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Achieving Equilibrium

One of the more interesting concepts in game theory is that of equilibrium. In a competitive game, everyone follows a strategy that gives them the best chance to win. Equilibrium occurs when all the players are making all the right moves. Because everyone is playing perfect strategy and no one has any reason to let up, no one is getting any closer to victory. As long as no one makes a mistake, the game stalemates.*

In some circumstances, the best way to break the deadlock is for players to take actions which *individually* are not optimal for them but which nevertheless lead to the best outcome *for the group*. Here's where it gets interesting. No one player acting on his own can bring about that best-for-all solution. All of the players must participate in pursuing what they know to be the second-best strategy in order for it to pay off for everyone. This isn't just some dry, academic exercise; the "Nash Equilibrium" and others like it have been used to model behavior from economic interaction to war. Equilibrium is a powerful tool for analyzing complex interactions.

Unlike a competitive game, D&D doesn't stalemate when no one makes a mistake. It's still possible, however, for what seems to be the best individual strategy to lead to less-than-optimal group results.

Most characters are built with an eye toward maximizing their effectiveness in a particular role, a particular situation, or even a specific attack routine. As we all know, sometimes in a D&D combat, the action that contributes the most to winning the battle might not be the action that the character is optimized for. A soft-skinned leader or controller might need to step into the danger zone to set up a flank so the striker can get the most out of her daily attack. The striker might need to forego that devastating daily attack or use it in a less-than-ideal way (attacking only one target instead of three, for example) in order to lock an enemy into a vulnerable location so that someone else can trigger a more important effect. There's an element of trust in doing this. The druid with the lousy Armor Class risks stepping next to the ogre because he trusts that the rogue will kill it if he has combat advantage. If the rogue doesn't follow through, then the druid player is right to wonder why he's taking so much risk for others.

This idea that what's best for the individual isn't always best for the group is part of what makes D&D a compelling game. It creates dramatic tension within the players and the group. Sometimes it even leads to tragedy when a character pays 'the ultimate price' for the good of others. You won't find that in Uno or Parcheesi.

Before wrapping up, I want to mention something that we're adding to *Dragon* articles in conjunction with Organized Play. Starting with last month's compilation, you'll notice little icons in some articles indicating one or more D&D rulebooks. These indicate what D&D product an article is most closely related to. If an Organized Play event is limited to, say, Essentials-only characters, then *Dragon* magazine content which comes with an Essentials icon (for now, those are *Heroes of the Fallen Lands* and *Heroes of the Forgotten Kingdoms*) can also be used at that event.

* If you've watched the film *A Beautiful Mind*, then you saw a whimsical explanation of this principle in a parable about a group of men, each trying to get a date with the most beautiful girl in the room. If all of the men talk only to her, she'll turn them all down and no one gets a date with anyone. If all of the men talk only to her friends, they'll all get dates, although none will be with the most beautiful girl. You really ought to watch the film. It's not about math.

Murkroot Trade Moot

By Matt Sernett
Illustration by Sam Burley

Severed from its twin and accessible only through quirks of fate and wrinkles in time, the Feywild holds many mysteries for the people of the world. Yet even residents of the magical realm struggle with its many unknowns and closely held secrets. Known trails twist in new directions. Spatial mirages make distant desires seem close and nearby dangers far away. Passages to and from the plane open or close based upon the blossoming of flowers, the direction of wind, the presence of fog, the phase of the moon, or the seeker's mood. In such an uncanny place, is it any wonder that well-known locations remain lost to most who seek them?

Somewhere sunken beneath the sodden soil at the edge of the great Murkendraw Swamp in the Feywild, a secret hides from the angry nobles of the Summer Court. Lost to all but those who've been there before, this place remains beyond the reach of those who would destroy, conquer, or exploit it—at least until someone who has been there betrays it. Fortunately, the keepers of the place guard it from such duplicity: The entrance to its warren of tunnels is changed frequently. Thus, a guide entrusted with the knowledge must first meet those who seek it.

Suppliers of slaves, purveyors of poisons, concoctors of uncertain elixirs, merchants of mercenaries, innovators of unusual items—all meet at the Murkroot Trade Moot to sell their wares. When an eladrin chokes upon wine at a ball or falls in the forest after the scratch of a dart, poisons purchased at Murkroot might be held responsible. When a princess swoons at the sight of a pauper or a priceless jewel vanishes from a vault, the potions of Murkroot frequently take the blame. The curse that cripples the hero might have its origins in Murkroot, as might its cure.

The Bogbottom goblins run the Murkroot Trade Moot. Goblin guides seek out both buyers and sellers, leading them to the latest entrance. Bugbear bouncers lurk in every shadow of the Trade Moot and its entrance. The few hobgoblins of the tribe administer fees upon sellers, act as arbiters in disputes, and serve as translators for those who need it. Unlike many goblin tribes, the smallest of the goblin family occupies the highest caste, and the bugbears act as bodyguards and servants. The hobgoblins that have found their way into the tribe make little headway in fighting this system, since the goblins and bugbears vastly outnumber them.

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The ancestors of the Bogbottom goblins passed into the Feywild decades ago and now the goblins regard themselves as Feywild natives. They live in muddy tunnels dug beneath the soft earth on the edge of the Murkendraw, the hag-haunted and rain-slashed swamp infamous for its most powerful resident, the witch known as Baba Yaga. Through a deal with her, the goblins acquired the glamour that protects the Murkroot Trade Moot. Its magic makes the place impossible to find by anyone who doesn't already know where it is. Fortunately for the trade at Murkroot, the Bogbottom goblin guides have an uncanny ability to find those who seek to do trade there—perhaps another part of the tribe's deal with Baba Yaga. What the goblins gave her in return, or what they might have promised for the future, the goblins will not betray.

Getting There

Those who seek to buy or sell at Murkroot must journey to the Murkendraw and travel along its edge. No firm border delineates where the swamp begins and the forest ends. Smaller marshes pool in the forest all around the Murkendraw, and islands of trees on higher ground exist within the larger swamp, further confusing the issue. The strange life of the Murkendraw—giant wasps, mud creatures, vine horrors, and other odd beasts— roams in this borderland as well. Many explorers in the area lose their sense of direction, and knowing if your path takes you deeper into the swamp or farther out can be the difference between life and death.

Yet if your wanderings take you within a few leagues of the Murkroot Trade Moot, and you mean no harm to the goblins who run it, a goblin guide will likely appear. Of course, leading you to the Trade Moot comes at a price. Each individual must negotiate with the goblin, who might ask money from one, for an item of clothing from another, and for a future favor from a third. Refusal to pay leaves the seeker lost in the marshes or woods, and threats against the goblin result in being led dangerously astray.

Each goblin guide has quirks and habits that might signify a mystical compulsion or special ritual. One goblin never turns right, another walks part of the way on its hands, and a third insists on being blindfolded. Some goblins insist those they guide do the same or otherwise behave oddly. Travelers have been required to tie their thumbs to their ears, talk only with their tongues stuck out, and wear their shoes on their hands. Whether this is due to the nature of the glamour that protects the market or the goblins' sense of humor remains unknown.

The entrance where a goblin takes the travelers might be a tunnel beneath an old stump, an opening in the earth hidden in a hollow log, or a whirlpool in the swamp that leads to a watery chamber underground. Once one knows of an entrance, the individual can find it again by normal means, but only until the goblins change the entrance location. This can happen without warning, with the goblins using the same entrance for visitors for anywhere from a few days to a month. Changing the entrance leaves the tunnel filled with rock and mud, and no amount of digging by invaders has yet rediscovered the Bogbottom's tunnels. Fortunately for those seeking to return to the Trade Moot, a few goblin guides linger around the old entrance to pick up stragglers left behind by a shift.

Once Inside

The mud-slick caverns of the Murkroot Trade Moot wend beneath the forest or swamp above. Water drips from dangling roots, trickles down the walls, and pools on the uneven floor. The water is shallow, but sometimes the muck hides a sinkhole into which one can sink well past the head. Roots twist along the walls, hang down in heavy curtains, and project as sharp spikes. Mushrooms and other fungi grow plentifully in the tunnels, sometimes gaining nutrients from dead organic matter such as patrons of the Trade Moot who grew too rowdy or who otherwise upset the goblins.

The Murkroot Trade Moot often shocks new visitors. After the dark, low-ceilinged tunnels, one emerges into a massive, multilevel chamber at what appears to be the center of a great warren. Dozens of tunnels open up off a room larger than most cities' central squares. Some sides of the room have four levels while others have three. Rope bridges drape overhead, linking levels or tunnels across the great chamber. Some rope bridges meet in midair, offering aerial places for merchants to sell their wares.

Goblins amble everywhere, poking their noses and hands into others' business whenever they wish. Goblins listen in on secret meetings, openly stare at anyone of interest, and literally tip the scales of deals according to their whims. The merchants and buyers at the Trade Moot tolerate this because the goblins never abuse the knowledge they gain, steal too much, or treat anyone unfairly. In fact, their actions keep everyone honest. Those who cheat in some fashion become the target of the goblins' attentions in later deals. When a goblin takes gold put on the table by a buyer and pockets it, it's likely the buyer completed

an unfair deal elsewhere just a moment ago or during their last time at the Trade Moot.

The Bogbottom goblins speak very little and expect no one to speak to them—especially about their quirky interference! Anyone who complains too loudly or accosts a goblin can expect to be brutally murdered by bugbears that appear to materialize out of the shadows. The only time the goblins inside speak up or become agitated are during the "changes." Whatever the means the goblins use to determine when to change the location of the entrance, they warn of it by suddenly and simultaneously wailing "Change!" in Common. The goblins then run about, seemingly in a panic as they scream at the top of their lungs. They head out every tunnel and run back and forth between the tunnels. The merchants typically use this time to secure their wares, but the unscrupulous ones, of which there are many, use the period to make deals they don't want the goblins to know about for one reason or another. Inevitably, an earth tremor then shakes the chamber for a time, sometimes slopping mud from the ceiling down onto the shops and people below, and occasionally knocking unwary folk off the rope bridges. When the tremors settle, the goblins return, and a new tunnel out of the Murkroot Trade Moot is opened while the old tunnel is closed to all traffic. The new tunnel then becomes the sole tunnel by which traders and buyers can leave the market.

Wares of the Murkroot Trade Moot

Virtually any sort of item is for sale in the Murkroot Trade Moot—eventually. Merchants come and go, leaving to secure more wares and returning to set up shop according to their own schedules. The potions seller that was a cornerstone of the market for months might suddenly vanish only to reappear in a different spot weeks, months, or years later. The surest way to know what's for sale and where to find it lies in asking one or more of the merchants. Many are happy to point potential customers in the right direction—after trying to sell them on the value and uniqueness of their own wares, of course.

Merchants set up shop each in their own way. Some occupy the semipermanent structures of roots and timbers at the center of the market. Others wander the muddy alleys while hawking their wares from their backs or small carts. Goods dangle in cages or on chains from the bridges, tents dot the muddy wallow of the market, and others set up tables to make impromptu stalls. In all, it's a chaotic mishmash and a riot of noise and color. Auctioneers and bidders holler, barkers tout their goods, shoppers bargain, and merchants barter—all while the goblins splash about through the mud or gambol across the creaking bridges, seemingly ignored by everyone.

One can find common items for sale. However, sometimes they have seen a great deal of use or are uncommon in the market. The coil of rope you buy might have bloodstains of unknown origin, and you might need to purchase the saddle off a horse's back.

Strange items are the stock and trade of the Murkroot Trade Moot: Poisons, potions, curses, slaves, mercenaries, and magic baubles of all sorts frequently are for sale. The availability and price of such things depends entirely upon the merchants and the buyers present at the time.

Merchants of the Moot

A few merchants have become fixtures in the Murkroot Trade Moot over the years.

Nagaptha, The Curse Witch: Nagaptha is a bog hag who adopts the form of a beautiful eladrin mystic. She prefers to stay in one of the dead-end tunnels off the market chamber. Although the goblins would normally chase a merchant out of the side tunnels, they make an exception for Nagaptha.

After learning which dark tunnel Nagaptha occupies, any potential customer must venture beyond the dangling root curtains of her lair and find Nagaptha amid her curios and cushions. In a lair wantonly over-decorated with moth-eaten finery and moldy objects d'art, Nagaptha holds court in a cloud of heady colored smoke from various incense burners and dangling censers.

Nagaptha offers one thing for sale: curses and their cures. She is willing to curse anyone or anything, but the price is high. As part of the bargain, she provides a way to remove the curse, but learning it has an equally high price. Nagaptha can also divine the cure to any curse, including ones she has never seen before, although those who bear such curses had best beware of her wrath should the curse endanger Nagaptha in a fashion.

Nagaptha's price might be a certain task or it might be to bear a curse in exchange. She particularly relishes an ironic or otherwise entertaining price. A

vengeful man might curse a foe to blindness to best that enemy and then be struck blind upon his victory. A jilted lover might curse a former mate to suffer an endless string of similar heartaches and pay for it by never feeling love again.

How Nagaptha enacts these curses and what benefit she gains from them remains unclear. Some insist she serves Baba Yaga or is the servant of a power of fate, but no proof of such rumors has come to light.

Grakkus, the Oath Seller: Grakkus, a cantankerous old cyclops, offers peculiar slaves for sale. He specializes in acquiring individuals bound by mystic oaths or personal codes, offering them to the highest bidder for their services. Each of the slaves wears a gorget of strange blue crystal that resists attempts to break or slip free. Once the slave has fulfilled both the terms of its contract with the buyer and whatever oath it has sworn, the gorget falls away, freeing the slave. If, however, the slave attempts to escape or otherwise disobeys a master, Grakkus can return the slave magically to his presence—to be disciplined by the master upon the master's return to the market or to be resold, if the master does not return within a month's time.

The bond created by the gorgets as well as whatever oaths or codes to which the slaves hold make Grakkus's wares highly loyal to their masters. Each slave is also unique, bearing a story and exceptional qualities. Grakkus therefore gains high prices for them and can afford to rent slaves for a period, knowing that the oath bound slaves will not fulfill their oaths before the contracts with their masters elapse. Such rented slaves return to Grakkus's side when their time or task is complete, owing to the magic of the gorgets.

Grakkus has a small staple of slaves to sell or rent, typically a half-dozen or so. One might be a dwarf warrior who swore to avenge the death of his clan by killing all the orcs of the tribe who slew them. Another might be a human paladin sworn to uphold the edicts of her faith but who is kept in captivity by masters who demand tasks that break these edicts. More than a few have been victims of curses placed by Nagaptha, having promised to complete a task for her.

Grakkus also buys individuals who will make good slaves for him, seeming to have a sixth sense for those who can be bound by their word. Although none have seen him capture slaves, he appears with new wares not seen in the market. Grakkus's reputation precedes him in the market, and none dare make a promise within earshot of the cyclops.

Grakkus offers no oaths beyond the bargains made in sales. As a cyclops, he should owe allegiance to a fomorian lord, and that he serves none might hint at his own trustworthiness about any oath he might give.

Menilitus: Eccentric is too paltry a term for Menilitus, a gnome and purveyor of potions and alchemical mixtures. Walking upon stilts through the mud and followed by a fire beetle bedecked with his rattling and tinkling cart of wares, Menilitus travels in a haze of words, muttering to himself about ingredients for his wares or repeating conversations he overhears. Despite his apparent fastidiousness about stepping in the mud of the market, Menilitis is perpetually speckled with the residue of his creations: eye of newt crusted to his shirt sleeve, the yellow ichor of an insect splattered across his chest, and the blood of a rat dried on his hands and under his nails.

Despite his unkempt and unconventional appearance, Menilitus offers quality merchandise. He has many potions and alchemical tinctures in stock on his cart (in unlabeled bottles and jars of all shapes), and anything he doesn't have on hand he can whip up while the customer browses other stalls. Although he knows many recipes by heart, Menilitus can craft potions by listening to a description of their effects, assuming he has the ingredients he needs or can acquire them in the Murkroot Trade Moot.

In addition to the potions one might find for sale in the great cities of the Feywild, Menilitus offers some unique to his strange traveling market stall. Although these items are for sale, they aren't for sale to just anyone. Potential customers for Menilitus's special potions must curry the gnome's favor somehow, generally by performing some distant, difficult, or dangerous service for him. A quest to retrieve the rare ingredients which go into his potions tends to involve all three of those elements.

Potion of Water Walking

The nearness of the Murkendraw makes for high demand of this specialty of Menilitus. With water drawn from the muddy floor of the Murkroot Trade Moot, Menilitus mixes in a paste made of the crushed bodies of water striding insects and the bladders of drowned fish. The resultant mixture is a rank-smelling, terrible tasting, gloppy gray liquid that grants those who can stomach it the power to walk on water. Given the unexpected depths of the swamp and the all-too-frequent instance of quicksand, many prize these potions.

Potion of Water Walking Level 4 Common

A tiny clay pot holds within it a malodorous glop, which, if choked down in one swallow, grants the consumer the power to walk over water.

Potion 40 gp

Power (Consumable): Minor Action. After drinking this potion, you do not sink into the surface of any liquid (unless you choose to do so). This effect lasts until the end of the encounter or for 5 minutes, whichever comes first. You can move across calm liquid as if it were solid ground. Rough or stormy liquid counts as difficult terrain. When moving across the surface of a liquid, you are in contact with it as you would be in contact with the ground. If the liquid is moving, you move with it as if the ground moved beneath you.

Potion of Eladrin Shape

Menilitus crafts *potions of eladrin shape* for members of the Bogbottom tribe or for merchants who seek a trick to avoid the close scrutiny of eladrin of the Summer Court. Easier to craft and with more common ingredients than a *potion of mimicry*, it offers a less expensive alternative to anyone seeking a magical means to pass as an eladrin for a time. Of course, the concoction is less powerful as well, and the voice and actions of any imbiber might quickly reveal an illusion is at work. Thus most who use these potions do so to pass casual examination rather than as deep cover for a covert action. Unscrupulous eladrin use them to change their appearances slightly for a time. Menilitus can make such potions for virtually any other race, but he rarely has all the ingredients on hand (such as hair or fingernails from a member of the race in question). Such special order potions cost double and require the buyer to procure any needed component. Of course, Menilitus refuses to make a potion of goblin shape of any kind. The Bogbottom goblins would not allow it.

Potion of Eladrin Shape Level 2 Common

A crystal vial contains a milky green liquid that smells simultaneously of hot iron and pine forest. The sharp tang of its flavor leads to the power to take on another form.

Potion 25 gp

Power (Consumable): Minor Action. After consuming this potion, you alter your appearance through illusion, appearing as an eladrin of your gender. Your eladrin guise is not of any particular eladrin, and it shares some of your general features. Thus, if your nose is particularly long or wide for a member of your race, your guise has an eladrin nose of greater size as well. If you have a particularly distinctive feature, such as a facial scar or discolored eye, this too is revealed in your eladrin guise. You retain your attire, mannerisms, voice, and speech patterns. This effect lasts for 1 hour or until you dismiss it (a free action). You gain a +5 power bonus to Bluff checks to pass yourself off as the creature you're imitating, although you do not gain this bonus when speaking.

Potion of Friendship

Menilitus crafted this mixture after discovering a recipe for the legendary *elixir of love*. Lacking the ingredients and the means to make that powerful magic liquid, Menilitus attempted to mimic it—with some success. Although it does not inspire the great devotion of that magic liquid, it does offer a firm foundation for the creation of a relationship. The trick, of course, is getting the person you desire to drink it, and of making certain you're the first to be seen by the drinker. One could surmount this challenge by forcing the liquid past someone's lips and by being close enough to kiss that individual, but then one must have ready a good explanation for the behavior. Even lovers look askance at such violent and strange actions as forcing someone to drink, and if that first bluff fails, the drinker becomes free of the potion's magic.

Menilitus seeks to improve upon his creation, and he's willing to part with his experimental versions for bargain prices—or for free, depending on how confident he is about the new version. Those who can bring Menilitus some ingredient for a true elixir of love would earn his eternal (if quirky) friendship.

Potion of Friendship Level 5 Common

This lucid pink liquid smells of roses and bubbles lightly when uncorked. One sip, and you trust the person who first meets your eye.

Potion 50 gp

Power (Consumable): No Action. You automatically have a friendly attitude toward the first person you see after consuming this potion. While you have this friendly attitude, you suffer a -5 penalty to Insight checks against that person. This friendly attitude lasts for 1 hour or until the person does something that would make you unfriendly, whichever comes first.

Potion of Elven Fleetness

Menilitus touts these potions as granting their drinker the nature lore that elves possess, but in truth they offer an awareness of terrain and an enhanced ability to move within it. To complete the picture of providing the magic of nature, Menilitus encapsulates the liquid in a duck's bladder that he seared with leaf patterns. While this makes some feel a bit queasy about the liquid, it does make them easy to imbibe since the user can pop the whole concoction in his or her mouth and chew.

Potion of Elven Fleetness Level 5 Common

Smelling of red fruit and tasting somewhat alcoholic, this wine-like potion offers its drinker the power to move easily in difficult terrain.

Potion 50 gp

Power (Consumable): Minor Action. After consuming this potion, you ignore difficult terrain when you shift. This effect lasts for the duration of the encounter or for 5 minutes, whichever comes first.

Fey Step Potion

Menilitus rarely makes these expensive potions available and never has more than a handful at any time. He guards the secret of their crafting closely, but many suspect the recipe requires some unsavory component. Menilitus's cart holds many powders purported to be the blood or bones of various creatures, and the Murkroot Trade Moot could serve as a means to procure the remains of eladrin, either from raided tombs or the recently dead. Whatever their makeup, the concoctions, which allow teleportation, lose potency when taken in rapid succession—as if one potion cannot abide the company of another in the drinker's body.

Fey Step Potion Level 10 Uncommon

Encapsulated in a tiny carafe of white porcelain, this murky blue liquid froths when uncorked and releases a silvery fog. Drinking the sour stuff grants the power to teleport.

Potion 200 gp

Power (Consumable ✦ Teleportation): Minor Action. After consuming this potion, you can use a move action to teleport up to 5 squares before the end of your next turn. If you consume another *fey step potion* before the end of the encounter or before 5 minutes elapses (whichever comes first), you teleport 2 fewer squares than the last dose allowed you to teleport.

About the Author

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Legacy of Nerath

Drive Back the Darkness with the Flame Imperishable

By Jeff Morgenroth
Illustration by Sam Burley

The world's humans are scattered and divided, engaged in a losing battle against the darkening world and their own ignorance.

It wasn't always so. Once, the splendor of Nerath lit the world with its culture and accomplishments. It united races and governed prosperously. Nerathi architects raised marvels of engineering; its artists composed works capturing the imagination; and its philosophy formed the foundation of humanity's ideologies. Yet none of these feats could save Nerath from destruction.

Humans today are the inheritors of this legacy, though few of them realize what their ancestors lost with the empire's fall. Although Nerath now means little more than ancient legends in the shadows of crumbling ruins, every person of every race alive in the world today shares this common thread to their history—that once, Nerath ruled, and the world was a better a place.

There are those who would see it so again.

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Using Nerath

Nerath forms the historical background for the world in many D&D campaigns. Beyond the legends and rare traditions which survived the fall, it is a mystery. In spite of this—or perhaps because of it—Nerathi heritage makes an excellent addition to any character's background, especially human characters. Incorporating elements of the empire will broaden the cultural and esthetic scope of your campaign as well as your character's connection to it.

Consider how you want Nerath to fit into your character's story. It can be a background element that inspires you to undertake quests or pursue ideals related to the empire's legacy. These characters are sometimes called the "Nerathi faithful," and they look upon the fallen empire with reverence. Alternatively, you might choose to fight against the empire's legacy; after all, in some eyes, Nerath succeeded only through conquest and dictatorship. You might resent ancient Nerath's subjugation of your people and view its hallowed virtues as failed arrogance. Either way, the empire's mark on your character's past is inescapable. Will you live up to its shining example or step out of its shadow to something even greater?

An Age of Legends

Nerath's history stretches back to the dark ages which followed the destruction of Bael Turath and Arkhosia. It dominates world history from then until its fall one hundred years ago. The triumphs and follies of its 500-year-rule are well-told legends throughout the world today, though many details have been lost to the toll of unkind years. What characters know about Nerath has been colored by their homeland and upbringing, and only the most dedicated scholars know anything beyond common folklore—anything true, that is.

It is well known that Nerath enjoyed a meteoric rise to power by filling the cultural and economic void after the wars that destroyed the old empires. Out of simple clans of farmers arose an incomparably vast empire forged through conquest and ingenuity by the legendary leader Magroth, first emperor of Nerath. At fifteen years of age, Magroth founded the imperial capital, lit the legendary Flame Imperishable, and led the growing Nerathi legions on decades-long marches of expansion which would claim most of the known world within his lifetime.

The empire met its finish beneath the rending claws of a seemingly endless horde of gnolls and demons led by the mysterious "Ruler of Ruin." With the central government destroyed, provincial kings banded together to defend what remained of the empire. One of them, the just King Elidyr, took up the imperial crown and rallied a valiant defense of Nerath, but it was not enough. When Elidyr was slain, the Ruler of Ruin simply returned to the abyss, apparently content to leave the world in chaos. The remaining lords of the empire—fragmented, fearful, and desperate—fell upon one another for survival. Commerce ground to a halt. Famine spread. Hope withered, and the Flame Imperishable became a funeral pyre for the world's greatest empire.

To this day, the core realm of the empire is a scorched wasteland littered with the crumbling shells of cities and noble villas which once gleamed like pearls beneath a hopeful sun. Swarms of flies obscure the day and the land is infested with savage gnolls, first among the Ruler of Ruin's servants in the world. The capital city still stands, though it has been transformed by the gnolls into a nightmare of its former glory. The soot-blackened walls are festooned with the flayed skins of defeated armies, and the sacred Flame Imperishable is clogged with the charred bones of the gnolls' victims.

The Imperial Legacy

Your character has grown up feeling the influence of Nerath in their homeland, though in most cases it is difficult to tell fact and legend apart. The following topics and myths might explain that influence. Rare scholars recognize, however, that by clinging to the most appealing legends and myths, humanity risks

The Flame Imperishable

The most important symbol of Nerath is the Flame Imperishable, a brilliant white fire set within the highest ramparts of the imperial palace. It burns even today. Legends say that Magroth took the flame after slaying the ancient gold dragon Ayunken-vanzen, who laired in the land which would become Nerath's capital city. The flame was a symbol of Neraths' manifest destiny—brilliant, pure, and undying.

Though the empire fell, the Flame Imperishable is eternal. Legends say that it will burn until the very breaking of the world. Today the flame is a symbol of hope amongst Nerathi faithful. Noble families incorporate its iconography in their heraldry and knightly orders dedicate themselves to its preservation. The masses of apathetic or ignorant commoners, however, think nothing of the flame's tarnished image as it flashes meaninglessly on the ancient coins trading between their grubby hands.

losing its memory and understanding of Nerath's reality, which is worth far more than its traditions.

Ruins: Nerathi architecture soared to unmatched functional and esthetic heights, thanks to use of innovative building materials, keen understanding of engineering, and implementation of ritual magic. Although their greatest works were ravaged during the fall, intact ruins are prized by heroes and treasure hunters, who are irresistibly drawn by the lure of undiscovered cities and complexes and the priceless treasures they conceal. For the Nerathi faithful, these ruins are much more than tombs to be plundered; they are places of deep reverence which often become sites of organized pilgrimages and intellectual preservation.

The Gates of Destiny

Greatest of all Nerath's engineering accomplishments are the Gates of Destiny which formed the main entrance to the capital city. Immense beyond reckoning, these gates soared into azure skies and gleamed white in the sunlight with their flanking, twin marble colossi sculpted in the likeness of angels. Legends say that milk and honey flowed from the angel's ewers, providing a never-ending bounty for the Nerathi. Some bards even sing of upstart armies that threw themselves down in weeping surrender at the Gate's majesty.

