DRAGON

A Dungeons & Dragons® Roleplaying Game Supplement

Editorial:
Splitting the Treasure

By Steve Winter

Illustration by Slawomir Maniak

From its beginning, *Dragon*® magazine* was aimed at the entire Dungeons & Dragons® community. Whether you were a player, a DM, or both, you'd find something in the magazine meant for you.

In 1986, TSR launched *Dungeon*® magazine. *Dungeon*'s purpose was to provide adventures. At that time, adventures were a hard sell. Dungeon Masters are a small subset of D&D® players, and DMs who buy adventures are a subset of that group. Reaching such a rarified audience through stores is difficult. The solution was a magazine that could deliver adventures directly to the people who wanted them without being beholden to reluctant distributors and retailers.

Dungeon had a clear mandate to provide adventures while *Dragon* covered everything else related to D&D. That split between the magazines made a lot of sense.

This divide was also rooted in printing presses and paper. *Dragon* and *Dungeon* weren't just different ideas; they were separate physical objects.

With *Dragon* and *Dungeon* entirely online, the limitations of paper, distribution, and delivery no longer matter. A subscription includes everything that Wizards.com offers: *Dragon*, *Dungeon*, the D&D Character Builder, the D&D Compendium, and the Adventure Tools. So, we must ask the question: does splitting articles into two artificial bins labeled "Dragon" and "Dungeon" still make sense? If so, then where should the dividing line be drawn?

If you boil them long enough, the arguments for and against the split reduce to the following two lines of thinking.

Maintain the Separation

Tradition: That's the way it's been done since the beginning in 1986. People are comfortable with the arrangement. The names *Dragon* and *Dungeon* have innate value.

Mystery: Some DMs are happy to have players reading *Dragon*, but they don't want players reading *Dungeon*, because it will spoil some of the mystery and secrecy in the campaign. Keeping that information apart is easy when articles have obvious labels.

Reunite

It's the 21st Century: Online publishing is fundamentally different from paper publishing. Maintaining past forms for the sake of tradition can water down the potential of the new forms.

Recruiting New DMs: One goal that every D&D player and DM should share is converting more players into excellent DMs. That's less likely to happen when the articles that can excite players about switching roles are walled away from them and labeled "don't read this!"

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We revisit this question to some degree almost every month—which, I suppose, is a more flattering way of saying that we've been thinking about it for three years without coming to a conclusion. It's time for some public debate. The options we'll throw on the table to get things started are:

- **Stay the Course:** *Dragon* focuses on material that is immediately useful to players, such as character options, common equipment, and character-focused variants. Adventures, monsters, and campaign backgrounds go into *Dungeon*. Articles that straddle the fence lean toward *Dragon* by default.
- **Return to Roots:** *Dungeon* goes back to publishing only adventures. Everything else, whether it's for players or DMs, goes under the *Dragon* label.
- **Tear Down the Wall:** Eliminate the distinction entirely and roll everything into *Dungeons-and-Dragons-dot-com*. Articles that are specifically aimed at Dungeon Masters could be signified with an icon for the convenience of those DMs who want to restrict their players' access to potential campaign surprises.
- **Embrace the Machine:** Although *Dragon* and *Dungeon* online are now delivered electronically, they don't make full use of the digital medium. Player- and DM-focused material on related topics could be segregated AND integrated through the magic of hyperlinking. This approach could extend through the entire DDi system, tying *Dragon*, *Dungeon*, and the online tools into a unified instrument. Such a format probably would mean a shift away from PDFs and toward an online-only presentation.

We're reasonably happy with the current arrangement; we'd have changed it already if we weren't. But we're always interested in making improvements and in seeing the opinions and predilections of readers, whether they're subscribers or nonscubscribers. What's your preference? Which road would you like to see *Dragon* and *Dungeon* take? Is there an alternative that's not mentioned here? Post your feedback in the comments section below, in the forum, or send it to dndinsider@wizards.com.

* The original title was *The Dragon*. TSR dropped the word "the" with issue 39 (July '80) and trademarked the name as *Dragon*™ magazine.

The Rise of Bardic Beauty

By Ed Greenwood

Illustration by Eric Belisle

At Gen Con in 2010, Ed Greenwood and a room full of Gen Con attendees met together at the Spin a Yarn seminar to create a work of cooperative storytelling. Each person in the seminar had a chance (or several) to make suggestions. What you read next incorporates as many of those suggestions as possible. Our advice: Don't read this while drinking.

When you bind a raging Waterdhavian noble hand and foot, then toss him down a short flight of polished wooden stairs, he makes a series of satisfyingly sharp thudding sounds. If he doesn't land on his head, he's aware enough to utter some muffled grunts of pain through the gag you have been thoughtful enough to provide. Grunts give way to groans once he has reached the bottom—if you haven't broken his neck and thereby earned yourself some silence, that is.

How do I know this? Well, there's a tale in that, but to hear it will cost you.

Just a nib.

Yes, one copper. Like most folk, I can be bought cheaply these days.

Chapter 1: Not the Usual Sort of Masked Visitor

It all began with a forgetful minstrel.

One forenoon, Ankathra and I were still yawning and wrapped in old robes, drying from a shared bath that had done nothing at all to wake us up. As we sat huddled together over mugs of warm broth from the nearly empty pot that had been our only sustenance for the last tenday, we rather gloomily contemplated the state of our wealth.

More specifically, we were looking at just seven copper nibs. One of them was a square stamped bit from somewhere in the Tashalar that we doubted any sober city shopkeeper would take as honest coin.

Ankath's stomach rumbled.

"*That's* not going to make us fat and happy," she announced. I didn't bother to nod.

We had once been young and strikingly beautiful, with sweeping falls of glossy hair and long legs that drove people wild. Nobles hired us to adorn their arms at revels, plays, and forays through the streets, seeking to gain the envy of poorer folk.

Those were the easy days.

All too soon, the bloom of young beauty faded, and we slathered our faces with ointments meant to make us look younger. We took to wearing daring lace and tight leathers. And we worked our nights—and days—through, season after uncounted season.

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Now, we were settling into lives we'd once despised. We'd become "attic witches," the aging women who dwelt in dark, Dock Ward attics that sweltered in the summer and grew icy in the winter.

We had seen almost thirty winters, with dagger-stabbing cold and ice rime playing counterpoint to summer damp and stormrain salt, and we were as wrinkled as some of the duchesses up in Sea Ward who had seen more than seventy seasons. We had aches that never really went away, and pitch held a few of our teeth in place. We never bothered looking in our cracked mirror these days.

If we knew that the swift severity of the guild enforcers would not trouble us, we would have taken to brewing dragon-kiss potions long ago to make ends meet. Unfortunately, neither of us looked enough like the guilded potion sellers, so the ruse of strangling them and taking their places would not work.

Believe me, we'd thought about it, and we had even taken good close looks at all of them.

I stared at the coins, thinking. It had been a long time since we could afford to burn fuel in our little grate. If it hadn't been for the meager warmth coming up to us from the kitchens of The Naked Supper three floors below, we'd have frozen long ago. Even with our arms wrapped around each other beneath six cloaks, all our gowns, and three mangy old furs, nights were for shivering. We reheated our broth by balancing our little cauldron atop the Supper's chimney, waiting seemingly forever. We'd had more than a month of the sort of weather when an elf, a dwarf, and an orc would all huddle together to keep warm.

A sudden rap on our door jolted me out of my musings and caused Ankath to start.

No one ever came calling at this time of day. Not in these frigid depths of winter here in icy Dock Ward.

Ankath was closer, so she kicked the door bar up out of its holder and let the door sag open with its usual sickly banshee squeal.

"We've nothing to steal," she wearily informed whoever it was.

If it was some snatch-sword with his blade out and at the ready, so be it. The gods carry some of us off in far worse ways.

Outside, in the gloom at the top of our narrow stair, stood a lone man. Stooping because of the low rafters, he had his cloak pulled high and a gullnose sea hat worn low, so all we could see were his two sharp eyes.

His eyes moved from Ankath to me and stayed, seeming to bore right into my head. Despite the broth, I started to shiver. Those eyes were two daggers of uncaring coldness, casually stabbing through my soul.

"Tace," their owner stated, more than asked. "You're Veldarmatace Rordan."

I nodded, my wet hair sending small patters of water all over the tabletop and my broth.

"And you," I replied, "are someone else."

"Indeed," came the flat reply, in tones that warned me not to inquire farther. "You used to tell stories."

So I had. In my days of shimmering and glittering on the arms of old scent-drenched nobles, I'd spun many a fancy tale to earn chortles and extra coins.

"I did," I replied, trying to echo his forbidding tone.

I waited, staring steadily at our visitor over my broth. He was wearing a mask of black cloth that hung down over his mouth, though the mask was not the gem-bespangled things nobles wore to masked balls. It didn't look coquettish, or grand, or fantastical. It looked menacing.

"Can you write?" he asked, as if in challenge.

I shrugged. "I have a fine hand, but I lack parchment, ink, quills—and inclination."

Out of the folds of his cloak came an arm clad in a silken sleeve as fine as any noble's. He dropped something on the table with a clinking thud: a heavy purse.

"Open it," he ordered. "Behold your inclination."

I sat like a statue, eyes locked on his, so Ankath undid the strings and poured the contents out across the table. I didn't have to look at them to know they were gold. Every one of them. Brightly polished, recently minted high dragons of Waterdeep. Ankath was counting, but I knew there were more than sixty, probably more than seventy. That was more coin than we'd ever had on that table. More coin than we'd mustered for the past twenty summers.

My throat was suddenly as dry as windblown Anauroch. I poured broth down it, swallowed, and asked, "What do you want written? A false confession that sacrifices our lives, a fake treaty that will start a war, or words purporting to be those of a god?"

"I gave you seventy-seven dragons," our visitor—our *client*—replied dryly. "I do not need you to feign anything. I want stories."

"Stories? What *sort* of stories?"

"Unbelievably fanciful tales," came the reply. "Ridiculous everything-and-the-drunken-gnome epics of silliness and overblown idiocy. Suitable for a minstrel to pick ideas out of—to improve upon."

"A minstrel?"

"Yes," our visitor snapped, all ice again. "A man too tuneless to be a bard, and too forgetful to play at minstrelsy any longer without written tales at hand."

"Comical stories?"

"No, hilarity you can leave to m—ah, stories with conflict, comeuppances, and schemers. That involve these elements and anything you care to add."

The hand reappeared with a list written on parchment. Ankath seized it before it hit the coins, and ten blank pieces of parchment followed. A flat wooden box appeared, and then came a sealed inkwell.

"I'll return not tonight, but the next one," our visitor informed us. "If I like what I read, I'll add as many more dragons as I've given you already. Those, and all else, are yours to keep regardless."

"And if we just flee? What then?" Ankath asked.

"Then your deaths will come swiftly. I dislike both deceit and being made mock of. No place in all the Realms will hide you from me." And with that flat statement of fact he turned and went down the stairs.

The two of us looked at each other.

