord a solid kick in the pants, pitching him over onto his face.

Then Elminster stalked away, not looking back.

Face down in the dirt and furious, Manshoon snarled.

"I swear," he whispered, knowing how many eyes were upon him, "I'll slay you some day, Elminster. And work it so that as you die, you know full well who has slain you."

He kept still, hunched down. For now, though, he must play the overconfident fool, to avoid being destroyed by Mystra as too dangerous. Yet at the same time work, with infinite patience and contingency upon contingency, scheme overlapping scheme, toward ultimate triumph.

Oh, the things he could do without being hampered by Elminster's meddlings!

Hah, the things he could do *to* Elminster if the old bearded goat didn't have the goddess protecting him!

"There will come a day, Elminster of Shadowdale," Manshoon announced to his own spellchamber quietly, as he teleported back to its dark, deserted safety, "when *my* chance will come. A day when you aren't cloaked and armored in the favor of a goddess."

He turned slowly on one heel, to look around at the quiet darkness. "And on that day," he added with a crooked smile, "Manshoon will laugh–and Elminster will die."

Find out what happens when Elminster faces off against Manshoon alone in *Elminster Must Die.*

by Bill Slavicsek

AMPERSAND

AMPERSAND SPECIAL: ESSENTIALS PREVIEW

THE FIGHTER, PART 2

Hi. This is another of our special free-to-all editions of my regular column. I'm talking about our DUNGEONS & DRAGONS Essentials products throughout this month and next. As you read this, I'm at Gen Con with a bunch of my R&D staff. If you happen to be in the area, drop by and say hi. And watch our website for continuing coverage of our events and seminars direct from the show.

This time out, let's take a look at the second new fighter build—the slayer. Note that I'm only showing a little bit of the 1st-level slayer. Check out *Heroes of the Fallen Lands* for the complete class build when it debuts in September.

THE ESSENTIALS FIGHTER

Martial Striker: Fighters such as the slayer use overwhelming force to take down enemies. The slayer's use of heavy armor and a large amount of hit points allow the slayer to stand in for a defender when the tide of battle requires it.

Why This Is the Class for You: You like playing a tough character who possesses unmatched defenses and a decent amount of offense.

Slayer

Key Abilities: Strength, Dexterity

When tales are told of the most legendary warriors, slayers are the heroes those stories speak of. Slayers are elite shock troops, standing at the forefront of battle with a combination of strong armor, advanced tactical cunning, and a mastery of withering two-handed weapon attacks.

On the borderlands of civilization, the common folk are beset on all sides by a multitude of foes. Goblin invaders can outnumber a town's defenders five to one, and powerful giants and trolls can easily shrug off a spear thrust or a crossbow bolt. The slayer is trained to correct this imbalance. By pairing the heaviest melee weapons with fearless combat tactics, a slayer can score deadly blows against larger enemies or hew through mobs of lesser foes.

Slayers come from all backgrounds and societies. Some are warriors with only the most basic training, relying on raw fury and instinct to overwhelm their enemies. Others might be former soldiers whose homes have been destroyed like so many others on the borderlands, and who have sworn to use their martial skills for vengeance.

The slayer combines the best traits of a defender and a striker, with superior defenses backed by devastating weapon attacks. This class grants heavy armor proficiency and plenty of hit points, making a slayer the ideal warrior to stand at the front line of battle.

Class Traits

Hit Points: You start with hit points equal to 15 + your Constitution score. You gain 6 hit points each time you gain a level.

Bonus to Defenses: +2 to Fortitude

Healing Surges per Day: 9 + your Constitution modifier

Armor Proficiencies: Cloth, leather, hide, chainmail, scale

Weapon Proficiencies: Simple melee, military melee, simple ranged, military ranged

Class Skills: Athletics (Str), Endurance (Con), Heal (Wis), Intimidate (Cha), Streetwise (Cha)

Trained Skills: Three from the list of class skills

Level 1: Heroic Slayer

Although other warriors might focus on defense or fancy maneuvers, you have trained from your first day of combat to cut your foes down without mercy.

Benefit: You gain a bonus to the damage rolls of weapon attacks. The bonus equals your Dexterity modifier.

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SLAYER HEROIC TIER

Total XP	Level	Feats Known	Class Features and Powers
0	1	1	Heroic Slayer Weapon Talent Fighter stances Power Strike
1,000	2	+1	Utility power
2,250	3	–	Improved Power Strike
3,750	4	+1	Ability score increase Quick Swap
5,500	5	–	Mighty Slayer
7,500	6	+1	Utility power
10,000	7	–	Extra fighter stance Weapon Specialization
13,000	8	+1	Ability score increase
16,500	9	–	Inexorable Slayer
20,500	10	+1	Utility power

Level 1: Weapon Talent

As a fighter, you have insight into all types of weapons and the ability to use them with deadly effect.

Benefit: You gain a +1 bonus to the attack rolls of weapon attacks.

Level 1: Fighter Stances

Fighters learn a number of stances—special powers that combine positioning, footwork, and combat tactics to maximum effect. A stance allows you to customize your approach for fighting different enemies. For example, *duelist's assault* lets you unleash your full fury against foes that try to slip away, while *mobile blade* lets you excel in the thick of the fight, moving freely to take on a different enemy each round.

Benefit: You gain two of the following powers of your choice.

Berserker's Charge

Subtle shifting and skirmish tactics work for some, but you prefer to make your movement in combat count. You have trained to unleash the full fury of your combat style in devastating charge attacks that let you lay waste to your foes.

Berserker's Charge — Fighter Utility

You channel your combat fury to run down your foes.

At-Will ✦ Martial, Stance
Minor Action — **Personal**

Effect: You assume the berserker's charge stance. Until the stance ends, you gain a +2 power bonus to your speed when charging and a +2 power bonus to the attack rolls of your charge attacks.

Unfettered Fury

Other warriors try to control their rage out of the fear that it will compromise their careful training. You prefer to embrace your berserker fury, gladly sacrificing accuracy in combat to take out lightly armored foes with crippling attacks.

Unfettered Fury — Fighter Utility

You embrace your inner fury, hitting fast and hard to mow through your foes.

At-Will ✦ Martial, Stance
Minor Action — **Personal**

Effect: You assume the unfettered fury stance. Until the stance ends, you take a -2 penalty to attack rolls with weapon powers and gain a +4 power bonus to the damage rolls of basic attacks using a weapon.

Level 1: Power Strike

Power strike is a quintessential exploit. This power is usable with a wide range of tactics and a variety of weapons. The exploit ensures that your weapon has a devastating effect on your foe.

Benefit: You gain the *power strike* power.

Power Strike — Fighter Attack

By pushing yourself beyond your normal limits, you unleash your full wrath against a foe.

Encounter ✦ Martial, Weapon
Free Action — **Personal**
Trigger: You hit an enemy with a melee basic attack using a weapon.
Target: The enemy you hit
Effect: The target takes 1[W] extra damage from the triggering attack.

RULES COMPENDIUM

Hi. This is another of our special free-to-all editions of my regular column. I'm talking about our Dungeons & Dragons Essentials products throughout this month and next. We just returned from the fun and excitement of Gen Con, and now it's back to our normal routine.

For those of you who weren't able to make it to the convention, check out our coverage of it. We've got pictures, seminar logs, and podcasts of many of the key Wizards events that took place over the course of the long weekend. We had a lot of fun talking to fans, playing games, and revealing secrets about upcoming products. Next up for us—PAX, here in Seattle in a few short weeks.

Now let's get back to my continuing revelations about the new Essentials products. This week, I want to talk about the *Rules Compendium*. This digest-sized paperback provides 320 pages of game rules and debuts in September. The book not only explains the basics of the Dungeons & Dragons roleplaying game but also contains detailed rules and commentary for seasoned gamers. Other products might be designed specifically for either players or Dungeon Masters, but the *Rules Compendium* is for everyone at the game table.

The Core Rules All in One Place

The rules of the Dungeons & Dragons roleplaying game have traditionally been split into two categories—rules for players and rules for Dungeon Masters. Further, these rules have consequently been presented in two different books, the *Player's Handbook* and the *Dungeon Master's Guide*. Getting a complete picture of how the game works has required reading both books, as well as the smattering of rules in the *Monster Manual*. That division of information has been practical, given the large scope of the game, and it is an arrangement that many of us are used to—particularly those of us who have been playing the game from its earliest versions. The downside of this division is that readers sometimes need to flip through two or three books to find a particular rule and sometimes can't find the rule at all.

The *Rules Compendium* puts all of the rules of the game in one place. This is the rulebook for the core game, whether you're playing Gareth the cleric or DMing an epic campaign. This is the go-to book for how to make a character, decipher a monster stat block, play through a skill challenge, launch into a battle, and engage in any of the other fundamental activities of the game.

The new *Rules Compendium* is a comprehensive game reference, but it goes a step further; it tells you how to play the game. If you have the *Rules Compendium*, you have the information you need to use things like the powers in your player book and the monsters in your DM book. You still need to go to those other books for particular game elements, such as powers, monsters, and magic items, but you need only this book to understand how those elements fit into the game as a whole.

Because of the book's focus on the game's core, some rules didn't make the cut. Rules for artifacts, for instance, aren't included. In contrast, every power keyword that has appeared in our books is defined. The book also includes things that aren't rules but provide context for understanding the game, which is a combination of game play and storytelling. For example, alignments are defined, since alignment is a core story conceit of the Dungeons & Dragons world.

Rules Updated and Clarified

One of our goals for the *Rules Compendium* was to make its rules as up-to-date and clear as possible. To achieve that goal, we have incorporated every update to the core rules that has occurred since the current edition of the game was released. "The book includes updates like the revised Stealth rules, the changes to how weapons and implements work, and new DCs for various tasks," explains Jeremy Crawford, senior developer and lead on this project. "The revisions that we introduced in *Player's Handbook 2*, *Player's Handbook 3*, *Dungeon Master's Guide 2*, *Monster Manual 2*, and *Monster Manual 3* are all included. When the book is released, it will contain the most current version of the game's rules."