The angels were pulled down by the gnolls so that their wreckage was dashed across the causeway leading through the gate, which now bears blasphemous markings dedicated to the Ruler of Ruin.

Architecture: Many elements of Nerath's great civic works, such as its roads, aqueducts, public buildings, and even fortresses, survived in provincial regions. All are still used by people today, who are accustomed to walking in the literal shadows of their ancestors. Few, however, have the knowledge to maintain these structures. Their architectural secrets are jealously sought by today's kings, who are eager to erect monuments of their own to rival the ancient empires'.

This reverence for Nerathi construction is not universal; some Nerathi sites are shunned as places of ill omen.

The Eladrin Empress

In addition to the Flame Imperishable, a common image seen in surviving Nerathi art is that of the Empress Amphaesia. Legends say that Magroth claimed her for his bride after his conquest over her father, the King of Blooms, during a campaign in the Feywild. A figure of mythic beauty, Amphaesia guided the empire through the turbulent years following Magroth's sudden death. She herself disappeared after helping cure the horrific Ashen Plague. Adventurers returning from Nerathi ruins are accustomed to bearing objects graced with the likenesses of her otherworldly beauty, and such images are frequently worked into talismans carried for good luck and protection by treasure seekers.

Social Structure and Politics: Countless customs practiced today began with the Nerathi, though most of them are now no more than simple traditions or festival days. Nerathi ideals have succumbed to the evils of greed and fear. Ambitious monarchs have trumpeted "tradition" in their efforts to scoop ever more power into their own hands. Such kings prop up their authority by claiming a hereditary connection to former emperors or governors. Some cultures go so far as to defame Nerath as an example of hubris and as a challenge to existing authority. In these places, anything related to the empire's legacy may be outlawed rather than revered. Restoring the lost egalitarian social structure of Nerath may be a challenge too daunting for societies to overcome, but it's undertaken by many Nerathi faithful.

The Lost Heir

Some Nerathi descendants cling to hope, praying that an imperial heir will one day emerge to lead the faithful back to their homeland. Elaborate hero-cults are common, but many feel that the line of emperors died with Elidyr. A few claim to be that heir and wage bloody wars against rivals over rightful inheritance of the imperial throne and title. The sad truth is that there almost certainly is no Nerathi heir of blood lineage—unless it's the heroes striving to preserve Nerath's legacy of equality and dignity.

Personal Ethics: While Nerathi virtues rewarded self-discipline and sacrifice, the exact opposite is true in most regions today, where folk are forced to cut ethical corners just to get by. Bereft of the self-confidence and security of their ancestors, many humans today are forced by circumstance to do whatever is necessary to survive. This almost always results in selfishness and moral apathy; so long as monsters, villains, and dark forces threaten existence, few willingly take the high road when easier and pettier options are available. The Nerathi faithful often take up their ancestor's ethics as a matter of personal honor or genuine desire to improve society.

The Sage of Ages

Legends say the philosopher Tallas created Nerath's ethics system. This figure of limitless insight kindled the flame of reason in humanity by tutoring emperors and chronicling the ascension of Nerath. Today, enlightened leaders are inspired by Tallas's treatises; bards celebrate his epic poems; and wizards set themselves to uncovering his many arcane formulas. Yet it seems that each revelation only brings two more of Tallas's secrets to light. Sorting out the myths, realities, forgeries, and artifacts of this legendary figure is a task eagerly taken on by the world's scholars.

Religion: Though they respected the gods, Nerathi took great pride in their ability to succeed without divine guidance. To them, the highest reverence went to their virtues of duty, equality, reason, and temperance. When the empire fell, however, religions stepped in to fill the cultural hole. Today, few societies take the time to bother with ancient philosophy, and most clerics owe little to Nerath save the splendid architecture of their temples. Many clerics openly attribute Nerath's fall to its haughty self-reliance and diffidence toward the gods, with the cleric's patron deity always playing a prominent role in guiding folk through the chaos that followed. To the Nerathi faithful, bodies of literature written by Nerath's many philosophers are among the empire's most treasured artifacts.

The Cult of Magroth

Today Magroth is hailed as a shining example by proud humans and scorned as a tyrant by others. Some Nerathi descendants worship him as though he were a god, praying for the mighty emperor's guidance and protection. Most dismiss this obsession as antiquated or even blasphemous. Regardless of their opinions of the man, Magroth's achievements are such that all ambitious kings measure their life's accomplishments against his. They always come up short.

The Inheritors of Nerath

Though the empire is gone, its influence can still be felt in your character by incorporating the following backgrounds into your history.

Many Nerathi faithful take up important quests on behalf of the empire's legacy. These personnel quests provide long-term goals which can guide your character's actions across a whole tier of play or even span the entire campaign. Fulfilling them will carry the light of Nerath into the future and bring you great rewards as well. Use what follows as a starting point, and work with your DM to incorporate your background and personal quests into the story.

Civic Reformer

You study Nerathi lore, learning from the past to better the future. Perhaps you're inspired by great works of Nerathi literature or art, finding universal truths in their ancient expression. Maybe you marvel at the ruins of ancient Nerathi baths, forums, or roads, feeling that your homeland deserves the comforts enjoyed by your ancestors. Or maybe you're a student of the great philosopher Tallas, whose ethics guided the society which once ruled the world. Regardless of what you study, you're driven to bring this knowledge back to civilization. Be cautious though—the world's kings and nobles won't willingly surrender their authority. Thankfully, you are not alone in this search. Many cities shelter likeminded individuals who long to see their homes rise to the heights set by Nerath. Whether they are hidden societies or mobs in search of a leader, working with these groups may help you change the world.

Associated Skills: History, Streetwise

Personal Quests: Explore Nerathi ruins for ancient lore; assist a troubled realm with your accumulated knowledge; govern justly using the ethics of Nerath.

Fey Exile

Your ancestors were rescued by the former Empress Amphaesia before the fall of Nerath and brought to the Feywild to dwell with her and her father, the King of Blooms. Of all the scions of Nerath, you and your kind are the most pure to the imperial legacy. You were steeped in the empire's rich culture and philosophy through a line of unbroken teachers and grandsires. From birth you've been groomed for a purpose. Perhaps that is to preserve Nerath's only living culture from agents of the Ruler of Ruin, or maybe it's to wage war against him in a final battle to restore Nerath. You may have even made a warlock pact with your fey host.

Associated Skills: Arcana, History

Personal Quests: Return from the Feywild and find your family's former home; earn an audience with Empress Amphaesia; unite Nerathi faithful across worlds.

FOR PLAYERS AND DUNGEON MASTERS

The backgrounds described here include personal quests for characters to pursue. You can choose to treat these as atmosphere and roleplaying tools only, but it's better if you make them integral parts of your campaign's story. There is no reason why they can't be as important as any other quests the characters undertake, or why they should be rewarded any less. When a player selects a background quest, decide (based on the player's desires and the DM's vision for the campaign) whether it should be a minor or major quest and whether completing it should earn a reward for the individual or for the entire group. Don't rule out the possibility that what you thought would be a minor, personal quest might become a major, group quest before it's accomplished. Quests have a way of doing that.

When a quest is fulfilled, the DM ought to reward the characters the same way they would would for any other quest according to the level when it's accomplished and the difficulty of the quest. Because these are personal quests, try to make the rewards personal, too. This is a perfect opportunity to award a sought-after rare or uncommon magic item or one of the legendary boons described later in this article.

Quests which are taken on in heroic tier should be accomplished in heroic tier, but that doesn't need to be the end of the story. Each background suggests three possible quests. When one is completed, players can select (or begin thinking about) their next one. The suggested quests are not the only possibilities; use them for inspiration and create quests that will make this campaign memorable.

The idea of personal quests was introduced in the *Player's Handbook Races: Dragonborn* book. You can find more information and suggestions about it there.

Keeper of the Flame

For years you have tended a spark of the Flame Imperishable which burns as a beacon of hope within a shrine that still stands in a former Nerathi city. As one of its attendants, you are a member of an esoteric society known as the Keepers of the Flame who are well versed in secret lore. Are you a wizard in the custom of ancient Nerath, or perhaps a simple scholar keeping alive the living light of humanity's mightiest civilization? You recognize that you and your order possess the most powerful symbol of ancient Nerath, but to what end? Are your efforts futile, or will they illuminate the path to greatness?

Associated Skills: Arcana, Religion

Personal Quests: Protect your shrine from looters; deliver an ember of your fire to another city and raise a shrine in its honor; reclaim the Flame Imperishable from the gnolls.

Last Legionnaire

You are one of the few brave soldiers left in the final struggling legions of the empire, still fighting under the imperial banner despite your lost cause. As a member of the disciplined legion, you underwent time-honored trials of endurance and strength to become the perfect soldier. Though your skills are peerless, where does your loyalty lie? Perhaps you truly believe that Nerath can be reclaimed and its provinces reunited, or maybe you fight because it's all you know. What were the circumstances of your recruitment into the legions, and why are you now separated from them? Has your general issued you special orders requiring you to venture away from a battlefield? Perhaps you are that battlefield's only survivor, and you dragged yourself from the red field of slaughter with a vow to search for meaning in the aftermath of so much destruction and sacrifice.

Associated Skills: Endurance, Heal

Personal Quests: Use your military acumen to organize or protect defenseless folk; take command of an allied army; rally the scattered legions for a final march to recover the capital city.

People of the Gold Dragon

You come from a tribe of primal barbarians conquered by Magroth after he slew Ayunken-vanzen and lit the Flame Imperishable. Magroth claimed your ancestor's lands as his own but welcomed your ancestors into his service when they swore to serve the master of the dragon's undying fire. Your ancestors incorporated the best of both their own primal traditions and Nerathi science into their culture to become enlightened mystics dwelling in the wilds around Nerath. As one of the few that remain, do you hold true to the blending of cultures or cast aside the failed façade of civilization and embrace your primal heritage? How is the strength of the golden dragon manifested through your evocations?

Associated Skills: Diplomacy, Nature

Personal Quests: Work with civilized folk toward a common goal; find a way to commune with the spirit of Ayunken-vanzen; gain draconic allies to aid you in driving the gnolls from your homeland.

Provincial Renegade

Nerath is dead, and if you have anything to say about it, it'll stay that way. As a citizen of a former rebellious province, your heritage is filled with tales of subjugation, and you hold nothing but resentment for humanity's "greatest civilization." How do these feelings manifest themselves? Do you actively seek out Nerathi sites or artifacts to vandalize? Or do you make it your mission to restore and celebrate the traditions of your homeland before it was conquered? Are you filled with bitterness over the past or optimism for the future, eager to step out of Nerath's failed legacy?

Associated Skills: Intimidate, Streetwise

Personal Quests: Impair those who cling to worn-out ethics; restore elements of your homeland's culture; find a way to extinguish the Flame Imperishable.

Red Pilgrim

Through trials of blood you have survived the red pilgrimage, a journey only the bravest or most foolhardy Nerathi descendants make to their gnoll-infested homeland in order to gaze upon the capital city's ruin. What drove you to undertake this quest, and what will you do once you've accomplished it? Were you sent to recover an artifact, or perhaps to rescue human captives? Maybe you needed no reason other than to stand in the presence of the Flame and witness the terrors which were unleashed upon your ancestors. Now that you've seen them, are you more driven than ever for vengeance, or are you doubtful that Nerath will ever rise again?

Associated Skills: Perception, Stealth

Personal Quests: Guide others on their pilgrimage to the capital city; undertake daring attacks against the gnolls; protect other Nerathi faithful—at any cost.

Scion of Patricians

You're of noble blood and descended through an unbroken Nerathi pedigree. You grew up with stories of your ancestors' wealth and prestige; you might even be the heir of an important Nerathi politician or of a self-styled "emperor" of a provincial region. Throughout your life you've been taught to respect your heritage and that you possess the power and imperative to be a leader of humankind. How has living in the shadow of your ancestors affected you? Do you have a feeling of entitlement, taking what you feel is owed to you for your ancestor's glory? Perhaps you feel the opposite—that your wealth and heritage brings the burden of responsibility to contribute something to a world spiraling into darkness.

Associated Skills: History, Insight

Personal Quests: Discover the true line of your noble descent; use your family connections to restore order to a turbulent city; perform a deed of your own worthy to stand beside your ancestors'.

Nerathi Customs

Though the old ways are vanishing, many Nerathi faithful have created new customs to honor what was lost. Consider incorporating any of these traits into your roleplaying to set the tone of a Nerathi faithful.

- Before dining or setting out on a great task, face toward Nerath that was and the Flame Imperishable that will forever be, and honor their dignity with a moment of silence.
- Wear a sash of blue, the color of Elidyr's kingdom, across your shield to honor his sacrifice.
- Allow no harm to be done to eladrin women to respect Empress Amphaesia.
- Kill carrion-flies whenever you find them, for they are the messengers of the Ruler of Ruin.
- Speak the name of the gold dragon when undertaking brave deeds in order to evoke its strength.
- When you meet a Nerathi descendant, place your hand over their heart to feel the still-beating soul of the empire.

Legendary Boons

As you venture into the legacy of Nerath, you might be touched by the same grace which shined from the empire during its height. This might be the ability to manifest energies linked to the empire, or a powerful state of mind developed through your own dedication.

Crimson Determination — Level 4+

Having completed the Red Pilgrimage, your hatred of the gnolls' desecration makes you imagine each enemy you face is a member of their foul kind—and you show them no quarter.

Lvl 4 840 gp
Lvl 14 21,000 gp
Lvl 24 525,000 gp

Legendary Boon

Property: You gain a +2 bonus to damage rolls against bloodied targets.
Level 14: +4 bonus.
Level 24: +6 bonus.

Evoke the Gold Dragon — Level 6+

You have woken the spirit of Ayunken-vanzen, which sleeps within the ancient lands surrounding Nerath. Its fiery presence is now manifested in your powers.

Lvl 6 1,800 gp
Lvl 16 45,000 gp
Lvl 26 1,125,000 gp

Legendary Boon

Property: You can speak and understand Draconic.

Power (Daily ✦ Fire): Free Action. *Trigger:* You hit with a primal power using a weapon. *Effect:* You deal an extra 1d6 fire damage, and the target takes ongoing 5 fire damage (save ends).
Level 16: 2d6 fire damage and ongoing 10 fire damage.
Level 26: 3d6 fire damage and ongoing 15 fire damage.

Imperial Oration — Level 8+

Being well practiced in the Nerathi art of debate, you emphasize subtle questioning and reason to arrive at truth.

Lvl 8 3,400 gp
Lvl 18 85,000 gp
Lvl 28 2,125,000 gp

Legendary Boon

Property: You gain a +2 item bonus to Diplomacy checks and Insight checks.
Level 18: +4 item bonus.
Level 28: +6 item bonus

Power (Daily): Free Action. Reroll a Diplomacy check or Insight check that you just made. Use the second result even if it's lower.

Legacy Undying — Level 2+

So long as the Flame Imperishable exists, the soul of Nerath is kindled. Your faith in that inspires you and your allies to greatness.

Lvl 2 520 gp
Lvl 12 13,000 gp
Lvl 22 325,000 gp

Legendary Boon

Power (Daily): Minor Action. You and each ally within 5 squares of you gain temporary hit points equal to the number of your remaining healing surges.
Level 12: Twice the number of your remaining healing surges.
Level 22: Three times the number of your remaining healing surges.

Legionary Discipline — Level 9+

By organizing your allies using tactics handed down from the legion, you prepare them for any foe.

Lvl 9 4,200 gp
Lvl 19 105,000 gp
Lvl 29 2,625,000 gp

Legendary Boon

Property: You and each ally within 5 squares gain a +1 item bonus to initiative checks.
Level 19: +2 item bonus.
Level 29: +3 item bonus.

Sanctuary's Poise — Level 8+

Your time with the Nerathi exiles in the Feywild has given you ancient wisdom and the ability to slip into that world's mystic currents.

Lvl 8 3,400 gp
Lvl 18 85,00 gp
Lvl 28 2,125,000 gp

Legendary Boon

Property: Gain a +1 item bonus to Arcana, History, Nature, and Religion checks.
Level 18: +2 item bonus.
Level 28: +3 item bonus.

Power (Daily ✦ Teleportation): Move Action. You teleport a number of squares equal to 1 + your Charisma or Wisdom modifier.
Level 18: 3 + your Charisma or Wisdom modifier.
Level 28: 5 + your Charisma or Wisdom modifier.

Self-Made Legacy — Level 8+

You have worked tirelessly to create meaning greater the empire's dead heritage, and you're not about to let it end now!

Lvl 8 3,400 gp
Lvl 18 85,000 gp
Lvl 28 2,125,000 gp

Legendary Boon

Power (Daily ✦ Healing): Free Action. *Trigger:* A critical hit is scored on you. *Effect:* You spend a healing surge.
Level 18: Regain an additional 2d6 hit points.
Level 28: Regain an additional 3d6 hit points.

Nerathi Feats

The cultural traditions of Nerath live on in those heroes who challenge themselves to live by their ancestor's virtues. These feats do more than give you bonuses to some situations; they proclaim your belief in the ideals which made the empire great.

Duty's Virtue

Your commitment to your allies and quests drives you to act quickly when in danger.

Benefit: Once per round, you can use the aid defense action as a minor action, but only if the chosen ally is bloodied. Also, you gain a +2 feat bonus to initiative checks.

Imperishable Destiny

Drawing inspiration from success, every victory speeds you further along the road of greatness.

Prerequisite: Human

Benefit: For each milestone you've reached since your last extended rest, you gain a +1 bonus to ability checks, saving throws, and skill checks until your next extended rest.

About the Author

Jeff Morgenroth lurks on the outskirts of Seattle, where he games, thinks, writes, and tinkers away his days. He pretends to have a real job only so he can contribute regularly to Dungeons & Dragons®. He is an avid lover of martial arts, squeaking pie sneaks, orks, and his sweetheart Mariah. Seek him wherever a chorus of frogs drowns out sounds of the highway, or where heavy-metal power chords shatter the still of dark places.

Arena Masters

Grandmaster Training for Gladiator Adventurers

By Robert J. Schwalb

Illustration by Brian Valenzuela

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"Again!" shouted Xephenah.

Loren raised the heavy sword, its wavy blade chipped from solid rock. He dropped into a fighting stance. His opponent, a flat-faced tarek, eyed him. It too was tired. Sweat cut runnels through the grime caking its face. Loren's own breathing matched his foe's, and he felt the last four hours of training on the arena floor bearing down on his quivering muscles and throbbing in the bruises and cuts now decorating his body.

The tarek shifted from foot to foot, feinting and testing Loren. Its long arms and gnarled fingers hung almost to the ground, stirring up dust with each movement. Loren suspected its opponent was buying time, trying to catch its breath before renewing their contest. Whether he was or not, Loren could not afford to relax his guard lest the tarek add to the injuries already chewing away at Loren's strength.

The brute sprang forward. It gave no warning and came at him all scrabbling claws and bared fangs. Training shouldered aside exhaustion and propelled Loren to the side so the tarek tumbled by him. In one swift downward slash, the flat of Loren's blade struck the tarek's thick skull and knocked him senseless. Loren leveled the weapon at his foe, waiting for him to move.

"Good, good, Loren, your falling dune is beyond reproach. We are done for today," said Xephenah, a small, brown Draji trainer. The slight male patted Loren's arm, adding, "I think, my friend, you have learned all I can teach you."

Loren smiled, pride easing his hurts.

"But there is still much for you to learn. Tomorrow, yes tomorrow, you shall meet with Magnificent Tsor. Perhaps you will not find his lessons so easy?"

Few gladiators have the luxury of using the same weapon from match to match let alone relying on other useful equipment to see them through their gladiatorial contests. Most make do with whatever the arena masters give them, so adapting to new arms and armor becomes crucial to surviving these matches. Rather than acquiring trinkets and baubles, gladiators (and indeed most adventurers on Athas) devote their efforts to mastering grandmaster training by which they can increase their combat options in ways that cannot be taken from them.

As described in the *Dungeon Master's Guide 2*, grandmaster training is an alternative reward you gain in place of a magic item. Unlike magic items, you don't find grandmaster training as treasure, but rather you fill a magic item slot you would have gained by gaining the training from a master. Grandmaster training typically lasts for five levels before it fades.

The following pages include several gladiator masters you might seek out and the grandmaster training they can impart if you convince them of your worth as a student. Each entry includes a description of the grandmaster, an overview of the training, and the specific grandmaster training available under his or her tutelage.

About the Author

Robert J. Schwalb is an award-winning game designer who has contributed design to or developed over one hundred roleplaying game titles for Dungeons & Dragons®, *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*, *A Song of Ice and Fire* RPG, *Star Wars* RPG, and the d20 system. Some of his more recent work for Wizards of the Coast can be found in *Monster Manual 3*, *Player's Handbook 3*, and *Martial Power 2* and in the pages of *Dragon* and *Dungeon* magazines. Robert lives in Tennessee.

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Beautiful Vanous

"All you need to learn resides within your beast. Embrace its wildness and find clarity in its simplicity."

Gulg's long-standing connections to nature and its creatures informs their fighting styles through what they observe from the predators stalking the shadows cast by the towering agafari trees. Warriors model their combat techniques on the battle prowess exhibited by the dread kirre, the creeping spider, and the slippery snake, and emulate them in their own maneuvers. These same methods extend to the gladiators who fight in the Forest Arena. Some even train these predators to fight at their sides.

Beautiful Vanous exemplifies such a fighting technique because she pairs up with a savage hunting cat named Tagster. The two fight as a perfect union of human and beast born from countless contests and a long-standing bond.

Grandmaster Training

For all that Vanous is a legend in Gulg, few outside the isolated city-state know her by name. Instead, merchants and travelers who have witnessed her fight speak of the veiled beauty and her ruthless fighting style. Vanous does not often take students, but she can be moved to teach if presented with a pair who demonstrate a similar bond. When she takes on an apprentice, she trains the student's beast as much as she does the student. She is fierce and wild, holding little back in her lessons since she believes pain is the best instructor.

Beastmaster rangers and hybrid beastmaster rangers are the only students Vanous accepts.

Vanous's Savage Spirit

The connection between the ranger and his or her beast is established before they ever come to Vanous. She reveals the power the bond contains.

Vanous's Savage Spirit Level 3

When you draw on your inner reserves, your beast companion heartens, finding new vitality.

Grandmaster Training 680 gp
Prerequisite: You must have the Beast Mastery or Beast Mastery (Hybrid) class feature.
Property: When you use your second wind, your beast companion gains 5 temporary hit points.

Vanous's Combined Awareness

Key to any union of ranger and beast is a fundamental awareness of the beast's instincts and perceptions. With this understanding comes a far greater ability to detect hidden threats and respond to danger in all its forms.

Vanous's Combined Awareness Level 5

Your companion's guttural growl alerts you to danger.

Grandmaster Training 1,000 gp
Prerequisite: You must have the Beast Mastery or Beast Mastery (Hybrid) class feature.
Property: While you are within 5 squares of your beast companion, you gain a +2 item bonus to Perception checks.
Power (Daily): No Action. *Requirement:* You must be within 5 squares of your beast companion. *Trigger:* You would make an initiative check. *Effect:* Roll for your initiative check twice and use the higher result.

Vanous's Coordinated Assault

The connection between ranger and beast grows under Vanous's instruction until they become of one mind.

Vanous's Coordinated Assault Level 7

You follow your beast's lead and smash into the enemy.

Grandmaster Training 2,600 gp
Prerequisite: You must have the Beast Mastery or Beast Mastery (Hybrid) class feature.
Power (Daily ✦ Beast): Standard Action. *Effect:* You and your beast companion charge the same target.

Vanous's Menacing Beast

Mutual respect and devotion awaken unrivaled loyalty in your beast companion, so that it puts your needs ahead of its own.

Vanous's Menacing Beast Level 9

Seeing you imperiled prompts your beast companion to strike.

Grandmaster Training 4,200 gp
Prerequisite: You must have the Beast Mastery or Beast Mastery (Hybrid) class feature.
Property: While you are within 5 squares of your beast companion, you gain a +2 item bonus to Intimidate checks.
Power (Daily ✦ Beast): Immediate Reaction. *Requirement:* You must be adjacent to your beast companion. *Trigger:* An enemy adjacent to you targets you with a melee attack. *Effect:* Slide your beast companion up to 2 squares into a square adjacent to the triggering enemy. Your beast companion then makes a melee basic attack against that enemy.

Magnificent Tsor

"Magnificent Tsor find threat of violence as deadly as violence itself."

Draj's arena chews through gladiators like a tembo does through a halfling's bones, so few champions who fight in the brutal coliseum make names for themselves. Magnificent Tsor, however, is a rare example. The half-giant gladiator is a terror because he is a stranger to mercy and his brutality is legendary. Tsor has a habit of punching his trikal through his victims and then parading them, shrieking and flailing, at the end of his weapon to the audience's approving roar. He is big, battle-scarred, and possessed of a cruelty that has served him well in the long years he has fought in Draj.

Grandmaster Training

Selfish, cruel, and thoroughly despicable, Tsor guards his secrets well. He never willingly teaches others his techniques lest they use them against him. Only a Moon Priest's command will see the half-giant relent and take on a pupil. The experience for the student is as unpleasant as can be, though, because the training is often lethal and the student rarely emerges from the experience unscathed.

Magnificent Tsor's Brutal Finish

"Magnificent Tsor say dead enemy useful. Violate corpse and delight in horror from other foes."

Magnificent Tsor's Brutal Finish Level 14

You hack down the enemy with such brutal ferocity, your foes' courage flees them.

Grandmaster Training 21,000 gp

Property: You gain an item bonus to Intimidate checks equal to the number of creatures you drop to 0 hit points during the encounter. The bonus lasts until the end of the encounter.

Power (Daily ✦ Fear): Free Action. *Trigger:* You drop a creature to 0 hit points. *Effect:* Each enemy that can see you grants combat advantage and takes a -2 penalty to the attack rolls of attack powers that include you as a target. The enemies suffer this effect until the end of your next turn.

Magnificent Tsor's Horrid Dispatch

"Magnificent Tsor say throw dead enemy away as example to others, who die next."

Magnificent Tsor's Horrid Dispatch Level 16

You hack down the enemy and hurl its mangled corpse away. Enemies close to the carcass panic and flee in all directions.

Grandmaster Training 45,000 gp

Property: You gain a +1 item bonus to attack rolls with all fear attack powers.

Power (Daily ✦ Fear): Free Action. *Trigger:* You drop a nonminion enemy to 0 hit points. *Attack:* Area burst 1 within Strength modifier squares (enemies in the burst); level + 2 vs. Will. *Hit:* The target is dazed until the end of your next turn. If the target was in the origin square, it also falls prone.

Magnificent Tsor's Unrelenting Fury

"Magnificent Tsor say rest when dead."

Magnificent Tsor's Unrelenting Fury Level 18

You turn an appalling injury into the momentum you need to overcome your enemy.

Grandmaster Training 85,000 gp

Property: You gain a +2 item bonus to death saving throws.

Power (Daily ✦ Healing): No Action. *Requirement:* You must not have expended your second wind. *Trigger:* You would drop to 0 hit points. *Effect:* You use your second wind and also gain a +2 power bonus to attack rolls until the end of your next turn.

Magnificent Tsor's Punishing Retort

"Magnificent Tsor say if enemy hits you, hit enemy back."

Magnificent Tsor's Punishing Retort Level 20

The bite from a strike serves only to spark your wrath, a fury manifesting as a brutal strike of your own.

Grandmaster Training 125,000 gp

Property: Gain 1 healing surge.