In unison we both plucked up a coin from the table, peered hard at it, and bit. Gold, sure enough. And none of the tingling that I had learned—my only talent for the Art, all the Watching Gods curse me—meant magic, great or small.

These coins were what they purported to be: high dragons of full worth. Seventy-seven gold coins.

We stared at each other.

"I'm dreaming, aren't I?" I asked Ankath.

She shook her head slowly and looked at our visitor's list again.

"Well? What should we do?" I asked.

She was reading the list. Frowning, now, and shaking her head.

"Ankath! What're you thinking?"

She looked up at me. As her empty gut rumbled again, she stirred the coins on the table with her finger so that we could hear them clink.

"I'm thinking you should start writing."

Chapter 2: Fancies, Silly and Otherwise

"Was he drunk, or . . . ? He didn't seem madwits."

Ankath shrugged. "Not barking, singing, babbling crazed, no, but he *is* a minstrel. Or a bard."

"So he must be madwits, you mean."

Ankath shrugged. "Well, *minstrels*—you know what they say . . ."

I nodded. "I can't believe what he says, though. An enchanted talking sword that holds the trapped soul of a sneak thief who wants to get out of it? How hoary an old tavern tale is that?"

"There's more," Ankath told me sweetly. "The sneak thief faints at the sight of blood. An elf lass from Icewind Dale, who goes by the name of 'Kitty' and was the thief's lover back before he got enspelled into the sword, is in, er, hot pursuit of this blade."

I groaned.

"Seventy-seven more gold dragons," Ankath reminded me. "Anything you care to add, he said."

I groaned again. "Before I add things, is there anything else on his list about the fainting blade?"

"It might be a nine lives stealer," my attic-mate read out calmly, "and it's guarded by two beholders. A pair of eye tyrants fused together eyestalk to eyestalk, on one side only. They float side by side like a pair of giant floating eyes. The sword is entwined between their mated eyestalks, so the only way to free it is to cut them apart. They, uh, 'see eye to eye.'"

I winced. "Who *writes* this stuff?"

"You do," she reminded me sweetly. "Oh, and this talking sword is apparently the only known way to separate the two beholders. The combined magic-destroying gazes of their large central eyes generate a mighty field that can undo the spells upon the blade and free the thief's soul. 'Stick the sword between the two large globes.'"

I rolled my eyes at our leaky, crumbling ceiling. "Only a man would write that."

"A man did," Ankath agreed cheerfully. "Want to hear the rest?"

"No. Seventy-seven gold pieces isn't enough to make me listen to one more—"

"Serious pixies have found the sword and are worshiping it in wild rituals as a deity," she declaimed, moving her finger down the list. Not nearly far enough down the list. "They have chants. 'The sword! We love the sword! Give us more sword!' After that, he has written 'wild rituals' again."

I covered my eyes and gulped broth. The last of it, *stlarn* it.

"With two beholders woven around this sword, I'll bet they're wild rituals," I told Ankath. "Probably involving lots of shrieking and running blindly for their little pixie lives."

She nodded, giving me a look I knew.

I groaned again. "There's more, isn't there?"

"The drow mage who enspelled the thief into the sword goes by the name of 'Cupcake' up here in the World Above. She was exiled from her city in the Underdark for being disgustingly cheerful and perky, and dressing in gowns of orange, pink, and yellow."

"All at once? Another madwits. Or is she supposed to be a kind, nice, loving drow?"

"No, he's quite clear about that. She's evil and sadistic, it says here. And mad. She carries around a *bag of holding* full of dead kittens. From time to time she dresses them in frilly things, animates them as little zombie kittens, and takes tea with them."

I told the ceiling several of the filthiest expressions I knew. "I'm beginning to see why our visitor was desperate enough to come to us."

"To you," she reminded me firmly. "The famous Tace of the Tales."

"Don't *stlarning* remind me," I snarled. "How am I supposed to spin together any sort of crazed story, given this to work with?"

"Oh, there's more."

"I'll just *stlarning* bet there is. Why don't you take one of these shiny dragons down those stairs and buy us some of the strong wine I need so that I can start on this?"

"Why don't you write something first? *Before* I get murdered in the open street because someone sees I've got a gold dragon—or guesses I've got a coin of any sort clenched in my fist? We're in Dock Ward after a nasty snowstorm, remember? The Watch wouldn't find my body for a week, and everyone this side of Castle Waterdeep knows that!"

I sighed, nodded, and picked up the nearest quill. All of them were trimmed and sharp, of course, and the inkwell was heavy with the best Unkthorl's Sea-squid ink. I set one of the nice, new, blank pieces of parchment in front of me.

Blank. Given what was on our mad client's list, writing anything was going to be an exercise in overcoming dread. And tossing taste to the winds.

What had the legendary Mirt the Moneylender's motto been? "Tasteless with gusto." That was it! Tasteless with gusto, indeed, and here we go. I opened the inkwell, reached to dip my quill, and–

"Oh, I've got tentacles on the brain . . ."

The singer's voice was male and cheerful. More importantly, though, it was just down the stairs, at the last bend, and coming closer!

I put the dry quill back down. Ankath and I stared at each other.

Then I was rushing to snatch up the old axe we kept behind the door to deter unwanted visitors, and she was hastily sweeping all the coins off the table into her robe and shrugging it off to form a bundle around them. Bedraggled, bareskinned women were commonplace in Dock Ward, and bundles of gold coins were not.

"In here," Garuskus snarled hoarsely, "not up there!"

Garuskus, the hairy and permanently unwashed forger, lived in a squalid and ill-smelling room just beneath us. He spent his idle hours skewering rats, roasting them, and eating them with pleasure.

"There's nothing but a pair of wrinkled old women up there!" he said.

"Oh?" the singer replied. "By the looks of you, perhaps I'll try my luck with them!"

"Enough with the jests! Get in here before someone sees you, Hornadar!"

"'Someone,' Gar? We're in Dock Ward! Who exactly are your neighbors in this dump that you worry so much about them seeing what you do?"

"You have no idea. There's a dwarf who hires himself out as an 'investigator,' a girl with a bee tattoo, an outlaw on the run from somewhere along the Sword Coast who came here calling herself 'Ios' but now pretends to be a sage by the name of Rosemary, and–"

"Takes a lot of thyme to do things?"

"What? No, no, she's madwits. Goes around stables by night salting any donkeys she can find. Sometimes the hostlers chase her across the rooftops of half the city, or into Mistshore, or right into the harbor!"

"I see," Hornadar replied in a tone indicating that he thought Garuskus was more than a little madwits himself. "So, what have you for me this time?"

"Not out here!" Garuskus almost shrieked. "There was a bard on these stairs a few breaths back!"

"Oh?" his visitor snapped, sounding interested.

"Oh, yes," Gar replied before we heard his door bang, cutting off whatever else he'd gone on to say.

Ankath and I traded glances again, then with one accord went silently to the corner and lifted the stone statue head away from the rathole it covered. We preferred to keep our neighbor's future meals down with him and not up running all over us as we tried to sleep. Then we devoted ourselves to listening. Hard.

". . . to see the two *ladies* who live above me. Who are so thincoin poor that they'll agree to anything about now. He hired them to spy on me, of course."

"Of course," Hornadar agreed calmly. "The question is who wants to know all about your visitors and why? Who was this bard?"

"I don't know! I've no ear for music and no desire to listen to a man tell me tales! One of the old, forgetful ones who spent most his nights strumming and yelping at every last Sea Ward and North Ward revel when he was younger. Rhandelvur something-or-other, I think."

"I see," Hornadar said again, more softly this time. Soft and . . . dangerous. Yet when he spoke again, it was light and brisk, as if Gar had never mentioned bards or anything else. "So, Garuskus, what're you offering me?"

"Scrolls–real magic! Seven of them!"

"Real, you say? You've tried them, have you?"

"Hornadar, you know I can't work spells! Or is this another of your jests?"

"I must confess that it is. Let us be serious, then. I've crossed half Faerûn to climb your stairs and smell your delightful rotting half-eaten rats, Gar, so–to it. Tell me, man."

"Well, I have *Brenhri's scrivening scrambler, Harkle's crushing anvil*–"

"The high-in-the-air summoning version? Height depending on mastery of the Art?"

"Er, ah, yes, as it happens. Then *Volothamp's dead-arm, Harkle's hackle, Tupidratkrea's summon quiche, Aungul's cheesemelter,* and *lesser shavecat*."

"So two cantrips, three rather useless journeyman castings, and two worthy spells. For which I can see myself parting with, say, eight hundred dragons."

"Per scroll?" Our neighbor's voice sounded more sickly than hopeful.

"Eight hundred all told, Gar. I'm neither a charity nor a fool. I very much doubt you parted with a single copper nib to get any of them, now did you? So it's all rich sauce for–"

"Only if I can sell them at a decent price, Hornadar! Why, the anvil spell alone is–"

"Worthless to you in this city, isn't it? You don't dare try to peddle it or any of yon scrolls here, or you'd have done so long since."

A shrewd thrust, and dead true. Gar did not reply.

Silence stretched until Hornadar asked silkily, "So will you gain nothing? Or accept my offer?"

Chapter 3: Darker Bargains

"Oh, *naed*," Garuskus snapped unhappily. "Eight hundred and six?"

"Seven hundred and ninety-four. Less, if you go on demanding."

"Seven hundred and a talking chastity belt?"

"So you've heard about that, have you?" Hornadar sounded amused more than surprised. After a long moment, he added, "Done. I lack the time just now to exploit it properly, so why not?"

"Why not, indeed?" Gar echoed, rather feebly.

We heard a series of heavy *thunks* then, as if something large and solid was being put on a table. Then a smaller clinking impact that was more familiar to

us: a purse, even larger than the one that had been dropped onto our table such a short time ago.

"You can keep the robe," Hornadar said casually. "I've others. There are four hundred gold dragons sewn into it, and a hundred more in the purse. Every last one of them minted recently in this city. I'll take your pick of four of the scrolls now, and collect the other three when I bring the belt and the remaining three hundred. Done?"

"Done."

"Good. It's been the usual pleasure doing business with you."

I winced. This Hornadar could make a handful of words drip with an ocean of sarcasm.

Coins clinked as Garuskus swept them up. "So, how are things in Cormyr?" he asked a trifle too nonchalantly.

"Oh, the usual. Woodcutters chasing treants—that sort of thing. There was a big werearmadillo moot last month, down Marsember way."

"There was?"

"Of course not, Gar. I was trying to remind you to attend to your own business in a way that employed some shreds of subtlety, but the effort was obviously wasted. So I'll be blunt. When making small talk, keep it small. Don't pry. Consider this: Have I ever once asked you where you get these scrolls?"

"No," our neighbor replied sullenly. "Not that you'd get the truth if you did ask."

"Indeed. Not unless I needed it and cast the simplest of spells to force it out of you."

"Really?" Our neighbor's voice was suddenly sharp.