We have also clarified many parts of the game, especially those parts that have provoked the most questions. You will find many new examples as well as commentary. Take conditions: their section of the book not only includes the nuts and bolts of how conditions work but also addresses some of the questions that come up in play. For example, players sometimes wonder, "Can an ooze or a snake be knocked prone?" The *Rules Compendium* says yes and suggests what's going on in the game world when that amorphous or limbless creature falls prone.

As we worked to clear up as many rules as possible, we also came across portions of the game that

needed more than a new example or a fresh turn of phrase. Some pieces begged for revision, particularly subsystems that were overcomplicated or simply no fun to play. For example, we have tightened up the rules for flight, and those rules now appear with the other movement rules, not in a DM-only section. Similarly, we have tweaked how mounted combat works so that it is easier and more fun to include in an encounter.

Every revision we made is meant to work with the material already in print. You will be able to take a flying monster from the *Monster Manual*, for instance, and use it with the slimmed-down rules for flight without needing to change anything in the monster's stat block.

Looking Forward and Backward

The *Rules Compendium* represents the current state of the game, reorganized and fully indexed. The book lays the foundation for products to come, and it is rooted in the material that came before it. This collection of rules, examples, and explanations is a resource both for people coming to the game for the first time and for gamers who know the system inside and out. Our hope is that when you're at the game table and wondering about something like, "What happens when my wizard tries to teleport the ogre straight into the air?" you will know where to go for guidance—the *Rules Compendium*.

Rules Compendium Preview

Here's a chunk from the upcoming Rules Compendium that covers the resistances, vulnerability, and immunity rules. These rules are cleaned up and much easier to reference now, showing how the *Rules Compendium* immediately improves play at your table.

Resistance

Resistance means a creature takes less damage from a specific damage type. Resistance appears in a stat block or power as "Resist *x*," where *x* is the amount that the damage is reduced, followed by the type of damage that is being resisted. Damage cannot be reduced below 0. For example, a creature that has resist 5 fire takes 5 less fire damage whenever it takes that type of damage.

Some creatures are inherently resistant to certain damage types, as noted in their stat blocks, and some powers and other effects grant temporary resistance.

Against Combined Damage Types

A creature's resistance is ineffective against combined damage types unless the creature has resistance to each of the damage types, and then only the weakest of the resistances applies.

Example: A creature has resist 10 lightning and resist 5 thunder, and an attack deals 15 lightning and thunder damage to it. The creature takes 10 lightning and thunder damage, because the resistance to the combined damage types is limited to the lesser of the two (in this case, 5 thunder). If the creature had only resist 10 lightning, it would take all 15 damage from the attack.

Not Cumulative

Resistances against the same damage type are not cumulative. Only the highest resistance applies.

Example: If a creature has resist 5 cold and then gains resist 10 cold, it now has resist 10 cold, not resist 15 cold. Similarly, if a creature has resist 5 cold and then gains resist 2 to all damage, the creature still has resist 5 cold, not resist 7 cold.

Combined with Vulnerability

If a creature has resistance and vulnerability to the same type of damage, they both apply. Subtract the smaller value from the larger one and apply the result. For instance, a creature that has resist 5 fire and vulnerable 10 fire is treated as if it has vulnerable 5 fire.

Immunity

Some creatures are immune to certain effects. If a creature is immune to a damage type (such as cold or fire), it doesn't take that type of damage. If a creature is immune to charm, fear, illusion, or poison, it is unaffected by the nondamaging effects of a power that has that keyword. A creature that is immune to a condition or another effect (such as the dazed condition or forced movement) is unaffected by the stated effect.

Immunity to one part of a power does not make a creature immune to other parts of the power. For example, when a creature that is immune to thunder

is hit by a power that both deals thunder damage and pushes the target, the creature takes no damage, but the power can still push it.

Vulnerability

Being vulnerable to a damage type means a creature takes extra damage from that damage type. Vulnerability appears in a stat block or power as "Vulnerable *x*," where *x* is the amount of the extra damage. For instance, if a creature has vulnerable 5 fire, it takes 5 extra fire damage whenever it takes that type of damage.

Against Combined Damage Types

Vulnerability to a specific damage type applies even when that damage type is combined with another. For instance, if a creature has vulnerable 5 fire, the creature takes 5 extra fire damage when it takes ongoing fire and radiant damage.

Not Cumulative

Vulnerabilities to the same damage type are not cumulative. Only the highest vulnerability applies.

Example: If a creature has vulnerable 5 psychic and then gains vulnerable 10 psychic, it has vulnerable 10 psychic, not vulnerable 15 psychic. Similarly, if a creature has vulnerable 5 psychic and then gains vulnerable 2 to all damage, the creature still has vulnerable 5 psychic, not vulnerable 7 psychic.

Combined with Resistance

If a creature has vulnerability and resistance to the same type of damage, they both apply. Subtract the smaller value from the larger one and apply the result. For instance, a creature that has vulnerable 5 fire and resist 10 fire is treated as if it has resist 5 fire.

CHECKS AND MORE CHECKS

Welcome to the eighth of our special, free-to-all editions of "&." I've been showing off portions of our Dungeons & Dragons Essentials products since the beginning of July, and the anticipation just keeps building!

This time out, I want to pull the cover away from an especially important piece of text that we're very proud of. This is the section of the DM Kit that explains the fundamental rule of the game—making checks. It describes what a check is and when to call for one; the difference between ability checks, skill checks, and attack rolls; what each ability and skill is for; and how to decide when to use one instead of another.

We think we've presented the clearest, easiest-to-understand explanation of the game's most important rule in any edition. A DM who understands checks is well on the way to grasping just about every rule there is in the Dungeons & Dragons game.

USING CHECKS

A typical adventure environment is full of dangers, surprises, and puzzles. A dungeon room might hold a complex bank of mysterious levers, a statue positioned over a trap door, a locked chest, or a teleportation circle. Sometimes adventurers need to cut through a rope, break a chain, bash down a door, lift a portcullis, or smash the Orb of the Reaver before the villain can use it.

Characters' interaction with the environment is often simple to resolve in the game. If a player tells you that his or her character is moving the lever on the right, you tell the player what happens, if anything. The lever might be part of a fiendishly clever puzzle that requires the adventurers to pull several levers in the right order before the room completely fills with water, testing their ingenuity to the limit, but no rules govern the character's attempt to pull the lever. The players simply tell you which levers they pull.

If a lever is rusted in position, though, you might ask the player to make an **ability check**; no particular skill is involved, just a raw test of the character's Strength. Similarly, you might call for a Strength check to see if a character can break through a barred door or lift an adamantine portcullis.

Characters might also use **skill checks** to use, manipulate, or destroy objects in the dungeon environment. For example, you might call for an Arcana check as a character tries to move an orb suspended in the air that's part of a complex magical puzzle. This section describes how to use skill and ability checks to figure out what happens when characters attempt various tasks within the game world.

Whenever a character attempts an action, answer these three questions to decide how to adjudicate it:

- ✦ What kind of check is it?
- ✦ How hard is it?
- ✦ What's the result?

What Kind of Check?

First of all, make sure that the situation actually calls for a check. If there's no chance of failure, don't bother with a check.

Assuming that there is a chance of failure, determine what kind of check is appropriate: an ability check, a skill check, or an attack.

Use an **ability check** if the task is fundamentally a measure of one of the character's key attributes (ability scores), and if training of any kind isn't a factor. All that matters with an ability check is the character's level, ability score, and luck (represented by the die roll).

Use a **skill check** if training of some kind—the knowledge and talents that a character learns, represented by skill training—might be a factor in the outcome of the task. A skill check is really just a specialized kind of ability check that takes skill training into account. The only difference between an Athletics check and a Strength check is that some characters are trained in Athletics—they've studied and practiced to become better at climbing, jumping, swimming, and other athletic pursuits than other characters.

Use an **attack** for any direct attempt to cause harm to an enemy. Attacks are another specialized form of ability check, one that takes a character's skill with a weapon into account (in the form of a proficiency bonus). Generally, when a character tries to cause harm to an object rather than an enemy, use an ability check instead. The fighter's skill with an axe doesn't necessarily help him break down a dungeon door. On the other hand, a ranger's skill with a bow does help her cut a rope with an arrow, so that's an example of a situation where you might use an attack to resolve an attempt to damage an object.

Plain ability checks are fairly uncommon in the game. Most of the time, you'll find that a skill covers whatever actions the characters in your game attempt.

Skills and Abilities

Use these general descriptions of the abilities and skills in the game to help you decide what kind of check governs a task.

Strength: Strength measures a creature's physical power. Use a Strength check for any attempt to lift, push or pull, or break something.

The **Athletics** skill is based on Strength. Use an Athletics check when an adventurer tries to climb, jump, swim, or perform a similar feat of physical power.

Constitution: Constitution represents a creature's health, stamina, and vital force. Constitution checks are rare—you'll find more use for Endurance checks.

The **Endurance** skill is based on Constitution. Use an Endurance check when a character tries to stave off the physical effects of disease or resist extreme environmental effects, or somehow pushes beyond normal physical limits.

Dexterity: Dexterity represents a creature's hand-eye coordination, agility, reflexes, and balance. Dexterity checks are also rare. Use Acrobatics or Thievery for most tests of balance, agility, and hand-eye coordination.

The Acrobatics, Stealth, and Thievery skills are based on Dexterity.

Use an **Acrobatics** check when a character attempts some feat of agility, tries to escape from restraints, or needs to maintain balance on a narrow or slippery surface.

Use a **Stealth** check any time a character is trying to move around while avoiding notice, staying out of sight and moving quietly.

Use a **Thievery** check when a character tries to pick pockets or open locks, to disable traps, or perform other feats of sleight of hand or fine manipulation.

Intelligence: Intelligence measures how well a creature learns and reasons. Intelligence-based skills reflect specific areas of study, but you can use an Intelligence check as an excuse to give the players a clue—either to see whether the character remembers some important piece of information that the player has forgotten, or to get a bit of insight into a puzzle the characters are trying to solve.

The Arcana, History, and Religion skills are based on Intelligence.

Use an **Arcana** check when a character tries to interact with a magical effect in the world or to recall some knowledge about elemental, fey, or shadow creatures. The Arcana skill encompasses knowledge about all kinds of magic and how it operates.

Use a **History** check when a character tries to recall some useful historical information or recognize a clue based on historical knowledge.