Power (Daily ✦ Weapon): Immediate Reaction. *Trigger:* An enemy adjacent to you hits you with a melee attack. *Effect:* Make a melee basic attack against the triggering enemy. This attack deals 1[W] extra damage.

Nightmare

"Sight is a luxury."

Originally established as a farce, the blind gladiator contests were humiliating matches in which blinded gladiators were pitted against each other or monsters hauled out from the desert. These disadvantaged warriors caused more harm to themselves while casting about for their unseen foes than they ever did to their opponents. In time, though, gladiators learned to overcome these challenges, learning to use other senses to pinpoint their opponents and secure a victory. Of these versatile warriors, none are as feared as Gulg's Nightmare.

Although not blind himself, Nightmare specializes in unseen matches all the same. In battle, he dons a heavy helmet made from a nightmare beast's skull with the sockets sealed with clay to obstruct his vision completely. Nightmare proves blindness is no hindrance because he focuses psionic energy to heighten his other senses, which allows him to fight with equal ability. In fact, many of his foes have been deceived by his apparent handicap only to learn their error with a sudden painful death.

Grandmaster Training

Nightmare is named aptly, because he is a sinister figure, remorseless and vicious on the arena floor. When he takes on a student, it isn't out of kindness, but rather it is a chance to spit in the eye of the arena masters who orchestrate the ends so many gladiators face. Nightmare is selective about his pupils, and should he find weakness or hesitation, he might discard or slay his pupil with little warning.

Nightmare's Keen Senses

Nightmare's first lesson frees you from relying on sight alone to track your enemies. You can use your other senses to reveal hidden foes and to guide your strikes so they fall with unnerving accuracy.

Nightmare's Keen Senses Level 11

Your other senses come to the fore when your vision fails you.

Grandmaster Training 9,000 gp

Property: You can make a Perception check to locate a hidden enemy as a free action once on your turn.

Power (Daily ✦ Augmentable, Psionic): No Action. *Trigger:* You would make a melee attack against a target with partial concealment or superior concealment. *Effect:* Your attack ignores concealment.

Augment 1: As above, and you gain combat advantage for this attack.

Nightmare's Instinctive Adjustment

Continuing your training under Nightmare helps you react to hidden perils and causes your instincts to protect you from enemies who would creep up on you.

Nightmare's Instinctive Adjustment Level 13

You let your heightened instincts guide you out of danger.

Grandmaster Training 17,000 gp

Property: You gain a +2 item bonus to Perception checks.

Power (Daily ✦ Augmentable, Psionic): Immediate Reaction. *Trigger:* An enemy ends its turn in a square adjacent to you. *Effect:* You shift 1 square and gain combat advantage against the triggering enemy until the end of your next turn.

Augment 1: As above, but you shift up to 3 squares.

Nightmare's Equal Footing

Nightmare's techniques help you turn back your disadvantage so your opponent faces the same. You might achieve this with a strike to the eyes or by altering a foe's senses through a psionic strike.

Nightmare's Equal Footing Level 15

Your opponent's sight fails at your strike, putting it on the same footing as you.

Grandmaster Training 25,000 gp

Property: While you are bloodied, you have tremorsense 1.

Power (Encounter ✦ Augmentable, Psionic): Free Action. *Requirement:* You must be blinded. *Trigger:* You hit an enemy with a melee attack. *Effect:* The triggering enemy is blinded until the end of your next turn.

Augment 1: As above, but the target is blinded (save ends).

Nightmare's Unseeing Stance

Your training with Nightmare eventually reaches its nadir, allowing you to triumph over blindness and perceive with perfect clarity.

Nightmare's Unseeing Stance Level 17

You close your eyes and embrace the perfect darkness. Your other senses take over and guide your strikes with shocking accuracy.

Grandmaster Training 65,000 gp

Power (Daily ✦ Augmentable, Psionic, Stance): Minor Action. *Effect:* You enter the unseeing stance. Until the stance ends, you are blinded and gain blindsight 5. You can end the stance as a free action.

Augment 1: As above, except you gain blindsight 10.

Heroes of the Forgotten Kingdoms

Star Crossed

Star Pact Hexblades

By Matt Sernett
Illustration by Aaron Miller

What creature, possessed of a dreaming mind and hopeful heart, has not gazed upon the night sky in wonder? The unchanging stars serve the people of the world as inspiration, serve as the basis for creating a calendar, and guide people in terms of navigation, and they have done so for centuries. Yet those who make a habit of observing the glittering firmament occasionally spot . . . anomalies—minute differences from what the star charts and celestial codices describe.

After one bright day, an old star might fail to rise with its brethren, sometimes trailing after them like a child left behind by its parents or sometimes hurtling ahead as if chased by the cosmos. New constellations occasionally bloom, dimly illuminating space once dark. Some astronomers claim to have seen stars vanish or explode into brighter light.

Who can say if these differences are temporary fluctuations or a pattern played out over too many lifetimes for mortals to record? Who can say what the stars are? Some claim the stars are holes in a black shell that surrounds the world and protects it from being drowned by the Astral Sea. Others insist the lights represent the eyes of the gods and other entities keeping watch upon their creation. More gullible folk dream of the stars as gemstones of impossible size and brightness or as the souls of the dead cursed to behold the living as the shadow of night claims the land.

Some warlocks take a greater interest in the stars than even the most dedicated astrologers. Indeed, many of the records of the night sky beloved of today's astrologers and navigators come from the observations of such arcanists over the centuries. Hexblade warlocks make a pact with powerful entities, and those who engage in a star pact tie

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themselves to certain *things* beyond the stars. Such warlocks have good reason to keep a watchful eye upon the heavens.

Creating a Star Pact Hexblade

The star pact provides a new pact option for hexblade warlocks. To create a star pact hexblade, follow the guidelines for creating hexblades as described in *Heroes of the Forgotten Kingdoms*. Choices pertaining to the star pact are presented below.

Ability Scores

Star pacthexblades rely upon Charisma like all hexblades, but they also do well to have a high Intelligence. The study of the stars requires a sharp mind and a strong memory, and several star pact features rely upon your Intelligence modifier.

Race

The following races make good star pact hexblades.

Eladrin: Born under the dancing stars of the Feywild, eladrin nevertheless come to know many of the same constellations that soar over the world. Despite vastly different astronomies and alternative names for stars, some of the architecture of the heavens remains constant regardless of the plane in which the observer stands. Although many eladrin assign no more meaning to this similarity than the mirroring of worldly features that happens all over the Feywild, eladrin star pact hexblades see a deeper significance.

Eladrin star pact hexblades know that such stars are the only real constants of the universe, and they theorize that the entities that lie behind them act as the bonds between planes. Through the alignment of the stars, ley lines trace their magical paths across the face of the earth. Additionally, their influence changes the fate of mortals and gods.

Such eladrin stand apart from their fellows because they look beyond the selfish concerns of courtly politics or the flights of fancy that claim other fey. Eladrin star pact hexblades hope not only for worldly power or an afterlife of bliss, but for influence over essential forces that compose existence. To master the stars is to tug at the threads that stitch the multiverse together.

Shade: The Shadowfell has a night sky all its own. It seems a void of inky blackness, but by careful observation, one can gradually discern pinpricks of guttering gray. Those who gaze upon it for too long see among these shadow stars dire visions. Constellations appear to shift and writhe. Stars falter or whirl about one another. The sky seems to portend a personal doom.

The only stars that don't deceive their viewer are the dead stars. Stars that long ago faded from sight in the world glimmer in dull solidity in the Shadowfell. Like tombstones signifying their own celestial gravesites, the dead stars hang in a net that perfectly resembles their once-bright spots over the mortal landscape.

Given to gloomy thoughts and black moods, shades have long contemplated the Shadowfell sky despite the dangerous emotions it provokes. Shades record the position of the dead stars and use them in much the same way as the people of the world. Shade star pact hexblades go further, seeing a shadow skein behind the death of stars in the world. By comparing the sky of the Shadowfell with that of the world, they find new constellations and new meanings in the movement of celestial bodies. That some beings exist among these lights is a given, and shade star pact hexblades believe that their influence commands the life and death of mortals and gods alike.

(Note that the shade is not an available race at this time, but it will appear in *Heroes of Shadow*.)

Tiefling: When the compacts signed with Asmodeus still dripped with fresh blood, some among the tieflings already sought a way out of their end of the bargain. Although many hexblades made a further infernal pact to steal more power or reinforce their fiendish ties, star pact hexblades made their promises to gain a new master. They believed that one pact might break another, and the might of the star entities seemed greater by far than that of Asmodeus.

For all their power, the beings imprisoned behind the stars showed little interest in the destiny of the tiefling race or the safety of their souls. Tiefling star pact hexblades gained power through their star pacts, and some procured enough to disentangle themselves from the devils. Yet madness was the price many paid for that freedom, and to this day tieflings are especially wary of star pact hexblades.

Tieflings have a long tradition of star pact hexblades, but unlike hexblades with an infernal pact, the tradition does not derive from learning passed down through the generations. Instead, individual tieflings become obsessed with the stars without prompting by history or community. Such tieflings find solace in the night sky and communion with the unknowable entities that lurk unseen among them.

REVELATIONS OF MELECH

The scroll called *Revelations of Melech* is wound inside a narrow obsidian cylinder whose exterior is scribed with strange star constellations. The protective obsidian cylinder acts as a *rod of harvest*.

The following names and associated qualities are scribed on the manuscript inside the cylinder.

Acamar: Acamar is a corpse star whose motions and behemoth size send celestial objects that draw too close spiraling to their doom.

Caiphon: This purple star is usually on the horizon. It has the guise of a helpful guide star, but sometimes betrays those who rely upon it.

Delban: An ice-white star often visible only during winter, Delban might surprise the stargazer with an impromptu flare during any season.

Gibbeth: Better not to write or think overlong on this greenish point in the sky.

Hadar: Hadar is the extinguished cinder of a star lurking within the cloaking nebula of Ihbar.

Ihbar: A dark nebula between stars, Ihbar is slowly expanding and eating the light of neighboring constellations.

Khirad: A piercing blue star, Khirad's radiance sometimes reveals secrets and gruesome insights.

Nihal: Nihal is a reddish star that writhes around the position it should hold in the heavens.

Ulban: Ulban's blue-white light disrupts cognition and the ability to recognize danger.

Zhudun: Another corpse star, Zhudun is historically described as shining a baleful light over the Ruined Realm of Cendriane in the Feywild before its fall.

Star Pact

The strange entities that associated with the stars have many names, but oddly, these names seem a constant across all languages and cultures that know them. Star hexblades learn the names in fevered dreams and waking delusions, and among them are the following: Hadar, Acamar, Gibbeth, Nihal, and Ulban. Each is associated with a particular light in the night sky, or in the position where a star *should* be. The powers and personalities associated with the stars differ according to the warlock who interacts with them, and their influence is often so subtle as to make star pact hexblades who detect it doubt their own thoughts and senses.

Level 1: Star Pact Reward

As a star pact hexblade, you use your intellect and knowledge of the arcane to weave strength into your attacks, adding power to both your magical and physical attacks.

Benefit: You gain a bonus to the damage rolls of your warlock and warlock paragon path powers. The bonus equals your Intelligence modifier. The bonus increases to 2 + your Intelligence modifier at 5th level, 4 + your Intelligence modifier at 15th level, and 6 + your Intelligence modifier at 25th level. At 9th level, you also gain this bonus to the damage rolls of the creature you summon with *summon warlock's ally*.

Level 1: Star Pact Boon

They say a creature's fate is written in the stars, yet only star pact hexblades can fully comprehend how true that aphorism is. Doom begets doom, and death spirals inevitably toward more death. With the influence of Acamar, the Hungry Star, you use the death of one foe to tug at the web of fate and draw another enemy closer to the end.

Benefit: You gain the *dire fate* power.

Dire Fate — **Warlock Utility**

The death of one foe seals the fate of another as the stars guide your hands and mind to kill.

At-Will ✦ Arcane
Free Action (Special) — **Personal**
Trigger: You reduce an enemy to 0 hit points, or an enemy adjacent to you drops to 0 hit points.
Effect: You gain a +1 bonus to attack rolls until the end of your next turn.
Special: You can use this power only once per round.

Level 1: Star Pact Weapon

The secrets of the *starshadow blade* always find their way into the possession of a star pact hexblade through seeming coincidence and accidents of misfortune. When you call your pact weapon, it takes the form of a longsword formed of ghostly light and darkness. At times it glimmers with a baleful paleness and at others it appears surrounded by slithering tendrils of shadow visible only from the corner of the eye.

The entities you contact through the star pact exist as beings of unknowable minds associated with both the brilliance of stars and the cold silence of the dark between them. Occupying a unique place both within and outside the cosmos, they sit astride the skeins of fate. *Resplendent blade* and *wield the warp* reveal these connections by giving you the power to create starbursts with sword strokes and to alter existence by shifting all in the universe but you and your foe.

Starshadow Blade — Warlock Item

This longsword of shifting light and shadow appears as if someone made it by folding molten dreams and nightmares in the forge of a star.

Weapon Category: One-handed military melee weapon
Weapon Group: Heavy blade
Proficiency Bonus: +3
Damage: 1d10

Resplendent Blade — Warlock Attack

Your sword flares with dazzling white light, and as you plunge it into your foe, your enemy bleeds brilliance.

At-Will ✦ Arcane, Implement, Radiant, Weapon
Standard Action **Melee** weapon
Requirement: You must use this power with your *starshadow blade*.
Target: One creature
Attack: Charisma vs. AC
Hit: 1[W] + Charisma modifier radiant damage, and one enemy adjacent to the target takes radiant damage equal to your Intelligence modifier.
Level 21: 2[W] + Charisma modifier radiant damage.
Special: You can use this power as a melee basic attack.

Wield the Warp — Warlock Attack

Your stab into open air and time a space warp to place your startled foe on the tip of your sword.

Encounter ✦ Arcane, Implement, Psychic, Radiant, Teleportation, Weapon
Standard Action **Melee** weapon
Requirement: You must use this power with your *starshadow blade*.
Target: One creature
Attack: Charisma vs. Fortitude
Hit: 2[W] + Charisma modifier psychic and radiant damage, and you teleport the target to a square adjacent to you.
Level 13: 3[W] + Charisma modifier psychic and radiant damage.
Level 23: 4[W] + Charisma modifier psychic and radiant damage.

Level 7: Star Pact Weapon Retribution

Star pact hexblades know Ihbar not by its light, but by its darkness. A blot of black in the sky that has slowly expanded over the centuries, Ihbar swallows traveling stars, cloaking their light as they enter it. Ihbar seems reluctant to release the wandering celestial bodies that enter it, because they take longer to cross Ihbar's darkness than other sectors of the sky. Star pact hexblades use the *gaze into nothing* power to grant foes a glimpse into Ihbar's darkness. For some the blindness provokes terror. A rare few have even gone mad.

Benefit: You gain the *gaze into nothing* power.

Gaze into Nothing — Warlock Attack

You pass your sword before your foe and starlike motes of darkness leap from it to enter your enemy's eyes, leaving them black voids.

Encounter ✦ Arcane
Immediate Reaction **Melee** 1
Requirement: You must be holding your *starshadow blade*.
Trigger: An adjacent enemy attacks you.
Target: The triggering enemy
Effect: The target is blinded until the end of your next turn

Level 9: Summon Warlock's Ally (Star)

A presence enters the world in response to your call. A crack in the air opens to reveal a sucking void, and the struggling mass of an unseen thing emerges before the crack closes with a sound like skin tearing. You have summoned a thought phantom, one of the lesser spawn of the star entities. The thought phantom is slow but it stalks foes invisibly and seeks to crush their thoughts.

Thought Phantom — Summoned Creature
Medium aberrant magical beast

HP your bloodied value
Healing Surges none, but you can expend a healing surge for the thought phantom if an effect allows it to spend one
Defenses your defenses -2, not including any temporary bonuses or penalties
Speed 5

☼ **Vanish into the Void ✦ Aura** 2
You gain a +2 power bonus to Stealth checks while you are in the aura. The thought phantom is invisible, so it has total concealment and combat advantage against any creature that cannot see it somehow.

Standard Action (psychic) **✦ At-Will**
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); your level + 3 vs. Will
Hit: 1d8 + your Charisma modifier damage, and ongoing 5 psychic damage (save ends).

Minor Action ✦ At-Will (1/round)
Effect: The thought phantom either walks, shifts, runs, stands up, squeezes, or crawls.

Opportunity Action ✦ At-Will
Trigger: An enemy adjacent to the thought phantom hits you.
Effect: You become invisible until the start of your next turn.

Level 11: Hexblade's Action (Star)

Legendary hexblade paragon path feature

With intense focus upon your arcane connection to the stars, you open a conduit to the thoughts of the star entities and foist their attentions upon your foe. By shielding your brain to even a glimpse of their intense minds, you save yourself from their staggering power.

Benefit: When you spend an action point to take an extra action, the next enemy you hit or miss with an attack before the end of your turn is dazed until the end of your next turn.

Level 11: Star Pact Aspect

Legendary hexblade paragon path feature

Your intense meditation on the beings that lurk beyond space and that link the planes gives you astonishing insight into the magic that flows through everything and steels your mind against the horrors of the knowledge you unearth.

Benefit: You gain a +2 bonus to Arcana checks and resist 10 psychic. At 20th level, the resistance increase to 20. If you already have resist 10 psychic or higher (or resist 20 psychic or higher at 21st level), increase the value of that resistance by 5.

Level 11: Star Pact Curse

Legendary hexblade paragon path feature

You've come to learn things forgotten by primordials and kept secret by gods. Your connection with the beings that provide that knowledge grants you protection against the dangers of knowing things that the universe wishes to remain unknown, but your enemies aren't so lucky. You open a foe to the insights of Khirad, the piercing blue star of insight and horror.

Curse of Forbidden Knowledge — Legendary Hexblade Attack 11

You open your enemy's mind to the maddening knowledge of unknowable thoughts. Your babbling foe foams at the mouth and lashes out at any of its friends that comes close lest they learn something from its gibberish.

Encounter ✦ Arcane, Implement, Psychic
Standard Action **Ranged** 5
Target: One enemy
Attack: Charisma vs. Fortitude
Hit: 3d10 + Charisma modifier psychic damage.
Effect: Until the end of your next turn, the target must make a melee basic attack as an opportunity action against any enemy of yours that ends its turn adjacent to the target.

Level 12: Star Pact Invocation

Legendary hexblade paragon path feature

You open your mind and body to the stars and become them. Your body transforms into radiance and void, and as you gain the perspective of the distant stars, you feel yourself becoming more detached from the reality you know. The star entities show little interest in the affairs of mortals, but as you siphon their power to do your will, you can't help but feel that something is watching—and drawing closer.

Star Invocation — Legendary Hexblade Utility 12

Your body dissipates into a whirl of starry lights.

Daily ✦ Arcane
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: You become insubstantial and weakened until the end of the encounter or until you dismiss this effect with a minor action.

Level 16: Improved Star Pact Boon

Legendary hexblade paragon path feature
Your promise to the star entities offered them more than you realized, but it granted more power than you thought as well. Now that you understand what you have lost, you believe you would have made the same bargain, but perhaps your thoughts to the contrary were also bargained away. The death of a foe not only causes a hole in fate but an imbalance in space as well, allowing you to manage the motion of enemies like the Behemoth Star, Acamar, shifts the stars around it.

Benefit: When you use your *dire fate* power, you can choose an enemy within 2 squares of you and slide that enemy 1 square.

Level 20: Star Pact Transformation

Legendary hexblade paragon path feature
Calling upon the star entities to fulfill their enigmatic promise to you, you erupt into an ecstasy of light. Floating high above the battlefield, your radiance shines brighter than the sun. Allies can hardly bear to look upon your majesty, and enemies can be struck blind when they dare to face you.

Starry Transformation — Legendary Hexblade, Attack 20

Like a shining mote of light, you float into the air and shed brilliant light.

Daily ✦ Arcane
Minor Action — **Personal**
Effect: Until the end of the encounter, you shed bright light in a radius of 30 squares, and you gain fly speed 8 and immunity to radiant damage. In addition, you can use the secondary power once per round

Secondary Power (Arcane, Implement)
Minor Action — **Melee** 1
Target: One creature
Attack: Charisma vs. Reflex
Hit: The target is blinded until the end of its next turn.

Level 25: Greater Summon Warlock's Ally (Star)

A moment after your call, the soundless and weightless immensity of the way walker simply appears. Air feels drawn into the starry void that forms its roughly humanoid body. Around it sounds seem muted. Light dims.

This being from the outer darkness serves the star entities, acting toward their unknowable ends in the voids between worlds and planes. Unused to existence in mortal space, the way walker is only half real. It passes through objects like a ghost, and it can grant you and your allies the power to walk with it in the spaces between existence and nothingness. Enemies who feel its touch aren't so lucky; their minds become open to the incredible disinterest the way walker feels toward all reality, and, for a moment, they lose the will to act or to live.

Benefit: You can use your *summon warlock's ally* power to summon a way walker.

Way Walker — Summoned Creature
Huge aberrant magical beast

HP your healing surge value; **Healing Surges** none, but you can expend a healing surge for the walker if an effect allows it to spend one
Defenses your defenses +2, not including any temporary bonuses or penalties
Speed 10; phasing

☼ **Vanish into the Void ✦ Aura** 2
You gain a +4 power bonus to Stealth checks while you are in aura.

ǂ **Standard Action** (psychic) **✦ At-Will**
Attack: Melee 3 (one creature); your level + 5 vs. Will
Hit: 2d12 + your Charisma modifier psychic damage, and the target is dazed until the end of its next turn.

Minor Action ✦ At-Will (1/round)
Effect: The way walker either walks, shifts, runs, stands up, squeezes, or crawls.

Minor Action ✦ Encounter
Effect: Until the end of your next turn, any enemy that ends its turn in the way walker's aura is pushed up to 2 squares away from it.

Minor Action ✦ At-Will
Effect: You or one ally within 2 squares of the way walker gains phasing until the end of its next turn.

About the Author

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Class Acts: The Cavalier's Steed

By Richard Baker
Illustration by Eva Widermann

In many realms and kingdoms, the mounted warrior stands at the apex of military effectiveness. Human knights riding heavily armored warhorses smash orc hordes in overwhelming massed charges; eladrin cavalry sweep through an enemy's flanks, swords flashing in the starlight; goblin wolfriders bound across the battlefield, rending foes with fang and spear; mighty archmages soar over teeming armies on the vast leathery wings of manticores, wyverns, or dragons, raining down destruction from above. No one can deny that the combination of skilled rider and powerful steed is almost irresistible in battle. Any hero can fight effectively from nearly any mount, but a few characters stand out as the masters of mounted combat. The knight is famed for skill in mounted combat, while the cavalier is renowned for his or her steed, charger, or warhorse—a loyal companion and ally touched by the divine favor that follows any paladin in battle.

Mounts offer cavaliers (and any like-minded heroes) several significant advantages. Obviously, mounts are useful in overland travel. Heroes in the world of Dungeons & Dragons® rarely embark on any long journey or epic quest without first providing themselves with a form of transportation faster than their own feet. Simply outfitting the party with riding horses can shave tedious days off most journeys. Heavily armored characters naturally gain more advantage from mounts than light-footed characters do, so it's not surprising that the warriors who wear heavy plate armor find mounts especially useful.

In battle, mounts offer the tactical advantages of increased speed, battlefield control, and in many cases, powerful natural attacks or abilities. A human knight or cavalier in plate armor might normally have a speed of only 5, but that same character mounted on a warhorse has a speed of 8. Instead of being slower than most enemies, the knight or cavalier is faster, which provides a wealth of new tactical options for many encounters, including the ability to prevent your enemy from escaping by simply outrunning you. Mounts contribute to the ability to control a battlefield by taking up a lot of space; a cavalier on horseback blocks twice the frontage and threatens 50% more squares than he or she would on foot. Finally, mounts can provide heroes with the ability to fly, special attacks such as breath weapons or trample attacks, or useful traits that provide riders with bonuses to defenses, charging, or other benefits.

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Paladin (Cavalier)

Mounted warfare is the cavalier's forte, and all cavaliers possess a mystic bond to the spirit of a virtuous steed or charger ready to serve them in battle. For cavaliers who select the Pace of the Virtuous Charger class feature, this spirit settles over any mortal mount they ride, blessing the most ordinary horse with outstanding speed and stamina. However, other cavaliers choose to manifest their noble companion spirit by summoning it in the form of a celestial steed. The Summoned Steed ability provides these cavaliers with an alternate class feature to replace Pace of the Virtuous Charger.

Should Your Party Be Mounted?

Even if your party doesn't include a cavalier or a knight, mounts can be useful for your party. It costs little to equip yourselves with mounts—a riding horse costs only 75 gp, and (unlike previous editions of the game) you have no combat penalties or drawbacks other than the animal's size for fighting on horseback. Naturally, horses are best used for long journeys and outdoor encounters. You'll cover ground a lot faster in overland travel, and if you get into any fights on open ground, a riding horse offers a great speed advantage for attack or escape. Horses don't do well with steep stairs, narrow doorways, low ceilings, and other such obstacles you might encounter in many indoor spaces. It's best to leave your mounts picketed outside at a safe distance when exploring dungeons or caves.

Level 4 Alternative: Summoned Steed

Galloping through the planar mists to answer the cavalier's call, the celestial steed takes on the appearance and solidity of a living, breathing beast for as long as the cavalier requires its service. When dismissed, it canters off into cloud and mist, returning to the celestial domains from whence it came. If slain, the steed can be summoned again at full strength the next day.

Benefit: Instead of your Pace of the Virtuous Charger class feature, you gain the *call celestial steed* power.

Call Celestial Steed — Paladin Utility 4

The thunder of galloping hooves and a far-off neigh greet your call or whistle. From a silvery mist or cloud, a celestial warhorse or similar steed dressed for battle appears, ready to serve you.

Daily (Special) ✦ **Divine, Summoning**
Standard Action **Ranged** 5

Effect: A celestial warhorse appears in an unoccupied space within range to obey your commands. The steed is an ally to you and your allies, and it serves as a mount to you or one ally you designate. While the steed is serving as a mount, the normal rules for mounted combat apply (see the Rules Compendium).

The only actions that the steed can take while riderless are move actions and free actions. When the steed makes a check, you make the roll using your game statistics, not including any temporary bonuses or penalties.

The steed lasts until it drops to 0 hit points, at which point you lose a healing surge (or hit points equal to your surge value if you have no surges left). Otherwise, it lasts until you dismiss it as a minor action or until you start an extended rest.

Special: You can use this power twice per day. However, if the steed drops to 0 hit points, you cannot use the power again until after an extended rest.

Celestial Warhorse
Large immortal beast (mount)

HP your bloodied value — **Initiative** equal to yours
Healing Surges none, but you can spend a healing surge for the steed if an effect allows it to spend one — **Perception** equal to yours
Defenses your defenses, not including any temporary bonuses or penalties
Speed 8

Traits

Charger (mount)
The steed's rider gains a +5 bonus to damage rolls on charge attacks.

Standard Actions

⊕ **Kick** ✦ **At-Will**
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); your level + 5 vs. AC
Hit: 2d6 + your Charisma modifier damage.

↓ **Trample** ✦ **Encounter**
Effect: The warhorse moves up to its speed and can move through enemies' spaces during the move, if that enemy is Medium size or smaller. Each time the warhorse enters an enemy's space for the first time during the move, it makes the following attack against that enemy.
Attack: Melee 0; your level +3 vs. Reflex
Hit: 2d8 + your Charisma modifier damage, and the enemy falls prone.

Mounted Combat Feats

Any character can take advantage of a mount's speed and the large amount of space it takes up in a battle. You might elect to specialize in this form of combat by choosing one or two mounted combat feats. These feats are most useful for characters who expect to spend a good deal of time on horseback and who are engaged in outdoor adventures and encounters. Cavaliers with the Call Celestial Steed ability can provide themselves with a mount whenever they need one;

other characters might find it useful to acquire magic items or rituals that produce mounts so that they can saddle up when the opportunity presents itself.