Hornadar sighed. "Put that away if you want to live longer, Gar. I'm a wizard, not a dullard. I don't wander through Dock Ward wearing robes weighed down with gold coins without casting wards on myself first. Oh, and you might want to acquire the habit of replenishing your vital weaponry a mite more often. The poison on that point looks too old to sicken a small dog."

"*Naed*," Garuskus said again, sounding beaten.

"Be easy, Gar. I'm not going to kill you. This time. Not if you freely and truthfully answer a question."

"What?"

Oh, Gar was unhappy, all right.

"Have any other mages been up these stairs to your door, looking to buy things—or information? In, say, the last tenday or so?"

Our neighbor was slow to answer. "I, ah, know not if he was a wizard, but six mornings back, I had a stranger looking for a list of items. A long list. Had a cloak wrapped around him that was covered in foodstains, like it had been a tablecloth. Had a huge wooden club under it, for 'reminding folk of information,' he told me. Introduced himself as Phyl of House Attio—an obvious false name, being as twelve traders call themselves that in Dock Ward alone. If his accent was anything to go by, he was Thayan."

"Eleven traders, after last night," Hornadar corrected, almost absently. "Thayan. A wizard, indeed. What sort of items?"

"Coaches, wagons, horses, tools in good order. Asked if I'd seen them in the hands of certain persons recently. To be seized in place of unpaid coins, he said—back taxes owed."

"Ah, yes. I know him—under several names. As Phyl of House Attio, he works for Infernal Revenue, the coinseizing agency that uses fiends as enforcers. Has a brother Hoar, who works a bridge, in trollshape. Summer house in Arabel, very friendly with pixies, spellscarred, always wears that cloak—calls it his 'civil suit.' Very strong on Thayan adventurers reporting in writing all treasure they gain. I remember him all too well. There'll be a curse on every last item on the list. So, were you able to help him?"

"No," Gar said sullenly. "I don't go to the sort of places where his 'certain persons' are likely to be found. Can't afford it."

"I see," Hornadar replied, his voice going soft and silky again. "Do you happen to recall the names of any of these 'certain persons'?"

"Various nobles, some traders I've heard of but never dealt with . . . no one I really re—oh, wait now, there was one odd name. Cupcake."

Uh-oh. Ankath and I traded glances. She looked as short of happy as I felt.

"Cupcake?" Hornadar's voice was idly casual.

"Cupcake. Mage who dresses in bright colors. Might have some smelly kittens with her. Perky. Dangerous. Hinted she wasn't human behind her spells. He seemed very eager to find her."

"And he'd come all the way from Cormyr to find her."

"Hmm. Not a land he's usually in. Did he say anything about what he'd been doing in Cormyr?"

"No, he didn't Thay."

"Ha ha," Hornadar said wearily. "You didn't happen to see anyone trailing after him, did you? A halfling, for instance?"

"A . . . no, why? Does he usually consort with halflings?"

"He hired one as an 'assistant' a season back. Name of Bahenny Wherryn. More of a diversion than an aide, I'd say. He thinks he turns invisible whenever he crosses his arms."

"Now who's jesting?"

"I wish I was. Surprising as it might seem to you, Garuskus Mrandrivurr, there are folk across the Realms even more madwits than those who dwell here around you in Dock Ward."

Mrandrivurr? I glanced at Ankath. Well, those who listen to floors learn something new every day.

"That I can well believe, but if this Wherryn's a pickpocket who can't go as invisible as he thinks he can, why hasn't someone caught him for thieving long ago and relieved him of his hands—or his life?"

Even through the floor, we could hear Hornadar's shrug. "The gods smile on Wherryn, for some reason. Possibly because he causes endless wild adventures to unfold on all sides as he stumbles through his days."

"And this Phyl? Do they smile on him, too?"

"Mayhap they once did, but these days I think he's cursed to travel the Realms and seek every last thing on his list while others amuse themselves—or labor under their own curses—trying to stop him."

"Others?"

"A priest of Dispater, for one, and Kawkuz, for another. The worst two of many."

"Dispater . . . what's a Kawkuz?"

"The dread commander of an undead army, and as for the 'what,' he's . . . no, you won't believe me."

"Hornadar, I'm not some backcountry bumpkin. I live in Waterdeep, remember? City of Splendors, the Town of a Thousand Tales? The longer I dwell here, the more unlikely things I believe. Tell me about this Kawkuz so I'll know him if he comes up yon stairs."

"Oh, you'd know him, all right. Unless you're visited often by one wereplatypus or another, all of whom can send their thoughts into your head and see yours. Kawkuz carries a magic staff that spreads infections. It also turns cats and kittens into undead dire beavers."

"Into what?"

"Believe harder, worldly Waterdhavian. Undead dire beavers—yes, beavers. Burning red eyes, big gnawing teeth, like to eat wood? Oh, and some vicious undead puppies, too. An army of biting, gnawing little beasties. In Baldur's Gate they called them the Dananaeshun, because they ate the Dananaeshun gnome family out of house and home—literally. Gnawed the home into collapse, then ate what fell on their little bony heads. They'd already eaten all the gnomes and every stick of furniture in the place. When they were done, all that was left was the cellar pit. And some bones, of course."

"Of course." Garuskus swallowed audibly. "And these, er, ravening beavers are after this Phyl?"

"Indeed. Of course, he's after them, too. Or at least he's after Kawkuz. Seems that staff is on Phyl's list."

"Where'd this list come from, anyway? The gods?"

"The gods inspired Dysbygur, High Archivist of Eltabbar, who drew the list up."

"You're not making all this up, are you? This isn't going to be one of those groanworthy 'And then mad Elminster woke up and knew it had all been a dream' stories, is it?"

"I'm not making this up, Gar. If you were inventing such a tale, would you come up with something this wild and unlikely?"

"No," Garuskus said unhappily. "Not in a lifetime of ice-cold forenoons." We heard him moving about nervously, pots rattling as he blundered into them. "This bard, now, this Rhandelvur who came a-visiting before you—do I have to worry about him, too?"

Hornadar chuckled. "Yes," he replied sweetly.

We heard movement, then Gar snapping, "Hey, now! Don't go! Not without telling me about the bard! Hornadar! Don't you—"

"Garuskus Mrandrivurr, if you persist in shouting, nothing I tell you will keep you alive. You're the one who lives in Dock Ward, remember? Who should know better?"

"Yes, yes, sorry, Hornadar! Sorry!" Gar was hissing fearfully now, trying to whisper but doing it loudly.

"Sorry indeed," I murmured, before I could stop myself.

Chapter 4: Stranger Revelations

Ankath pinched me fiercely, but luckily Hornadar had started talking, and neither of the men in the room below had heard me.

"Rhandelvur isn't quite the broken old man you think he is."

"I don't think he's anything. I've barely heard of him!" Our neighbor sounded rather defensive.

"Well, then, hear and heed: your visitor—"

"Not mine," Gar said sullenly. "He came to see the two upstairs, not me."

"Their visitor, then," Hornadar continued firmly, "is famous among bards and minstrels Realms-wide. He composed 'The Song of Elminster's Eversmoking Pipe.'"

"Never heard of it."

"Evidently. Well, my cultured Waterdhavian, perhaps you've heard this?"

Hornadar sang a line or two of "Love in the Snows" quite passably . . . and then sighed. Gar must have shaken his head.

Hornadar sighed. "Rhandelvur owns a letter of credit signed by the legendary Mirt the Moneylender—not that the Fat Lord's still alive to honor it."

"No!"

"And that's not all you should know about Rhandelvur Rhengallant," Hornadar added triumphantly. "Literally hundreds of spells—magic that holds buildings up, keeps the city from falling into Skullport and Undermountain, and stops Mount Waterdeep from exploding—are tied to his life."

"What?"

"Oh, yes. He happened to be standing strumming in the wrong place, years and years back, when things went wild. The Watchful Order magists were in desperate need of a living man who wasn't a wielder-of-Art to serve as a transfer focus for dozens of wards, guards, and anchors."

"Guards? Anchors?"

"Spells. Powerful ones," Hornadar said.

"So they—? No . . . no, I don't believe it!"

"Garuskus," Hornadar said icily, "there might well be small creeping things dwelling on earthmotes floating over distant Chult who care what you do or don't believe, but I don't. Nor will your beliefs or lack of them matter if Rhandelvur Rhengallant dies. One of the wards linked to him is the one that keeps the Sleeping Kraken from erupting up through most of Dock Ward and slaking its thirst for blood. Warm human blood."

Gar swallowed noisily again. "And is this Rhandelvur likely to die soon?"

"Well, all those spells are eating away at his mind. Have been for years. That's probably why he was here to see the attic witches. He'll be needing their tales

to give him something new to sing about before he forgets every song he's ever known."

"Well, why doesn't someone use magic to fix his mind? Or at least capture him and keep him drunk, shut away somewhere safe?"

"You don't want to live in a place warded by a drunken mind," Hornadar said softly, and we heard Gar's door open.

He strode out onto the stairs before adding softly, "Oh, wait. You already do."

Ankath and I barely had time to think about what we'd just learned and the importance of what I was going to write for this forgetful bard, when there came a hammering upon our door.

I went for the axe, and Ankath slung one of the bed furs around herself and caught up the removable leg off the corner table. It hadn't been designed to come off so easily, but as furniture gains life experience, it adapts accordingly.

I swung wide the door this time, axe ready.

And looked straight into the glare of an angry Garuskus Mrandrivurr, who was on our doorstep.

"You two were spying and listening!" he snarled.

"To whatever you were up to with Hornadar?" Ankath asked him coolly. "I don't think so. Not after the warning we got from Rhandelvur. Go away, Gar, before we follow the advice he gave us about how to deal with you."

"What? What advice?"

"No, Garuskus Mrandrivurr," I said firmly into his face, starting to close the door, "you don't want to learn that. Truly, you don't."

He blocked the door with one stoutly booted foot. "I'll be the judge of that."

Ankath looked at our neighbor in contemptuous silence, then glanced at me. "We could tell him a bit."

I shrugged. "Very well. He should think over consequences a time or two in his life, to be sure. Gar, how soon would the warmth of your body awaken a trio of frozen harbor crabs? And being as they always wake up hungry, what do you think they'd do first? Hmm?"

Our neighbor's jaw dropped open, his face went pale, and he staggered back from our door.

I slammed it in his face, then barred it and headed for the table. Writers never waste good vivid images.

The cold had long ago conquered my fingers and was now busy creeping into my mind. The former were like numb sticks, and the latter was fresh out of ideas and reduced to staring dully at Ankath as she hissed, "What're you doing? Write more! Why have you stopped? You know what's at stake!"

"I . . . I can't think," I hissed back. "I know how important this is, but . . . I'm spent. Nothing comes into my mind. I . . ."

"You will doom Waterdeep if you don't start writing with that quill instead of posing with it!" Ankath snarled.

I gave her a helpless shrug, and she spat at the ceiling in frustration, snatched me out of my chair, and rolled me across the bed until I came off the other side as a huge ungainly ball of sleeping-furs. She angrily tied them all in place around me with our clothesline and thrust me at the chimney.

"Embrace the chimney," she ordered.