Use a **Religion** check when a character tries to draw on knowledge about gods, religious traditions and ceremonies, divine effects, holy symbols, or theology. The skill also covers knowledge of immortal and undead creatures, as well as the Astral Sea with its dominions.

Wisdom: Wisdom measures a creature's common sense, perception, self-discipline, and empathy. You might use a Wisdom check for a test of a character's intuition, but the Perception and Insight skills cover many such situations.

The Dungeoneering, Heal, Insight, Nature, and Perception skills are based on Wisdom.

Use a **Dungeoneering** check when a character tries to find a path through winding caverns, determine the cardinal directions underground, recognize a dungeon hazard or aberrant monster, or forage for food in the Underdark. The skill represents both knowledge and concrete survival skills.

Use a **Heal** check when a character tries to perform first aid, stabilize a dying ally, treat disease, or examine a corpse.

Use an **Insight** check when a character tries to read another person's itentions or get a feel for a situation.

Use a **Nature** check when a character tries to navigate the wilderness, recognize hazards of the wild or natural creatures, or live off the land while traveling outdoors. Like Dungeoneering, this skill represents knowledge as well as survival skills.

Use a **Perception** check any time a character tries to detect something using one of the five senses: when searching for traps or secret doors, following tracks, listening for sounds behind a closed door, locating an invisible creature by sound or smell, and so on.

Charisma: Charisma measures a creature's force of personality, persuasiveness, and leadership. You might use a Charisma check to measure a character's first impression on an NPC, but more prolonged interactions usually rely on a Charisma-based skill check.

The Bluff, Diplomacy, Intimidate, and Streetwise skills are based on Charisma.

Use a **Bluff** check when a character tries to deceive other people or monsters, whether the character is trying to feint in combat or tell a convincing lie.

Use a **Diplomacy** check when a character tries to change opinions, to inspire good will, to haggle with a patron, to demonstrate proper etiquette and decorum, or to negotiate a deal in good faith.

Use an **Intimidate** check when a character tries to influence others through hostile actions, overt threats, or deadly persuasion.

Use a **Streetwise** check when a character tries to get by in civilization: to make contacts, gather rumors and information, find supplies, or avoid dangerous neighborhoods.

A VAULT FULL OF MONSTERS

This is our final installment of Dungeons & Dragons Essentials previews in Ampersand. Before long, you'll be able to pick up your own copy of these terrific books and see first-hand what all the excitement is about.

The last piece of the collection that we need to show off is the *Monster Vault*. This is a hefty 320 pages (in digest size, like the other books) of the game's most iconic and useful monsters, from Angel and Archon to Yuan-ti and Zombie with loads more in between. Many of these have been seen before in previous *Monster Manuals*, but everything in the *Vault* has been reexamined, its statistics rebalanced, and its powers polished up to make these creatures state of the art and in line with the most current Dungeons & Dragons design philosophy. We're not talking about anything earth-shattering; rather, a few numbers have been tweaked here and there to make creatures more challenging, or powers have been given more interesting and dynamic effects.

But that's not all you get in this box. There are also ten sheets of monster tokens. They're numbered to make it easy to keep track of which hit points go with which token and double-sided to show when they become bloodied. Ten sheets give you hundreds of tokens so that you'll always have what you need or something very close to it.

There's one very cool piece of cardboard tech here that, even though it's a small thing, we're particularly fond of. It's what some are calling "the enorminator"—a cardboard ring that drops around a Large-size token to turn a Large creature into its Enormous cousin. A few of those simple rings allowed us to squeeze a lot more tokens showing a lot more variety of monsters into the ten sheets, and gives you complete freedom when it comes to deciding which monsters to pump up into Huge brutes and solos.

Finally, there's also *Cairn of the Winter King*—a 32-page adventure for 4th-level characters—and a double-sided poster map for use with the adventure (and the tokens) and any other encounters and adventures you create on your own.

No amount of talking will substitute for a good example–and what better example could there be than that perennial favorite, the beholder gauth? Below is the introduction to the beholders section of the book, the statistics block for the beholder gauth, and as an added bonus, the stats for the enormous carrion crawler—just because we like carrion crawlers (and we had to show off "the enorminator")!

Beholder

Creatures of abhorrent shape and alien mind, beholders seek dominance over all they survey. The floating horrors enforce their will by firing rays of magic from their eyestalks.

When the unwholesome plane known as the Far Realm comes into tenuous contact with reality, terrible things boil across the boundary. Nightmares form the thunderhead of psychic storms that presage the arrival of warped beings and forces undreamt of by the maddest demon or the vilest devil. Many aberrant creatures stumble upon the world by accident, pushed in like chill wind through a door suddenly opened. Others crash into reality because it is as loathsome to them as their surreal homeland is to all sane natives of the rational planes. Beholders, however, come as conquerors. Each one seeks to claim all in its sight, and beholders see much indeed.

Beholders do not belong in the world or in any of the planes inhabited by immortal or elemental, primordial or god. Their home, the Far Realm, is so antithetical to rational thought that most who glimpse the plane go mad. Like other unsettling inhabitants of that place, beholders have forms unlike those of natural creatures.

Diverse and Horrible Powers: Beholders come in a bewildering variety,
and many that escape the Far Realm emerge into the world altered by the passage. Each beholder projects a number of supernatural powers through its eyes, but the specific details and arrangement of those powers vary by beholder variety. Worse, the powers can change and improve over time, so that as a beholder grows older, it becomes more fearsome.

Ruled by Few: The only certainty when dealing with beholders is that they possess malignant intent and a desire for dominance. Indeed, beholders rarely tolerate subservience to other beings, and they shun the company of their own kind. When beholders work together or do the bidding of a more powerful master, the world is in peril.

Beholders serve only those creatures that they fear and from which they cannot escape. Formidable titans, mighty dragons, and legendary spellcasters can sometimes command a beholder's allegiance, but these would-be lords must be cautious of betrayal. As deceitful as it is malign, a beholder will submit to the authority of a strong leader if it believes it can one day claim that creature's power.

Masters of Many: Beholders believe that they deserve to rule all they see. Lesser beings that show obedience to these hungry and unpredictable horrors can find a place—albeit not a safe one—in their service. Beholders accept all manner of creatures as their attendants, lackeys, and minions. Such slaves must frequently prove themselves valuable, lest their masters decide that they would make better meals than they do servants.

Beholder Gauth	**Level 5 Elite Artillery**
Medium aberrant magical beast	XP 400
HP 102; **Bloodied** 51	**Initiative** +4
AC 17, **Fortitude** 16, **Reflex** 18, **Will** 19	**Perception** +10
Speed 0, fly 6 (hover)	All-around vision, darkvision
Saving Throws +2; **Action Points** 1	

Traits

All-Around Vision

Enemies can't gain combat advantage by flanking the gauth.

Standard Actions

Bite ✦ At-Will

Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +10 vs. AC

Hit: 2d4 + 5 damage.

Eye Rays ✦ At-Will

Effect: The gauth uses two *eye ray* powers chosen from the list below. Each *eye ray* must target a different creature. Using *eye rays* does not provoke opportunity attacks.

1. *Fire Ray* (fire): Ranged 8; +10 vs. Reflex; 2d6 + 6 fire damage.
2. *Exhaustion Ray* (necrotic): Ranged 8; +10 vs. Fortitude; 1d8 + 4 necrotic damage, and the target is weakened (save ends).
3. *Sleep Ray* (charm): Ranged 8; +10 vs. Fortitude; the target is slowed (save ends).

First Failed Saving Throw: The target is knocked unconscious instead of slowed (save ends).

4. *Telekinesis Ray:* Ranged 8; +10 vs. Fortitude; the gauth slides the target up to 4 squares.

Minor Actions

Central Eye ✦ At-Will

Attack: Ranged 5 (one creature); +10 vs. Will

Hit: The target is immobilized until the end of the gauth's next turn.

Str 12 (+3)	**Dex** 15 (+4)	**Wis** 16 (+5)
Con 15 (+4)	**Int** 18 (+6)	**Cha** 20 (+7)
Alignment evil	**Languages** Deep Speech	

Enormous Carrion Crawler Level 17 Elite Soldier
Huge aberrant beast XP 3,200

HP 332; **Bloodied** 166 **Initiative** +14
AC 33, **Fortitude** 31, **Reflex** 30, **Will** 29 **Perception** +11
Speed 6, climb 6 (spider climb) Darkvision
Saving Throws +2; **Action Points** 1

Traits

Threatening Reach
The carrion crawler can make opportunity attacks against enemies within 3 squares of it.

Standard Actions

Tentacles (poison) ✦ **At-Will**
Attack: Melee 3 (one creature); +20 vs. Fortitude
Hit: 2d6 + 8 damage, the carrion crawler can pull the target 1 square, and the target takes ongoing 10 poison damage and is slowed (save ends both).
First Failed Saving Throw: The target is immobilized instead of slowed (save ends).
Second Failed Saving Throw: The target is stunned instead of immobilized (save ends).

Bite ✦ **At-Will**
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +22 vs. AC
Hit: 2d12 + 12 damage.

Hungry Assault ✦ **At-Will**
Effect: The carrion crawler uses *tentacles* twice or uses *tentacles* once and *bite* once.

Tentacle Flurry (poison) ✦ **Recharge** when first bloodied
Attack: Close blast 3 (creatures in the blast); 20 vs. Fortitude
Hit: 2d10 + 5 damage, and the target takes ongoing 10 poison damage and is slowed (save ends both).
First Failed Saving Throw: The target is immobilized instead of slowed (save ends).
Second Failed Saving Throw: The target is stunned instead of immobilized (save ends).

Str 25 (+15)	**Dex** 18 (+12)	**Wis** 16 (+11)
Con 22 (+14)	**Int** 4 (+5)	**Cha** 18 (+12)

Alignment unaligned **Languages** –

And there you have the full run of our Dungeons & Dragons Essentials previews. Next month, we return to our normal schedule, meaning just one Ampersand column for you and more time to play D&D for me!