Mounted Combat Feats
Battle Trample
Expert Trample

Battle Trample

Stamping hooves, quick kicks, and thrashing body make it dangerous for enemies to stay near a well-trained mount with an experienced rider. You are practiced in the commands and training needed to use your mount's size and strength to best advantage in battle. Battle Trample provides you with a way to use your mount offensively even when you're using your standard actions to make your own attacks.

Benefit: You gain the *battle trample* power.

Battle Trample Feat Attack

You incite your mount to stamp, rear, and kick unpredictably. Any foe remaining too close to you takes damage and is driven back a step or two.

Encounter
Minor Action **Melee** 1
Target: Your mount that you are riding and that has a *trample* power.
Effect: The target gains an aura 1 that lasts until the start of your next turn. When any enemy that is Medium or smaller ends its turn in the aura, that enemy takes 3 damage, and the target can push the enemy 1 square.

Expert Trample

One of the most powerful advantages a strong mount offers to a warrior is the ability to ride down enemies, knocking them to the ground if they don't move out of the way. Trampling is a risky tactic against a ready foe, because the mount provokes opportunity attacks from each foe whose space it enters. You are skilled at protecting your mount during a trample attack by using timing and quick parries to manage the threat your mount faces during this maneuver.

Benefit: Your mount gains a +4 bonus to AC against opportunity attacks it provokes when using a *trample* power or ability.

Improved Mount Feats

The cavalier's celestial steed normally takes the form of a mighty warhorse, but some cavaliers seek different steeds. Their religious traditions might honor legendary heroes or saints who rode other sorts of steeds into battle, or their quests might take them into places where warhorses wouldn't serve well. The Improved Mount feats represent specialized cavalier prayers or traditions that make more capable or powerful mounts available.

Improved Mount Feats	
Improved Steed (celestial battle tiger)	Heroic Tier
Improved Steed (celestial behemoth)	Paragon Tier
Improved Steed (celestial pegasus)	Paragon Tier
Improved Steed (silver dragon)	Epic Tier

Improved Steed (Celestial Battle Tiger)

You have learned to summon a large, powerful battle tiger from the celestial realms to serve as your steed. It is more agileand more deadly than a warhorse.

Prerequisite: *Call celestial steed* power

Benefit: When you use your *call celestial steed* power, you can choose to summon a celestial battle tiger instead of a celestial warhorse.

Celestial Battle Tiger
Large immortal beast (mount)

HP your bloodied value | **Initiative** equal to yours
Healing Surges none, but you can spend a healing surge for the tiger if an effect allows it to spend one | **Perception** equal to yours
Defenses your defenses + 1, not including any temporary bonuses or penalties
Speed 9 (forest walk)

Traits

Tiger Agility (mount)
The tiger gains a +10 bonus to Acrobatics and Athletics checks. It does not need to move to gain a running start for Athletics (jump) checks.

Standard Actions

⊕ Bite ✦ At-Will
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); your level + 5 vs. AC
Hit: 2d8 + your Charisma modifier damage.

↡ Battle Pounce ✦ Encounter
Effect: The tiger jumps up to 5 squares and attacks.
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); your level + 5 vs. AC
Hit: 3d8 + your Charisma modifier damage, and the target falls prone.

Triggered Actions

↡ Raking Claw ✦ At-Will
Trigger: An enemy enters a square adjacent to the tiger.
Attack (Immediate Reaction): Melee 1 (triggering enemy); your level + 5 vs. AC
Hit: 1d8 + your Charisma modifier damage.

Improved Steed (Celestial Behemoth)

You have learned how to summon a hulking, armored rhinoceroslike creature from the celestial realms to carry you into battle. It isn't fast, but it's extremely tough and packs a powerful wallop.

Prerequisite: 11th level, *call celestial steed* power

Benefit: When you use your *call celestial steed* power, you can choose to summon a celestial behemoth instead of a celestial warhorse.

Celestial Behemoth
Large immortal beast (mount)

HP your bloodied value | **Initiative** equal to yours
Healing Surges none, but you can spend a healing surge for the steed if an effect allows it to spend one | **Perception** equal to yours
Defenses your defenses + 2, not including any temporary bonuses or penalties
Resist 5 all
Speed 7

Traits

Heavy Impact (mount)
The behemoth's rider gains a +4 power bonus to damage rolls with charge attacks, and any target hit by the rider's charge attack falls prone.

Standard Actions

Gore ✦ At-Will
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); your level + 5 vs. AC
Hit: 2d10 + your Charisma modifier damage, and the behemoth pushes the target 1 square. The behemoth can shift into the vacant square.

Trample ✦ Encounter
Effect: The behemoth moves up to its speed and can move through enemies' spaces during the move. Each time the behemoth enters an enemy's space for the first time during the move, it makes the following attack against that enemy.
Attack: Melee 0; your level +3 vs. Reflex
Hit: 4d8 + your Charisma modifier damage, and the behemoth pushes the target 1 square and the target falls prone.

Improved Steed (Celestial Pegasus)

You can summon a celestial winged horse from the heavens to serve as your steed. The pegasus is a swift, strong flier.

Prerequisite: 11th level, *call celestial steed* power

Benefit: When you use your *call celestial steed* power, you can choose to summon a celestial pegasus instead of a celestial warhorse.

Celestial Pegasus
Large immortal beast (mount)

HP your bloodied value | **Initiative** equal to yours
Healing Surges none, but you can spend a healing surge for the pegasus if an effect allows it to spend one | **Perception** equal to yours
Defenses your defenses, not including any temporary bonuses or penalties
Speed 8, fly 8

Traits

Spirited Charge (mount)
The steed's rider gains a +3 bonus to attack rolls on charge attacks instead of +1. If the charge attack hits, the rider can make a saving throw.

Standard Actions

Kick ✦ At-Will
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); your level + 5 vs. AC
Hit: 2d8 + your Charisma modifier damage.

Flyby Attack ✦ Encounter
Effect: The pegasus moves up to its speed. During this move the pegasus can make a *kick* attack or its rider can make a melee basic attack. The pegasus and its rider do not provoke opportunity attacks from the enemy it or its rider attack during this action.

Improved Steed (Silver Dragon)

Only the greatest of heroes are entrusted with dragons to serve as their mounts. You can summon a silver dragon from the celestial realms to carry you into battle. The dragon is a strong, fast flier, and its fighting ability is outstanding, too.

Prerequisite: 21st level, *call celestial steed* power

Benefit: When you use your *call celestial steed* power, you can choose to summon a celestial dragon mount instead of a celestial warhorse.

(See next page for silver dragon steed stats.)

Silver Dragon Steed
Large immortal magical beast (dragon, mount)

HP your bloodied value **Initiative** equal to yours
Healing Surges none, but you can spend a healing surge for the dragon if an effect allows it to spend one **Perception** equal to yours
Defenses your defenses + 2, not including any temporary bonuses or penalties
Speed 8, fly 10
Resist 25 cold
Saving Throws +2

Traits

Draconic Power (mount)
The dragon's rider gains a +1 bonus to attack rolls.

Standard Actions

Bite ✦ At-Will
Attack: Melee 2 (one creature); your level + 5 vs. AC
Hit: 3d8 + your Charisma modifier damage.

Breath Weapon (cold) **✦ Encounter**
Attack: Close blast 5 (creatures in the blast); your level + 3 vs. Reflex
Hit: 3d8 + your Charisma modifier cold damage.
Miss: Half damage.

Minor Actions

New Vigor (healing) **✦ Encounter**
The dragon regains hit points equal to your surge value, and it regains a use of its breath weapon if its breath weapon has been used already in this encounter.

Triggered Actions

Tail Slam ✦ At-Will
Trigger: An enemy enters a square adjacent to the dragon.
Attack (Immediate Reaction): Melee 1 (triggering enemy); your level + 5 vs. AC
Hit: 3d6 + your Charisma modifier damage, and the target falls prone.

Jade Horse

Paladins can summon warhorses from other planes, but most other characters lack any such ability. However, a few wondrous items provide their owners with the ability to summon and dismiss magic mounts at need—a handy trick for adventurers who don't know when they'll need to ride long distances or what might become of living mounts they leave behind when they enter a dangerous dungeon or step through a magic gate. The *jade horse* is a small, crudely carved image of a horse, about 3 inches long, carved from pale green or brown-green jade. Knights especially prize a *jade horse*, since it provides a capable steed at a moment's notice.

Jade Horse **Level 8 Uncommon**

This small statuette of a horse summons a full-sized, obedient mount at your command.

Wondrous Item 3,400 gp

Power (Daily): Standard Action. A jade horse appears in an unoccupied space within 5 squares of you to obey your commands. The horse is an ally to you and your allies. While you are riding the horse, the normal rules for mounted combat apply (see the Rules Compendium).

The only actions that the horse can take while riderless are move actions and free actions. When the horse makes a check, you make the roll using your game statistics, not including any temporary bonuses or penalties.

The horse lasts until it drops to 0 hit points, at which point you lose a healing surge (or hit points equal to your surge value if you have no surges left). Otherwise, it lasts until you dismiss it as a minor action.

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Jade Horse
Large natural beast (construct, mount)

HP your bloodied value **Initiative** equal to yours
Healing Surges none, but you can spend a healing surge for the horse if an effect allows it to spend one **Perception** equal to yours
Defenses your defenses, not including any temporary bonuses or penalties
Resist 5 all
Speed 8

Traits

Nimble Charger (mount)
The jade horse and its rider do not provoke opportunity attacks when charging.

Standard Actions

Kick ✦ At-Will
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); your level + 5 vs. AC
Hit: 2d6 + 4 damage.

Trample ✦ Encounter
Effect: The jade horse moves up to its speed and can move through enemies' spaces during the move. Each time the horse enters an enemy's space for the first time during the move, it makes the following attack against that enemy.
Attack: Melee 0; your level +3 vs. Reflex
Hit: 2d8 + 4 damage, and the enemy falls prone.

About the Author

Richard Baker is an award-winning game designer who has written numerous D&D adventures and sourcebooks, including *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.

Class Acts: Hexblades
The Lady's Gift

By Robert J. Schwalb
Illustration by Brian Valenzuela

It began with a ripple. The White Well's still waters, reflecting the fey moon's pale light until the pool appeared milky white, stirred as if some irreverent spectator had tossed a pebble just to see what would happen. The ripple became ripples. The ripples became froth. The water boiled and seethed with alarmingly violent motion.

Then it stopped. Perfect stillness reigned once more. It was then that the white blade rose from the water. Inch by inch it climbed ever higher until a platinum crossbar appeared, to be followed by a pearlescent handle gripped by a flawless hand whose skin was cream and whose grip was easy. The sword stood above the still pool, raised high by an expectant hand.

I waited, uncertain for a moment, until reason told me the sword was being offered. In moving into the pool, which I did after my shameful hesitation, I took the first step onto Destiny's road.

Arcane magic permeates the planes. Many magic-users require complex formulas to harness and focus arcane energy into spells. Others access its power from the blood in their veins or through other mediums such as song and poem.

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Warlocks sidestep these painstaking methods for accessing magic by forging pacts with powerful entities. These agreements let warlocks skip the meticulous research and memorization to hurl spells and twist reality to suit their needs.

A warlock's pact is invisible and intangible; it manifests itself in the dread power released by their spells. For the hexblade, however, the pact can become a physical thing. By drawing on the pact, the hexblade calls for a mighty weapon, a manifestation of the dire agreement that binds the individual to the patron. The weapon is not the source of the hexblade's power but an expression of its might. This magical weapon reveals much about the warlock who wields it.

This article introduces a new fey pact weapon, the *sword of the White Well*. As with the *blade of winter's mourning*, you must be a hexblade and have chosen the fey pact to gain its benefits. For more information on hexblades, see *Heroes of the Forgotten Kingdoms*. The sword is a fantastical weapon entrusted to those heroes who win the Lady of the White Well's favor. Over the following pages, you'll learn about the Lady, the sword, and the new features and powers available to those who make a pact with her.

The Lady of the White Well

The Feywild shines with magical potential that is wondrous in its brilliant and terrible beauty. Among the most powerful beings found there are the archfey. These beings are possessed of vast power and majesty. They have walked the forests and deserts, climbed the mountains, and swum the seas since before the tearful sundering of the Blessed Three (the gods Corellon, Lolth, and Sehanine). The archfey are mighty forces in this plane, and they are uncontested in their rule of the demesnes they claim.

Not all archfey, however, are willing to consort with the "lesser races," let alone each other. These have withdrawn to the wildest places, where they spend eternity in contemplation or furtherance of their inscrutable plans.

Others are prevented from leaving their refuges by ancient magic that binds them there. The Lady of the White Well is such an archfey.

Although not seen in many years among the civilized fey, one can hear her tale in Queen Titania's court, for its tragedy and romance make it popular with singers and star-struck youths. Ages ago, Sehanine, Corellon, and Lolth lived in joyful harmony. Their lives and love were woven through bonds of kinship and passion unlike any the world has seen since. Their company was doomed to heartache when darkness poisoned Lolth against her fellows, leading to her exile in the Abyss and the fall of those elves who sided with her against their kin. Before the tragic end of their romance, Lolth's jealousy was fed by Corellon's adoration for Sehanine. To restore her place as Corellon's favored, Lolth beguiled an eladrin knight and wove a glamour to make him look like Corellon. The enchantments affecting the poor knight led him to a pool where Sehanine bathed. The goddess believed the young knight to be her companion, and she conceived a child from their union.

Corellon was enraged when he discovered Sehanine's infidelity. Before Sehanine could intercede, Corellon doomed the child to remain at the pool where she had been conceived until the day when she might give her heart freely to another. Sehanine cared for her daughter, gave her power over the night, and taught her powerful magic. The moon goddess's favors would not last; Lolth's treachery and the Dawn War that followed saw both Sehanine and Corellon withdraw from the Feywild. Thus the Lady of the White Well has remained, waiting for one worthy to win her heart.

She has not had to endure the long years alone. Many have come to her shore, seeking favor. She has refused them all so far, but to those few who impress her with earnestness and talent, she has offered boons. To the rarest few, she offers something even greater: the chance to win not only her heart but also her hand. Upon these, she bestows the *sword of the White Well* in the hope that her champion will prove worthy.

Fey Pact of the White Well

If you are a warlock with the fey pact, you can choose the following class features in place of those normally granted to hexblades of the fey pact. If an alternate option is not included here, you gain the normal class features granted by the fey pact.

Level 1: Fey Pact Weapon

You have sought out the Lady of the White Well and impressed her enough to earn her favor. She entrusts you with a charge: fight in her name and for her honor. How you acquit yourself in your quests will determine whether you can one day claim the ultimate prize.

The *sword of the White Well* was the noble blade used by the fey knight who fathered the Lady. When he learned how he had been used by Lolth, the knight hurled the weapon into the well and vowed to never

fight again. Thus the weapon symbolizes the tragic circumstances of the Lady's birth while also representing the gift of magic she bestows to champions who have the best chance at winning her heart.

The weapon possesses perfect balance and adjusts its length and weight to its wielder. While not as accurate as those weapons favored in the eladrin courts, it compensates by delivering devastating wounds wherever it strikes.

On gaining the sword, you also learn two spells to unlock its magical power. *Moonfire blade* transforms the weapon into radiant moonlight to help your strikes slip through armor and other defenses unobstructed. When enemies loom on all sides, you can use *well of light* to call forth the Lady's power in a shining beacon.

Sword of the White Well — **Warlock Item**

The sword's slim, pale blade shines as if bathed in moonlight.

Weapon Category: One-handed military melee weapon
Weapon Group: Heavy blade
Proficiency Bonus: +2
Damage: 1d12

Moonfire Blade — **Warlock Attack**

The blade's soft glow builds until it blazes with dread power. Each strike using this weapon slashes through your foe's defenses.

At-Will ✦ Arcane, Implement, Radiant, Weapon
Standard Action **Melee** weapon
Requirement: You must use this power with your *sword of the White Well*.
Target: One creature
Attack: Charisma vs. Reflex
Hit: 1[W] + Charisma modifier radiant damage. If the target ends its next turn adjacent to you, it takes radiant damage equal to your Dexterity modifier.
Level 21: 2[W] + Charisma modifier radiant damage.
Special: You can use this power as a melee basic attack.

Well of Light — **Warlock Attack**

By spinning your blade in a complex pattern, you call forth the Lady's favor in a brilliant white light.

Encounter ✦ Arcane, Aura, Implement, Radiant, Weapon
Standard Action **Melee** weapon
Requirement: You must use this power with your *sword of the White Well*.
Target: One creature
Attack: Charisma vs. AC
Hit: 2[W] + Charisma modifier radiant damage.
Level 13: 3[W] + Charisma modifier radiant damage.
Level 23: 4[W] + Charisma modifier radiant damage.
Effect: You activate an aura 1 that lasts until the end of your next turn. While in the aura, your enemies have vulnerable 3 radiant to your attacks.

Level 7: Fey Pact Weapon Retribution

The Lady intercedes on your behalf when you come into danger and bathes you in her radiance to spare you from harm.

Benefit: You gain the *moonlit escape* power.

Moonlit Escape — **Warlock Attack 7**

An enemy's attacks stir the Lady's heart, and she shelters you in her protective light.

Encounter ✦ Arcane, Psychic, Radiant
Immediate Reaction **Melee** 1
Requirement: You must use this power with your *sword of the White Well*.
Trigger: An adjacent enemy attacks you.
Target: The triggering enemy
Effect: The target takes 5 + your Charisma modifier psychic and radiant damage. In addition, you become insubstantial until the start of your next turn, and you can shift 1 square.

Level 9: Summon Warlock's Ally (Fey)

During the first years of the Lady's exile, several handmaidens stayed with her, offering companionship and sympathy. As these handmaidens died, the Lady sustained them in undeath and sometimes sends these servants to aid her champions.

The handmaiden appears in soft, white light. She is an achingly beautiful eladrin, yet strange in her bearing and manner. She is armed with a slim, white sword and ready to fight at your side.

Benefit: If you have the *sword of the White Well*, you can use *summon warlock's ally* to summon a mourning handmaiden.

Mourning Handmaiden — **Summoned Creature**
Medium fey humanoid (undead)

HP your bloodied value; **Healing Surges** none, but you can expend a healing surge for the handmaiden if an effect allows it to spend one.
Defense your defenses + 2, not including any temporary bonuses or penalties
Speed 6
☼ **Shining Presence ✦ Aura** 2
You gain a +2 power bonus to Insight checks while you are in the aura.
Standard Action (radiant) **✦ At-Will**
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); your level + 5 vs. Reflex
Hit: 2d8 + your Charisma modifier damage, and the target is immobilized until the end of your next turn.
Minor Action ✦ At-Will (1/round)
Effect: The handmaiden either walks, shifts, runs, stands up, squeezes, or crawls.
Opportunity Action (teleportation) **✦ At-Will**
Trigger: An enemy hits you with a melee attack while within 10 squares of the handmaiden.
Effect: The handmaiden teleports to a square adjacent to you. You take only half damage from the triggering attack, and the handmaiden takes the other half of the damage.

Paragon Path: Valiant Hexblade

At 11th level, you can take on the valiant hexblade paragon path. You are a shining warrior armed with the Feywild's power and steeped in strange magic from an otherworldly patron.

Prerequisite: Only a hexblade with the fey pact can take this paragon path.

Level 11: Sustaining Action (Fey)

Valiant hexblade paragon path feature

The first steps on your paragon path reward you with greater access to the magical energy of your pact. You learn to use this magic to draw forth the Feywild's life-giving energy to sustain you.

Benefit: When you spend an action point to take an extra action, you regain a number of hit points equal to your Charisma modifier. In addition, you can take a free action to teleport a number of squares up to your Dexterity modifier, either before or after the extra action.

Level 11: Fey Pact Visage

Valiant hexblade paragon path feature

Fey magic infuses and transforms you into an idealized version of yourself.

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

Level 11: White Well Curse

Valiant hexblade paragon path feature

You learn to tap into the White Well's power through your pact and summon it to destroy your enemies. Soft light plays across your features and suddenly intensifies in a blinding flash.

Curse of Blinding Radiance — Valiant Hexblade Attack 11

White light blazes from you, stealing your foe's vision and giving you new power with which you bring this contest to a close.

Encounter ✦ Arcane, Implement, Radiant
Standard Action **Ranged** 5
Target: One enemy
Attack: Charisma vs. Fortitude
Hit: 2d6 + Charisma modifier radiant damage, and the target is blinded until the end of your next turn.
Effect: Until the end of your next turn, your attacks against the target deal 5 extra radiant damage.

Level 12: White Well Invocation

Valiant hexblade paragon path feature

The Lady watches you with great interest. She celebrates your triumphs and mourns your defeats. Her increased attention results in greater access to her power; you can call upon her name to aid you when your situation is dire. The Lady lends you powerful magic to become pure, silvery light. With this boon comes her sorrow, a poignant grief that can crush your spirit.

White Well Invocation — Valiant Hexblade Utility 12

The White Well's magic transforms you into pure moonlight, enabling you to move with supernatural speed. The grief carried by the magic, though, can overwhelm you.

Daily ✦ Arcane, Aura
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: You activate an aura 1 that lasts until the end of the encounter. The aura is filled with bright light. Whenever you take damage while the aura is active, roll a d20. On a 10 or higher, you can teleport up to 5 squares after taking the damage and become insubstantial until the start of your next turn. On a 1or 2, you are dazed until the start of your next turn. Otherwise, nothing happens.

Level 16: Improved Fey Pact Boon

Valiant hexblade paragon path feature

The magic gained from your pact helps you to merge with the moon's light, to let it flow through you and shield you from harm. As your experience with this magic grows, so too does your ability to transform yourself into this brilliant radiance.

Benefit: When you use *soul step*, you become insubstantial until the end of your next turn.

Level 20: Fey Pact Transformation

Valiant hexblade paragon path feature

Your bond with the Lady grows strong and her affection for you seems boundless. You can call upon her favor to become a shining knight, a devoted protector who fights for her honor and hand. So transformed, your enemies recoil in fear, sensing their demise in the moonlight that dapples your armor.

White Well Transformation **Valiant Hexblade Utility 20**

The White Well's magic flows through you, transforming you into a radiant champion. Your foes recoil in fear from your brilliant aspect.

Daily ✦ Arcane, Teleportation
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: Until the end of the encounter, you gain a +2 power bonus to Reflex, Will, and speed, and you can use the secondary power once per round.
Secondary Power (Arcane, Fear, Implement, Radiant)
Minor Action **Melee** 1
Target: One creature
Attack: Charisma vs. Will
Hit: 10 radiant damage, and the target grants combat advantage to you until the end of your next turn.

Level 25: Greater Summon Warlock's Ally (Fey)

The knight who fell to Lolth's treachery so long ago lingers as a watchful and protective spirit over his daughter. Although the knight vowed never to bear arms and don armor after his disgrace, he safeguards his offspring from harm by using the Feywild's magic.

The Lady's favor rewards you with a fragment of the knight's essence to fight at your side. The doomed knight unleashes all the grief brought on by his fall and withers your enemies' resolve to fight.

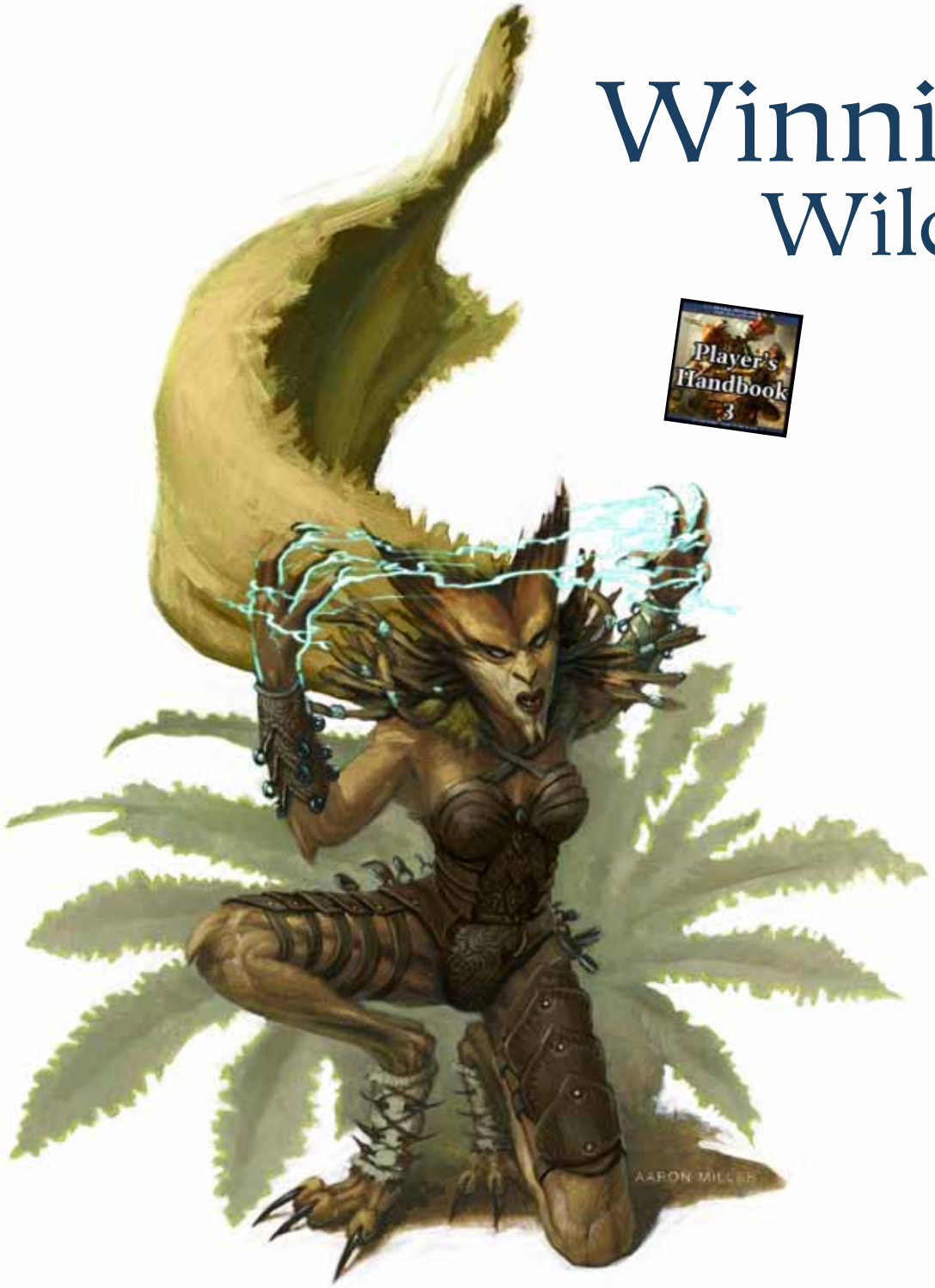
Benefit: If you have the *sword of the White Well*, you can use *summon warlock's ally* to summon a spectral protector.