It was a posture familiar to us both from our daily cauldron warmings, but I . . .

"Hang on to that chimney and listen," she added. "I'll write, and you tell me what you hear!"

Well, now . . .

I embraced the chimney, wrapping myself around it and putting my ear to the greasy smoke. I tried to hear the voices floating up from the Supper below. I heard a lot of clinking and clattering from the cooks, but around it I could, yes, hear scraps and snatches of converse in the Naked Supper.

Eight summers had passed since the Naked Truth festhall had changed from a dance and drinks club to a food hall and become the Naked Supper. An ill-run establishment, it had replaced dancing with chairs and tables, and it had started serving an unappealing gruel. The nightly streams of Waterdhavians from better wards who had sought thrills and brought fair coin with them had ended with the departure of the dancers, and the gruel had become steadily worse since then. These days the patrons tended to focus on the drinking more and less on anything else, which made for some very strange tales indeed.

"She's a seamstress, see? So she takes this order for ritual gowns, the most ghastly pink you've ever seen, and spills arglut glue on the cloth. Really sticky stuff, but firm when it sets—you can make false noses and ears from it. Edible, too. Aye, har har, my thoughts went there, too!"

Rolling my eyes, I dutifully relayed this over my shoulder to Ankath, the slight turning of my head bringing another voice up the chimney.

"Just back in Suzail from Arrabar were these particular Purple Dragons. Team the king sends everywhere, out of uniform, to do his bidding. It's hunting kittens this time, for some madwits reason I heard not, but they'll get them if they're anywhere in the Realms to be got! These Dragons, see, are really good. A one-eyed oldguard warrior leads them. Goes by the name of Ikhabhod and hurls black pudding at foes when he fights. White black puddings, mind, because they're made with the gore of a monster that has white blood."

A higher, louder one drowned out that one.

"Nothing in the bathhouse but steam, dirty water crowded full of drunken Zhents, and a lot of something horrible they were quaffing called 'absinthe' or some such."

Someone retched loudly, and yet another voice cut through the resulting din of oaths, scraping chairs, and fists smacking into flesh.

"They're saying this she-priest caused the Spellplague all by herself! Some old battleblade called Amanthe Flaurence, who falls asleep all the time, sometimes in mid-prayer. Cleric of Ilmater, at a crum-

bling old temple of the Maimed God, somewhere in Impiltur. I don't believe it, myself, but . . ."

That fourth new voice gave way to a fifth.

". . . craziest dancer I ever saw. Says she dances for the gods, rides in on a horse she calls a 'nightmare,' then scampers around the stage. Jheloa, she calls herself. An utter madwits, but beautiful! She's that good on the eyes!"

" . . . so if we're all good and ready when I cut the bard's throat, we can race in and loot the grand houses that haven't fallen while what's left of Waterdeep is still screaming and fleeing in all directions!"

Chapter 5: Nastier Clevernesses

I hurled myself at the door. "We have to get down there, right now!"

"Down into the Supper? We're not dressed!"

"I am—or near enough—so get that door open! I have to get down there and see who said the last bit!"

"Why? What was it?"

"All about being right-ready to plunder all ruined Waterdeep after he cut the bard's throat," I told Ankath grimly, shedding bed furs as I lumbered, stumbled, and tripped my way to the door.

Obligingly she flung it open so I could fall headlong down the stairs, and go on losing the bedclothes she'd wrapped around me as I rolled on, around the curve of descending steps. I caught a brief glimpse of a maroon-robed, hooded man hastening down the stairs far below me, before he hurried on, out of sight.

Garuskus flung his door open and stepped out to see what was going on, of course—just in time to get a jumping Ankath full in the face as she raced after me, trying to claw some clothes on in mid-leap.

"Coins hidden," she gasped as she landed beside me in a heavily thumping heap, our surly neighbor out cold in her wake.

We half-sprinted, half-fell down the rest of the stairs, collecting no end of bruises as we tried to dress each other on the run while cracking our elbows against every turn of the walls. Then in through the kitchens, expecting an angry shout from Brorath but thankfully rushing through his domain unnoticed while he was busy shouting obscenities amid the billowing steam of four unattended pots boiling over at once. We tumbled into a dark back corner of the Supper. Then into the labyrinth of dimly lit booths we went, where men were muttering shady transactions over plates and tankards that had long since been emptied. The reek of scorched gruel hadn't yet crept out of the kitchens to assail them, and they were all hard at their hissing converse.

"The seas are running red! No, really—crimson! Even up in the sea of ice. The beaches are all pink snow and vicious crabs, driven up out of the water and starving, so watch your toes! Some crazed sage says it's the gore from thousands of undead fish, or undead kittens in a bath, or some such!"

"Well, if that's what he's saying, you've got the 'crazed' part right! I've never heard such utter bilgesauce in my life! Why, next he'll be . . ."

We rounded a corner. More booths and different voices, but none the one I was straining to hear.

Luckily we were exactly the sort of folk who could go peering around the Supper's back booths without arousing immediate suspicion.

"So after the fortieth murder, the mages finally got together to hunt the slayer down. It turns out it wasn't Elminster at all, but a doppelganger using his name and likeness. This not-Elminster had got hold of some magic to create its own little army of golems, but all it had to work with was a warehouse full of cheese!"

"You're not—"

"I am. The doppelganger had an army of cheese golems. 'Course, most of the Realms can sleep safe in their beds—march 'em too far south and they melt!"

"Oh, for the love of Lady Firehair! How cheesy can your tales get?"

"Har har-dee har. You'd not be laughing, Sir Defender of Sune, if they were smothering you!"

A paladin of Sune, here? In the back booths of the Supper? I rolled my eyes and didn't have to look at Ankath to know she was doing the same.

"Wait a bit, now," someone else at that table said, "they'd not melt all that fast if they were aged correctly and strong to begin with."

"Well, then, Waterdeep's first line of defense would be that madwits half-orc who wanders the Rat Hills—Bongo, that's his name! The one who always howls how he'll do slaughter with his mighty two-handed 'Cheese Shredder'! There he'll be, a lone figure, eating hard, as the army of cheese golems lurches right over him! Haw haw haw!"

"Haw-haw. So if these golems all have a little accident with azure paint, they'll be, uh, blue cheese?"

Patrons groaned and hurled tankards in response to that, er, witticism, so we ducked around another corner and into a new cluster of booths.

"Cloth vipers? What're cloth vipers? Dangerous snakes or something?"

"They're not dangerous snakes, Laedly. It's the latest street term for overdressed widows seeking new husbands, and . . ."

Neither voice was the one. We kept moving.

"Well, a War Wizard of Cormyr was after them, too! Seems one of the dead kittens in the bag was his favorite pet!"

"Apprentice, I heard. A lady who looked like a drunkard's dream and was still alive but magically trapped in cat shape! They're saying she got away while the mind flayer was busy turning all the dead kittens into some sort of giant cat golem!"

"Mind flayer! You didn't say anything about a mind flayer! That nice massage lass at the bathhouse was a mind flayer?"

Well, that certainly sounded interesting, but the voices weren't right and we had to look like we were searching for someone rather than stopping to listen.

" . . . so mad with grief he thought he could bring his dead wife back if he made her a body. So he'd been collecting random body parts from corpses

like any energetic wizard can if he whisks himself to enough battlefields and back alleys, plus he'd been grabbing snakes and beasts and reeds and, well, brown stuff, and . . ."

Next table.

"This isn't just a chastity belt. It's a magic chastity belt, see?"

"What, enchanted so its cold iron won't rust, or something worth talking about?"

"It talks."

"Is this the one that has a sneak thief trapped in it? You know, the one that Hornadar the Slayer ended up with after all the, ah, trouble? The thief that was trapped in a sword before that?"

"That's the one. Hornadar's welcome to it. I mean, who would want to wear one, knowing it can trap folk inside itself?"

"Someone who wants to carry her lover around without all the expense of feeding him?"

More groans. We moved on.

"No, no, far worse magic than that! Seems the Spellplague isn't done. A drifting cloud follows the sword, about two bells behind, and bucks that get caught in it become does—and lasses become jacks!"

"Urh. Well, wizards always have had very strange ideas of what's funny. That's got to be a spell, not some sort of lingering Spellplague—way too much gets blamed on the Spellplague, I tell you! Half the mage crimes in the Realms are explained away as lingering blue fire, when they're—"

"Yes, yes, wizards are as dishonest as the rest of us! That's hardly news, Rhuz."

"I'll say! That Hornadar was trying to unload a chastity belt on me a few days back, and he'll have swoggled someone into taking it by now."

I touched the crook of Ankath's right arm to signal she should tarry with me, and made a show of going past this table to peer into a booth where a lone man slumped, asleep or worse, to buy time to hear more.

I was startled to hear him murmuring aloud, "She was so ugly, this she-ogre, that she dances in fishnets with the fish still in them! Fish that go right on trying to swim upstream—and down. Baraundarella's her name, but they call her Salmon-Ella. Not much of a catch, lemme tell you."

I looked around wildly to see if this drunk was speaking to someone—and pulled back and out of there in a hurry when I saw eyes staring coldly at me from across the booth. Just two eyes, floating alone in the air, or so it seemed.

Back at the table where they'd been talking about the chastity belt, the five tough-looking men had moved on to nastier clevernesses now. Literally.

"Oh, he's been up to nastier clevernesses, let me tell you! A curse on the thing was all too likely to send someone holding it all over the Realms and beyond! Lady Darkrose barely escaped alive, all her archmastery notwithstanding! First it took her to Candlekeep, but before she could say one word to the monks, it whisked her to Arrabar—she recognized Luth's Tower—and then to a certain bathhouse in Marsember I know some of you gentlesirs are familiar with—"

"'Good jacks don't always capture the lass?' Is that the one?"

"Yes, that one. Then the curse took her away again—this time to midair, falling past more earthmotes than she was interested in counting, where a mountaintop in Halruaa used to be. She was trying to cast a spell to avoid being splattered all over the ground when she ended up on the battlements of Westgate, staring into a rising storm. Then she was up on an icy ridge, looking down on the Ten Towns—and woefully underdressed for the occasion, of course. Two shivers later, she was in Arabel, then atop Thaymount, then Undermountain, and then in what she swears up and down was Elminster's place!"

"I was talking to the old bard whose mind is going—"

"Which one?"

That sally brought on a general roar of laughter.

"Rhandelvur Rhengallant," came the reply, "and he said she remembered, by being there, something he was singing about in a ballad. An old ballad."

"Yes, ladies?" one of the five men challenged us then, swinging around to give us a hard, cold stare. We'd tarried too long.

Chapter 6: In for a Nib

"Lady Darkrose owes me money," I said quickly. "I was hoping to hear where she'd ended up."

Five men exchanged leering grins. "So it's true what they say about her, is it? Well, Lady Beauty, you'll probably find her at Lornstable Manor right now. Under Lord Lornstable."

"Thank you," I replied eagerly, turning and towing Ankath briskly away.