Keep Playing!
Bill

Powers, Implements, Feats

By Mike Mearls
Roleplaying Game Group Manager

As the release date for the Dungeons & Dragons *Essentials products draws nearer, we've shown off a number of new features and options. This time, we look at some of the changes to the roleplaying game that the Essentials products bring to the table.*

Implements

Going forward, the Dungeons & Dragons game will feature a system of proficiency with implements that works just like weapon proficiencies. If you are proficient with an implement, you can use it with any of your implement powers. It doesn't matter where that power comes from—a paragon path, a different class, a new build, whatever—you can use any implement that you're proficient with to use your power.

Previously, a power's class determined the implements that could function with it. This change was made to make it easier to understand how implements interact with powers and to make multiclassing less arduous.

Powers

The Essentials products update a few powers. These updates fall into a few categories.

Rules Updates

If we planned on updating a power included in an Essentials product, we went ahead and printed the updated version in that product. For example, *weapon of the gods* had its keywords updated and its text clarified. *Nimble climb* explains its effect in a way that better interacts with the rules for climbing.

Wizard Encounter Spells

The wizard's encounter spells can now include an effect on a miss. This change helps the wizard to better function as a controller. While some spells, notably *burning hands*, deal half damage on a miss, others provide for some sort of forced movement, condition, or other effect that deals no damage but harasses an enemy in some manner.

For example, *charm of misplaced wrath* now forces the target to make an attack on a hit or miss. The hit effect allows the wizard to slide the target and daze it.

Races

If you have looked at *Player's Handbook* 3, you've seen a preview of how races change in the Essentials products. Each race now provides a +2 bonus to one specific ability and a +2 bonus to an ability chosen between two options. For example, dwarves now gain a +2 bonus to Constitution and a +2 bonus to either Strength or Wisdom.

We've made this change to make the races a little more flexible and give players stronger options when creating characters. It also better matches the Dungeons & Dragons world. Dwarves make good clerics and fighters. Elves excel at both archery and arcane magic.

Humans still gain a +2 bonus to one attribute, but they also have a new option for a racial power. If you've followed along with our previews, you've seen that some classes no longer utilize at-will attack powers. Human characters get the option to choose from either selecting an at-will attack power from their class (if the class and the type they choose have them) or taking a new power called *heroic effort.*

Heroic effort shows why you should never count a human out when the chips are down. It is an encounter power that grants a +4 bonus to an attack or saving throw. Best of all, you can use it after missing with an attack or failing a save to change the result.

Feats

The Essentials products roll out a new take on feats. Feats are arranged in categories. Each category embodies a concept, tactic, or some other unifying factor that ties together the feats within the category. For example, the Enduring Stamina category encompasses feats that make your character hardier and more resilient. A feat like Toughness gets slotted into that category.

The categories themselves have no mechanical effects. They serve to organize feats and make it easier to choose the best feat for your character.

The Essentials products no longer organize feats by tier. All of the feats in *Heroes of the Fallen Lands*, for example, are available at 1st level, provided that you meet any other prerequisites. The biggest effect of this is that some older feats have been surpassed in power by new ones. For example, you can now take feats that provide a bonus to Fortitude, Reflex, or Will defense in the heroic tier. Previously, such feats were reserved for paragon levels.

Whenever we introduced a new feat that makes an older one obsolete, we did so only because the feat was just as useful but no more powerful at lower levels. In some cases, such as feats that provide a bonus to defenses, the new versions provide a smaller benefit at low levels and scale up at the appropriate rate. In other cases, a feat was reserved for paragon tier but lacked any specific balance reason for that placement.

For example, Seize the Moment is a paragon tier feat that grants combat advantage to enemies with a lower initiative on the first round of combat. Aggressive Advantage grants that benefit against all enemies. Aggressive Advantage is clearly a better feat, but the benefit it provides scales perfectly with level. Nothing has changed at 11th level to make that benefit weaker. In this case, we've taken a useful feat and made it available earlier in a character's career.

Finally, as you've seen in earlier previews, many classes in the Essentials products rely on basic attacks. The Melee Training feat allows a character to use any ability to modify such attacks. That feat has been updated so that it provides the new ability's full bonus to attack rolls but only half to damage rolls. Melee Training offers its intended flexibility in creating characters without becoming a default choice.

For instance, a slayer who uses Melee Training to attack with Dexterity matches a Strength-based slayer in damage while gaining superior mobility by relying on light armor. A knight who opts to attack with Constitution gives up some damage but has more hit points and healing surges. Such characters are viable without becoming clearly better than ones without Melee Training, at the expense of using up a feat slot.

Magic Items and Equipment

Finally, there are a few changes to magic items and equipment. The big change makes it easier for Dungeon Masters to control access to magic items in the campaign. Do you like the idea of turning the players loose to buy any item in the game, or would you rather restrict access based on an item's complexity and impact on the campaign? The new rules help you answer that question, and they demand an article of their own. Look for that preview coming up later this month.

Dungeon Master's Kit

by James Wyatt,
Dungeons & Dragons R&D Creative Manager

The *Dungeon Master's Kit* is a linchpin of the Essentials products, the first key product for a new Dungeon Master after playing the Dungeons & Dragons Fantasy Roleplaying Game Starter Set (the new Red Box). It covers a lot of the same ground as the *Dungeon Master's Guide* but comes at the material from a slightly different perspective.

Goals

The most important goal for the *Dungeon Master's Kit* is to provide everything a new Dungeon Master (DM) needs to run the roleplaying game.

That's a big deal, actually. It's something the game has never really tried to do before. In the past, being the DM always meant buying more stuff. If you were just playing a character in a game, you needed the *Player's Handbook*. If you wanted to be the DM, you needed the *Player's Handbook* **plus** the *Dungeon Master's Guide* and the *Monster Manual*.

Now it's no longer additive. If you're a new player, you pick up one or both of the player books—*Heroes of the Fallen Lands* or *Heroes of the Forgotten Kingdoms*. If you're a new DM, you **instead** pick up the *Dungeon Master's Kit*.

That said, the *Dungeon Master's Kit* is still just a starting point. You can run a game using nothing but the *Dungeon Master's Kit* for a while—probably at least a couple of months. But eventually a new DM will want to pick up the *Monster Vault* and the *Rules Compendium* for a more complete and enhanced experience.

I like to think of this in terms of dollars. A new DM used to have a $105 buy-in to start running the game. Now we're offering a $40 buy-in to get you started.

Contents

What do you get with your buy-in, and can you really play for months with just that investment?

The box includes a 272-page digest-sized paperback book, two 32-page adventure books, two poster maps, two sheets of monster tokens, and a DM screen. It might help to think in terms of three discrete chunks.

First is the **DM book**. A fair amount of text in the book is material that also appears in the *Dungeon Master's Guide*. That's really just a case of not wanting to mess too much with a good thing. The *Dungeon Master's Guide* presents a strong treatise on the art of Dungeon Mastering for new and experienced DMs alike, and we wanted to preserve as much of that information and advice as we could fit into the *Dungeon Master's Kit*.

But there's more! The book also includes essential rules material, the information a DM needs to understand *how to play* as well as *how to run* the game. There's a discussion of alignment and information about the good and unaligned deities (not just the evil ones). There's a section of streamlined combat rules that can help you run the game until you decide it's time to pick up the *Rules Compendium*. And there are magic items for you to give out as treasure.

There's also some material that first appeared in *Dungeon Master's Guide 2*. For example, that book had a really good section on building encounters that focused on encounters as a means for telling the story of the adventure. It also included good advice for creating movement in encounters. Those sections speak strongly to some fundamental issues of running the game, so we thought they deserved a place in the first stop for new DMs.

The second chunk is the adventure material, which includes the **two adventure books**, the **two poster maps**, and the **monster tokens**. The adventure books are two parts of a single, grand adventure called *Reavers of Harkenwold*, written by Rich Baker. It's a complex adventure that, to my mind, really shows off what's possible within the framework of an adventure. This represents a pretty significant departure from the approach we took in the first *Dungeon Master's Guide*, where we presented a really basic, bare-bones adventure to help DMs wrap their minds around the facets of adventure design. In contrast, I think both new and experienced DMs will be studying *Reavers of Harkenwold* for years to pick up ideas about how to build interesting, dynamic, story-rich adventures for their players.

The adventures are supported by the poster maps and token sheets. You can play every combat encounter in the adventure using the poster maps and monster tokens, and a broad selection of tokens appropriate for player characters are included as well.

Let me emphasize that: The *Dungeon Master's Kit* gives you everything you need to run the game except dice. With this box, you don't need to buy miniatures. You don't need a battle mat or Dungeon Tiles. The box includes everything you need.

The last component is the **DM screen**. This is a nice cardboard screen with updated tables on the inside and a familiar piece of art on the players' side. It's not the same heavy stock as the deluxe screen, but it is a great starting point with lots of information in one easy-to-reference place.

So how much can you play with just the contents of this box? Well, *Reavers of Harkenwold* will keep your gaming group busy for roughly two months, assuming that you play for a couple of hours every week. Once you've finished that adventure, you can use the poster maps and monster tokens to build your own adventures, but pretty soon you'll want the new monsters (with accompanying tokens) provided in *Monster Vault* and some way (such as the *Dungeon Tiles Master Sets*) to build your own battle maps.

Page 42

The *Dungeon Master's Book* that comes inside the *Dungeon Master's Kit* includes a lot of familiar information, but in some cases the presentation and arrangement of that information is greatly improved. Let me highlight one example: the much-loved guidelines for adjudicating actions that the rules don't cover, which appeared on page 42 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*.

As presented in the *Dungeon Master's Guide*, that section looks like a stopgap. It's what you do when all else fails. Yet I've heard people say that they could run the game using just the table on that page. As I was working on that section of the *Dungeon Master's Kit*, I realized that I had been looking at it in the wrong way.

Page 42 isn't what the DM does when all else fails—it's what the DM does *all the time*. In the *Dungeon Master's Kit*, this table appears in a section called "Using Checks," in the chapter called "Running the Game." Once we've talked about the modes of the game, covered narration and keeping the players informed, and explained how exploration works, we move on to how to use checks to determine character success or failure at the actions they attempt. It's a simple three-step process:

1. Determine what kind of check is called for.
2. Determine how hard the check should be (set the DC).
3. Determine the results of the check.

That's not a stopgap, it's "the most important rule" expressed in a broader way. It's how attacks work. What kind of check? An attack roll. How hard is it? Use the target's appropriate defense. What are the results? They're defined by the power being used.