Spectral Protector **Summoned Creature**
Medium fey humanoid (undead)
HP your bloodied value; **Healing Surges** none, but you can expend a healing surge for the protector if an effect allows it to spend one.
Defense your defenses + 2, not including any temporary bonuses or penalties
Speed 7, fly 3 (hover)
☼ **Shining Presence ✦ Aura** 2
You gain a +4 power bonus to Insight checks while you are in the aura.
Standard Action (psychic, radiant) **✦ At-Will**
Attack: Close blast 3 (enemies in the blast); your level + 5 vs. Will
Hit: 2d12 + your Charisma modifier psychic and radiant damage, and the protector can push the target up to 3 squares.
Minor Action ✦ At-Will (1/round)
Effect: The protector either walks, shifts, flies, runs, stands up, squeezes, or crawls.
Minor Action (psychic) **✦ At-Will** (1/round)
Effect: Until the end of your next turn, any enemy that ends its turn in the protector's aura takes 5 psychic damage and a -2 penalty to attack rolls until the end of the enemy's next turn.
Opportunity Action (psychic, teleportation) **✦ At-Will**
Trigger: An enemy adjacent to you attacks you.
Effect: You and the protector teleport, swapping positions. The protector becomes the target of the attack. If the triggering attack hits the protector, it makes the following attack.
Attack: Melee 1 (triggering enemy); your level + 5 vs. Will
Hit: 5 psychic damage, and the protector can slide the target up to 3 squares.

About the Author

Robert J. Schwalb is an award-winning game designer who has contributed design to or developed over one hundred roleplaying game titles for Dungeons & Dragons®, *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*, *A Song of Ice and Fire RPG*, *Star Wars RPG*, and the *d20 system*. Some of his most recent work for Wizards of the Coast can be found in *Monster Manual 3*, *Player's Handbook 3*, and *Martial Power 2* and also in the pages of both *Dragon* and *Dungeon* magazines. Robert lives in Tennessee.

Winning Races: Wilden



The Stormchasers

By Scott Fitzgerald Gray
Illustration by Aaron Miller

"My touch is fire; my eyes, lightning. My journey follows the path of the unwavering wind. I move across the world like the endless rain, washing all corruption away where I pass."

– Kenganha, wilden stormchaser

The wilden are a people of two worlds—born of the Feywild but equally at home in the mortal realm. True to the nature of their communal race, wilden eschew formal settlements to gather in loose conclaves in the unspoiled wilderness, favoring locations where the boundaries between the natural world and the Feywild are thin. The largest wilden conclaves are often situated around the locations of permanent planar portals linking the Feywild and the world. The folk of such conclaves dwell not so much in either realm but within the planar nexus that marks the hazy boundary between them.

Planar boundaries in the mortal realm, however, often coalesce around areas of existing instability. A gate to the Shadowfell opens up adjoining fissures in reality through which the energy of the Astral Sea is unfurled. The power of permanent portals to the Abyss or the Nine Hells sends ripples through the firmament that crack the barrier to the Far Realm. A gate to the Feywild can become a magnet for the planar energy of the Elemental Chaos.

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Born of the Storm

Most folk never notice the effect of such planar instability unless a full planar breach brings the creatures and hazards of one realm crashing into another. The wilden, as a race newly created by the energy of the Feywild, are notably susceptible to the effects of other planar energy.

In places where permanent portals between the mortal realm and the Feywild also weaken the planar boundaries to the Elemental Chaos, the fury of the storm rages unabated. Wilden native to this type of elemental nexus call such sites "storm-homes." Some of the wilden dwelling within a storm-home develop a connection to elemental energy. They are called stormchasers, and they are imbued with a passion and a power that they carry with them all their lives.

Stormchasers manifest this close connection to elemental power by way of the Aspect of the Elements feat, which allows them to replace one of their existing aspects of nature. A wilden in the aspect of the elements manifests harmless signs of elemental energy—lightning arcing between his or her fingertips when the wilden attacks, a temporary shroud of flame or ice crystals protecting the wilden when a foe's attack goes wide, or a pulse of storm light in the wilden's eyes when he or she grows angry or amused.

Wilden imbued with elemental power do not represent a separate race or bloodline. Stormchasers are not a formal order or tradition. Rather, the stormchaser is a racial theme whose feats can be taken by any wilden character.

Satordi, the Lightning Oak

Storm-homes are spread throughout the mortal realm, from the most ancient jungles to the remotest mountains to the new forests and woodlands reclaiming the frontiers of fallen Nerath. Satordi is not the largest or most significant of the storm-homes from the wildens' point of view, but unlike most others, it is well known among the humanoid races because of its proximity to settled lands. This 500-strong wilden enclave sits within the nameless and otherwise uncharted woods north of Winterbole Forest, less than a month's travel from Nentir Vale.

Like most wilden settlements, Satordi is little more than clumped collections of sheltered gathering spots shared by all members of the wildens' communal society. To outsiders, it presents a most inhospitable appearance. Within the verdant shadows of the impenetrable rainforest, the howling wind seems to taunt all those who make their way along the woods' ancient trails. Satordi is marked by the presence of a mighty and ancient oak whose blackened branches scrape the sky 500 feet above the ground. The windswept sky beyond the settlement is rarely occluded by more than a wisp of cloud, yet the elemental power that weaves through this area drives pounding rain and hailstorms that come and go in a heartbeat. Lightning leaps constantly from ground to sky and back again.

The great tree marks the planar breach that gives this site its power. Portals open and close constantly among the lightning oak's twisted roots. The energy of the elements is so pervasive here that any power which deals cold, fire, lightning, or thunder damage within 1 mile of the site receives a +1 bonus to the attack roll. Any resistance to those damage types is reduced by 2 within the same area.

Visitors are welcome in Satordi. The wilden that dwell here exhibit the friendly curiosity toward other folk that is typical of their race. Those who dwell beneath the lightning oak have a particular interest in adventurers who shape and master elemental power and in characters whose stated purpose and quest pits them against the aberrant corruption of the Far Realm.

Special Background

This background can be taken to demonstrate a wilden's connection to an area of elemental power.

Stormchaser: All wilden share a spiritual connection to the elemental fury of nature in their aspect of the destroyer. However, your connection to elemental power is stronger than that, letting you shape that power and unleash it as you hunt.

How does your status as a stormchaser affect your relationship with your kin? Are storm-homes common in your native land, making you only one of countless wilden imbued with such power? Or is the power of the storm a rare and legendary thing among your community? Does your power set you on the path to greatness and mark you as one possessed of the full fury of nature? Or do your people view your elemental power as a weakness which dilutes the purity of your Feywild essence?

Associated Skills: Arcana, Endurance

New Feats

Although designed to demonstrate a connection to elemental power, these new feats are useful for any wilden character. Players who take these feats are encouraged to work some element into their characters' histories corresponding to the background information presented above.

Some of these feats grant additional bonuses to characters who are in the aspect of the elements granted by the feat of that name.

Aspect of the Elements

Prerequisite: 11th level, wilden, Nature's Aspect racial trait

Benefit: Replace one of your Nature's Aspect options with the aspect of the elements. You can use the *fury of the elements* power while you are in this aspect.

Fury of the Elements **Wilden Racial Power**

You channel elemental power and unleash its fury against your foes.

Encounter ✦ Varies
Immediate Interrupt **Personal**
Trigger: You are hit by an enemy attack that deals cold, fire, lightning, or thunder damage.
Effect: You take half damage from the triggering attack. Until the end of your next turn, your next attack deals 1d6 extra damage of the type or types dealt by the triggering attack.

Elemental Shield

Prerequisite: Wilden, Nature's Aspect racial trait

Benefit: Whenever you choose an aspect of nature to manifest, choose a damage type: cold, fire, lightning, or thunder. You gain resist 5 to that damage type for the next attack that hits you and deals that damage type. The resistance increases to 10 at 11th level and 15 at 21st level.

Path of Ice

Prerequisite: Wilden, Nature's Aspect racial trait

Benefit: When you use a wilden racial power, the first time you are subjected to forced movement before the start of your next turn, you can ignore the forced movement and shift 1 square as a free action instead. One creature adjacent to you before or after the shift takes cold damage equal to your Wisdom modifier. The cold damage equals 3 + your Wisdom modifier at 11th level, and 6 + your Wisdom modifier at 21st level.

If you are in the aspect of the elements, you shift 2 squares.

Pulse of Lightning

Prerequisite: Wilden, Nature's Aspect racial trait

Benefit: When you use a wilden racial power, until the start of your next turn, the first enemy that targets you with a close or area attack takes lightning damage equal to your Wisdom modifier. The lightning damage equals 3 + your Wisdom modifier at 11th level, and it equals 6 + your Wisdom modifier at 21st level.

If you are in the aspect of the elements, one other enemy you can see also takes lightning damage equal to half that taken by the first enemy.

Surge of Thunder

Prerequisite: Wilden, Nature's Aspect racial trait

Benefit: When you use a wilden racial power, until the start of your next turn, your opportunity attacks deal 2 extra thunder damage and push the target 1 square. At 11th level, the extra thunder damage increases to 4 and you push the target 2 squares; at 21st level, the extra thunder damage increases to 6 and you push the target 3 squares.

If you are in the aspect of the elements, a target of your opportunity attack must also save or fall prone.

Touch of Flame

Prerequisite: Wilden, Nature's Aspect racial trait

Benefit: When you use a wilden racial power, until the start of your next turn, the first enemy that hits you with a melee attack takes fire damage equal to your Wisdom modifier. The fire damage equals 3 + your Wisdom modifier at 11th level, and it equals 6 + your Wisdom modifier at 21st level.

If you are in the aspect of the elements, the enemy is also weakened until the start of its next turn.

About the Author

Scott Fitzgerald Gray (9th-level layabout, vindictive neutral) started gaming in high school and has worked as a writer and editor much of the time since then. After belatedly realizing he could combine both vocations in 2004, he's been making up for lost time as a freelance RPG editor and designer, primarily for Wizards of the Coast. He lives in the Canadian hinterland with a schoolteacher, two daughters, and a large number of animal companions.

Winning Races: Deva

Veilwalkers and Redeemed Devas

By Peter Schaefer and Robert J. Schwalb
Illustration by Spikytiger

Devas throughout the world perform heroic deeds, standing against the swells of darkness that threaten all. Their acts are great enough to overcome the race's rarity: Even though few have seen a deva, most have heard at least one tale about the heavenly being who wields blade and magic against evil. Not every deva matches the heroes of those stories.

Every deva is keenly aware that a line of immorality exists that they must not cross, but where that line lies is always a mystery to them. Most walk far from that line out of fear of becoming one of the rakshasa, but a very few instead walk as near that precipice as possible while remaining heroes. And some fall, but seek redemption. Below are two potential paragon paths that you can use to flesh out your deceptive or redeemed deva character, respectively: heavenly deceiver and dark star.

Deceptive Devas: Veilwalkers

Some devas are condemned to a perilous fate by previous incarnations that include hundreds of lesser scoundrels and repentant villains. Their intemperate or selfish actions have placed a deva's soul on the brink of permanent corruption, and now that deva must strive to make up for the earlier incarnations' faults. Other devas purposefully tread the boundary between moral and immoral to better understand their enemies, or because they recognize and accept their personal weaknesses, or because of the power that they choose to wield.

Devas so close to corruption are called veilwalkers. Most devas consider veilwalkers anathema and think them scarcely better than rakshasas, but members of many other races are more forgiving. They understand that not everyone can walk the highest road in the dangerous world into which they are thrust, and they laud what good the veilwalkers do.

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Veilwalker Adventurers

Three sample deva adventurers are described below.

Gautma was not aware of his past lives until his research as an artificer revealed that members of his race had past incarnations and could draw on their wisdom. That experience is lost to him, and when he discovered that it was past corruption that had caused it, he swore that his future incarnations would not suffer the same pain. His every heroic act is to atone for unknown past misdeeds, and his inability to ever know whether he has succeeded haunts his nights. In addition to fighting evil where he finds it, he struggles to invent magic devices to better the world, now and after he is gone.

The deva bard **Senneh** doesn't care that she had past incarnations who brought her to the brink of corruption, and she wouldn't know if she hadn't revealed herself to a deva who had taken it on himself to counsel her in morals. She called it lecturing and left without looking back. She uses the illusion powers to make her life easy and get away with petty crimes, but she knows that the people she entertains enable her to lead the life she does, so she also protects them when necessary. She knows almost nothing about how close she is to corruption or what it would mean, but she does an excellent job of walking the veil even so.

Ymen became a psion after studying the memories of scores of lifetimes spent mastering mind magic. In his pursuit to understand and master his mind and others', he learned of veilwalkers and the unique powers they wielded. The ability to craft illusions and examine their effect on people intrigued him. Even more, he was intrigued with the benefit of experiencing villainy and observing others' interaction with those villainous acts—but he admits this only when he is most honest with himself. Vigorous exploration of evil peppered with good acts brought him to where he could wield the power he sought. Ymen can no longer touch the memories of his past lives, but he has learned all he needs from them. He travels with a company of heroes doing good, balancing his moral acts with more questionable habits.

Paragon Path: Heavenly Deceiver

At 11th level, your veilwalker deva takes on the heavenly deceiver paragon path. You walk just this side of a boundary thinner than the finest veil and develop an affinity for the deceptive magic of the rakshasa even as the memories of past incarnations become distant. You choose your path to take advantage of this power and wield it against evil; or perhaps you are on a path dictated by your carelessness—because the intentionally evil would already be beyond redemption. You bear patterns on your skin distinct from those on most devas. The colors are always darker and include more red than their incorruptible brethren. The patterns made by the colorations are sharper, more sudden, and more violent than the simple elegance of other devas.

The longer you remain a veilwalker, the greater a command over illusion and deceit that balancing act grants you. Manipulation of others becomes an art and a second nature to you.

Level 11: Deceitful Action

Heavenly deceiver paragon path feature

Stealth might be your best tool at times, so you cloak yourself from the eyes of others to better achieve your ends.

Benefit: When you spend an action point to take an extra action, you become invisible until the end of your next turn or until you make an attack.

Level 11: Illusion-Sheathed Strike

Heavenly deceiver paragon path feature

Your mastery over how others perceive you twists within the minds of your foes, causing them painful mental distress as you attack. Your strikes also cause them to retreat from you.

Benefit: You gain the *illusion-sheathed strike* power.

Illusion-Sheathed Strike **Heavenly Deceiver Attack 11**

Your foes hold you in such fear that it forces them to their knees.

Encounter ✦ Illusion, Psychic
Free Action **Personal**
Trigger: You hit a target with an at-will attack.
Target: That target of the at-will attack
Effect: The target takes 1d10 extra psychic damage, and you slide the target up to 3 squares.

Level 11: Snake-Tongued Mastery

Heavenly deceiver paragon path feature

Words are more than tools. With you, they can form reality—for others and only for a time. Your ability to deceive others allows you to twist how another perceives its environment.

Benefit: You gain a +2 bonus to Bluff checks, and you gain the *deceitful image* power.

Deceitful Image Heavenly Deceiver Feature

The image looks real, smells real, sounds real, and feels real to a light touch. But it's not real.

Encounter ✦ Illusion
Standard Action **Close** burst 10

Effect: You create an illusion of any size within the burst that lasts until the end of the encounter, for 5 minutes, or until you use this power again. It appears real to all senses. If the subject of the illusion would normally emit sounds, the illusion can do so as well, but on a limited basis (subject to the DM's judgment)—it's not possible, for instance, for the illusion to engage in an extended conversation.

You can give the illusion simple instructions such as moving in a set pattern, appearing to chew on local plants, and similar actions. You can also match actions to a specific trigger. An illusion might move when a creature moves next to it or cower and scream when it is attacked, for example. The illusion cannot travel outside the area of the burst.

You make a Bluff check when the *deceitful image* is created. Creatures that view or interact with the illusion are entitled to Insight checks opposed by that Bluff check to detect that they are viewing an illusion. A creature is allowed a check the first time it sees the illusion and each time it interacts with it. A creature that touches an illusion automatically determines that the image is fake.

Level 12: Duplicate Image

Heavenly deceiver paragon path feature

Are you where you appear to be? Or are you standing slightly to the left of yourself? As you hone your ability to deceive others, you can also present others with a twin of yourself to fool their senses and make them doubt their senses.

Benefit: You gain the *duplicate image* power.

Duplicate Image Heavenly Deceiver Utility 12

Suddenly, there are two of you.

Daily ✦ Illusion
Minor Action **Personal**

Effect: Until the end of the encounter, you gain a +5 power bonus to all defenses against opportunity attacks and a +2 power bonus to all defenses against other attacks. When an enemy hits you with an attack, you can use a free action and end this effect to cause the enemy to reroll the attack with a -5 penalty.

Level 16: Deceitful Terrain

Heavenly deceiver paragon path feature

By altering the perceptions of others, you can cause them to avoid illusory hazards. Of course, you choose what they see, so you also control how they adjust their positions.

Benefit: When you start your turn, you can use a free action to slide an adjacent enemy to another non-hindering square adjacent to you.

Level 20: Illusion of Solitude

Heavenly deceiver paragon path feature

Imposing illusions upon others, whatever your goal in doing so, might give you the upper hand in combat. By using your abilities to momentarily fool a foe into believing it is suddenly alone, you can provide yourself and your allies with the distraction you need to win the day.

Benefit: You gain the *illusion of solitude* power.

Illusion of Solitude Heavenly Deceiver Attack 20

Your enemies see only what you want them to see.

Daily ✦ Illusion, Psychic
Free Action **Personal**
Trigger: You make an at-will attack.
Target: Up to three targets of the at-will attack

Effect: If you hit the target with the triggering attack, the target takes 3d8 extra psychic damage. It is also dazed and does not have line of sight to its allies (save ends both). If you miss with the triggering attack, the target takes half damage and cannot see you (save ends).

Aftereffect: The target cannot see you (save ends).

Escaping Darkness: Redeemed Devas

Imagine yourself as an immortal. Consider what it means to recall the world's birth, when it coalesced from raw chaos, shaped by crude hands only to be refined by the gods who formed you from the ether. What would it be like to witness history unfold on the grand scale, to see mortal lives appear and disappear in the blink of an eye, to see empires claw their way into existence only to collapse under the weight of their own decadence? How could you cope with watching the people around you grow up, live their lives, and die? Could you cope? Or would you crumble beneath the memories burdening you—the loves lost, the hopes dashed, the endless horrors tumbling out from the darkness in the world?

Fix these ideas in your mind and you might come close to understanding why devas fall from grace. They never have release from the temptations arrayed around them, short of withdrawing from the world altogether. The memories of lives once lived haunt their dreams and their thoughts, with past failures and destroyed lives swimming up from

their unconsciousness to haunt them like ghosts. Is it any wonder then why some devas surrender to the darkness? Can you blame them for setting aside the moral lives they chose in a time forgotten by all but their own?

When a deva falls, it is a grand betrayal that not only creates lasting evil in the world, but also diminishes the good toward which so many devas fight. Devas are a vanishing race and in their place are born the rakshasas: evil, hedonistic monsters that live only to slake their unholy thirst for pleasure and excess. Once a deva falls, redemption can be a road too arduous to follow because the delights and excitement in their wicked life stain their souls, trapping them in an evil existence. As difficult and unlikely as it might be, returning to the light is possible. A deva who breaks darkness's hold never forgets the cruelties and evils he or she committed and must bear the horrors forever. Yet in doing so, they are suited to fighting that from which they escaped.

Redeemed Deva Backgrounds

Each life a deva lived lingers in the new deva's mind and so the memories of a time as rakshasa vie against those of a brighter, more virtuous life. The following backgrounds are available for devas touched by evil.

Fallen Star: A deva's transformation into a creature of evil is a terrifying experience. Rather than hold the darkness at bay, the deva throws wide his or her arms to embrace it. The soul darkens, twisting and writhing, the countless lifetimes screaming and wailing in sorrow, nudging the deva closer to madness. When the deva is finally slain, it rises at once as a horrific undead monster until it is finally put down with purifying light. The poisoned soul is not done with this world, however, and it returns again and again as a rakshasa, each time recalling all the foulness it committed and the temptation to commit those acts again. How did you escape the cycle of reincarnation as rakshasa?

Associated Skills: Bluff, Insight

Personal Quests: Acquire a specially blessed weapon with which to hunt and slay rakshasas; advise a ruler on how to protect his realm from the influence of rakshasas and devils; locate a spot where slain rakshasas reincarnate and purify it against their use.

Purified Soul: You fell from grace and lived many lifetimes as a rakshasa. For some reason, a god intervened and lifted you from the darkness to give you another chance in the light. Your wickedness burned away, leaving you pure and whole once more. Who was the god? Why were you chosen? Did you go willingly?

Associated Skills: Insight, Religion

Personal Quests: Raise a shrine or temple to your benefactor deity; find another deva who is tortured as you once were and guide him or her back to the light; remove a tyrant from power.

Sorrowful Existence: You escaped the eternity as a rakshasa but at a terrible price. You recall with perfect clarity every wicked deed you performed, every cruelty done by your clawed hands. You can't escape the memories and the other lifetimes are nearly silent now, just faint wisps that surface only to level accusations and recriminations. How do you cope with the guilt? Are you at risk of falling again?

Associated Skills: History, Intimidate

Personal Quests: Enter a rakshasa stronghold and rescue slaves; aid another deva in gaining forgiveness for past atrocities; locate a rakshasa you once associated with and either lead it to redemption or kill it forever.

Paragon Path: Dark Star

At 11th level, your redeemed deva takes on the dark star paragon path. Freeing oneself from corruption is no guarantee against returning to evil, and no one knows this better than does the fallen deva. Reclaiming your deva form does nothing to dispel those memories and experiences from your time as rakshasa. The wicked memories lurk in your thoughts, urging you to indulge in deviant acts, to embrace vice and wickedness, and to succumb to evil's temptation once more.

Your dark memories haunt you. Try as you might, you cannot silence the voices nor can you suppress the experiences you found in your fallen state. As you were once able, you can still call upon the memories you carry to aid you, but in addition to the other deva lifetimes, you also can draw upon your time as rakshasa as well. Drawing from these recollections places you at risk of falling once more, but provided you remain fixed toward your path, perhaps one day you will overcome the shame you must shoulder.

Devas know their redeemed brethren as dark stars, so named for their new ascendancy toward virtue and also for the evil shadowing their souls. Devas are, of course, rare in the world and so dark stars are even rarer—so scarce most might believe them representative of the entire race. As a dark star, you must ever contend with your unpleasant memories while working to earn the redemption you have received.

Prerequisite: Deva

Level 11: Horrifying Action

Dark star paragon path feature

When you push yourself, your extra effort interferes with your ability to tamp down on the darkness within you. Enemies near you glimpse what you once were and recoil in horror.

Benefit: When you spend an action point to take an action, you can use *memory of a thousand lifetimes* once that turn without expending its use or even if you have used it already during this encounter. Enemies adjacent to you when you spend the action point cannot make opportunity attacks against you until the start of your next turn.

Level 11: Maddening Delusion

Dark star paragon path feature

When you lived as a rakshasa, you used every means at your disposal to feed your unholy appetites. In calling upon your memories to aid in your attacks, old habits assert themselves and plague an enemy with unspeakable hallucinations.

Benefit: When you use *memory of a thousand lifetimes* to add to an attack and that attack hits, the target takes a –2 penalty to its attack rolls and grants combat advantage until the end of your next turn.

PRIMARY ABILITY

When an attack power mentions primary ability under the attack line, it's telling you to use your highest ability score for the attack. So, if you're a fighter and Strength is your highest ability, determine your attack modifier from Strength when using *excruciating transposition*.

Level 11: Excruciating Transposition

Dark star paragon path feature

The moment you fell, dark forces gifted you with strange powers over time and space. Although you have traveled far from that life, you can still call upon those gifts to protect yourself against an enemy's attack.

Benefit: You gain the *excruciating transposition* power.

Excruciating Transposition — **Dark Star Attack 11**

You punish a foe's ambition by twisting fate so it becomes the target of its own attack.

Encounter ✦ Psychic, Teleportation
Immediate Interrupt **Ranged** 10
Trigger: An enemy hits you with an attack.
Target: The triggering enemy
Attack: Primary ability + 4 vs. Will
Level 21: Primary ability + 6 vs. Will
Hit: You and the target teleport to swap positions. The target's triggering attack deals half damage to you, and the target takes psychic damage equal to half the attack's damage.

Level 12: Tangled Fate

Dark star paragon path feature

Fate bows to your wishes. The corrupted memories violate the natural order and twist outcomes to your advantage.

Benefit: You gain the *tangled fate* power.

Tangled Fate — **Dark Star Utility 12**

You twist fate's strings to compel it to serve your interests.

Daily
No Action **Ranged** 5
Requirement: Your *memory of a thousand lifetimes* power must be unexpended.
Trigger: You use your *memory of a thousand lifetimes* power.
Target: One creature
Effect: Roll a d6. The next time the target makes an attack roll, ability check, skill check, or saving throw, you can add or subtract the number to or from the result as a free action.

Level 16: Vile Rebirth

Dark star paragon path feature

Evil powers rail against your virtue and tempt you with gifts and offerings to lure you back to their embrace. These forces are so powerful, they won't let your mortal body die.

Benefit: Once per day, when you make a death saving throw, you can add +10 to the saving throw after you roll it. Then, until the end of the encounter, you lose resistance to radiant damage.

Level 20: Soul Scourge

Dark star paragon path feature

You release the mingled light and darkness found in your soul in one brilliant burst. After the light fades and your enemies' wails for their burned souls die down, you remain while shadows and light dance around you.

Benefit: You gain the *soul scourge* power.

Soul Scourge **Dark Star Attack 20**

You burn the flesh with painful light and scorch the soul with killing darkness.

Daily ✦ Necrotic, Radiant
Standard Action **Area** burst 2 within 10 squares
Target: Each creature in the burst
Attack: Primary ability + 6 vs. Will
Hit: 1d8 + primary ability modifier radiant damage, and ongoing 10 necrotic damage (save ends).
Miss: Half damage, and ongoing 5 necrotic damage (save ends).
Effect: Until the end of the encounter, your attacks deal 4 extra necrotic and radiant damage.

About the Authors

Peter Schaefer eschews the stimuli of sight and sound because they are false. Fool him once, shame on you; fool him twice, never trust again, he says. He perceives the world solely through touch, taste, and smell, and he has worked out a distinct series of scent codes and taps that allow him to interact with his fellows. He accomplishes his work on such projects as *Adventurer's Vault 2*, *Divine Power*, and many D&D Insider articles via these codes and the patience of those around him.

Robert J. Schwalb is an award-winning game designer who has contributed design to or developed over one hundred roleplaying game titles for Dungeons & Dragons®, *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*, *A Song of Ice and Fire RPG*, *Star Wars RPG*, and the *d20 system*. Some of his most recent work for Wizards of the Coast can be found in *Monster Manual 3*, *Player's Handbook 3*, and *Martial Power 2* and also in the pages of both *Dragon* and *Dungeon* magazines. Robert lives in Tennessee.

Dreaming of Waterdeep

A Gustin Bone Story

By Rosemary Jones

Illustration by Warren Mahy

He ran. He ran as fast as he could, through the mud in the yard, past the snarling hound lunging on the end of its chain, waking the two remaining hens roosting in the barn's doorway. Even the old barren sow due for the butcher before the end of the fall grunted and shifted in her dreams as he barreled past her pen.

He lunged for the ladder on the far wall and scrambled up it. One rotten rung cracked. He slipped, banged his knees painfully against another rung, but kept climbing. When he got to the top of the ladder, he flung himself face first into the musty old straw. There, safely hidden from the world, Gustin Bone gave way to the fury, sorrow, and regret that shook his ten-year-old body and howled like a lost soul.

A long time later, Gustin uncurled, wiping the tickling straw out of his hair and face. Then he walked across the ominously creaking floor to the open barn window and gazed across the moonlit farm, the most desolate and lonely place in all the world. His uncle was gone, nowhere to be seen.

"I'm going to die here," Gustin pronounced. And, liking the sound of his own voice echoing into the rafters, he shouted a little louder, "I'm going to grow old, die here, and nobody is ever going to know my name! It will be a tragedy."

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Then he stopped. He wasn't quite sure that something could be a tragedy if nobody else knew about it. But he loved the sound of the word. He had learned it from the widow. She visited on a regular basis to clean out the farmhouse and scold his uncle about the state of Gustin's clothes and general hygiene.