The men called after us, asking if we wanted to earn easy coin right here and now, but I kept moving. It hadn't been dark enough in the Supper to keep me from seeing tentacles under the table where the legs of two of the men sitting around it should have been.

None of them owned the voice I'd heard coming up the chimney. Had we taken too long to get down here? Was its owner gone?

"*. . . so if we're all good and ready when I cut the bard's throat, we can race in and loot the grand houses that haven't fallen while what's left of Waterdeep is still screaming and fleeing in all directions!*"

Oh, it was clear enough in my memories, to be sure. I'd probably have a harder time forgetting than recalling its vicious glee.

We were most of the way through the back booths of the Supper now, just two tables away from emerging into the brightly lit common room that opened out in front of the bar. A balding man in maroon rose from a seat to lurch along ahead of us.

Would someone have been foolish—or fearless—enough to discuss such matters in an open dining room in Dock Ward? The Streets of a Thousand Eyes and Ears? Ankathra and I traded the swiftest of

looks—her to reassure herself I hadn't found the voice I was seeking, and me to send that reassurance—and went on peering as we strode.

The next table was crowded with excitedly gabbling sages, or at least men trying to appear learned.

"Nay, nay, Lararchford, the ceremony must be done in the winter, when the crimson tide has given the snows the proper hue. A sort of pink, though that's a rather paltry word to properly describe . . ."

Not him.

"Kitty was upset last month because her lover went from sword to chastity belt."

Nor him.

"Throw it in and I'll fold it over—and no one will ever know it came from your hand."

I managed not to shudder. Not him, either. Thank the gods.

"So, what's the most pressing need of a plot elemental dying of loneliness? Anyone? Anyone? A burial plot, haw haw haw!"

Haw, haw. Wincing, I moved on to the last table, where an abundance of toppled flagons and slumped men told me much had been imbibed, and those who'd downed it were beginning to feel the price.

"So these two linked tyrants worked as 'seeing-eye beholders,' if you'll forgive the phrase—'tisn't mine—to a blind elephant. Thanks to some mage's spell trial gone awry, the elephant has a trunk the size of a bull elephant's, but the rest of it is closer in size to one of those fat, shaggy little ponies. The darn thing got tired of dragging its trunk years ago, and now it stands on a wagon that's got dozens of wheels underneath, and rolls everywhere."

"And when it falls off the wagon," the drunkard at his elbow interrupted with a happy, slurred offering, "a deva gets its wings!"

"Oh, belt up, Gollard! You should've laid off the ale two bells back!"

None of those voices was the one seared into my mind. Either we were too late, or the one we sought was out in the common room.

Ankath gave me another look, and I knew why. How were we going to scour that wide, well-lit room without being immediately obvious to everyone who glanced our way?

Well, we weren't. This wasn't some chapbook tale, where a diversion would obligingly happen. Our search was going to be stonebold obvious to anyone sitting between here and the door. We were just going to have to hope that whoever had been so gleefully eager to cut a bard's throat and plunge Waterdeep into ruin for easy plundering didn't think he'd been overheard and wasn't feeling overly guilty or wary—or ready and eager to thrust a blade or hurl a spell into everyone suspicious who came too near.

Well, in for a nib, in for a fistful of lions.

"Then damn it to Tempus if she doesn't show us conjure-scenes of every last place and person and plant she liked the look of, from her travels clear up and down the Sword Coast! Sevenscore and more! It was torture!"

"Trip pictures? They all do it—even Cupcake used to before I fled her arms for good!"

I stiffened, and I knew Ankath did, too, though I carefully didn't look at her. Cupcake again.

"You know," I said then, turning to Ankath, "perhaps she didn't come here tonight, after all."

We exchanged nods and puzzled frowns, buying time beside this first table of the common room in hopes we'd hear everyone around it speak. Some of the men looked up at us, but they lost interest right away and turned back to their conversations. Good. It was the suspicious ones who watched coldly that I was worried about. That sort tended to carve their ways through life with sharp knives, leaving no witness alive in their wake.

"Wasn't this Cupcake hunting you for a bit?"

"No."

"I thought this Cupcake mage was the beloved of this Phyl of House Attio who's been nosing about this last tenday—the one with that extremely large sword."

"No. He was saying she was his lass, and he the lovelorn seeker after her, but I hear that was just so much fancy talk to get folk to tell him where she was. He was hunting her for something—unpaid taxes or a debt or some such. I know the type, I can spot collectors a block away."

"He's a collector, all right, but I heard from Gabe Affhouse that this Phyl was after her to get his hands on one of her kittens. Seems he made the kitty swallow a gem for safekeeping and now wants the stone."

"Wouldn't it have just dropped the stone out its hind end in the usual way?"

"Well, he's probably been tracking it to examine its every last leaving, to make sure he doesn't—"

"Do you gentlesirs mind?" an exasperated woman's voice came from the next table. "I'm trying to eat!"

"That's funny," the man who'd talked to Affhouse retorted, with a leer. "I've been wondering when you'll give up eating that platter—"

His companion elbowed him in the stomach, causing him to swallow whatever he'd been about to say.

"I beg your pardon?" the woman asked archly.

"Ulp, er, hem, aha, I mean—"

I led Ankath on, turning up the side of the second table to keep close to the first. One man, just one, at that first table hadn't said a word, yet.

The woman was returning her attention to her own meal with loud protestations of disgust about men in general and those at the next table in particular, as several of the males in question enthusiastically made lewd gestures to her back. Perhaps if I—

"Over there, purple cloak, table in the corner," that last man murmured suddenly, in a high, fluting voice. "He's the one. Used to leave his victims pinned to Dock Ward alley doors by dainty nobles' cheese knives, driven right through their throats."

With a firm effort, I resisted looking toward the table in the corner. Alley murderer or no alley murderer, the man identifying him had a voice utterly unlike the one I was seeking. Time to drift on.

"Well, really!" The goodwomen dining with the one who'd complained were setting out to verbally embellish their views of uncouth males, but even the most toadlike of them lacked a voice low enough to match the one I sought. I needed to hear men speak. Perhaps in the corner that had just been mentioned?

The nearest table in that direction had eight men crowded around it, with the heaped remains of what must have been a belt-bursting feast—washed down with generous amounts of wine—in front of them. Seven were Waterdhavian, and they were happily telling the lone outlander sitting with them all about the infamous Mirt, the legendary fat rogue of a Lord of Waterdeep who'd just vanished one day, about a century ago—but up until then had been a gruffly impudent foe of many a haughty noble.

"Even liked bards, he did," a diner chirped.

"Liked 'em with their heads on platters, you mean," growled the man next to him.

The man sitting across from them had a long white beard and a beak of a nose—and was growing a puzzled frown.

"Why does my pipe smell funny?" he asked the world at large.

Then he looked at me and started to really frown.

Chapter 7: A Voice in the Night

I gave him my best bewildered innocent look. It had probably been more effective when I was about six, but still . . .

After a long, uncomfortable moment, he transferred his glare to Ankath and held up his curved pipe as if she'd done something dastardly to it. Which for the right coin she might well have done, but honestly, neither of us had seen this particular gaunt bearded old man—or his pipe—before.

Another moment later, he lost interest and turned back to the conversation around the table. Huh. Another madwits.

Well, it wasn't as if Waterdeep had any particular shortage of them.

The folk at the table were all gabbling about Mirt again. And why not? He was safely nowhere to be found—hadn't been for nigh a century—so any manner of wild lies and wilder rumors could safely be told about him.

"All the city knows Mirt isn't dead!" one of the patrons proclaimed loudly. "He's just missing. Seen fleetingly just about everywhere in all the Realms, he is, doing almost anything from ruling kingdoms to becoming Mirtina and birthing new dynasties of little Mirts. You've heard the latest tale of Mirt? The one that has him as the owner of a new dance club in Castle Ward? He's the man who opens and closes the curtains between acts, too."

"The rest of the time," another man grunted, "he just wants to sit and finish his drink. Gets through a lot of drinks, he does. And why not? At his age, he's earned the right to just sit and drink."

"They do sword dances out front, too, with all the jacks and lasses in skirts," his table neighbor put in. "And they have a sword swallower."

"It's the latest place to be seen at—for the next month or so."

"The curtains were designed by my Aunt Florence," another man said proudly, then belched thunderously. "The club mage—Cupcake, they call her—casts spells every night to make it look as if flames are licking up them, but they never burn."

"Mirt hands out a jewel every night, to the best dancer at the last dance. Which sometimes means the only one still sober enough to keep their feet—if you know what I mean."

"He does a mask dance himself, which is something to see. If you're smitten by the sight of a fat old man wheezing and shuffling around, wearing only a mask and codpiece, that is."

"It's a cursed codpiece!" someone said eagerly.

"Aye. Its curse is that it's being worn by Mirt," someone else added dryly.

"Are you two ladies looking for business?" the man with the white beard asked us sharply then, turning rather suddenly to give us his glare again.

"Yes," Ankath told him, at precisely the same moment as I said firmly, "No."

The whole table regarded us, as Old Whitebeard smiled sourly and asked, "Well, which is it?" And he raised one hand in the manner of a wizard about to leisurely cast rather unpleasant magic.

"We're looking for business," I said swiftly, "but not with any of you, goodsirs. We have a commission to fulfill first, and are seeking the, ah, particular clients we've been hired to carry it out with."

Old Whitebeard nodded. Ankath smiled and strolled on. I followed her.

The next table was noisier, and several sets of two or three folk chattered in their own conversations.

". . . so everyone was chasing the kittens into the bathhouse—where they all fell into the water, of course! So in comes Wherryn, to have a bath, and gets a bit of surprise! The kittens could all swim, but they'd rather perch on something, so when he came up for air the first time, every last one of them treated his head like an island! A slippery, moving island they needed to dig their claws into to stay aboard! Hahhah! He couldn't yell for the Watch fast enough!"

". . . the Sunite paladin's sword was singing away—a love song to elementals, but it turns out pixies are besotted by its song, so they swarmed the paladin to get the blade away from him. Which they did just before three or four angry treants showed up to tear him out of his armor, piece by piece. Seems the pixies were all over the walking trees, hugging them fiercely, before they heard the song, and the treants wanted no competition! He'll live, but he'll be a-healing at the temple for another few months, at least. Aroused treants are fierce."

". . . oh, yes! They said it was a magic sword but they were willing to part with it cheap. Took Rheskyn three days to find out why. Stunningly good-looking weapon, mind you, as sleek and beautiful a thing as

you're ever likely to see, handles well, but has a mind of its own, like a lot of these enchanted blades. It hates to draw blood, and it tries to twist aside so as to strike with its flat and not its edge. So light wounds or none, but its magic hits its targets hard enough at any touch. It makes them babble curses uncontrollably in a language they don't know, but that the sword does, until they slay someone and break the magic. It's different language each time, so if you're not a cunning linguist or lucky enough to know many tongues, you're going to be reduced to writing notes to everyone to get through life for a bit. The jack who had it didn't even want to draw it, for fear of what it might land him in."