It's how skills work. A character wants to jump across a chasm. What kind of check? An Athletics check. How hard is it? Set a DC based on the distance. What's the result? If the character succeeds, he or she jumps to the other side of the chasm. If the character fails, it's a fall into the chasm.

With the DC and damage tables as the centerpiece of that key rules section, the *Dungeon Master's Kit* actually manages to present a much more flexible approach to skills than the *Player's Handbook* does. You don't need to carefully apply precise modifiers to determine the DC to climb a wall. You can just look at the table of DCs by level, decide whether it should be easy, hard, or in between, and go. Of course, if you want the precise tables and guidelines, you can always refer to the *Rules Compendium*, but I think the *Dungeon Master's Kit* presents a really strong approach to running the game. Armed with these tables, the DM is in control of the game and is empowered to make decisions on the fly without getting bogged down in detail.

I do regret that this concise answer to life, the universe, and everything no longer appears on page 42 of the book. ("Using Checks" starts on page 101, and the DC table is on page 107.) Instead, on page 42 of the book in the new *Dungeon Master's Kit*, you'll find the definitions of the evil and chaotic evil alignments. Make of that what you will.

Do You Need It?

As with the rest of the Essentials products, the material in the *Dungeon Master's Kit* is part of the Dungeons & Dragons roleplaying game, though it incorporates all the latest rules updates. Nothing in its pages renders books you already own obsolete or inaccurate.

If you already have the *Dungeon Master's Guide* and *Dungeon Master's Guide 2*, you won't find so much new material in the *Dungeon Master's Kit* that it becomes a "must have." Perhaps more than any other Essentials product except the Starter Set, the *Dungeon Master's Kit* is squarely aimed at *new* Dungeon Masters.

However, I think you'll want to take a look at *Reavers of Harkenwold*. You'll also find the latest information about skill challenges and check DCs (supported by careful mathematical analysis!) in the pages of the *Dungeon Master's Book*. There's a quick summary of a lot of updated rules all in one place; a method for random generation of treasure, including some changes to the way we think about magic items; updated traps and terrain; poster maps and tokens that will provide a lot of repeat use; and so on . . .

If you're already DMing a Dungeons & Dragons game, you don't *need* the *Dungeon Master's Kit*—but you should take a look regardless. You might just find you want it anyway.

On Friday, Bill will preview some of the contents of the *Dungeon Master's Kit* in his "Ampersand" column.

Magic Item Rarity

By Mike Mearls,
Dungeons & Dragons Roleplaying Game R&D Group Manager

As the release of the Dungeons & Dragons Essentials products draws near, we're showing off the rules updates and new options available in these products. This week, we look at magic items and how the new rarity system helps expand the items the game includes while giving Dungeon Masters more tools to tinker with in their campaigns.

One of the consistent pieces of feedback we've received about the Dungeons & Dragons game concerns magic items. Many players and DMs have told us that while plenty of the items in the game are treasures worth risking a character's life and limb for, the most powerful items felt a little flat. On the other hand, we've also seen in playtests that magic items can sometimes crowd out a character's other options. Particularly at high levels, a character's boots, armor, gloves, belt, weapon, and other gear add quite a few powers and abilities that might overshadow other character aspects.

In looking over feedback and inspecting the game, we came to the conclusion that we wanted to add a broader variety of items to the game. A magical sword that unleashes bolts of lightning on command should be able to sit alongside a belt that increases your maximum hit points.

Rare Items

Rare items were the first piece of the puzzle. It's simply the nature of game design that even after assigning levels to items, there will always be better and worse items within a specific level. Sometimes that difference comes down to a character's needs. Other times, players simply value one type of item over another, like one that deals extra damage.

Rare items allow us to create a category of treasures that are clearly more powerful without simply forcing them to a higher level of play. For example, a *flame-tongue longsword* that can hurl bolts of fire at will is more powerful than a *resounding weapon* that dazes an enemy once per day. However, both weapons' enhancement bonuses determine where they sit within the grand scheme of levels. A *+1 flame-tongue longsword* must sit somewhere between levels 1 and 5. Above that point, its enhancement bonus is too low to keep up with other weapons, even if it has a nifty activated ability.

By introducing rare items, we can allow those two weapons to sit near each other in terms of level.

So, what does mean if a magic item is rare?

First, the rules assume that the DM hands out one rare item per character per tier. Rare items are meant to be character-defining, powerful objects that help forge the character's identity in the world. If you find a *flame-tongue* weapon, you've uncovered an important, powerful blade. Since the characters won't have many of these items, they can be more complicated in terms of type and number of powers.

Second, characters cannot normally create or buy rare items. They are simply too hard to find to show up in the hands of a merchant or trader. You must find them or, at the DM's option, track down the rare and wondrous reagents needed to create one. You can't simply stock up on them or buy one for each item slot.

Third, rare items sell for 100% of their listed gold piece value. If you find one and want to sell it for cash, you have no trouble finding a buyer willing to pay an exorbitant price to take it off your hands.

Common Items

Common items are the exact opposite of rare items. They offer useful but limited abilities. The processes of their manufacture are well known, and anyone with the money can track one down for purchase.

Common items lack activated powers. They usually confer a simple bonus or a static effect that you note on your character sheet and forget about. For example, a pair of gloves that grants a +2 bonus to Thievery checks makes a fine common item. You note the modifier to your skill check, adjust the total bonus as necessary, and never think of the gloves again until you find new ones to replace them.

The intent behind common items is to keep the game's complexity load manageable. Common items are useful, but they don't create a distraction or an extra layer of choice within an encounter.

Common items sell for 20% of their listed gold piece value. They are valuable but relatively easy to find. About half the items you find on adventures are common items.

Uncommon Items

The rest of our magic items are now uncommon. They occupy the middle ground between rare and common items. They have powers, but these powers are typically daily abilities. They have static effects, but they are rarely character-defining or critical to a hero's identity.

Like rare items, uncommon items must be found. They are seldomly up for sale and few people know how to craft them. Even those smiths who can make them require exotic, difficult-to-find materials to complete them. Uncommon items sell for 50% of their listed price. A little less than half of the items you find on adventures are uncommon.

The Net Result

As you can see, an items' rarity has a big effect on how it interacts with the game. Characters can easily stock up on common items, but rare and uncommon items only enter the game at the Dungeon Master's discretion. This approach seeks a middle ground between empowering characters to buy and sell items while giving the DM a useful tool for keeping the game manageable and exciting.

The best part of this system lies in its flexibility. A Dungeon Master can easily shift the tone of a campaign by adjusting how rarity functions. In a high magic campaign, the characters can buy and sell any items. In a world where magic is rare and wondrous, the characters can't buy anything, while the only items they uncover are rare ones. Even then, a character can expect to find only two or three such items over the course of an entire campaign.

The default rules walk a line between empowering both Dungeon Masters and players. They seek to give DMs some control without taking all the fun out of spending the gold pieces that the characters earn on their adventures. If that default doesn't work for you, changing how you treat magic items in the game is a snap.

Magic Item Usage

Before we bring this discussion to a close, it's worth mentioning that the limits on using daily magic item powers are no longer part of the game. They existed to prevent the characters from stockpiling items that were far below their level but still had useful, daily powers. Under this scheme, such items are uncommon. Stockpiling a number of them is impossible without house rules or a Dungeon Master who willingly awards multiple copies of such items as treasure. With our new rarity scheme in place, we no longer need such rules.

Psionics, Magic, and Metal

By Richard Baker and Rodney Thompson

Once again we return to the merciless wastes of Athas, the world of the *Dark Sun* campaign setting. Athas was once a world of fair green kingdoms and shining blue seas, but foul sorcery defiled the world centuries ago. Now the realms of the ancients are forgotten; their cities are crumbling ruins, their temples are dark and silent. In this, the third and final installment of "Design & Development" covering *Dark Sun*, Rich Baker (lead designer for the new 4th Edition *Dark Sun* setting) and Rodney Thompson (lead developer) take a look at some of the story elements and game mechanics that make Athas unique.

Magic

Rich: Some of the most important differences between Athas and other D&D settings are changes in the workings of magic, both arcane and divine. In Athas, the Primordials won their ancient war against the gods, destroying or scattering their divine foes. The divine power source simply doesn't exist anymore. Clerics, invokers, paladins, avengers—these character classes are absent from the *Dark Sun* setting. Other leaders such as ardents, warlords, and shamans must serve as the primary healers in an adventuring party.

Rodney: This was one of the first big topics we tackled during the design and development of the setting. The 2nd Edition version of Dark Sun always seemed to want to get rid of the divine spellcasters (and even succeeded with the paladin), but ended up changing it so that, instead, clerics worshiped the elements. The class structure of 4th Edition made it a bit easier to lose an entire power source, because leaders from other power sources could provide adequate healing and fill the other roles just as well. Cutting out the divine power source helped us create an Athas that seemed a lot closer to what the designers of the 2nd Edition setting really wanted to do but might have had their hands tied by the need of a cleric class for healing. Because elemental worship was an important part of the setting, we kept that alive in the themes, specifically the elemental priest theme.

Rich: Arcane magic exists in Athas, but it is inherently perilous. Arcane magic is drawn from some vital emanation of the world and the creatures in it; using arcane magic carelessly *defiles* the caster's surroundings. A spellcaster can avoid causing injury to the living things in his or her vicinity by drawing forth the power for a spell slowly and carefully, but a caster who doesn't care about such things can hurl more powerful spells by ripping this vital energy from his surroundings. Normal plants in the area die and crumble to ash when defiled; animals (including humans and humanoids) suffer wracking pains. For heroic characters, the choice to defile is an ever-present temptation. At any time, a desperate (or callous) arcane spellcaster in need of more power for his magic can defile, ruining his surroundings and injuring his friends in order to fuel his spells.

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For arcane casters, this is reflected by the *arcane defiling* power—a special ability that all arcane spellcasters in the Dark Sun campaign gain.

Arcane Defiling **Arcane Feature**

You draw upon the vitality of nearby life to fuel your magic, heedless of the harm you cause to the land and your allies.