"If you never come clean, boy, it will be a tragedy. Your mother, if she lived, would weep to see the state that you're in," the widow would say, flinging Gustin's shirts and breeches into boiling water while he sat shivering on a stool wrapped in a too-thin towel.

As little as he liked her cleaning methods, he was rather fond of the widow, who invariably ended her session of scrubbing by producing some type of biscuit or baked bread from her basket. But it wasn't her attention to the mud behind his ears that made him screw his face into a frown and shout that night to the uncaring world, "I refuse to die here!"

No, it was the actions of his uncle—that woefully stupid, uncaring, altogether wrong man—that caused Gustin to scramble through the straw to unearth his mother's battered old trunk and thrust open the lid to pull out her even more battered knapsack. Finally, Gustin decided, he would fill that knapsack full and follow the road out into the wide marvelous world, all the way to Waterdeep, that City of Splendors. He had to go now, he told himself, before it was too late.

Only that morning he had smiled and chattered as he walked with his taciturn uncle to the village. Gustin filled the silence surrounding them with his own running observations on the birds in the hedgerows, the likelihood that the hens would survive the winter, and the oft-expressed wish that his uncle might adopt a kitten to keep the mice out of the barn.

"Farhinner's got a litter," Gustin informed him. Farhinner was the tanner and kept cats to keep the rats out of the leather. "Two tabbies and a ginger-stripe."

"Dog wouldn't like it," grunted his uncle.

Gustin shrugged, a ripple of the shoulders that he'd copied from Farhinner. He liked the man. Since the tanner had no sons, it seemed likely that he might be looking for an apprentice in a year or two. A stinky trade, none smelled worse except the butcher's shop, but it meant a room in the village and no farmwork. At the age of ten, Gustin already spent his days plotting ways to escape from the farm.

"There's strangers," said his uncle, stopping so abruptly that Gustin was two lengths down the road and several words into an argument in favor of kittens before he realized his uncle was not moving.

Then he blinked and saw what his uncle was staring at. There were strangers. Marvelous strangers emerging from the woods and skidding down the embankment toward the road. The first man was dressed in fantastic colors, with ribbons and feathers hanging from his broad-brimmed hat, and a long swirling cape that went all the way down to the heels of his highly polished boots. The dwarf following close behind this dandy bore a highly polished helmet on his head and sported a bright red beard cascading down his barrel-round front. The third stranger, also human and obviously male, wore leather armor, well-cared for but marked with interesting nicks and scars. A long scabbard, very noticeable for its plainness, hung empty from his belt.

"Well met, my friends," cried the man with the broad-brimmed hat. "We are looking for a smith and an inn. My friend has a sword in need of mending and we all have need of a place to stay."

Gustin's uncle shook his head and turned on his heel, as if he meant to walk all the way back to the farm rather than talk to the strangers. Gustin, however, was propelled forward by his own curiosity.

"You'll want to follow us into the village," he announced, ignoring his uncle wavering in the background. "We can show you the smith and the tavern. We don't have an inn. But you can probably sleep on the benches at the tavern." It was what laborers from the lord's fields did on the harvest days if they'd drunk too heavily to find their way home safely in the dark.

"Any place with a roof would be welcome," answered the talkative stranger. "We'll take a stable or even a cow's shed tonight. I am Nerhaltan, my large friend here is called Wervyn, and the dwarf goes by the nickname Tapper."

The other two didn't say anything, but the dwarf Tapper glanced once, quickly, at the shadowed woods behind them. Gustin knew the track that they had been following; it led to old ruins, a little hill fort long since crumbled into a collection of tilting walls and a stair that climbed crookedly up to nothing. Village tales called the spot haunted, but every child defied their parents and made their way through the woods to race beneath high arch that once marked the fort's gate.

Gustin had run that race in and out of the ruins earlier that summer. No harm had come from it, although there had been a coldness about the place that he didn't like.

Behind him, his uncle sighed once and then gestured at the strangers. "It's not far to the village," he said. "We go slowly, the boy and I. Step ahead of us if you need to."

"We're happy for the company," said Nerhaltan, pacing along side Gustin. "Your lad seems very bright for his age."

"My nephew," grunted his uncle.

"I'm Gustin," said Gustin. And then proceeded to beguile the rest of the too short journey with dozens of questions for the strangers: How far had they come, what type of sword had the fighter broken, did the dwarf carry a battle-axe, had they ever seen a dragon, did they know how far it was to Waterdeep?

The dwarf turned his bright eyes on Gustin when he mentioned Waterdeep.

"That's a long way from here," Tapper said. "What do you know about the City of Splendors, boy?"

Gustin paused, catching back his next question before it popped out of his mouth. His uncle had paced a little ahead of them, walking with the tall fighter, and the two were discussing the state of the weather and the possibility of a storm before moonrise.

"I have a book," Gustin whispered, reaching into his tunic and pulling out his most precious possession so a corner showed. "A guidebook to Waterdeep."

"Looks a bit chewed," said the dandy on the other side of him. "Like the rats have been at it."

"I found it in the barn," Gustin admitted, "in a pile of rubbish my uncle meant to burn." Papers and other items belonging to his mother, he didn't add. His uncle once tossed everything into the bonfire pit after he caught Gustin snapping open the locks on her old trunk and rummaging through it. But then the widow had stopped his uncle from dousing the lot with oil and started a shouting match about respect for his dead sister. Eventually papers went safely from the bonfire pit to the barn, because his uncle insisted that he wouldn't have "any of it in my house any longer. It will give the boy dreams! And you'll know what will happen then."

Gustin still didn't know what would happen, although he hoped it would take him far away from the farm like his long-lost mother. As for the dreams, they began the first night that he lay curled in his creaking bed and read the enchanting words "Waterdeep, a city of high adventures and dark dearlings" by the light of a sputtering candle.

"Have you been to Waterdeep, goodsirs?" he asked the dandy and the dwarf. Both shook their heads.

"Waterdeep is no destination for a poor man," said Nerhaltan. "I won't go there until I have gold in my pockets."

"Yet some say it is the place for a dwarf or a man to find the gold to fill his pockets," added his short companion.

"It takes gold to make gold," the dandy said. "That is why we are here, after all."

"Quiet," said Tapper with a glance at Gustin that the boy pretended not to see.

They rounded the bend in the road. "Look, goodsirs, our village," said Gustin.

Nerhaltan blinked at the collection of buildings circling a widening in the road. One large oak marked the center of the village, a brute of arboreal pride so big that none had ever figured out how to cut it down, and so the road split around it and the village circled it.

"Well," remarked Nerhaltan, "I have seen smaller. Let's hope the smith knows something about swords as well as farm tools."

*****

The evening grew late, past sundown was past his uncle's usual bedtime, but the three adventurers kept them talking at the tavern, insisting on buying them a meal and, for his uncle, a tankard of ale, in return for conversation about the village and the ruins up the road. Gustin did most of the talking and his uncle did most of the eating and drinking. Eventually Gustin's uncle slumped in his chair, snoring lightly before the fire.

Gustin felt no urge to sleep. His brain was fizzing with the stories that the three strangers told in return, about stolen maps and lost treasures, risks taken and rewards won.

"Oh, I wish I could go adventuring," he said and then blushed at sounding so young. To cover his embarrassment, he reached for the slice of bread on his plate, crumbling it between his fingers and then making it disappear altogether in a shower of red sparks and a few tinkling notes of music.

Tapper's head reared back. "Well, now," said the dwarf. "That's a neat trick. Most small boys just eat the loaf to make it disappear."

Gustin shrugged. "It's just something I do to entertain the little children," he said with all the pride of a lad who owned ten years of age. As far back as he could remember, he could make small things disappear or shift around. Such tricks made the widow laugh when she came to clean the farm and she'd taught him ways to twist his fingers and words to whisper to add sparks or dancing lights to the effect.

"Hmm," said Nerhaltan, also staring intently at him. "Can you do other tricks?"

"A few," Gustin admitted. "Like making my voice come from someplace else." That sentence caused the fighter Wervynn to start in his corner, as Gustin's voice sounded behind his head. Like Gustin's uncle, the big fighter had been dozing in his chair.

The dandy and the dwarf laughed. "Oh, very good. Do another."

"Do you have a cloth and a coin?" Gustin asked. This was a fairly new trick for him and he'd been practicing to impress the widow.

Nerhaltan pulled a handkerchief edged with lace out of a hidden pocket. Wervyn produced a well-worn copper coin.

With a few waves of his hand, Gustin passed the coin through the cloth. Then he crumpled up the handkerchief and shook it out empty.

"Humph," said the fighter. "And where's my money?"

"Why in your pocket, goodsir, just where you had it," said Gustin.

The big man slid his hand under his vest and produced the copper coin again.

"Quick fingers?" the dandy questioned his companions.

"The boy never came near me," the fighter observed.

The trio stared hard at Gustin. "So, how did you do it?" Tapper said.

Gustin shrugged. "I've always been good at tricks," he admitted.

"A boy like you, a brave boy," began Nerhaltan, "could be a great help to us."

Gustin slid forward on his chair, eager to hear what the dandy had to say.

"Leave him alone." His uncle's flat voice, harsh and loud, startled them all. The man was awake and scowling. "No more tales. No more tricks."

His hand dropped hard on Gustin's shoulder. He pulled the boy out of his chair with one yank. "We are going home now. Stay away from us. Stay away from the boy."

"Uncle!"

"Goodsir," said Nerhaltan, following them into the twilight gloom outside the tavern's door. "It's growing dark. Let us buy you a bed for the night. We meant no harm and could perhaps come to some prosperous . . ."

"No!" shouted Gustin's uncle, lurching down the road, dragging a reddening Gustin after him. "No tales. No tricks. No more!"

Halfway back to the farm, his uncle's hand finally loosened enough on his collar to let Gustin wiggle free.

"I wanted to hear what they had to say," he protested, feeling very brave because the moonlight was dim and he could barely make out the deep frown scoring his uncle's face.

His uncle wheeled around, grabbing his shoulders, and shook him the same way that the farm dog would shake a rat when it caught one.

"Stay out of village until the strangers are gone. If they come near, do not speak to them. Do not look at them."

"But —"

"And no more silly spells," yelled his uncle. "How many times must I tell you! No magic at all!"

"I only do simple ones to make people laugh," protested Gustin.

"No more!" roared his uncle. "And no more trips to village. Not until you learn more sense."

They were in sight of the farmhouse. The dog set up a volley of harsh barks, awakened by his uncle's shouts. The farmer turned and yelled at the dog to be silent.

"Tomorrow, I'm burning your mother's books," he said in a quieter, more sober tone, turning back to his nephew.

"No!" Gustin sprang away from his uncle, racing toward the barn where her trunk was still stored.

"Including that daft guidebook you keep in your shirt!" yelled his uncle after him. "Don't think I don't know about that! No more foolish tales, boy, no more tricks! This time, I mean it!"

*****

Upstairs in the barn, Gustin stuffed the battered knapsack as full as possible with his mother's papers, scrolls, and books. He would leave nothing behind for his uncle's bonfire.

Down the barn ladder he crept with more caution than he had hurled up it. The farmyard was a tangle of shadows. The hound shifted, paws churning in some dream of a hunt, and rattled its chain as he crept past, but the old dog did not wake. It knew Gustin's footsteps in its sleep.

Gustin was out the gate and halfway down the road before he stopped to consider where he would go. Everyone in the village knew him. His uncle would look there first.

The three adventurers had talked about going back to ruins, just as soon as the fighter's sword was mended. After that, who knows where they would go? Waterdeep, as he had always dreamed, or some other destination equally splendid. Surely they would want a clever boy, a boy like him who knew more than a few magical tricks, to help them on their way.

Gustin turned off the road, following the track that led to the ruins. Being tired and mindful of the night shadows whispering through the tall grass, he decided not to go into the ruins by himself. Instead, he slid down into the bracken at the base of a tree, curling himself around the knapsack stuffed full of his mother's papers.

The three adventurers found him there, dozing in the late afternoon stillness and dreaming of Waterdeep.

The dandy poked him awake with one pointed toe. "What are you doing, boy?" he asked but his eyes were bright with laughter and he looked as if he knew what Gustin would answer.

"I've come to help you to find the treasure," Gustin said as boldly as he could with grass sticking out of his hair and a few dry leaves itching their way down his shirt as he scrambled to his feet.

"How do you know we are looking for treasure? Or your help?" said the dwarf and his face was harder and more suspicious than his companions.

"You said . . . last night . . . well, I thought," Gustin mumbled a little, staring at his toes, wondering if he'd been a little rash.

"Oh course, we are after treasure," said Nerhaltan. "What else would three like us be doing here? The boy's too bright for us to deceive." The dandy nodded high over Gustin's head at his companions. "We welcome your help, young wizard, welcome it indeed."

"I'm no wizard," Gustin quickly answered. "But I do know these ruins."

"Does your uncle know where you are?" asked Wervyn. The fighter looked concerned and frowned when Gustin shook his head. "Maybe you should go back to your farm, boy."

"Nonsense," answered Nerhaltan for him. "The boy's got too much adventure in him to be content on some farm. Lead on, lad, lead on. There's plenty for all if we can find our prize."

Gustin led the three men toward the ruins. The woods buzzed with the usual noise of warm autumn afternoon, birds calling to mates, the deep rumble of frogs, the chittering of insects. It sounded so normal that Gustin paused.

"What is it?" asked the dandy.

Gustin shrugged. He felt as if a dozen ants were marching up and down his spine. A prickling of his skin unlike anything he had ever felt before.

"Are we going forward or going back?" said Tapper.

"Forward," replied the dandy, giving Gustin a slight shove between the shoulder blades. "Go to, *sirrah*, go to."

"There's something wrong," said Gustin.

"What?"

He shook his head. Suddenly he wondered if he should have listened to his uncle and stayed home. And then he was ashamed of his cowardice. Here he was, so close to discovering a lost treasure, and he stood trembling, afraid of a few birds singing in the tangled branches over his head.

Even as that thought tumbled through his head, Gustin let out a great sigh of relief and enlightenment.

"It's the birds," he said to the three adventurers staring at him. "The birds. It's the wrong time of year. They should not be singing like that."

And the minute he said it, the woods fell silent. Not a cheep or a chirp could be heard.

The fighter drew his repaired sword out of the scabbard with a well-oiled hiss.

"It is close," he said to his friends.

Tapper peered from side to side. "Keep everyone together now. No one out of sight."

Gustin stared at the three now surrounding him in a tight knot.

"What is it?" he asked with a sinking certainty that he would not like the answer that he would receive from the adults.

"Nothing to worry about," said Nerhaltin with a strained smile. "Go on, boy, go on. There's a hole, you see, down by the base of the wall. It's too small for us, even Tapper won't fit, but if you can wiggle your way in —"

A shout sounded to their left. It sounded uncommonly like his uncle calling "Gustin! Gustin!"

Out of habit, Gustin almost started toward the shouts, into the thickest part of the woods, but Tapper grabbed his shirttails and pulled him back. "To the wall, boy, to the wall."

Silence fell again. Gustin listened but he heard no more from his uncle. Perhaps he was turning away and searching toward the village road.

They reached the walls of the ruin. The place seemed colder than before and more menacing than he remembered, the shadows clustering at the base of the wall and making a gloomy twilight inside the roofless rooms of the abandoned fort.

High above his head, a kitten mewed, a lost sound. Poor thing, thought Gustin, it must have climbed the wall and gotten itself stuck. Fond of cats, he chirped, hoping to draw it into the open.

"Hush!" Nerhaltan clapped a hand over Gustin's mouth. "Don't call to it."

Gustin wiggled his way free and eyed the dandy with suspicion. "Why should I be afraid of a stray kitten?"

"Not a cat," muttered Tapper, nervously looking around. "It just sounds like a cat. When it's not trying to sound like your mother."

"Or a group of birds." That from the fighter, who had put his back to the ruins' wall and was staring out at the woods.

"Now, about this hole," said Nerhaltan. There was a hole at the base of the wall, newly dug as Gustin could tell by the fresh clods of dirt lining its rim. As the dandy had said, the opening was small, the stone blocks of the wall preventing it from being enlarged beyond the current opening.

Gustin went flat on his stomach and peered within. He snapped his fingers, concentrating on a useful spell that the widow had taught him, and made a light. The little glowing ball rolled away from his hand and dropped down the hole. It disappeared into a chamber located just under the wall.

"A safe room. All these little hill forts used to have them. A place to hide treasure," explained Tapper leaning over Gustin's shoulder. "The original way in . . . well, we couldn't use that. So I came around to the other side of the wall and broke in through the roof. But it's too narrow a route for us to wiggle down and back."

The air issuing from the hole smelled stale, dank, and uncommonly like a grave to Gustin.

"Is there something down there?" Gustin asked. For the end of his sensitive nose caught another scent, a stink like an animal but no animal that he could identify.

"Nothing down there now," said Nerhaltan.

"Now that it is out here," added Wervynn. The fighter was facing away from the wall, looking up the broad stone staircase that wound around the tower to the guards' walk at the top of the wall.

"Go on, wiggle in," the dandy gave Gustin a little push from behind. "Look for a box, a little gold box with brilliants around the edge of the lid. That's all we need to pay our way to Waterdeep."

The late afternoon shadows stretched from the trees to the base of the fort, like long black fingers reaching for the adventurers standing over Gustin. "Hurry," said Nerhaltan. "We should be out of here as quickly as possible."

For the very first time in his ten years, Gustin wished that he was back at the farm and his uncle was yelling at him about his neglected chores.

He slid headfirst into the hole, plunging his arms in front of him like a swimmer to drag himself forward. His feet kicked the air outside until somebody grabbed his ankles—Nerhaltan probably—and shoved him all the way in. Gustin slithered forward, concentrating on his light spell. A faint glow began to strengthen before him.

"What do you see?" The shout sounded very far away and muffled to his ears.

"Nothing!" he yelled back.

Then he popped like a cork from a bottle, tumbling out of the tunnel and onto the littered, stinking floor of the room under the wall. Piles of debris cushioned his fall. For which he was grateful until he put his hand onto the half-rotted corpse of a mouse. With a yelp of disgust, he rolled away, only to land on a much larger pile of bones that crumbled and cracked under his slight weight.

Gustin sprang hastily to his feet and spat a hasty command to his spell. By the glowing light that he now made float in the center of the room, he could discern rib bones, leg bones, and a few vertebrae. After a squeamish moment, he came to the conclusion that these were the remains of a lost sheep or, possibly, a calf. It certainly could not be a ten-year-old boy. After all, if somebody his age had gone missing from the village, he would have known. Even if it had been years and years ago. Or so he told himself firmly.

Gustin began kicking through the trash strewn about the room, looking for the gold box that Nerhaltan described. Nothing glittered or gleamed. After one quick turn around the room, he decided the search was hopeless and that he would rather be above ground, no matter what lurked among the trees.

Crossing back to the hole where he had entered, Gustin found that it was just out of reach. Even pushing the larger bones, dead leaves, and other bits of rubbish in the room into a pile under the hole didn't help. The material was too unstable. Every time he climbed up, the pile collapsed under his feet.

"Help!" he yelled. "I need a rope!"

There was no answer.

Gustin called again, louder and more urgent.

A faint cough sounded far above his head and then he heard Nerhaltan call, "Where are you, boy? Where have you gone?"

The dandy's voice was muffled and strangely distorted and, Gustin shivered despite himself, altogether too eager for an answer. Especially for a man who should know exactly where he was. After all, Nerhaltan had pushed him down this hole.

All the magic Gustin possessed tingled up and down his spine. Something was out there and it meant him harm.

Something sniffed at the hole leading into the safe room. Something scratched at stone and dirt, as if something too big for the hole was trying to dig its way in.

Gustin drew a deep breath and concentrated as he had never concentrated before. Then he opened his mouth and let his voice sail out and away from him, using the very same spell that had so startled the adventurers in the tavern. "Here I am! Here I am!" his words should be sounding from the very top of the hill fort's crumbling tower if his spell worked.

He held his breath, keeping perfectly still. Faintly, distantly, he heard the scrape of a heavy body moving away.

"We found a way but we could not use that," Wyvern had said. Not a lock, not a barred door,

Gustin decided. But a creature hunting in the tunnels under the fort? Is that what had driven the adventurers above ground and to this second, futile attempt using him to rob the safe room?

He dashed across the room, running his hands across the dank and soiled walls. Solid stone scraped his palms. He ran a circuit of the room, banging heavily against walls, kicking at the foundations, looking in the waning light of his spell for any sign of a door.

When he found it, he practically tumbled through it. Rotted wood painted to look like stone gave away before his frantic blows. He kicked a hole large enough to crawl through and found himself at the base of a bare stone stair twisting up toward the fort's main gate.

With as light as step as possible, Gustin speeded up the stairs to arrive panting at the top. By the slant of the shadows covering the courtyard, he had been below ground for barely an hour, perhaps even less. But he was acutely aware of the unnatural stillness of the woods beyond the ruins. Not a bird chirped, not an insect buzzed.

Above his head, he heard a cry, almost startling him from his crouched hiding place at the top of the stairs. Then he realized it was his own voice, still echoing among the stones: "Here I am! Here I am!"

"Where are you, boy? Why are you hiding?" A great shadow passed overheard as something huge and beastly clattered along the guard's walkway along the top of the fort's wall. The voice was Nerhaltan's but the shadow cast by the dropping sun upon the weed-choked courtyard was too large to be that slender man.

Gustin crept under the broken arch of the main gate. He slid around the gate's main pillar, hugging as tight to the wall as he could, hoping whatever prowled above him would not glance down.

The woods were very close, he told himself firmly. He only had to sprint a short distance with no cover at all before he could lose himself in the friendly shadows under the trees. Whatever hunted at the top of the wall surely could not leap down and catch him before he reached the trees. All these arguments made perfect sense in his head but he could not persuade his trembling body to leave the relative safety of the wall.

Then he remembered Nerhaltan pushing him down the hole with uneasy glances toward all sides.

Gustin stared in the direction of the hole where he first entered the hill fort. He could easily see the loose dirt piled outside the wall from where he stood. Equally easily, he could make out the distinct shape of a man's boot leaning against the wall. It looked very much like Nerhaltan's leg. As for the rest of the dandy, there was no sign. Just the one leg leaning against the blood-splattered wall.

Fighting back the bile rising in his throat, Gustin prepared to run as he had never run before. Directly above him, he heard the beast cry out in Nerhaltan's voice, "There you are, clever boy!"

Another shout sounded across the meadow: "Gustin!"

Emerging from the trees, his uncle ran toward him, shouldering the heavy crossbow that he kept over the mantle for winter's wolves and other raiders of the chicken coop.

Behind his uncle strode the widow, her hands alight with flame. "Get down!" she yelled even as his uncle dropped to one knee and fired an iron crossbolt over Gustin's head.

Gustin flattened himself in the weeds at the base of the wall. He heard the beast above cry out in pain, no longer disguising its voice, but screaming with a ferocious roar of frustrated bloodlust.

The widow spat out the words of a spell and long ropes of flame streamed from her outstretched fingers. The beast howled louder. The stench of scorched flesh and fur rolled over the gagging Gustin as he crawled as hastily as possible away from the base of the wall.

His uncle reloaded the crossbow and shot again. The second bolt also struck home. The beast coughed and called out weirdly in the voice of the dandy: "Ah, the blood, the blood."

A heavy body crashed down from the guard's walk at the top of the wall. Gustin rolled over and stared down the length of his body. Framed between his boot toes was a hideous mix of a stag's legs with a lion's body and a giant badger's head. A tufted tail lashed from side to side as the wounded creature struggled to its hooves. It kicked out at Gustin but a blaze of fire from the advancing widow drove it briefly away from the boy.

Gustin scrambled to his feet. The badger head swayed back and forth, the open mouth blowing out a carrion breath that made him gag. Bony ridges lined the inside of its black lips, clearly visible far too close to his nose.

Raising his own hands, Gustin repeated the spell being shouted by the widow. It was louder and longer than the one that she had taught him to light a candle. Smoke rather than fire blossomed at his fingertips. Cursing his fumble of the spell, he flung the smoke at beast's eyes. Baffled and choking on the thick black smoke streaming from Gustin's hands, it wheeled around, racing away from Gustin to the safety of the trees.

A third crossbolt from his uncle's bow pierced the creature's throat. It tumbled over its hooves, crumbling into the grass.

With three strides, Gustin's uncle reached him and swept him up in a hard one-armed embrace. Then he dropped Gustin with a thump. "I told you to stay away from magic," he growled. "I told you to stay away from those men."

"Ah," said the widow, crushing Gustin in her own mint-scented embrace. "Leave the boy alone. How was he to know there was leucrotta in these ruins?"

Gustin wiggled his way out of the widow's hug. "Where are they?" he said, looking around for the tall fighter and his dwarf companion.

"Run off!" snorted his uncle. "We saw them on the road."

"He's been searching for you all morning," the widow whispered in Gustin's ear.

"But why?"

"Because you are family," grunted his uncle, shouldering his crossbow and stepping around the dead beast in the meadow.

"That's worth something," the widow said, pointing at the leucrotta's body.

His uncle shrugged. "Send them out from the village to fetch it. It's magic and I'll have none of it."

"It wasn't magic that killed her," the widow said. "And it won't be magic that kills this boy."

His uncle shook his head and stomped off. The widow sighed. "There goes a stubborn man. It wasn't magic, that's what I keep telling him."

"Who? Who died?" But even as he asked, he knew the answers. It was as close to his heart as her book about Waterdeep.

"Your mother was always twice the wizard that I was," said the widow. "And restless with it. That farm was far too small to hold her. But it stole the laughter from him when she took to wandering. She was all the family he had."

"He has me," Gustin knew even as he said it that the day was coming when he would follow his mother's footsteps out of the village. The adventurers might have tricked him, even run off and left him, but it didn't make their tales any less appealing. He would go to Waterdeep and see the City of Splendors for himself.

"Make me a promise," said the widow as they walked through the woods. "The next time you leave, tell us both good-bye. Don't make her mistake and go running off without a word."

"I promise," Gustin said, and with a whisper of magic, he made his words echo from all the treetops.

About the Author

Rosemary Jones is the author of two Forgotten Realms stand-alone novels, *Crypt of the Moaning Diamond* and *City of the Dead*. Her short stories can be found in the Realms anthologies *Realms of Dragons II* and *Realms of the Dead* as well as other science fiction and fantasy books. For more on her latest projects, check her website at www.rosemaryjones.com.

by Bill Slavicsek

Ampersand

The Next Wave in Digital Offerings

This month, I want to take some time to tell you about what's coming up for our Dungeons & Dragons® digital tools as well as the usual previews and product reminders. I'm also adding a new section to try to remind myself to inject some glimpses of the inner workings of R&D into the column. So, this column is going to fill up pretty quickly. Let's get to it!

A Day in the Director's Seat

I met this morning with James Wyatt, the D&D Creative Manager, to go over the various projects under his purview. That means that we talked about upcoming novels, the progress on the D&D *Ravenloft* roleplaying game (which I'll begin showing off after the start of the new year), and a couple of other projects that we haven't announced yet.

After that, Mike Mearls (D&D R&D Group Manager) and I met with Chris Tulach from Organized Play to discuss the next couple of seasons for D&D Encounters. We're in the midst of an adventure centered around the Keep on the Borderlands, so make sure you head over to your local game store on Wednesday evenings to check it out. We brainstormed upcoming seasons, and we're excited about where we're taking the program. I'll start previewing upcoming seasons over the next couple of columns.

Then the heads of a bunch of different departments crammed into one of our meeting rooms to formalize the go/no-go decision for the new version of the *D&D Character Builder*. The word went out earlier this week that the new digital tool will launch on November 16. I'll talk more about this later in the column.