" . . . now the Watch was very interested in getting their hands on these kittens! Seems one of them was blessed by the goddess Selune, so any were-creature who touches it is instantly forced into its wereshape. So being as everyone knows the city is infested with werefolk, but singling them out is nigh-impossible, this could be one small furry beast that's very useful to our lawkeepers, to be sure!"

"Y'see, there wasn't just one Spellplague—there were a dozen! And they're all still alive and creeping around the Realms like clouds of smoke! When they all get together, something awful is going to happen. Meanwhile, the tavern up in North Ward where the high-priced seers gather of nights is afloat in rumors that they're all coming here! Soon!"

" . . . so when the drow went to wrest the sword from the pixies, they led her a merry dance, see? So she ran out of patience and set them all on fire with a spell!"

" . . . no, no, a lot of the parsley sold here—the stuff in bales, down on the docks—doesn't come from Secomber or the river valley farms at all! 'Tis elven parsley, with leaves bluer and larger than our stuff. It comes up through Skullport from the drow! Aye, the drow grow it or get it from somewhere!"

"Oh, that place is cursed, I tell you! The only bathhouse in Marsember free of mold, they bill themselves as, and so it is. What they don't tell you is that some mages from afar—'Shoon' or some such place, I think they said—spy on everything that goes on there with spells. Everything! And some of the goings-on, even so, will raise your eyebrows! Paladins chasing each other through the baths and out into the alleys behind, summonings of Dispater, and the gods alone know what else!"

" . . . but their translator, now, he went proper howling mad! Rushed right out into the streets biting people and babbling!"

"Sorry, I've forgotten now. I guess that was the thought that ran away!"

" . . . so the magic deposited them in the throne room of Dispater himself! Cheese golems and undead kittens all biting and snarling and spitting! Needless to say, he was less than pleased."

" . . . a voice in the night, talking about killing bards and making half the buildings in the city fall down. Fair gave me the creeps, it did!"

Ankath and I stiffened and looked at each other at those words, even though the voice saying them wasn't anything like the one I was listening for.

Too late, staring into each other's eyes and wincing, we realized anyone around us could have seen—would have seen—our reaction. We both spun around, pivoting and peering anxiously in all directions, looking for eyes fixed on us.

We found them.

In the corner we'd been heading for, a darkly handsome man was giving us a very cold look as he rose from his table against the wall. He was swirling his purple cloak around himself—to hide the dagger he'd just drawn!

His eyes were like two dark dagger points as he headed for us, coming fast.

Chapter 8: Something Fishy, As Usual

The chatter swirled about us unabated, with everyone in the Naked Supper seemingly oblivious to the murderous advance of the man in the purple cloak.

He was richly dressed, I noted absently. He wore thick gold rings, and gems adorned his garments here and there. We rarely saw garb this fine in Dock Ward. The rich were wise enough to hide their wealth unless they wanted to be relieved of it—usually along with their lives—in short order.

Our own deadly short order seemed to be coming upon us. Very quickly indeed.

I spun around and started to run, with Ankath already way ahead of me. We sprinted hard and headed back the way we'd come, which was toward the alley door and the kitchens. The common room offered no safety with its openness and all the watching eyes—not against a dagger that sharp. We'd be down dead before folk even started shouting and screaming, and our murderer out the doors and well on his way across Dock Ward into hiding.

"Hey, not so fast!"

That cry came from one of the booths we'd peered into earlier. It was accompanied by a long and hairy arm that reached for Ankath.

She ducked into a sitting slide on the none-too-clean floor of the Supper, slid under that reaching arm as deftly as any acrobatic young street thief, then skidded into a leap back to her feet and on, with supple grace and the proverbial speed of striking lightning.

I dealt with it the other way. I grabbed hold of those groping fingers and pulled, bringing their owner half out of his chair. Then I bit those fingers hard, turned, twisted, and flung him into a stumbling, off-balance run out of the booth. Roaring with pain and wringing his bitten hand, he ran right into the path of our purple-cloaked pursuer.

The latter slowed not a whit as his dagger flashed out and up. The roaring turned into gurglings as a slashed throat sprayed blood everywhere. Patrons seated nearby shrank away and put hands over their tankards and flagons to keep the gore out of their drink. With that obstacle dealt with, the man in

the purple cloak strode faster, eyes locked on mine, getting nearer.

"No, I hadn't seen anyone run like that since that she-ogre chased down a halfling in the streets of Scornubel. The hin swore he was fleeing because he never ate meat—but his lass told a different tale, heh-heh!"

Ankath ducked into the kitchen. Wise girl. I hurried after her. With any luck, Brorath might slow the man who was in such a hurry to murder us.

"We need more than a little soap here! Haven't we slid far enough?"

" . . . oh, it's not good when you catch Salmon-Ella—or when she catches you!"

"These music elementals continuously play, or sing, or emit one song, over and over again. Yes, every last inane and tiresome lyric. The wizard Narthol-van says they're created by the sheer persistence of certain tunes, so it follows that Harpers have caused a lot of them to come into being over the years. This particular elemental wouldn't stop giving us the 'Cor-myte's Boast' with some amusingly wrong words, but completely off-key. Discordant in the extreme!"

"Well, you must have lacked a rogue. They always have the right keys, har har!"

The groans that greeted this unfunny sally were drowned out by Brorath's roar of wrath, right in front of me. I plunged toward it and into a blinding fog of billowing steam and smoke, hoping I wouldn't meet the sharp edge of his cleaver by chance.

"You think you can strut right in here when-ever you please, don't you?" he was bellowing. "Like you owned the place, or want to rent it for just long enough to warm one of my counters, hey? Well, I'll show you! This is our grease wash, and this is what I do to folk who come bursting into my kitchens!"

Uh-oh. It seemed Ankath was well and truly caught. One of Brorath's gigantic red hands was clamped firmly around her upper arm. He started towing her back and forth through the air as if she was a doll, or a dishrag, and—

Sudden cold fire slashed down my back and left bottom-cheek.

The murderer's dagger!

I screamed, as loudly as I knew how, and flung myself forward in a desperate dive.

Straight at Brorath's ankles.

Obligingly he toppled over me—right into the path of the man in purple. The murderer slashed out viciously with his dagger.

And collected a pot full of half-fried onions on the side of his head for his troubles, hurled hard and accurately by Brorath's slop chef. He went down, with a shouting, bleeding Brorath punching him from beneath. That vicious dagger whirled up and away, clanging off some pots and then the ceiling, trailing blood. Some of it my blood.

The purple-cloaked man, dazed but struggling, clawed his way back upright.

So I launched myself at him feet first, aiming for his face with both heels.

I missed and got him solidly in the throat instead.

Eyes bulging, he was driven back and upright, into a hard collision with the hearth-rack behind him, which obligingly gifted him with its foremost pot in a slow but inescapable topple that I'd thank-fully already bounced and twisted past. I fetched up in Ankath's arms in a whirling slide along slippery grease that took us both down the main kitchen aisle.

Behind us, with magnificent fury, the pot emptied itself atop our purple-cloaked pursuer's head, burying him—and Brorath, beneath him, too—in boiling fish.

We didn't stay to relish the sight, but clawed our slippery ways upright, largely by clinging to each other. Then we fell out the alley door and into the strong waiting arms of a maroon-robed, balding stranger with a kind smile, whose bared forearms were crisscrossed with tightly knotted cords.

"Ladies, may I be of assistance?"

"That depends," I gasped. "Who are you?"

"Sordred Hilhelm am I, Suffering Hand of Ilmater, at your service." He flashed a wide, bright smile.

"I don't trust smiling priests," I told him flatly.

He bowed. "Then you are wise, lady. Know that I am under temple orders to keep watch over certain persons here in Dock Ward, including Garuskus Mrandrivurr and Hornadar the Slayer. Not to mention particular outlanders such as Bahenny Wherryn and the one who calls himself Phyl of House Attio. I couldn't help but notice the, ah, gallant visitor who called on you earlier today. And, just now in the Supper, I saw that you'd attracted the attention of Lord Esqwurr Ulbrinter. The Slayer of Bards. He has murdered six bards we know of, as well as another threescore and five citizens—not to mention likely slaughtering quite a few more we don't. Is he still right behind you?"

"Y-yes, but not pursuing us right now. He's under yon fish. Along with Brorath, the cook."

As we all watched, Brorath's slop chef skidded to a halt beside the pile, brandishing a skillet in either hand. With swift brutal sweeps Lhardoagur smashed aside the top of the fish mound to expose the slack and staring face of Lord Ulbrinter, which he pro-ceeded to batter using one skillet after the other.

The priest let the noble's nose explode in spatters of gore and one cheek get mashed in ere murmuring a spell that froze Lhardoagur in mid-swing.

"Can't have Dock Ward cooks pay the price for murdering nobles, even those who richly deserve it," he announced, picking his way forward through grease and water and strewn fish.

Halfway to the mound he plucked up the onion pot, then used it with care and precision to hammer and crush every single Ulbrinter finger. And thumb.

"Ladies, if you'll help me drag his lordship out into the alley," he said to us then, "we can do Waterdeep a little service."

"He was talking about slitting the throat of a bard, that would make buildings collapse all over the city," I told the priest, pointing at the battered and uncon-scious noble, "so they could be looted."

Hilhelm shot me a quick, stern look. "You heard that, did you? Who else knows about that?"

"Quite possibly everyone in the Naked Supper right now," I told him quickly, "so you can't silence us all."

He winced. "Lady, lady, what kind of a priest do you think I am?"

"A dedicated and devout one," Ankath answered for me. "But other sorts of priests are almost as dangerous."

He winced again. "Wise words, lady. Wise words."

We took hold of Lord Ulbrinter's wrists and pulled, the priest doing most of the heaving. Once we were out in the alley, Hilhelm turned to kick the kitchen door closed again. Through the closing gap, I saw the frozen Lhardoagur suddenly move again, completing his enthusiastic swing through empty air, so that he overbalanced and toppled with a crash.

That was promptly answered by a louder crash of sliding, bouncing empty metal pots and lids.

Ankath and I winced in unison, but the priest smiled in satisfaction and murmured, "The holiest of pain: self-inflicted. Truly, in fair Waterdeep, the good folk always win."

Chapter 9: Prudence is Given a Holiday

"I think it would be prudent to get well away from here," Ankath announced, as the fulsome reek of the alley really caught hold of our noses, clear down to the backs of our throats, "or take his lordship far away before he awakens. The wrath of nobles has a long and persistent reach."

"Ah," Hilhelm told us, "as for that, I was hoping to solicit your aid for a little time longer, ladies. We need to relocate his lordship, just as you suggest, and I have the perfect place in mind."

"Holy man," Ankath told him severely, "two half-dressed women and a priest of pain dragging an unconscious and bleeding noble along the cobbles might be a sight tolerated in Dock Ward, but we're apt to attract rather prompt Watch attention once we're away from the docks!"

The priest of Ilmater nodded and smiled. "Well said. However, if I procure a coach, and the two of you support our 'drunken' lord as we rumble northward, we might fool the Watch. You'd best search him for spare daggers and any coins he might have unwisely brought with him first. Make sure his boot heels don't conceal blades or gems, mind."