At-Will ✦ Arcane, Necrotic
Free Action **Personal**
Trigger: You make an attack roll or a damage roll as part of an arcane daily attack power.
Effect: You can reroll the triggering roll but must use the second result. In addition, each ally (willing or unwilling) within 20 squares of you takes necrotic damage equal to half his or her healing surge value. This damage ignores immunities and cannot be reduced in any way.
Special: You can use this effect once for any arcane daily attack power you use, affecting any single attack roll or the damage roll for that power.

Rodney: The defiling rules were the mechanical element we tackled first, because we knew we wanted to get it right before anything else. The mechanics went through a lot of changes.

The end result reflects the intersection between several design goals. We wanted the defiling mechanics to be ever-present (thus, the power is at-will) but not slow down the game (it only comes into effect when you use a daily power). We wanted to make the temptation to defile strong; a reroll on daily attack rolls is already pretty tempting, but adding the ability to reroll a damage roll will surely come into play when a character hits with a daily but then sees a lot of 1s on the damage dice. There had to be a cost for using it that reflected the nature of defiling (dealing damage to your allies), but you shouldn't be able to circumvent that cost (not being able to reduce that damage). At the same time, this couldn't just be an automatic minion popper, so it only damages your allies.

The *arcane defiling* power forms the basis of much of the other defiling mechanics in the setting. Feats and paragon paths alter the way that the power works. For example, here's a feat tied specifically to *arcane defiling* that, when taken, represents the character walking further down the defiling path:

Defiling Adept

Prerequisite: 11th level, *arcane defiling* power

Benefit: When you use an arcane daily attack power with *arcane defiling*, that attack can score a critical hit on a roll of 19–20. The critical range increases to 18–20 at 21st level.

Lack of Metal

Rich: Continuing with the themes of ruin and scant resources, Athas is a world that has been largely stripped of its useful metals. A simple steel sword is a treasure worth a noble's ransom; a suit of plate armor, or even steel chainmail, is a ridiculously ostentatious luxury. Given the scarcity of metal, Athasians have been forced to substitute inferior materials for their weapons and armor. Axes or hammers have heads made from bone or stone; swords are made from wood lined with razor-sharp obsidian or lacquered bone; "plate" armor is crafted from the treated shells of large desert creatures such as sand chuuls or braxats. The heights that it once achieved are long gone, so that in many ways, Dark Sun is now a primitive world.

Since most Athasians are similarly armed and armored, there are no special penalties for using weapons and armor made from inferior materials. Instead, metal arms and armor are exceptional. In Athas, steel (or bronze or any other metal) is a masterwork material with a minimum enhancement value of +3. In other words, if you find a steel longsword, it's automatically a +3 *steel longsword* at the bare minimum. Naturally, steel longswords are worth thousands of gold pieces or their ceramic equivalent. There isn't any real difference between a +3 *bone longsword* and a +3 *steel longsword*; you just can't find any steel swords that aren't at least +3 in value as compared to un-enchanted weapons made of lesser materials.

Rodney: What good are inferior weapon materials without some kind of mechanics to tie into them, right? Inferior materials are something that cuts right to the heart of what Dark Sun is about: survival. Heroes with bone clubs and obsidian swords reflect the desperation that players face in the setting, and we wanted to find some ways to reflect that without sapping the fun out of the game; danger and excitement but not tedium. We include two variant rules for weapon breakage, optional armor overheating rules (explaining why most of the folks on Athas aren't running around in suits or armor), Athas-flavored alternatives to masterwork armor, and make the assumption that DMs running *Dark Sun* campaigns will use the inherent enhancement bonus rules introduced in *Dungeon Master's Guide 2*, with a few tweaks to make them even more beneficial for a *Dark Sun* campaign. Moreover, the book has an extensive section to help DMs create rewards for players that don't rely on handing out tons of magic

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weapons, piles and piles of gold and silver coins, and so on. Heroes can get by with just the weapons they scavenge in the desert, and finding a +3 *steel dagger* can be a major victory.

More than any other setting for 4th Edition, we wanted to make extensive use of optional and variant rules that retain the core experience of what Dungeons & Dragons is while giving it a distinct and unique flavor that Dark Sun has always brought to the table. Additionally, most of these variant rules are presented in a way that will allow DMs to use them or ignore them as they see fit, making it so that each DM can tailor their *Dark Sun* campaign to their particular vision of how it should feel.

Psionics

Rich: While the gods of Athas are silent, Athasians long ago turned to another source of enlightenment and power—the study of psionics. Psionics are more prevalent in Athas than in other D&D settings; psionic academies and monasteries can be found in all the major cities, psions-for-hire advise nobles and merchant houses, battleminds fight in the bloodstained arenas, and monsters that roam the wastelands are armed with potent psychic attacks to match their fangs and claws. Since divine magic is absent from the world and arcane magic is sanctioned only in the hands of the sorcerer-kings' chosen servants, psionics are the only "magical" power source most city-dwelling Athasians are familiar with. In fact, most Athasians possess at least one *wild talent*, a minor psionic trick or ability they were born with.

When you create a *Dark Sun* character, you have several tools at your disposal for incorporating psionic elements. You begin with a wild talent for free; it's just part of your Athasian heritage. If you want to create a character with access to more potent psionic powers, you can choose the Wilder character theme or create a multiclassed or hybrid character incorporating a psionic class. If your character concept revolves around a robust array of psionic talents, you should probably just create an ardent, psion, or battlemind.

Rodney: Wild talents are yet another optional rule system that we included to give the game a distinct feel that called back to the classic setting. Wild talents are cantrips, small effects that don't have a lot of impact on the outcome of a combat encounter but that creative players will find uses for. We even include a table for determining your wild talent randomly. Here's a sample wild talent:

Sensing Eye **Wild Talent Cantrip**

An image forms in your mind, revealing what you would see if you were standing some distance away.

At-Will ✦ Psionic
Minor Action **Personal**

Effect: Choose one square you can see that is within 5 squares of you. Until the end of your next turn, you can determine your line of sight from that square.

About the Authors

Richard Baker is an award-winning game designer who has written numerous D&D adventures and sourcebooks, including the *Manual of the Planes*, *Draconomicon 2*, and the *Dark Sun Campaign Guide*. He's also a New York Times bestselling author best-selling author of Forgotten Realms novels such as *Condemnation*, the *Last Mythal* trilogy, and the *Blades of the Moonsea* series.

Rodney Thompson is an RPG designer at Wizards of the Coast. Originally from Chattanooga, TN, his credits for Dungeons & Dragons include *Monster Manual 3*, the *Dark Sun Campaign Setting*, *Player Essentials: Heroes of the Fallen Lands*, *Player Essentials: Heroes of the Forgotten Kingdoms*, and *Monster Vault*.

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On Becoming a Gamer

BY SHELLY MAZZANOBLE
illustrations by William O'Conner

Picture this:

It was a humid August night in downtown Milwaukee. I was alone on a street, in a city I'd never been to before. Well, as alone as I could be considering there were nearly twenty-thousand people milling about. I was there for business—my first business trip! (If you don't count that time I was a waitress and my ex-boss and I drank too much and wandered onto a Bainbridge Island ferry.) I had just started a new job and was sent to this strange place to demo a product I barely understood myself. A trading card *game*? Since when do trading cards attack each other?

My co-workers were at a bar called the Safe House. At least, I hoped it was a bar. I stopped making assumptions about my environment after about hour one in the convention center. Apparently, to get into the Safe House, you need a password, but I was more focused on finding the place first. So I did what anyone (who didn't have an iPhone because they hadn't been invented yet) would do in this situation—find a nice stranger to ask. Preferably nice strangers who look like they might frequent a bar that requires a password. I spotted a couple walking toward me who fit the bill.

"Excuse me," I said. "Do you know where the Safe House is?"

The couple didn't respond, which made me think this was part of the Safe House schtick. *The first rule of the Safe House is to make people feel like jackasses when they ask about the Safe House*. Makes sense considering its theme, even sort of cute if I weren't standing here alone and thirsty.

"Excuse me," I repeated. "I'm looking for a *bar* called the Safe House. Do you know where it is?"

Nothing. It's like I didn't even exist, the way they looked right past me. I was eight inches from them. Close enough to see the rim of her contacts. The depth of his pores. Man, I hoped they had some cold cream back at the hotel, because that makeup was going to be a bitch to take off.

"Hello?" I jumped up and down in case their visual cortexes required the same stimulation as my dad's beloved automated snowman that sings "Burning Love" every time it senses movement. The mailman almost sued us because of that thing!

Still nothing. *Come on*! Sure, I could have found someone else to ask-people were walking by in a steady stream-but I felt invested in this challenge now. *Why won't they uncross their arms and answer me?*

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That was weird too. That pose. They were both standing stock still in the same position with their arms crossed over their chests like they were standing upright in a coffin. Creepy ...

I was alone(ish) in a strange(ish) city asking about a safe house. My mom would kill me.

Alas, I received help, but not from those two. Help came in the form of two hysterically laughing co-workers I recognized from R&D. (Why is R&D always laughing at me?)

"You can't see them," Paul, my co-worker explained (if you can call that explaining). "They're invisible."

Great. The entire world has drunk the Kool-Aid. Or least everyone within five miles of downtown Milwaukee.

"What are you talking about? They're right there," I said, pointing to their stony faces.

"They're obfuscating," said Lane, my other co-worker, as he guided me across the street by my elbow. "It's part of a game."

"A game?" I asked. What was up with these people and their games? Don't people play Boggle and Life or Crazy 8's anymore?

"What kind of stupid game requires you to stand on street corners ignoring people who are clearly in distress?" I asked.

"A LARP," replied first co-worker, all blasé, as if he was telling me what's on the hotel's breakfast buffet.

Obfuscating? LARP? I scored OK on the English part of my SATs, but I don't remember these definitions. Why do you need a visible sign to prove you're invisible? What had I gotten myself into?

If I were half as savvy as I am today (yes, you become savvy after over a decade working at a gaming company), I would have known what they were doing and I never would have asked them for directions. I've even been known to obfuscate. I do it in meetings and in the gym when my trainer tells me to hold plank position for three minutes. I even do it sometimes at Barney's when the salespeople get too pushy. (Note that the sign for obfuscating is remarkably similar to the sign for "teddy bear" in baby sign language.)