After a morning full of meetings, I finally had some time at my desk to work on this column, as well as on a number of other projects flowing across my desk. For example, I got to approve final art for the cover of an as-yet-unannounced product. I can't tell you what this is for yet, but I can show off a small section of the art. This is the kind of stuff that makes the job so much fun to dive into every day.

Checking on email, I see that Laura Tommervick from the Brand Team, wants me to make sure that I remind all of you to follow us on Facebook. Become a fan today at http://www.facebook.com/#!/dungeonsanddragons.

Finally, I had to make a proofing pass through a bunch of projects currently in Typesetting, including the upcoming *Class Compendium: Heroes of Sword and*

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Spell. My preview this month is straight out of this February release, and you can check it out below.

New Releases

In stores this month, look for the *Beholder Collector's Set*. This limited edition product features four new beholder miniatures, including the ghost beholder and the eye of frost.

The second player's book in the D&D Essentials line of products, *Heroes of the Forgotten Kingdoms*, debuts this month. It contains new builds for druid, paladin, ranger, and warlock character classes, as well as races such as dragonborn, drow, half-elves, half-orcs, and tieflings.

Other D&D Essential products out this month include the *Monster Vault* and *Dungeon Tiles Master Set: The City* boxed sets. A cool feature of *The City* is that the box is gridded as rooftops, with the box top being shorter than the bottom so that you can lay out a few blocks of a 3-D city—just the thing for running a chase across the rooftops (which I did in last Thursday night's D&D game).

Our partners at IDW are releasing the first issue of the Dungeons & Dragons comic next week. Written by John Rogers (screenwriter of *Transformers* and co-creator of the *Leverage* television series) and illustrated by Andrea Di Vito (artist for Marvel's *Thor* and *Nova*), the story is set in and around Fallcrest—the town detailed in the *Dungeon Master's Kit*. The story is a great D&D story while also having all the hallmarks of a John Rogers production—witty dialog, fast-moving action, the right amount of humor, and great characters. I heartily recommend this book!

Digital Horizons

It was a while ago that I told you that we wouldn't over promise and under deliver anymore for D&D Insider and our digital endeavors. I know that it's been frustrating for you to get only snippets of news here and there, and it's certainly not fun for us to hold back information and not share with you the cool things that we're working on. At the same time, I never want to get up in front of you again (live or via this column) and tell you that something is coming and then discover later that we just couldn't deliver on the promise.

Well, here we are, finally with some news to share. Let's start with the Character Builder.

Perhaps the greatest thing that Wizards has accomplished in the digital arena, certainly since the launch of the new edition of D&D, is the Character Builder. Since the launch of this program, we've been working on a number of ways to improve both the tools and the experience. The first place

we decided to make changes was to move from a client-based to a web-based tool set. We are moving to a web-based solution to make the tools accessible to multiple platforms. The web-based solution makes it easier for us to react to new technology opportunities, such as tablets and mobile devices. We also wanted to move to a solution that promotes individual account ownership and hinders piracy. Finally, we wanted a solution that would more easily interact with our community site, Facebook, and the upcoming virtual roleplaying table (more on that shortly).

We'll launch the new Character Builder with a known issues list and FAQ, as well as with other roadmaps to highlight launch functionality and to lay out what we plan to do with future builds of the tool. Tool by tool, we'll use the known issues lists and FAQs to make sure that there's as little confusion as possible about what works, what we'd like to do in the future, and what we won't be tackling in the near term.

There are five things I really, really like about the new Character Builder.

1. It's ultimately portable. I can use it on any computer or computer-like device, wherever I am.
2. It's both PC and Mac friendly. I can access it from either kind of machine.
3. There are multiple character sheet options. I can pick an Essentials character sheet or a sheet that takes advantage of the digital medium, and we can add other versions of sheets as demand warrants.
4. The user interface is better. We've learned a lot, tested a lot, and made a tool that is easier to navigate and use.
5. Content filters are better. The D&D game is loaded with content, and the new Character Builder offers lots of ways to filter that content for you. You can make choices up front to limit the amount of information you're bombarded with, and you can add more elements later as your play style and game mastery demands.

   OK, there are six things.
6. More agile. The new tools allow us to respond faster to customer needs. We can make updates and changes to the system more quickly, and the new content is pushed live almost instantaneously—content updates just happen, with no downloads required.

   No, wait. Seven.
7. *Dark Sun* and Essentials. The new tool includes options so that you can create characters using the *Dark Sun Campaign Setting* and *Heroes of the Fallen Lands* as well as with material from all products already loaded into the previous tool. And more content is on the way.

So, if you're a D&D Insider, check out the new *Character Builder* starting on Nov. 16. If you're not a D&D Insider yet, there will be demonstration videos available to show you what the new *Character Builder* can do.

Within the next month, we're also starting up a Friends and Family Beta for the new virtual roleplaying table. This thing is awesome. Watch for additional beta tests in the coming months, including one **exclusively** for D&D Insiders. We'll get into the details on this in the weeks ahead.

Class Compendium: Heroes of Sword and Spell Preview

Here's some of the introductory material and a glimpse of the fighter class, as presented in the upcoming *Class Compendium: Heroes of Sword and Spell*. Look for the complete entry when the product releases in February.

Introduction

Heroes in the Dungeons & Dragons® game come in many different forms. Some are bold warriors, some are stealthy scouts, and some are masters of arcane or divine powers. Even in the same class, heroes might embrace any number of different paths or methods as they master their abilities and gain new powers. A fighter might be a noble knight, a brutal slayer, or a canny weaponmaster. A rogue might be a daring thief, or a dangerous scoundrel armed with a grab bag of deadly tricks and techniques. Your character could follow any of these paths, or you can define a unique blend of powers and abilities all your own.

The Dungeons & Dragons *Essentials*™ rulebooks *Heroes of the Fallen Lands*™ and *Heroes of the Forgotten Kingdoms*™ presented new versions of classic heroes such as the fighter, cleric, rogue, and wizard. *Class Compendium*™ provides revisions and updates for the versions of these classes that were originally presented in the 4th Edition *Player's Handbook*®, and integrates them with the class material found in the Dungeons & Dragons *Essentials* rulebooks. *Class Compendium* also includes an updated version of the

warlord, which has not yet appeared in the *Essentials* rulebooks, and provides the most current updates to many powers, features, and feats for these classes.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Class Compendium: Heroes of Sword and Spell is a Dungeons & Dragons supplement designed for players. It presents the rules you need to build characters of five popular classes: cleric, fighter, rogue, warlord, and wizard. It doesn't include descriptions of character races, skills, or equipment—you'll need *Heroes of the Fallen Lands* or *Heroes of the Forgotten Kingdoms,* to complete your character. *Rules Compendium* provides the complete, most up-to-date rules for the game. If you're new to the Dungeons & Dragons game, you should begin with the Dungeons & Dragons *Fantasy Roleplaying Game Starter Set*. It contains the basic rules of the game, dice, counters, and a starting adventure to kick off your game experience. When you're done with the starter set, you'll be ready to create new characters using *Heroes of the Fallen Lands*, *Heroes of the Forgotten Kingdoms*, or *Class Compendium: Heroes of Sword and Spell*.

The Classes

This book provides all the information you need to create and play characters of five distinct Dungeons & Dragons classes: cleric, fighter, rogue, warlord, and wizard. A brief description of each class follows; you'll find the full presentations later in this book. Each class description begins with an explanation of the class's background and abilities, and includes step-by-step advice for creating a character of that class.

USING THIS BOOK WITH OTHER RULEBOOKS

The game options presented in this book are designed to work with the options in other Dungeons & Dragons rulebooks.

Powers: When you are instructed to choose a power of a particular type and level for your character, you can select the power either from this book or from another source that includes powers of that type and level. For example, if you are playing a weaponmaster fighter and are instructed to choose a 2nd-level fighter utility power, you can choose that power from this book or from a book such as *Heroes of the Fallen Lands*, which includes 2nd-level fighter utility powers in the sections for the knight fighter and the slayer fighter.

Feats, Paragon Paths, and Epic Destinies: When you choose a feat, a paragon path, or an epic destiny, you can make your choice from any source, as long as your character meets the prerequisites.

Fighter

Why This Is the Class for You: You like playing a character who can stand up to attacks and give back what you get.

Fighters are among the world's greatest warriors, having earned their status through hours upon hours of training and perfecting their fighting techniques. In battle, fighters hold the front line by slashing and striking in all directions, deflecting blows with shield or armor, and bashing anyone who dares take their focus from them. Fighters might be mercenaries, chasing after gold, thrill-seekers craving glory, nobles fighting for duty or honor, or brawlers throwing themselves into battle to experience the joy of combat.

Determination forms the core of nearly all fighters. It is what pushes them to hone their combat styles, what lets them endure the scrapes and bruises from sparring and actual fighting. Many fighters develop a distinctive style to set them apart from their peers. Sometimes these styles have roots in established traditions, while others grow organically from a variety of methods picked up during their travels.

Fighters are indispensible members of any community in which they are found. They rally the people and make a stand against the terrors stumbling out from the darkness on all sides. Some heroes rise from the ranks of common warriors, having the right mix of grit and courage to rise above the ordinary. Others have studied under masters, learning complex techniques they can bring to bear with great success. Once a fighter gets a taste of combat, adventure's call is too seductive to resist, and many set out to bring the battle to foes in the field. The knight, the slayer,

and the weaponmaster are three types of fighters. The knight and the slayer appeared in *Heroes of the Fallen Lands*. The weaponmaster first appeared in the *Player's Handbook* as the fighter.

Weaponmaster

Martial Defender: Tough and resilient, you use tactical cunning and battle prowess to contain the enemy and protect your allies.

Key Abilities: Strength; Dexterity, Wisdom, or Constitution Into the blackest pits beneath the mountains, bent on vengeance and glory, goes the weaponmaster. These warriors form the iron core of any legion. They crash into the teeth of enemy forces, armed with cold steel and grim purpose. They are the mercenaries loitering in taverns between expeditions, the guards who cast a watchful eye over their charges, the weapon masters who elevate fighting styles to lethal arts. The weaponmaster is a fearless warrior, ready to meet any challenge.

Weaponmasters can be found just about anywhere and among any sort of people. A few are gallant warriors fighting for noble causes, while others are calculating mercenaries who draw their weapons only when the pay is right. All weaponmasters, however, are adventurers, ready to face any challenge, to go where glory, plunder, or honor leads them.

Specialized combat maneuvers, or exploits, combined with a dedicated focus on a fighting style set weaponmasters apart from other fighters. A weaponmaster can slam his or her weapon through one enemy to crunch into another or carve a bloody path through enemies in a whirlwind of destruction. Weapons are crucial too, since weaponmasters know how to coax every advantage they can from their tools, and those who use axes fight differently from those who favor heavy blades. Compared to a knight or a slayer, a weaponmaster focuses on a broader variety of tactics and combat styles. While a knight or a slayer has fairly predictable, though still formidable, abilities, each weaponmaster cultivates a unique blend of specific maneuvers and abilities.

Weaponmasters develop their combat prowess in many different ways. Most have some elementary training to expose them to different weapons and armor. These trainees are often squires, militia, students, and soldiers. Once they're cut free, they grow their ability through practice and observation. Each battle proves instructive, giving the weaponmaster new insights that might develop into fullblown techniques.

Weaponmaster 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; light shield, heavy shield

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

Heroic Weaponmaster

At the heroic tier's beginning, you have mastered a few forms and maneuvers. As you progress, you discover new methods to help shape your unique fighting style.

Level 1: Combat Challenge

You are a weaponmaster, a warrior who commands the battlefield through prowess and unwavering resolve. Each attack demonstrates your talent and the danger you pose if an enemy ignores you. Whenever an enemy tries to disengage or attack someone else, your swift strike demonstrates why doing that was a terrible mistake.

Benefit: Every time you attack an enemy, you can choose to mark that enemy, whether the attack hits or misses. The mark lasts until the end of your next turn. In addition, whenever an enemy marked by you is adjacent to you and shifts or makes an attack that does not include you as a target, you can make a melee basic attack against that enemy as an immediate interrupt.

Level 1: Combat Superiority

You have highly developed combat instincts, born from experience in battle and excellence at arms. You can take any opening your opponent gives you, striking with speed and precision. Those struck realize their error and turn to face you, almost without fail.

Benefit: You gain a bonus to the attack rolls of opportunity attacks. The bonus equals your Wisdom modifier.

WEAPONMASTER HEROIC TIER

Total XP	Level	Feats Known	Class Features and Powers
0	1	1	**Combat Challenge** **Combat Superiority** **Fighter Weapon Talent** **At-will powers** **Encounter power** **Daily power**
1,000	2	+1	**Utility power**
2,250	3		**Encounter power**
3,750	4	+1	**Ability score increase**
5,500	5		**Daily power**
7,500	6	+1	**Utility power**
10,000	7		**Encounter power**
13,000	8	+1	**Ability score increase**
16,500	9		**Daily power**
20,500	10	+1	Utility power

An enemy hit by your opportunity attack stops moving, if a move provoked the attack. If the enemy still has actions remaining, it can use them to resume moving.

Level 1: Fighter Weapon Talent

All fighters are adept with weapons, from blades to hammers, axes to spears, and everything in between. You focus your training on your preferred combat technique. You might favor the defensive benefits from weapons and shield, or you might opt for the raw power of a two-handed weapon.

Benefit: Choose either one-handed or two-handed weapons. When using a weapon of your chosen style, you gain a +1 bonus to weapon attack rolls.

Level 1: At-Will Powers

Weaponmasters demonstrate their preferred fighting styles through the modifications they make to standard strikes, jabs, and feints. At 1st level, you develop two exploits you can rely on in any fight you find yourself.

Benefit: You gain two 1st-level fighter at-will attack powers of your choice.

Cleave

When faced with great numbers, such as when you're fighting goblins, kobolds, and other lesser creatures, it's often best to sweep them aside with your mighty strikes. *Cleave* lets you bash through one enemy and sink your weapon into another.

Cleave — **Fighter Attack 1**

You hit one enemy, then cleave into another.

At-Will ✦ Martial, Weapon
Standard Action **Melee** weapon
Target: One creature
Attack: Strength vs. AC
Hit: 1[W] + Strength modifier damage, and an enemy adjacent to you other than the target takes damage equal to your Strength modifier.
Level 21: 2[W] + Strength modifier damage.

Reaping Strike

You demonstrate your battle prowess through the feints and jabs you make to keep an enemy guessing. When you can ill afford to waste an attack, *reaping strike* is the answer. Even as the enemy evades your most powerful attack, it does not emerge unscathed.

Reaping Strike — **Fighter Attack 1**

You punctuate your scything attacks with wicked jabs and small cutting blows that slip through your enemy's defenses.

At-Will ✦ Martial, Weapon
Standard Action **Melee** weapon
Target: One creature
Attack: Strength vs. AC
Hit: 1[W] + Strength modifier damage.
Level 21: 2[W] + Strength modifier damage.
Miss: Half Strength modifier damage. If you're wielding a two-handed weapon, you deal damage equal to your Strength modifier.

Level 1: Encounter Power

The more complicated the exploit, the fewer the opportunities you have to use it. As part of your initial training, you master a challenging attack that you can bring to bear only once in any battle.

Benefit: You gain a 1st-level fighter encounter attack power of your choice.

Covering Attack Although you work to prevent it, enemies manage to get around you from time to time. *Covering attack* is useful for creating an opportunity for an ally to escape an enemy's clutches. If such a need reveals itself, you can launch into a terrifying assault to wrench your foe's attention away from your companion and place it on you where it belongs.

Covering Attack — Fighter Attack 1

You launch a ferocious attack at your enemy, allowing one of your allies to safely retreat from it.

Encounter ✦ Martial, Weapon
Standard Action Melee weapon
Target: One creature
Attack: Strength vs. AC
Hit: 2[W] + Strength modifier damage, and an ally of yours adjacent to the target can shift up to 2 squares as a free action.

Passing Attack Weaponmasters who prefer two-handed weapons learn to take advantage of their weight. A swing with such a heavy weapon can carry you forward to bring your weapon against a different enemy. Since the second attack depends on striking with the first, *passing attack* is best started against a brute or a lightly armored enemy, especially when you are trying to reach a different enemy your foe is protecting.

Passing Attack — Fighter Attack 1

You strike at one foe, allowing your momentum to carry you forward into a second strike against another enemy.

Encounter ✦ Martial, Weapon
Standard Action Melee weapon
Primary Target: One creature
Primary Attack: Strength vs. AC
Hit: 1[W] + Strength modifier damage, and you can shift 1 square. Make the secondary attack.
Secondary Attack
Secondary Target: One creature other than the primary target
Attack: Strength + 2 vs. AC
Hit: 1[W] + Strength modifier damage.

Level 1: Daily Power

The deadliest techniques you master require timing, opportunity, and willpower. The moments when all three conditions are right don't appear more than once in a day.

Benefit: You gain a 1st-level fighter daily attack power of your choice.

Brute Strike You draw on all your fury and all your training to deliver a punishing attack to an enemy. This fury does not abate until your weapon smashes through your enemy.

Brute Strike — Fighter Attack 1

You deliver a powerful blow that rends flesh and shatters bone.

Daily ✦ Martial, Reliable, Weapon
Standard Action Melee weapon
Target: One creature
Attack: Strength vs. AC
Hit: 3[W] + Strength modifier damage.

That's it for this month. Until next time,

Keep Playing!
Bill

Gamma World, Part 2

BY RICHARD BAKER AND STEVE SCHUBERT

Earth lies in radioactive ruins. A hundred years or more have passed since the Big Mistake, and the world is plagued by savage marauders and monstrous mutated beasts. In this world of Terra Gamma, brave mutant adventurers delve into the ruins in search of priceless technology—weapons and machines left over from our own 21st century, as well as fantastically advanced technology from alternate universes. Welcome to *Gamma World*!

Rich Baker, one of the designers of the new D&D *Gamma World Roleplaying Game*, and Steve Schubert, lead developer, take a look at one of the most interesting components in the new *Gamma World* game—the Alpha Mutation and Omega Tech cards.

Why Cards?

Rich: OK, let's get this one out of the way right at the start: Why introduce a card component into the *Gamma World RPG*? Well, the short answer is that we think it makes your game better and gives you a brand-new set of tools to play with. We can offer you options in this format that would be hard to do with a different approach because the medium of cards lets us try things with game play and character abilities we just couldn't do with a different mechanism. For example, finding tech in *Gamma World* is a lot like finding magical items in D&D. By treating items of advanced tech as "cards," you can randomly determine what's found by a simple draw rather than rolling on a chart or trying to stock an adventure with things your characters might want—and you can hand that card to a player and say, "Now you have this!" Many D&D DMs already encourage their players to provide wish lists of items they'd like their characters to find someday. Once you start doing something like that, it's not much of a leap for a player to provide his own wish list in the form of his own deck of tech items he wants to find.

If you're really worried about whether the booster cards belong at your game table, don't panic—*Gamma World* is a lot more than its collectible component. Each *Gamma World Roleplaying Game* box includes a deck of 80 cards. The starter deck isn't randomized, and you never need to buy another card for the game if you don't want to (although we hope you'll give them a try!) Much of your character is composed of things that aren't developed through card play. For example, your mutant origins are presented more or less like mini-character classes or themes in the text of the rulebook. Likewise, you don't need cards to choose your gear, determine your skills, or roll your ability scores. The booster cards are cool, but you can play without them.

Steve: We want setup to be very fast in *Gamma World*, to get you into the game and playing within minutes of opening the box. By putting powers and items on cards that you randomly draw, we reduce the rules burden on players. By that, I mean that a player won't need to read through a chapter full of mutations or items to start playing. You learn the powers one at a time, but spread across encounters as you draw a power or item and learn to use that rules element during an encounter.

The card deck also fulfills the same purpose as a random table in a book, but in a way that is easier to pass around the table and keep in front of players. If all the mutations were in a chapter with a die-roll

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based table, you might still be able to randomly generate mutations each encounter, but the whole book needs to be passed around, players would need to copy the power out of the book, and it would generally be slower. The physical nature of the card lends itself perfectly to ease of play.

Alpha Mutations and Omega Tech

Rich: We considered using cards to handle many different parts of character generation, but early on in design we realized that it was important for characters to include a permanent (or mostly permanent) core identity that card play wouldn't greatly change. If you're a pyrokinetic yeti at the start of the day, and after a few card draws you're a giant android, well, that's perhaps too weird even for *Gamma World*. So we wanted the highly random elements of card play to reflect only part of what your character was about, not everything he or she could do. That led us to the ideas of Alpha mutations and Omega tech.

Alpha mutations represent the strange, unexplained, uncontrollable manifestations of your mutant powers. Maybe in an alternate worldline you *always* had wings, and the fact that you're suddenly flapping them now means that reality just hiccupped for you. Or maybe some unknown factor in your immediate environment—low-level radiation, or a mutagenic toxin—takes effect, provoking a response from your insanely adaptable mutant body. Whatever the cause, the important thing is that you've always got one mutation that's more or less completely random. It lasts for a while, and then when you expend it (or just call your day of adventuring done) it's gone, and you find yourself with a different power. Basically, Alpha mutations are a great place for us to provide your character with powers that are too narrow, too powerful, or too goofy to be something that should be part of your character's permanent mutation themes. I mean, what are the odds that someone's going to life-leech you when you've got *anti-life leech*? If that's your current Alpha mutation, you just give a little shrug and wait to see if you get a different or better one later.

Omega tech consists of the sci-fi devices you find in the game. Terra Gamma is basically the ruins of our own modern world, so things like pickup trucks and CD players and 9mm pistols are pretty common, even if they're better than anything the natives of *Gamma World* could make for themselves now. Powered armor, anti-grav tech, plasma rifles, vibroswords, and other far-future tech we haven't invented yet. These elements were introduced into the world from parallel universes during the Big Mistake, and just like in previous editions of *Gamma World*, they're the most powerful weaponry and defenses you can find in the game. In effect, each one is a magic item. Much of your gear—swords, spears, modern-day rifles, bulletproof vests—is just gear you can buy or find anywhere, but the sci-fi stuff you acquire by drawing from the Omega deck.

The GM's Starter Deck

Rich: The *Gamma World* box includes a starter deck of 80 cards, which we call the GM's deck. These mutations and items range from virtually useless to really pretty good. Part of the fun of *Gamma World* is that you don't know whether you're going to draw from the deck you've built for yourself, which presumably includes mutations and items you would like your character to have, or from the GM's deck, which is a complete grab-bag. Hilarity often ensues.

Steve: The GM could also set aside specific cards as rewards for specific quests or encounters. That leaky fusion rifle might be a (mostly) non-leaky version used by the tusker general, that gets damaged when he's defeated. Or specific mutations could erupt due to an environmental effect in an encounter.

Building Your Character's Deck

Rich: If you decide to bring your own booster cards to a *Gamma World* game, you build yourself two player draw decks: an Alpha mutation deck and an Omega tech deck. When it's time to draw your next card, drawing from decks you created naturally offers an advantage over drawing whatever happens to be at the top of the GM's deck. However, it's not always to your advantage to simply stock up on the biggest, most awesome cards you can find.

In both categories, each card has one of three types. Alpha mutations have the Bio, Dark, or Psi types; Omega tech has the Area 52, Ishtar, or Xi types. These types describe the card's origin or affinity. For example, if you develop Poison Spurs, that's a biological mutation, so it has the Bio type. If you find a mass pistol, that's Area 52 alien technology. Different characters have affinity for different types of mutation or technology. If your primary mutant origin is dark energy, it usually offers a bonus for using Alpha mutations of the Dark type. One of the benefits of this approach is that a great mutation such as Disintegrating Touch looks better to some characters than others—not all characters want to build Alpha draw decks containing the exact same "best" cards.

Steve: The card types also allow a player or DM to customize a deck to suit a particular sub-genre of

a post-apocalyptic campaign world. Want an alien-invasion themed game? Use Area 52 tech cards and Dark or Psi Alpha cards.

Playing Cards and Refreshing Your Deck

Rich: Most Alpha and Omega cards are encounter powers—as long as you have the card readied, you can use it once per encounter. However, these two different character capabilities come into play and are expended through different mechanisms.

Alpha cards are always cycling through your character. When you finish a long rest, you shuffle your Alpha deck and draw one card to be your readied power. It lasts until the end of your next encounter (or until you use it up), then you draw a new one. You always have another Alpha power on the way. You can also change your Alpha card in the middle of a fight if you roll a natural 1 on any d20 roll—you experience an Alpha flux, and you immediately discard your current card and draw a new one. Hilarity often ensues.

Omega cards you need to find. When the GM tells you that you've found an Omega tech cache, you get to draw an Omega card. Each time you do, you roll a d20. On a 9 or less you draw off the GM's deck, which includes an assortment of devices that may be great or may be unusable; on a 10 or better, you draw off your own Omega deck. Unlike Alpha mutations, which are automatically expended when you use them, Omega tech can linger. Each time you use a piece of Omega tech, you make a charge check to see if it's used up or not. With a little luck, you might be able to keep a good piece of tech around for several fights, or indefinitely if you just save it for a rainy day.

Steve: The system is set up to provide one Alpha card and one or two Omega techs as options for characters during any given encounter. The Alpha cards cycle naturally (they get drawn, played, and discarded), whereas the Omega cards typically have a single use but might retain a charge allowing them to be used in the next encounter as well.

While the rules allow for random treasure draws, you and your GM need to shape the story around why that item might be just lying around. Part of the fun is making stuff up.

Overcharge and Salvage

Rich: Omega tech and Alpha mutations are also different because each offers its own unique subsystem. You can try to push an Alpha mutation for even greater effect, while Omega tech can be salvaged so that it becomes a permanent and durable piece of gear for your character.

Salvaging Omega tech means choosing an item to stick around even after you blow your charge check. Somehow you find a way to keep it working at a reduced level—maybe you jury-rig a car battery to your laser pistol or figure out a bit of crude programming code that lets you run your teleport pads with an iPhone. Powered armor that doesn't have any juice left for its onboard weapons or flight pack is still pretty good armor, after all. The salvage system means that if you begin to think of your character as "the guy with the fusion rifle," you get to keep your fusion rifle even after its charge is gone—it's just good, not awesome, now. The number of salvage slots you have available depends on your character level.

Pushing your use of an Alpha mutation is called *overcharging*. When you overcharge, you roll a d20. On a 10 or better, you gain the greater benefit of the overcharged ability. Your radiation eye deals a ton more damage, or you can stay airborne while you're flying, or your damage resistance shoots through the roof. On a 9 or less, your overcharge fails, sometimes spectacularly; hilarity often ensues.

Steve: The salvage slots let us give characters another way to advance some of their basic abilities–they provide upgrades to defenses and attacks that don't need to be accounted for in the level progression. You still must be high enough level to correctly salvage an item, and that "you must be this high to enter" restriction lets us design items with powers that are perfectly cool at a higher level but might be unbalanced at low levels of play. But even the Salvage 8 items like the *grav mortar* still have a really cool single-use effect, so they can be good draws even if you can't salvage it afterward.

On overcharge, my advice is to always do it. It might not always be the smartest thing to do, but it will certainly make for memorable game nights!

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.

Stephen Schubert is a game developer for Wizards of the Coast and is the Development Manager for RPGs and the Dungeons & Dragons game. He has provided development and design work for many 4th Edition D&D products, including the *Monster Manual* and *Player's Handbook* series as well as the *Gamma World Roleplaying Game*.

Tomb of Meowers

BY SHELLY MAZZANOBLE
illustration by William O'Conner

I lied. Big deal. As my mom would say, "call a cop." And maybe you should, because I fear where this Gamma World addiction will lead me next.

I said I wasn't going to write about Gamma World again. I even told my editor that.