"And if he awakens at the wrong time?"

Hilhelm's smile widened, and he held up a small vial. "I happen to have something from my temple that will take care of that." He shook some drops into Ulbrinter's slack mouth, slipped the vial back into its belt pouch, and announced, "He'll awaken only when I dose him with the contents of another vial I carry."

"I have a new respect for priests of Ilmater," I told him warningly.

His eyes twinkled. "No doubt."

"So where, miracle-working priest, are you going to get a handy coach in Dock Ward?" Ankath asked him, more curiously than severely.

Hilhelm held up a hand to request stillness and silence, whirled around to put his back to us, took three swift steps away, and cast a spell we couldn't quite see.

Which was when we became aware that dark figures were moving down the alley toward us, in hunched-over, cowled, murmuring pairs.

"Oh, *stlarn*," Ankath growled, drawing the stabbing needle she carried in her left boot.

"There'll be no need for that," Hilhelm told her gently, rejoining us. "I've walled us away from their hearing and reach. To them, we aren't here at all."

"I see," she replied. "Just as your coach isn't here at all, yes?"

He gave her another of those twinkling smiles, turned to work another magic that made the kitchen door glow for a moment—sealing it shut, no doubt—and told her, "Wait a bit, Lady. Even minor miracles take time."

The foremost pair of mutterers was upon us now, skirting us as if we were heaped alleyway refuse without faltering in their low-voiced but fervent conversation, They passed on out of our hearing, just in time for the next pair of alley negotiators to draw near. "We have to get rid of it."

"Well, yes, that was the whole idea of stealing the thing, now, wasn't it?"

"No, no, Larruz, you don't understand. You know king's tears always have an image in their depths—a scene of something?"

"Yes, Dargul, that's why they're worth so much. I'm not a simpleton, you know."

"I know you're not. So you will understand when I tell you that neither the king of a land nor its three most powerful noble lords are going to show any mercy to what's in this particular scene."

"Oh," Larruz replied. "That bad?"

"That bad."

Ankath turned to me. "Now I know why you never wanted us to greet clients in the alleyway."

I gave her my best grim smile. "Oh, this is nothing."

The next pair walking along the alley weren't cowled and murmuring. They were talking loudly and gesticulating grandly. Actors.

"We'll call it 'Cheese It: The Fuzz,' and end with a huge brawl onstage between the cheese golems and the undead beasts! It'll be a smash!"

"Uh, no. It'll certainly be a smash, all right, if it has an onstage brawl. In this city, Furnald, brawls have a distressing tendency to spread into general mayhem. As in, every single time. The only way to confine the bloodshed and damage would be to hold our play inside the walls of a noble's mansion, where such an ending would only get us whipped until we'd lost about half the blood in us, and chained in Castle Waterdeep's dungeons for six seasons or so, to enjoy a very slow healing. Not exactly the career arc I was

envisioning for myself, though your aims might, of course, have been lower."

"Well, all right, not an actual brawl, then, but something spectacular! Two of the characters fighting with wooden clubs, say, while being tangled up in eye-blindingly bright pink sticky rope!"

"Furnald, have you staged anything like that anywhere before? And if so, how did it go down?"

"Well, in Calimport once, we had two pleasure lasses mock fight in a pink net. The audience shouted lewd suggestions, as I recall."

"I don't doubt it. Just for the sake of artistic discussion, what if we weren't going to end with a brawl or a fight or nudity or anything pink? What then?"

"Well, there're always contests, like Pin the Diaper on the Child, or—"

"Pin the Diaper on the Child? That's popular? Anywhere?"

"Well, work with me, Ambras, work with me! What contest would you prefer?"

"No contest, but if I had to have one, maybe something with flames and smoke—illusory flames and smoke rather than real ones that burn theaters down."

"Say! I know a priest of Ilmater who's a smoke genasi. Fire and air, smoke on Ilmater—get it?"

"No, Furnald, I don't. Nor will most dunderheaded audiences, trust me. I might comment here that religious elements, unless they happen to be old nursery tales of the gods, are not the safest things to trifle with in any play. Trust me on that."

"Well, we could end with the 'it was all a dream' trick. How's this? Mirt wakes up, alone in bed, wearing the chastity belt. He finds a list of odd items to be collected on the bedside table, with a sword leaning up against it. It was all a dream!"

"You see, this is what can happen when you become a writer—these sorts of bright ideas that aren't as bright as those who have them think they are. Look at it from another person's view—that of the member of a paying audience, for instance. If it was really all a dream, I, the paying watcher, will feel cheated. Why? Well, I paid and watched a play for two or three bells—and, it suddenly turns out, really watched nothing. That might get you your brawl, right there."

"So say Mirt thinks it was all a dream, but the curtains pull back and he gets all astonished and alarmed, because it's his bed, but not his bedchamber! He's in some noble's conservatory! So . . . what really happened?"

"Hunh. That sounds like my real life, not a play. Furnald, have you ever thought that perhaps, just perhaps, you should try some other line of work?"

Mercifully, the actors moved on out of earshot.

Ankath gave the priest a stern look. "This coach had better get here soon."

Suffering Hand Hilhelm winced. "Your point," he told her, "is taken."

"I'll deliver it right up to the hilt, if it helps," she told him brightly.

The priest grinned. "I'll take that as reverence to the god, lady, but prudence suggests—"

"Give prudence a holiday," Ankath commanded. "This alleyway is dirty, it stinks, I'm getting cold, and the traffic has a decidedly inane line in chatter."

As if her words had been their introduction, another cowled pair came along the alleyway.

" . . . the bucket from the Yawning Portal was on the list. The payment bucket, that is, the one that's always getting kicked. There's a curse on it, you know, cast by someone who hadn't the coin to get hauled up out of Undermountain and almost died finding another way out."

"So something happened. Something the priest of Ilmater won't tell us about, involving drow, a renegade Red Wizard of Thay, a magic sword, and a boatload of fish!"

"Yes. You've summed it up precisely."

"Arrrgh! Are you or anyone going to explain it?"

"No." That reply was as cheerful as it was succinct.

For a moment I thought we were going to see murder done, but the obviously furious and unenlightened half of the pair settled for waving his hands wildly and saying mockingly, "I Thay, what an ill matter! Win, lose, or drow, there's something fishy about this whole sworded affair!"

That earned a chuckle from Hilhelm as well as from the walker who wasn't going to explain anything. About then, we heard the rumble of coach wheels, and the priest gave us both a smile. "Ah, that's our ride."

He sounded distinctly relieved.

Chapter 10: Happily-Ever-After Time

"He's confoundedly heavy," Ankath complained, as we paused to puff and pant at the third landing.

"So he is," the priest agreed happily. He'd crawled up the stairs on his hands and knees underneath Ulbrinter's considerable bulk all the way, doing most of the painful hard work.

It was dark, and the stair reeked of mildew, but Hilhelm had explained that the Ulbrinters never used this crumbling tower these days. It was the only part of their newly refurbished, brightly lit mansion we had any hope of moving through without being discovered by an army of servants.

So far, he'd been right. He'd also promised us the magical assistance of his temple to deal with any future Ulbrinter unpleasantness, such as if the murderer ever recovered enough to menace anyone, ever again. To decrease the chances of this possibility, Hilhelm had cast several sneaky spells to twist awry any healing magic the Ulbrinters might hire to restore their battered lord. With all that in place and the understanding of future aid, we'd gone along with him. This evening had become a very long night of hard work and imprudence.

"It's been a long time since I've been this high up in a noble's tower," I said, a little regretfully.

"The way of the world, Lady," Hilhelm grunted soothingly, from somewhere under the lolling limbs

of Lord Ulbrinter. "How many more flights can you see above us?"

"Two," I replied, "but there could well be three."

"Seven in all, I seem to remember," he gasped. "Well, my knees should recover if I'm helped back down the stairs by two kind ladies."

"Instead," Ankath said gruffly, "you're stuck with us." Then she added quickly, "Just teasing, Holy One. Here's the next landing, and you can rest again."

"Let's stop here," the priest suggested. "This should be high enough for what I have in mind."

"Which is?" I asked mildly as Hilhelm crawled out from under the noble lord, pitching him unceremoniously onto the floor.

"Bind him hand and foot, gag him, then awaken him with my handy vial—and push him down the stairs. Wherever he stops, we descend to and give him a push again. I want him to feel every bump and bruise. At the bottom, we untie him and slip away into the night. In the morning, some servant will discover that Lord Ulbrinter had an unfortunate fall."

"And when they revive him, and he starts raging about a priest of Ilmater and two Dock Ward doxies?"

"A certain spell I've cast will substitute random names and descriptions from his own memories. Every time."

"And when a priest of another god removes the spell?" I asked.

"Most of his mind will go with it, unless they're very careful as to how they go about it. He's murdered many, so I'm not inclined to be merciful."

Ankath nodded. "Agreed. Hand me some cord."

Hilhelm shook his head and undid the satchel he'd strapped to himself upon entering the coach. "Old clothing. It leaves no rope marks."

He started tossing out motley garments.

"There's blood all over some of these," I told him, peering. "Old blood."

The priest nodded. "This clothing's from his victims."

We set to work binding and gagging.

When you bind a raging Waterdhavian noble hand and foot, then toss him down a short flight of polished wooden stairs, he makes a series of satisfyingly sharp thudding sounds. If he doesn't land on his head, he's aware enough to utter some muffled grunts of pain through the gag you have been thoughtful enough to provide. Grunts give way to groans once he has reached the bottom—if you haven't broken his neck and thereby earned yourself some silence, that is.

We hadn't, it turned out, broken his neck.

That left Hilhelm happy.

"Ulbrinter will be suffering for the rest of his days," he commented, as we helped him south along dark streets, pretending to be hired pleasure girls under his care whenever Watch patrols challenged us. "Ilmater will be pleased."

When we got the priest to the doors of his temple, he asked us in. "A hot meal? Some wine?"

"We'll have those at home," Ankath told him kindly. "Have our thanks, Holy One—and remember to guard us against angry Ulbrinters if the need arises!"

"Have I not sworn by the god's name and my own? Sordred Hilhelm can be trusted!"

"I certainly hope so," I told him. "I have to get back to my writing," I told him gently. "I have a bard to save, remember?"

He nodded, more than a little regretfully. "Well, at least this night has given you much to write about."

"That it has," Ankath agreed. "That it has."

We both gave him a kiss for luck, waved farewell, and headed home to the growls of Garuskus and the familiar squalor of our top-of-the-stairs home.

Rhandelvur Rhengallant was properly grateful, and Sordred Hilhelm also spread word of our many skills—as we discovered when Hornadar the Slayer came smilingly knocking on our door, much to the fury of our neighbor below.

He was the first of many, so we got the roof fixed, plus gained better beds, plentiful fuel, and rich food.

So Ankath and I are attic witches good and proper these days. We offer our tales, beds, and stewpots to visiting minstrels and bards for whatever coins they can muster. "Bardic Beauty," one of them dubbed us.