I did find my way to the Safe House that night. And many more nights after that. (And I always found out the password beforehand, thus sparing me the humiliation of the Chicken Dance on closed circuit television.)

That was the first of many Gen Cons. It used to feel somewhat voyeuristic being there. Me in my Wizards polo shirt and designer jeans thinking I didn't really belong. No one gave me any notice unless I was handing out free samples, but I was certainly paying attention to them. Sure I worked for a game company, but that didn't make me a gamer. I haven't worn fairy wings since 1995 when I dressed up for Halloween as a Washington State Ferry. (Get it?)

For four days, these people existed in a different world. A world where swords, Stormtroopers, and synthetic hair ruled. The more different they were, the more they fit in. It was like bizarro high school. I found myself shying away from conversations because I had no idea what these people were talking about. Can't we talk about the upcoming Fall television line up? Or pets? Or grilled pizza recipes? I have tons of those!

What I really wanted to know was why wasn't everyone aware of this strange, enchanting world that existed in middle America? Shouldn't Diane Sawyer be here? Or at least Triumph the Insult Dog?

Gen Con can be counted on for a few staples—lack of sleep, blisters, eating my body weight in french fries. (It's hard to be a vegetarian in Indianapolis!) This year was different. Or maybe just I was. For the first time I didn't feel like just a Wizards of the Coast employee in a scratchy polo shirt. I felt like ... dare I say it? A *gamer.*

I noticed it first outside the Dwarven Forge booth. I was walking by with my pockets full of shiny new dice for Tabitha when I noticed their classic dungeon sets.

"Oh wow!" I said, dragging my boss into the booth. "Wouldn't you love playing in there?"

"I guess," she laughed.

"Why is that funny?" I asked.

"Because it's *you* talking about miniature terrain."

It's true. Since when did I get excited about tiny trap doors and a raisable portcullis?

Then there was the heated debate I overheard in the food court about what to call a large group of nerds. One camp was saying "party," the other was saying "stench." I walked over to their table.

"They're called a school."

We've spent a lot of time discussing this at the office.

And, oh yeah, there was a moderately, scary cool elevator ride with a school of nerds who saw my badge and started barraging me with demands.

"You're the Player-in-Chief, aren't you?" one of them sneered, standing dangerously close to the emergency stop button.

I am! (But jeez. Can't anyone be happy *magic missile* is magic again? Rest assured, your suggestions are on their way to R&D.)

I've been spending a lot of time thinking about gamers and D&D (an there's a reason for that but I'll save it for another time) and trying to figure out what it is about this game that resonates with so many

people. There's a reason that D&D has remained relevant in pop culture. It's still the go-to joke when trying to illustrate what a nerd a TV character is. You don't need to own any funny-shaped dice to know what a Dungeon Master is.

If you were there, I'm sure you have quite the highlight reel yourself. If you weren't there, you probably read about it on Facebook or someone's blog. And if you have no idea what Gen Con is, then your Google search for "Confessions" and/or "Wizard" has led you very far astray. Here's a smattering of my favorite things. Eat your heart out, Oprah.

Winners, Losers, and Drawers

You know that feeling of wanting to punch someone in the stomach the second you meet them? Then you know exactly how cartoonist Jared Von Hindman felt just after we were introduced. To be fair, the punch landed about six minutes into our encounter, but we were long lost nemeses at that point.

I knew of him of course, but hadn't had the strange pleasure of meeting him in person.

"So I hear you're writing for the D&D site, too," I said.

"Yes," he answered. "Light, fluffy lifestyle pieces."

"Oh. How ... interesting. Did you know I'm a cartoonist?"

Over the course of the evening, we flipped between feeling like we might be soulmates to, well ... punching each other in the stomach. We were like the Real Housewives of the Nentir Vale. If past lives do exist, I'm sure Jared and I were brother and sister. Nemeses indeed. I'm watching you, Jared.

Leveling With Kids

When I was little, I thought my dad was the coolest. He used to take me to get new sneakers and always managed to pick up a pair for himself, too. I wouldn't pull the trigger on selecting mine until I saw the ones he gravitated to. Then I'd tell the sales clerk that those coincidentally were the exact ones I wanted. Imagine that! It was so cool to walk out of Foot Locker with the same kicks on as my dad. Blue Nikes with the white swoosh. White Adidas with the red stripes. Once I even got golf cleats, which really made my mom mad.

"How are these practical for a six-year-old girl?" she asked.

That wasn't Dad's fault. I refused to leave the store without them.

If there's one thing I adore about Gen Con, it's seeing a father bestowing his love of all things geek on his offspring. Kids are dressed up as Link and Zelda without a clue as to who they are. Fathers and sons pose in front of the giant beholder statues. Dads and daughters bond over bedazzling foam swords.

I heard a man force his son to get in line for a Larry Elmore signed poster. When the kid, who clearly had better places to be, bellowed, "Why, daddy, why?" his dad simply responded with, "Trust me. Just ... trust me."

Seeing Red

I got assigned a task at Gen Con that seemed fun in theory. (No, not "handling" Ed Greenwood. I get assigned that task every year and it's always "fun.")

My task was this: Armed with a camera crew (how Entertainment Tonight!) and the new Dungeons & Dragons *Fantasy Roleplaying Game* packaged with the original, iconic Larry Elmore art, I was charged with walking around the show floor in search of stories from glory days of yore. I wanted to know things like, where did you first discover this mystical red box? Who was your first character? What memories does looking at this new, old box bring back? Who did you play with?

At first I thought, sure, I can do that. It's just walking around talking to people, and I do love those stories about how people were first introduced to D&D. But then I went into a blind panic. Suddenly walking around the show floor with a wireless mic and a camera crew (this was their first Gen Con and they were a little ... well ... shell shocked) begging people to talk to me seemed a little too 2nd grade. I started worrying: I'm going to look like a big, old doofus in an itchy polyester polo shirt. I won't know what they're talking about! They'll kick me to the curb in favor of real draws like Serra Angels and Time Lords and, lucky me, we'll get it all on camera! (To be fair, I was distracted by the Serra Angels and Time Lords. Costumes were on fire this year.)

But guess what? I didn't need to channel 2nd-grade Shelly. Getting people to wax nostalgic proved easy. I'd just look for people to take notice of what I was carrying and watch them respond with that same goofy grin and glossy-eyed look I get when I walk into the Nordstrom shoe department.

"There it is!"

"I remember that!"

"Those were some of the best games ever."

People were more than happy to share their stories. Places, people, characters, rituals—it all came flooding back. One woman told about how her first rogue went off the rails and stabbed another party member in the back. That guy ended up becoming her husband.

Hmm ... maybe there's more to that story. I talked to two guys who met playing the D&D Basic Game and were at Gen Con celebrating their annual Man-cation. Another guy shared how his group would nestle between the splintered floor and exposed insulation of the attic crawl space, *with candles*, to play their weekly game. They were more than eager to talk to me, on camera and off, about their early days with D&D. And here they all were, nearly three decades later.

Never Split the Party

Never. Keep them safely together in a suite at the Omni.

Remember the contest we ran a couple months ago asking for stories about old adventuring groups that split up for various reasons and the winning party would be reunited at Gen Con? I love essay contests in theory, but I hate the judging part. (Judging reality stars and red carpet fashion choices are one thing—from-the-heart reminiscing is another.)

The truth is, I'm a sucker for a sad story. And a funny story. Even just a well-written story. The judges went back and forth between several top contenders before deciding on the story about five guys who came together because of D&D and subsequently shared some of their best childhood-and-beyond memories because of it.

At dinner with the Wizards crew, they shared how Ben's Uncle Willy introduced a group of nine-year-old boys to a game they would spend hours playing on his parents' front porch. They were resigned to play on the front porch because Ben's parents wouldn't let the boys inside. Not even to use the bathroom. They had to run back to their respective homes to do that. Sometimes Ben would move the living room television up to the window so they could watch *Friday the 13th* while they played, but mostly it was just their imaginations, the characters they invented (and can still recall with the detail skills of an insurance claim adjuster), and the rules they sometimes went by, sometimes made up.

I know what you're thinking. *That's my group*! And it may be true. I think that what we liked about these guys was that their story encapsulated so well what we know to be true. Lots of friendships were developed because of D&D and while maintained, lots of groups were broken up because of college, family, jobs. Life happens. At least for 361 days of the year it does.

I wish my early memories of D&D didn't involve making fun of the boys who played it. I didn't have a gaming group then, but I do now. Better late than never, right?

"Friends come and go," one of the guys I interviewed said. "But your gaming group is forever."

"Yep," I said. "I know what you mean."

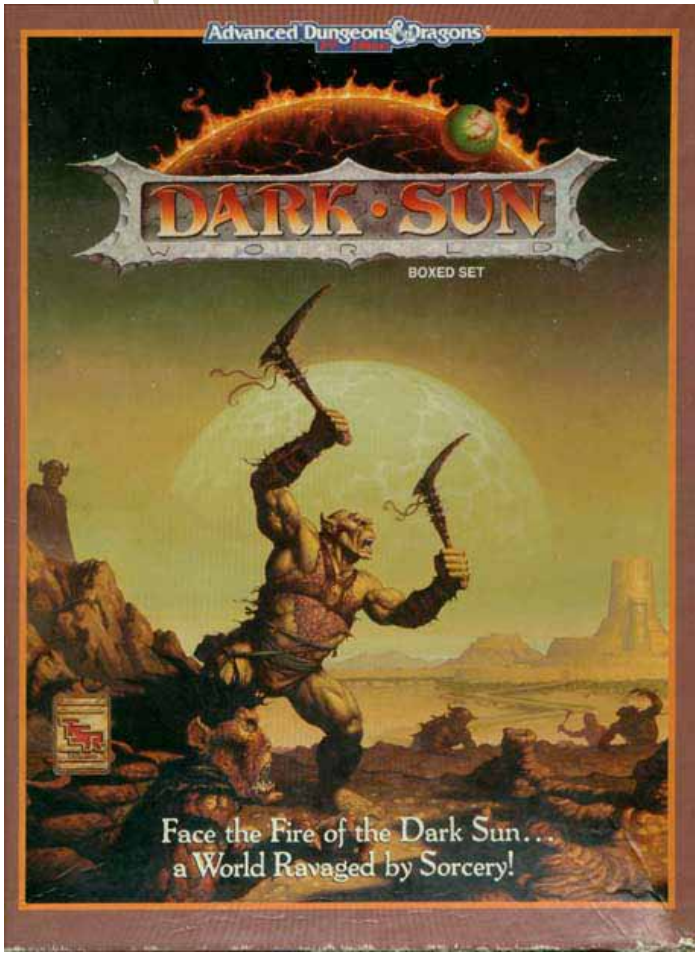
About the Author

Contrary to the visual evidence, Shelly Mazzanoble is not a dragon slayer. She was merely protecting it.