"Good," he said. "I mean, no offense, but people are going to start thinking you work here."

But what was I supposed to do with all of these characters? I now had maybe 40. 45. OK, 57 if you're counting. And I love them all. So much so that I couldn't bring myself to throw them into some nutso, war-ravaged, radiation-filled death trap. I mean, come on. I grew up best friends with a stuffed rabbit named Cornfeet and three invisible monsters. Is it so hard to fathom my love for a hawkoid plant?

Later that evening I talked to Bart, my carpool buddy, about my flock of Gamma World characters looking for adventure and their overprotective mother.

"I can't stop creating characters," I lamented. "And yet they have nothing to do."

"That's crazy," Bart argued. "I love my characters *because* of the crazy stuff they do. I can't rip a magical coin out of a zombie's neck in real life, but I can in a D&D game."

It's true. Bart does get all willy-nilly with his characters. After all, this is the same guy who thought a wall-mounted candelabra would make a cool nightlight for a kid.

The one thing we did agree on is that Gamma World characters aren't just fun to make—they're fun to hear about.

"Great!" I said, hoping he'd say that. "They're in the backseat if you want to meet them."

"Um, Shelly, you realize no one is there, right?" he asked. "Unless you managed to create a sentient pile of dirty gym clothes."

"Are those still in here? I thought an errant avocado rolled under the seat or something." It would have explained the smell.

As he read the character sheets of my most recent creations, Bart decreed that having a bunch of perfectly mutated characters with nothing to do is almost as bad as having a perfectly good adventure but no one to run it for.

"When I was in fifth grade, I read *Tomb of Horrors* for the first time," he said. "I've probably read it a hundred more times since then but never had a chance to run it." He said this all dreamy-eyed like he

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Zelda, safe in her bag of leadership (complete with shoe): "Get up there and check it out, Blanche!"

was expressing his wish to climb Mount Everest, save a whale, or audition for *Survivor*.

That's when I had my first brilliant idea of the day. I had a veggie lasagna in the freezer and a case of homebrew beer I was saving for a rainy Saturday. It was perfect! My bevy of Gamma World characters would explore the *Tomb of Horrors*.

I couldn't wait to get that pile of gym clothes and me home to sort out my dream team line up of characters to explore the infamous tomb. Bart said I should plan on bringing at least ten to the table.

"And not ones you're attached to," he warned.

Hmm... maybe this wasn't such a good idea.

* * *

Whenever I cross the threshold of my condo, Zelda, my cat, gets an attack of opportunity. Today was no different.

"Quit it, Zelda!" I shouted, using my Luxe handbag as a shield. What would Marc Jacobs say?

Anyone who knows me (or her) or is friends with me (or her) on Facebook knows we have a rather tempestuous relationship. She is bossy and vindictive and takes up way too much space on the bed. She also takes great pleasure in sneaking up behind me and digging her death claws into my calves or the backs of my arms. Once I had to beat her off my triceps with a fork. I am told by people with cats that this is what cats do. *Really?*

Zelda wasn't supposed to be my cat. She belonged to my friend and I was her cat sitter. Then one day he came back from vacation and told me he met another cat and didn't want Zelda anymore.

"We never really connected," he explained. "She seems to like you much more."

While that may be true, I didn't want a cat *permanently*. I wanted to get another dog. Maybe two more. But what choice did I have? It was my way or the Humane Society's way. And this is how I get thanked. I hate to say it, but cats kind of suck.

As if reading my thoughts, Zelda raced around to attack my shins. Thankfully I was wearing tall boots.

"Ingrate!" I scolded. "A dog would never get away with this." But because I proved to be an unworthy opponent, she quickly became bored and moved on to the couch to lick my epidermis off her claws.

"You think you're so tough?" I asked. "I should send *you* to the *Tomb of Horrors*."

That's when I got my second brilliant idea of the day. I *would* send her to the *Tomb of Horrors*! Who but a party of cats would make for a better adventuring team? They're stealthy, fearless, and they pack a mean weapon. This would be my chance to *finally* play some Gamma World characters I wouldn't get attached to. I got to work on crafting the perfect felinoid party.

Zelda, sensing I was doing something fun, spread herself over my lap and attacked my fingers as I wrote.

"Move it, catface," I commanded her, flipping to the appropriate page in the rulebook. "You're getting a make-over."

Giant felinoid!

"That's you, Zelda," I said and immediately felt bad. Not everything's fair in love and war and weight issues are one of them.

The next three combinations I created were felinoid mind coercer, electrokinetic, and pyrokinetic. A perfectly rounded party of cats if you ask me.

Zelda wouldn't adventure with just anyone. Monster is my friend Roxy's cat. He's a big gray beast with a nasty disposition. But who can resist a grossly overweight furball rolling around on his back? Not me. Once when I was over for dinner, I thought he was in a compromising position, like a turtle, so I went to help him ... and he hauled off and slapped me.

"Roxy!" I yelled. "Your cat just hit me!"

"Oh, he does that," she said. "He's just playing."

His playing resulted in a 4-inch scratch, millimeters from my eyeball. What is with you cat people?

The next party kitten was Maddux—a gigantic, shaved, toothless Maine Coon belonging to my friend Bre. You know that super tall kid in school who sucked at basketball? That's Maddux. As big as he is, he's timid as a field mouse, even hiding under the bed whenever someone turns on the oven. (Admittedly, that may be a testament to Bre's cooking and not his fortitude; he's afraid of the smoke detector.)

However timid he may be when it comes to kitchen appliances, he is not shy about food. His stepdad (who incidentally is Zelda's old dad. I know...

such a tangled web) made a huge feast of caprese salad and risotto using the saffron I smuggled back from the Spice Market in Istanbul. Apparently Maddux was looking forward to this meal as much as I was, because no sooner had I lifted my fork than that furball's giant, fluffy head was whisker-deep in my bowl.

"EW!" I shouted at Bre. "Your cat is eating my risotto!"

Know what she did? *Took his picture*! Come on, cat people!

Rounding out the party was Blanche, a small, white, rules-abiding kitty. I don't actually know Blanche, at least not personally. I met her on my way to Greenlake for a run. Her strategy is much like Monster's only she would gladly take the belly rub over a sucker punch. She ran in front of me, rolled on her back, and meowed loudly. I stopped to give her some rubs then moved on, but she followed me and dropped in my path again every few feet. As determined as she was to get some belly rubs, she refused to cross the street when I did. It was like she got caught on a kitty-proof barbed wire fence, the way she teetered there on the curb.

"I guess you have some boundaries, Miss Blanche," I noted.

Her boundaries, however, included *directly in my path* as I was about to step off the curb. Not wanting to squish her (well, sort of) I was forced to do a side-step lunge combination that ended up tweaking my hamstring so bad I had to see a chiropractor for months. Can I sue a cat for back co-pays?

* * *

When game time rolled around, Bart and I were downright giddy. Could that be in part to the empty bottles of beer littering my dining room table? (Drinking homebrew when playing D&D with cats is kind of essential.) I couldn't wait to put these kitties through their paces.

Bart made a few amendments to the adventure to accommodate the Gamma World characters. I was none the wiser, never having gone near the *Tomb of Horrors*, but I've heard the stories and lamented the fallen heroes. My friends would kill me if they knew what I was about to do to their beloved animal companions.

Bart doled out Alpha mutation cards to the party. Blanche got a force ax, Maddux got a pair of jet boots, Monster could turn your brain into gray paste with a shriek and Zelda got a pair of wings.

"Scary," I said, thinking of Zelda hovering above me. "Those better be some sturdy wings."

The adventure began in a high-tech lab. At the center of the lab was a brain in a jar.

"Meet Mommy Brain," Bart said.

I have a feeling that's supposed to be me. Bart better not kill me.

Zelda had been called forth to help with a super-secret mission.

"Well, the adventure stops here," I said. "Saying you want her to do something is the best way to ensure she won't do it."

"Then Mommy Brain tells Zelda to not go anywhere near the dreaded *Tomb of Horrors*. Do not seek out the powerful Omega Tech treasure rumored to lie within."

"Treasure doesn't tempt her. Trader Joe's tuna on the other hand ..."

"Do not seek out the bounties of canned tuna or attempt to bring down the almighty, slobbering lich, Acereruff."

"Acereruff?" I asked, looking at Sadie, Bart's old, arthritic pit bull mix lying in wait under the table.

Bart gave Sadie a rub with his foot. "I didn't want her to feel left out."

"Oh, okay, Zelda's in," I said. "Anything to spite Sadie."

"You will need a team of your best agents," the Mommy Brain told Zelda.

"I find it odd that you're essentially playing *me*," I said. "If I'm Mommy Brain, shouldn't I be telling Z what do to?"

Bart laughed. "When have you ever been able to tell Zelda what to do?"

True, true.

I had to admit, I was feeling a little remorseful at the thought of one of these innocent cats (and Zelda) biting the big cat nip mousie due to my errant roleplaying.

"Oh, don't worry," Bart said. "They won't die. They have nine lives, remember? They'll be transported back to the lab where Mommy Brain reincarnates them."

I guess that would be OK.

Also to assist with their journey, Mommy Brain gave the party a bomb disposal robot. The cats christened it Whiskers.

"Sweet!" None of my friends have pet robots.

The adventurers set forth down a very familiar hall.

"Two jackal-like creatures carved into the wall appear to be holding a bronze chest," Bart began.

"Get up there and check it out, Blanche," Zelda commanded.

"You really think one of your living, breathing, fur and blood party-mates is the best choice?" Bart asked.

Oh, right! The robot!

Whiskers moved forward and discovered a lever.

"Pull it," Zelda shouted.

Like they say, curiosity killed the cat. I guess that's good news for the robot.

After a Perception check that only Blanche was paying attention for, a pit trap just a few feet from the party was discovered.

"Back up, Blanche!" Zelda commanded, which is kind of *duh*. I mean, even a cat wouldn't deliberately step in a hole. A robot on the other hand ...

"Unfortunately, the trap is right where Whiskers was standing," Bart said, not feeling unfortunate in the least. "He falls on poison spikes causing 34 damage."

Holy cats! I almost wish we were in the Shadowfell.

"That seems kind of dramatic for two minutes into an adventure."

"Welcome to the *Tomb of Horrors*," he said.

Although Zelda had wings, she insisted Maddux use his jet boots to retrieve the robot (along with some diamonds and a gravity hammer). Whiskers was bruised and pretty beaten but thanks to Maddux's mechanics skills, he was rolling again. This time when the cats continued down the path, they put Whiskers first. Great in theory—he's meant to take the brunt of it, but he lacks some important skills.

"And Whiskers goes down again," Bart said after the next pit trap. "Not too perceptive, is he?"

Maddux pulled him back up to safety and got him moving again—this time in the middle of the pack.

For a scaredy cat with no teeth, Maddux proved to be a pretty solid adventurer. Thanks to his Perception checks, the party skirted the remaining pit traps and made it all the way to the end of the hallway. Yes, I've seen that green devil head a zillion times but standing in front of it, even as a cat, gave me the chills.

"Well, it seems like one of you should go through it," said Zelda, the fearless, careless leader.

They attached a lantern to Whiskers' arm and sent him in to check things out. He crossed the threshold of the devil's mouth, and his outstretched illuminated limb went dark immediately.

"What happened?"

Monster yanked out what appeared to be 50% less robot.

"Whiskers is gone?" I shouted. "Well, mostly."

And with that, the robot keeled over and died.

Zelda (the real Zelda) chose that moment of weakness to jump onto the dining room table and stick her face in a bowl of salsa. She's not allowed on the table and certainly not *in* my food (at least not when guests are present) but I scratched her head in favor of yelling at her. *There could be 50% less Zelda.*

"Is that a can opener I hear?" I asked. "Looks like Mommy Brain wants the kitties to come home.""

"No way!" Bart shouted. "This is just the beginning! And they've already gone farther than most."

Clearly *someone* has beer muscles.

"Haven't you heard of leaving well enough alone?" I asked. "I mean, they're cats. They probably need a nap by now. Let's have them rest."

"Let's have them explore one more room," Bart urged. He too is a dog person.

The cats turned their attention to the stone archway with the glowing stones just left of the misty pile

Monster (with Omega Tech cape), operating the Misty Archway

of debris that was once Whiskers. It did not look any more promising.

"Hey, I have an idea!" I said. "Why don't I just put these cats in a plastic sack and send them down the river?"

I must have looked pretty woeful, because Bart offered a tip.

"Maybe Maddux wants to use some of his science skills to figure out what to do with these stones."

I sighed. "Maybe Maddux wants to eat a pan of lasagna. Like Garfield."

But Bre would have been proud. Maddux was by far the most perceptive and skilled feline on this trip, and I was secretly mad at him for gaining enough knowledge to keep encouraging the party. After six failed attempts at color-coding, Monster finally found the right combo, causing the mist to disappear and reveal a smooth stone-walled chamber beyond.

"Nothing but an empty room," Maddux told the group.

And *whoosh!* Once they stepped inside, the party was teleported to said empty room. Only the room wasn't empty. Maddux noticed a statue.

"Oh, an arm that looks like it belonged to a statue." He pointed to the broken statue arm on the ground.

Zelda wasn't buying it.

"It can't be just a statue, stupid," she claimed. "And that's not just an arm. Jeez, do I have to do everything?"

Zelda punctuated this statement in real life by rolling over on her side and bunny-kicking my wrist.

"I think Zelda just took the statue's arm," I told Bart, before getting up to find the Neosporin. "And now it's bleeding."

She handed the statue arm to Blanche and I held my breath. There was some trick to it I knew, but I really wanted the cats to go home.

Something was definitely weird here. And not just in a post-apocalypse/feline survivors sort of way. I was punishing a bunch of cats by making them explore perhaps the most deadly D&D setting in its history. I was bleeding on my dice, my cat was eating my nachos, and I was about to blubber into my lasagna over the thought of Zelda being scared and bushy-tailed in that tomb, clawing at the stone walls trying to get back to my featherbed. Oh no! What had the *Tomb of Horrors* done to me?

"Do you want to continue?" Bart asked, opening another bottle of beer. "And investigate the statue?"

What choice did I have? I couldn't go on like this. I'm a dog person!

"Yes, onward!" I said. "But Zelda stays in the back."

About the Author:

Shelly Mazzanoble dedicates this column to Monster. Get better soon, buddy! You'll be punching and slapping in no time!

James M. Ward

Spotlight Interview

By Bart Carroll

Illustration by Jared Hindman

With *D&D Gamma World* released in October, we were thrilled to ask a few questions of the game's original designer, James M. Ward. During his time at TSR, James Ward published the industry's first science-fiction roleplaying game in 1976, *Metamorphosis Alpha*. The game in fact continues to this day, hosted at: www.metamorphosisalpha.net.

In 1978, James Ward and co-designer Gary Jaquet went on to create *Gamma World*—bringing the adventures within *Metamorphosis Alpha*'s *Starship Warden* planet-side... specifically, to a post-apocalyptic Earth, where nothing was seemingly out of the ordinary.

Our gratitude goes out to James M. Ward. Without his games, there wouldn't be a *D&D Gamma World* for us to enjoy today!

Wizards of the Coast: Can we start with the names? Where did you come up with "*Metamorphosis Alpha*" and "*Gamma World*"?

James M Ward: Gary Gygax was always a great fan of *Metamorphosis Alpha* (before the game even had a name) and he and I were sitting around trying to think of the first name for it. We both agreed that some type of "change" should be in the name because in the way I ran the game there were a lot of characters mutating. He and I traded several ideas back and forth, and as I recall it I came up with "Metamorphosis," and Gary liked "Alpha," thus making it: "Changing First."

When it came time to name *Gamma World*, we continued the Greek and went with the idea that it was on a world and not a ship.

Wizards: Brian Aldiss's debut novel has been cited as an influence on *Metamorphosis Alpha*. Were there other cultural influences may have helped drive creation of *Metamorphosis Alpha* and *Gamma World*?

JMW: *Starship* was the name of the Brian Aldiss book I read. But in those days there were lots of different stories from which I drew good ideas: Heinlein had a novel (*Orphans in the Sky*), for example, and lots of others did as well. I was an avid post-apocalypse reader and read every one of those books I could get. Those novels helped me create *Gamma World*. I also want to say that I had a lot of great help from the 'then' TSR staff.

Wizards: *Gamma World* was described in a *Dragon* Magazine article as meeting the desire to move from ship to planet. Why the decision to base the planet on a post-apocalyptic Earth, as opposed to a sci-fi world created out of whole cloth? This seemed a much different approach from D&D which—while medieval fantasy—avoided real world references.

JMW: *Gamma World* is a completely different treatment from *Metamorphosis Alpha*. It was decided, "not by me" that *Metamorphosis Alpha* was light roleplaying and *Gamma World* was to be a more serious effort. Since I was in the midst of reading lots of post-apocalyptic novels, the ideas from those books flew from my fingers into the *Gamma World* game.

Wizards: *Gamma World*'s wackier tone also set it apart from D&D—with its mutant chickens, rabbits, and the yexil which loved to eat clothes (to name just a few things). What led to designing *Gamma World* with a more humorous approach, as opposed to straight/hard sci-fi? Was there any resistance from taking this direction?

JMW: Sigh, I'm very glad you asked this question. The idea to make *Gamma World* wackier was not mine. It came from several designers from the TSR staff. On the other hand, I never considered a 9-foot tall humanoid rabbit that could turn all metal into rubber—wacky. This might be an area where I have blinders. I went along with the wacky material because I had lots of other things to do in those days. In hindsight, I should have used some editorial brakes on some of that material.

(From Steve Winter: One example can be found early in the 1st Edition *Gamma World* rulebook. For the overland maps: "the scale of the hex is roughly 43.7 kilometers (27.3 miles) from side-to-side." Where did these bizarrely specific measurements come from? Those were simply the cartographer's idea of a joke.)

Wizards: What type of gaming experience were you looking for with *Metamorphosis Alpha* and *Gamma World*? If D&D was meant to elicit high heroic

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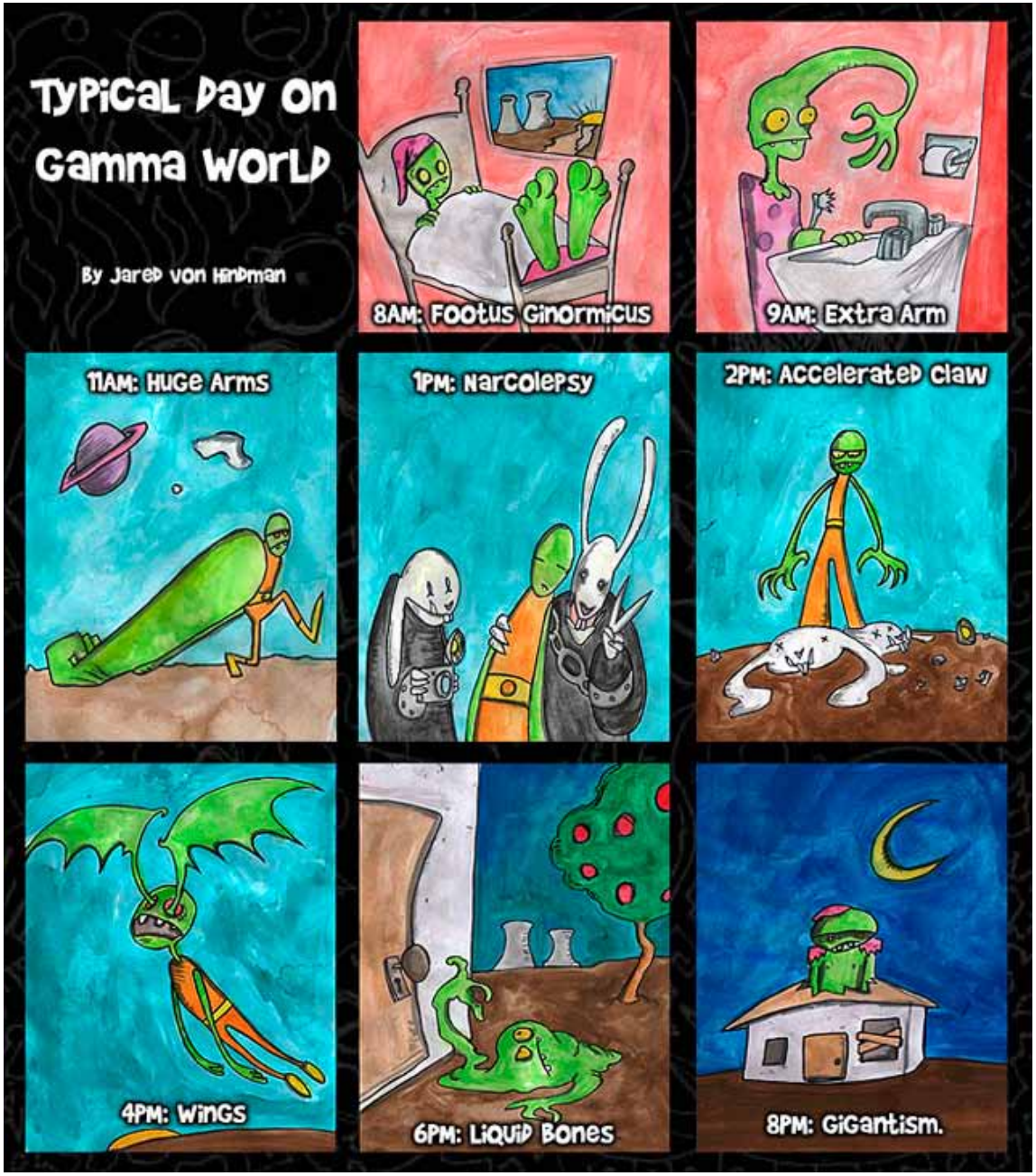

fantasy, was there more of a deadlier experience in *Metamorphosis Alpha* and *Gamma World* by design? On your website, it even states that you have an unfair reputation for total party kills!

JMW: Please keep in mind that in 1976 roleplaying was shiny and new. Even the concept of a "gaming experience" wasn't talked about at all. When I designed *Metamorphosis Alpha*, I wanted a science-fiction version of D&D that was an outer space dungeon. I fully expected people to buy the product and create their own starships. Imagine my complete surprise when almost everyone created their own *Starship Warden*.

I worked hard to make *Metamorphosis Alpha* different enough from D&D so that it was its own game. That's why the game uses three 6-sided dice among other things. I have never thought of *MA* as a deadlier version of D&D because of my players: Gary Gygax and his gaming group rarely had a character die while he was playing the game. I was completely taken aback when convention group after convention group died to a man while playing the game. Roleplaying experience is vital to surviving *MA*.

Wizards: Gary Gygax once wrote that he teleported his players aboard the *Starship Warden*, and they were terrified to be there. Do you have any favorite memories of early games, character demise, or outright wonder by players first making their way through these sci-fi gaming experiences?

JMW: I had the great pleasure of gaming with Gary often, and to this day—after playing with literally thousands of DMs—Gary is still by far the best in my mind. One night our group came over to his house to play with our mid-level characters. We were deep in the dungeon when we encountered a new portal to somewhere. Mind you, earlier portals led to *King Kong* island, and *Alice in Wonderland*, and even to

the dierder fields of a Jack Vance novel. We were all excited by this new portal.

After our clerics determined we wouldn't die instantly if we entered and we took what we thought were proper precautions, we all jumped in. Gary stood up from his DM chair and grabbed an NPC dwarf character that was along with the party and told everyone I would be running the rest of the adventure. In total surprise I asked how I could to that. With a huge grin on his face, Gary announced to us all that the group had been transported to the Starship Warden. With a groan, I went to my car and pulled out my materials and watched as my favorite half elf warrior/mage adventured on the ship, probably never to see Greyhawk again. *::using a hanky, wipes tears from my eyes in memory of that fine character::*

Wizards: Some D&D players recall *Expedition to the Barrier Peaks* as their first experience of science-fiction in their games. How did *Barrier Peaks* connect with *Metamorphosis Alpha*? Was the crashed spaceship intended to replicate or introduce *Starship Warden* to the **Dungeons & Dragons**?

JMW: Gary was always doing nice things for people. In those early days of roleplaying, I was the first person to suggest that he had to do a science-fiction version of D&D. Gary, not knowing if I had any writing talent at all, said, why don't you give it a try Jim? While I was working on my version of *Metamorphosis Alpha*, he had been writing *Expedition to the Barrier Peaks*. I'm sure his idea would have been a fallback position if I had screwed up royally. Lucky for me, he really enjoyed my version of the science-fiction game.

Wizards: Part of the fun in *Barrier Peaks* came from D&D players finding power armor and laser guns. This is of course a huge element in *Gamma World* as well—finding powerful weapons ("Artifacts of the Ancients"). Were you ever worried about the damage players could inflict on the world running around with missiles and neutron bombs? As a side note, where did the concept of the *black ray gun* come from (listed as the "ultimate handheld weapon")?

JMW: The first question deals with power gaming. I've gone on record as being taught everything I know about gaming from Gary Gygax. There is a huge faction of gamers who believe Gary was a conservative DM. I say, he wasn't. I'm the Monty Haul-style of gamer that loves giving my players everything they can and can't handle. Gary's style was a few levels below that, but he liked giving out stuff, and I'll tell you why. In those infant days of gaming, he had no idea what was too much. *Decks of Many Things*, *Staves of Power*, *Rings of Three Wishes*... these were all new and needed to be tested. If something broke the game, it didn't get used any more. Gary couldn't be miserly in his DMing, because he had to find out what worked and what didn't. In all of my refereeing efforts, I've never seen a character destroy a game by getting too much stuff.

As for the second question: I invented the *Gamma World black ray gun* as the ultimate weapon. The ray kills any protein material it touches. I just wanted to make something that was far and away the biggest, baddest thing available. Where did I get the idea? It just came to me when I was writing that section. I don't think I've read about it, elsewhere.

Wizards: Alternatively, why did you go with a system in *Metamorphosis Alpha* that featured few outright lethal weapons?

JMW: I think you will find that the weapon systems of all the versions of *Metamorphosis Alpha* are pretty tough. The *MA* style is, however, much more about mutations and their powers, than science-fictiony equipment.

Wizards: *Gamma World* character creation also reveled in its random mutations, from quills and spins, to wings, to dual brains. If you happened into this world, is there a favorite mutation you wouldn't mind having yourself?

JMW: I'm sure I would last about 15 minutes no matter what mutations I had in *Gamma World*. I'm a huge fan of *Life Leech*. I also like mutations that allow me to absorb energy states.

Wizards: *Metamorphosis Alpha* currently exists in its 4th Edition. What's remained from the first version, and where have you taken the game since? And there are plans for a 5th Edition as well?

JMW: 1st and 4th Editions are online for sale. All of the 1st Edition is in the 4th Edition with lots more detail. There are lots of fun things planned for *Metamorphosis Alpha* at the present time. I have a producer talking about a television show. (Naturally, I'll believe that happens when I see the first episode on my own TV.) On our website, we talk up all versions of the *MA* game and have a free newsletter that comes out a couple times a year. There are groups still making *MA* figures. We have modules coming out several times a year. Another group I'm talking to is trying to get a comic started up. Plus, I have two different *MA* novel outlines I'm trying to work on while I also attempt to pay the mortgage and eat on a regular basis!

JMW: I appreciate all the questions and I hope this helped to clear a few things up.

About the Author

Bart Carroll is neither the result of genetic experimentation by some insane wizard, nor a nightmarish creature loathsome beyond description (though he has been called both); a medium natural humanoid, he joined Wizards of the Coast in the spring of 2004. Originally producing their licensed property websites (including *Star Wars* and G.I. Joe), he transitioned to the D&D website, where he's remained part of the D&D Insider Team. In this role, he generates website content in support of the 4th Edition line of products, the online magazines, and the gamer lifestyle—of which he is an extremely proud adherent.