Alumni: Dark Sun

by Bart Carroll

One of the benefits of working here at Wizards is our extensive game archive and the ability to check out old games for reference. Some of these games have quite a long history—and so after poking around, I'm now sitting here with the 1991 *Dark Sun* campaign setting, stamped: TSR Library/201 Sheridan Springs Road, Lake Geneva WI 53147. That's about as far from the desert world of Athas as one can get. For those of you who never played through this original boxed set, it contains The Wanderer's Journal, a rules book, and the adventure "A Little Knowledge." Quite a bit of goodness is coming out this month, including *Psionic Power* and the *Castle Ravenloft board game*; however, we've covered psionics and even Count Strahd von Zarovich in previous installments. So this month, we turn our attention to Athas—and ask some of the R&D staff involved with the original campaign setting and its forthcoming release to give us their thoughts on surviving the desert wastes, both then and now.



The Horse's Mouth: Dark Sun's Origins

I first asked Steve Winter if he had any tales of *Dark Sun*'s genesis; he dutifully struck me over the head with a copy of *30 Years of Adventure: A Celebration of Dungeons & Dragons*. Right there inside, Steve had already written the exact essay I wanted. Without reprinting it in its entirety, I'll call out the following sections:

> "In the nineties, when my two sons first started getting interested in playing AD&D, I got a lot of mileage out of telling them that *Dark Sun* was my idea. For some reason, that seemed to impress them a lot more than everything else I'd done at TSR over the years. In truth, my contribution was the suggestion during the first brainstorming session that the world be a ravaged, dying desert world built on the crumbling ruins of a long-lost civilization. At the time, I'd been reading a lot of fiction by Clarke Ashton Smith and DEN comics by Richard Corben. My contribution to the creation of Athas began and ended with that one notion. As everyone knows, ideas are cheap. The people who created Dark Sun are the ones who actually did the work, not the guy who tossed off a nebulous remark like "make it a desert." Still, even a scrap of glory has appeal, and I'm not letting go of that one.
>
> *Dark Sun* was a revelation when it was published in 1991. It took AD&D to a type of setting where it had never been before and made it darker, more threatening, even more relevant with its undercurrent story of a world in ecological collapse. It was the richest and most original setting to come from TSR to that date. It was in Tim Brown's words, 'as ground-breaking as a new AD&D campaign world could be.' We turned the game on its ear and had a hell of a good time doing it.
>
> As the team originally envisioned it, Athas would feature none of the standard AD&D races or monsters. There would be no elves, dwarves,

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dragons, or orcs. It was a world of humans, muls, half-giants, and even more exotic species. That notion eventually made the marketing department very uneasy, however, because it left the setting with nothing familiar to draw in players and readers. The designers relented and added dwarves, elves, halflings, dragons, and a few other familiar shapes back into the mix. Each was subtly or radically twisted in some way to give it a characteristically Athasian quality. Tim recalled that ultimately 'marketing's objection took us in a whole new direction that we might not otherwise have gone, and *Dark Sun* was stronger for it."

Dark Sun and Battlesystem

Still rubbing my head (*30 Years of Adventure* is a fairly thick book), I went to Rich Baker:

> "*Dark Sun* came out right about the time I started at TSR, which means that the work was all done months and months before I arrived on the scene. When I started, I was assigned to the New Worlds product group in R&D, which meant that I was part of the team that focused on the *Dark Sun* product line following the boxed set. Tim Brown was the leader of the New Worlds team. I worked on several *Dark Sun* products in my first year or two at TSR, including the *Valley of Dust and Fire* sourcebook, the *Merchant House of Amketch* flip-book adventure, the *Dragon's Crown* mega-adventure, and *The Will and the Way* psionics sourcebook. I also pitched in with some outlining and freelancing coordination on books like *Earth, Air, Fire, and Water.* (Funny, to this day my fingers want to type Earth, Wind, and Fire there.)
>
> I ran a short *Dark Sun* campaign shortly after starting at TSR. The players included my wife Kim, Thomas Reid, his wife Teresa Reid, Wolf Baur, Tim Beach, and Colin McComb. The heroes took on a nasty bandit-lord sort of fellow, and rescued a high-ranking family member of a merchant house. Tim Beach and Wolf Baur played thri-kreen: Ka'Cha the druid, and Tik-tik the ranger. Tim wound up doing a lot of work on them over the next couple of years because he really liked the race, and I think the name Ka'Cha surfaced once or twice in thri-kreen source material. I remember that Tik-tik was the only character I killed in the campaign, stung by a giant scorpion. I think Wolf's still a little sore at me about it. I built my own civilized area for the game, which I called the Urd Region; I put it on the other side of the Sea of Silt from the Tyr Region.
>
> One thing I noticed about the setting early on that seemed to have fallen by the wayside: the mass-combat elements. Tim Brown was a big fan of the *Battlesystem* rules, and I think he always meant for *Dark Sun* to be a world where fantastic armies clashed all the time. The early sourcebooks included a lot of *Battlesystem* stats and conversions, but I don't think very many players out there in the audience were interested in those aspects of the setting (or in *Battlesystem* at all, really), so those elements vanished as the line matured. I suspect that a lot of the initial city design and political set-ups were intended to create the diverse factions and conflicts you'd want to see in order to support large-scale miniatures battles."

Battlesystem, for those not familiar with the line, involved rules for miniature wargaming. Reinforcing Rich's assertion, *Dark Sun* initially had the working title of "War World," meant to tie-in with the *Battlesystem* rules. Yet, as Steve Winter elaborated (over the cube walls, this time), part of the problem was in a lack of minis available for full *Dark Sun* battles, save for a limited line of *Ral Partha* minis suitable for individual characters.

Looking back at the original *Dark Sun*, Rich continued:

> "Character trees are something else that got a lot of attention in the original boxed set, but quickly disappeared. (*Editor's note:* Character trees meant having multiple, inactive characters waiting in the wings—what might otherwise be termed a stable. A sidebar discussing multiple characters later appeared in the *Dungeon Master's Guide 2*, page 35.) I think a lot of people experimented with them at first, but the concept ran into a simple problem: Folks didn't need rules for what they were doing anyway. The vast majority of DMs out there would allow someone whose character got killed to bring in a replacement at party level or maybe one level down anyway. I suppose that some players enjoyed bringing in a replacement character that was already "pre-storied" for the campaign, but I hardly ever saw it used myself.

One last thing: My biggest difficulty with *Dark Sun* as a designer was that you had to work with a small subset of monsters to feel like you were doing a good job and respecting the Athasian ecology. Between that and a general lack of conventional dungeons, it was hard for DMs to come up with *Dark Sun* adventures. For our 4th Edition *Dark Sun*, we worked hard to be inclusive about monsters, and our adventure design 'tech' these days is a lot more friendly to open-air adventuring. DMs should have a much easier time building adventures for the setting this time around, or so I hope."

Beyond the RPG: The Prism Pentad

When it comes to *Dark Sun*, many folks not only ran campaigns in that setting but fondly recall Troy Denning's series of novels set there as well. Astute readers might have picked up on *Dark Sun*'s return in our 2009 interview with Phil Athans, where he mentioned editor Fleetwood Robbins working on the line.

The Prism Pentad books rereleased soon after. As Fleetwood describes it, "*The Prism Pentad* follows the story of the revolution in Tyr and all that happens in its aftermath. In the power vacuum created by the absence of the sorcerer king Kalak, there is a struggle for control of the city between Tithian, a megalomaniacal nobleman with designs on absolute power, and a council of citizens led by another, more altruistic Nobleman, Agis. Other players in the revolution were the preserver Sadira and the slave gladiators Rikus and Neeva. Denning takes this as a set-up and runs through a series of dangers, from the dragon Borys to the first sorcerer Rajaat, who threaten not only the continued freedom of Tyr, but ultimately the entire existence of Athas.

"We did not change anything with the rerelease of Troy's series because we felt that it should represent one possible course of events for Athas following Tyr's revolution. Troy goes so deeply into the mythos of the world, visiting so many characters and so many scenarios, that we felt it should remain as its own piece of work. It's truly epic in scope."

Of course, with the Dark Sun setting coming back, it's time for new stories to be told. To that end, Jeff Marott's *City Under the Sand* debuts later this year:

"With the new *Dark Sun* novels, we wanted to keep the action on a more heroic level while at the same getting a glimpse of some of that brutally majestic power of the crimson sun. So, with *City Under the Sand* our main characters are a mix of "everyman" and the nobility, templars and their cronies. The idea is that a trading caravan, largely lost in a sandstorm, has discovered the ruins of a city near the Sea of Silt, not too far from Nibenay. In that city is a tremendous cache of metal, enough to equip an entire army. Needless to say, that would be an incredible boon to anyone with the resources to haul it out and forge it into weapons. Unfortunately, those left in the caravan don't have those resources. And what's more, there is something else in the city that no one could ever have known or understood.

The story follows the expedition commissioned by the Shadow King to retrieve the metal. It's filled with action, suspense and more than a little intrigue."

And with that, folks, we bid a farewell to Athas. We thoroughly hope you've been enjoying *Dark Sun* gaming in this season of Encounters as well as at the August 21 Game Day. If you'd care to listen to *Dark Sun* games in action, we'd also direct you to our podcasts with the folks from *Penny Arcade*, *PvP*, and *Tweet Me Harder*.

As always, happy gaming!

About the Author

A handsome head and torso sit atop Bart's snaky trunk. This author has no legs, but travels in a snakelike mode along the ground. He has huge bat wings. His tail is barbed and drips poison. Bart's arms are strong and hairy, ending in paw-like hands.