So now we're Bardic Beauty, Ankath and I, with a beautiful hanging sign and all.

And I do believe I'm proud of that title.

About the Author

Ed Greenwood is the man who unleashed the Forgotten Realms® setting on an unsuspecting world. He works in libraries, plus he writes fantasy, science fiction, horror, mystery, and romance stories (sometimes all in the same novel), but he is happiest when churning out Realmslore, Realmslore, and more Realmslore. He still has a few rooms in his house in which he has space left to pile up papers.

Character Themes: Neverwinter Redeemers

By Erik Scott de Bie and Ari Marmell

Illustrations by Craig J Spearing and Wayne England

Developing your character into someone with a rich story can be a fun and rewarding process. You likely have a good idea of what race and class you want to play, but you might not have thought out what your character's life was like before his or her adventuring career. A theme can help you flesh out your character and provide interesting options for developing his or her background.

This article details two character themes created for use with the Neverwinter setting. A seeker of Illefarn is a self-sufficient elf wayfarer who stumbles upon an ancient secret, and a son of Alagondar is a determined rebel opposing the imperialistic aims of Dagult Neverember, the lord of the city of Neverwinter.

Character Themes

Your character's theme is a career, calling, or identity that describes who he or she is in the world. Just as race and class create basic definitions about who your character is and what his or her skills are, theme adds a third character component to help refine your identity and backstory. For example, the seeker of Illefarn theme is most suited to an elf druid or ranger who has stumbled across a hint or a clue pointing to a threat to his or her beloved woodlands, or to a long-lost secret from the distant past. Alternatively, you might want to play a rogue or a wizard who comes across the clue or the item accidentally or through illicit means, only to be sucked into the destiny and intrigue behind its appearance.

Both of these themes are broad enough to encompass several distinct character stories. For information on using themes as part of character creation and rules for how to gain and use theme powers and features, see "Heroes of Nature and Lore" (*Dragon* 399).

Son of Alagondar

Leave fighting fair to those who have nothing to lose. This is our city, and we shall reclaim it any way we can.

You grew up on the mean streets of ruined Neverwinter, long after the Spellplague reduced the city to smoldering rubble. You learned the laws of this new world the hard way, and watched first-hand

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as the struggle to survive shattered families, stole livelihoods, and destroyed lives. As long as you can remember, you have suffered from the bizarre nightmares that are part of life in the broken city.

As bad as it gets, nothing has chased you away from your home. You are a child of Neverwinter, and while the city still stands, you refuse to kneel.

A few years ago, when Dagult Neverember, a lord of Waterdeep, arrived to stabilize and rebuild the city, you saw right through him. To you, he is not a savior but an invader—his army of "peacekeepers" an occupation force. You might have regarded them benignly at first, hoping your doubts would prove unfounded, but Neverember's goons quickly dashed any illusions you had about their intentions. But most people in the city aren't privy to your insight, or aren't willing to listen. You found that all the rhetoric in the world won't convince the people to rise up and resist the great "Protector," so you turned to more direct means.

You joined the rebel movement known as the Sons of Alagondar, named for the city's legendary royal family. With the Sons, you found ways to channel your rage, and felt as though in some small ways you have successfully restrained the usurper of your homeland.

The rebels have suffered setbacks recently, however. Their charismatic leader, Cymril, was slain less than a month ago, plunging the organization into chaos. Factions have emerged, each of them forging alliances with dark forces in the city. Some operatives of the Sons have made overtures to the brutish Dead Rats gang, while others curry favor with the malevolent Red Wizards in the city. Caught between your principles and the necessity of having potent allies, you aren't sure who you can trust. What started as a noble and simple fight for freedom has become complicated.

You have choices to make, and none of them are good. You dream of yet another solution: the return of a true heir of House Alagondar, who can unite the city against the usurper. But even if a true heir were to appear, would you welcome him with relief or suspicion?

Creating a Son of Alagondar

When you pledge an oath to the Sons of Alagondar, you take a vow to serve a cause greater than yourself. You swear to free your city, whatever the cost, and protect it from foreign oppression. You might have any number of skills, but your determination is one of a kind.

Class Prerequisite: None. Heroes from all walks of life are needed for this desperate task, provided they have the strong moral compass required for the self-sacrifice expected of a rebel.

Race Prerequisite: None. This theme fits best with a native of Neverwinter, suggesting that your son of Alagondar be human, half-elf, or dwarf (the predominant races in the city), but you can play any race you wish. What is required is an undying love of your city. Despite the organization's name, females are gladly accepted and call themselves Daughters of Never.

BACKGROUND

You've lived a tough life, always yearning for justice that never comes. You are suspicious by nature and know your beloved city like a best friend, knowledge that helps when you need to escape in a hurry.

Associated Skills: Insight, Stealth, Streetwise.

Starting Feature

You've honed your combat skills against the heavily armored Mintarn mercenaries Lord Neverember has brought to the city, requiring you to perfect the art of exploiting weaknesses. When you spot an opening in a foe's defenses, you don't hesitate to let your allies know.

Benefit: While you flank an enemy, your allies gain a +1 power bonus to attack rolls against that enemy.

In addition, you gain the *low blow* power.

Low Blow — Son of Alagondar Attack

At the opportune moment, you hit your foe where it counts.

Encounter ✦ Martial
No Action — **Special**
Trigger: Your melee attack hits a creature granting combat advantage to you.
Effect: The creature is dazed until the end of your next turn.

Additional Features

Level 5 Feature

Times are tough, and your foe is always better prepared than you are. Good thing you're a natural saboteur and sneak.

Benefit: You gain a +2 power bonus to Stealth checks and Thievery checks.

Level 10 Feature

Even when the going gets tough, you never give up. Come bloody swords, fire-breathing dragons, earthquakes, and cataclysms, Neverwinter endures—and so do you.

Benefit: The first time you are bloodied during an encounter, you gain temporary hit points equal to 2 + one-half your level.

Optional Powers

The following tricks and skills reflect a son of Alagondar's training as a saboteur and underdog. Your devotion to your city gives you strength.

Level 2 Utility Power

You have come to rely on your instincts and uncanny ability to size up a foe before engaging in battle. Only the foolish underdog never runs away. Then again, you can spot a foe who's about to go down at fifty paces.

Size 'em Up Son of Alagondar Utility 2

After hundreds of battles, you've learned get a quick instinctive read on any enemy.

Encounter ✦ Martial
Minor Action **Personal**
Prerequisite: You must have training in Insight.
Effect: Choose a creature within 10 squares of you. You learn which of that creature's defenses is highest and which is lowest, as well as its current and maximum hit points.

Level 6 Utility Power

You know that the key to defeating a superior force is surprise and speed, and have perfected both and incorporated them into your fighting style.

Hit and Withdraw Son of Alagondar Utility 6

You rush in and strike, only to disappear before your enemy knows what hit it.

Encounter ✦ Martial
No Action **Personal**
Trigger: You hit with a melee attack.
Effect: After the attack is resolved, you shift up to half your speed as a free action. If you are adjacent to a creature after this move and not adjacent to the target of your attack, you gain partial concealment until the end of your next turn.

Level 10 Utility Power

Sometimes, a hero has nothing left to give for his or her cause. When the moment comes, you gladly sacrifice yourself for the sake of your allies, your honor, and the city you love more than life.

Last Full Measure Son of Alagondar Utility 10

Spurning caution, you throw yourself in front of the attack meant for your friend, who is inspired by your valor.

Daily ✦ Martial
Immediate Interrupt **Personal**
Trigger: An enemy hits your ally with a melee or a ranged attack while the ally is adjacent to you.
Effect: The attack hits you instead of your ally, and the ally gains temporary hit points equal to 2 + one-half your level.

Seeker of Illefarn

Bad enough, in such tumultuous times, that our future might be in doubt. I will not permit our past to be stolen away as well.

You grew to adulthood in the shade of Ardeep Forest among a small community of elves, not far from the bustling metropolis of Waterdeep. You were raised on legends, tales, and songs of the kingdom of Ardeep and the great elven empire of Illefarn before it.

In ancient days, elves ruled a great empire in the North called Illefarn. This empire fractured when the last Coronal of the elves led the retreat to Evermeet. Illefarn split into the nations of Ardeep, Iliyanbruen, and Rilitha. These kingdoms each fell in turn over the centuries, with the last of the elves leaving Ardeep for Evermeet over a century ago.

Your parents and others moved into the Ardeep Forest to try to reclaim and relive something of Ardeep's former glory. But little remains of that lost civilization. As the seasons passed into years, you dreamed of glorious days when your people ruled the region in peace and fairness. You imagined ancient Aelinthaldaar, the capital of Illefarn, rising tall where Waterdeep stands now. You mourned the loss of that nation as though it happened recently, not gone from the world for over two thousand years. Illefarn fell not to the hostile orcs and other enemies that sought to destroy it, but to humans and dwarves and allied races whose growing presence squeezed the elves until the Coronal felt there was no room left for the culture that had thrived in the region since before the Crown Wars.

In your youth, you returned time and again to a glade dedicated to Corellon—not to pray, but to gaze in awe upon relics of lost Illefarn, including a single, cracked arrow said to have been launched from the bow of the empire's last Coronal, Syglaeth Audark.

But these were mere daydreams and empty wishes, and not part of your daily life until a few months ago, when several of your town's hunters returned with the body of an eladrin found dead near the Crypts of the Deepening Moon. Your people know well enough to avoid those tombs of Ardeep because of the creatures that guard them. Yet the fallen eladrin did not appear to be a typical tomb robber: the quality of her clothes and possessions indicated someone of higher rank, akin to a diplomat. But the style of her possessions more resembled the old fashions you'd seen on the statues and carvings of the ruins of Illefarn.

The town assembled a party of hunters and warriors to follow the eladrin's trail and learn where she came from, and you, having recently proven your skills in such matters, went along. Tracking the eladrin was hard but not impossible, with the trail eventually leading to Waterdeep. However, finding anyone who remembered the eladrin in such an enormous place proved more difficult than tracking her week-old trail through the forest, and many of your fellows abandoned the quest. But you pushed on. Something about the mystery drove you.

You finally met a group of moon elves that had seen the eladrin. They said she was secretive and spoke with a strange accent. She said she sought Ardeep, and the elves had assumed she meant Ardeep Forest. Apparently she had come from Neverwinter by ship. Why had she traveled to Ardeep Forest all the way from Neverwinter? Why the strange accent and clothes? Where did she come from—out of the distant past? It could be that the Neverwinter Woods, once the bastion of Iliyanbruen and a part of ancient Illefarn, holds the answers.

Perhaps it was fate, or an omen from the gods, that this should happen now, when you are old enough to choose your own way and skilled enough to make a difference. In the mysterious depths of the Neverwinter Woods and its surroundings, you can seek out other lost remnants of ancient Illefarn. You must locate them, and reclaim their wonders, their knowledge, and their treasures for the elves, to whom they rightfully belong. You must safeguard your heritage from those who would desecrate it for personal gain. And if you can, you must uncover the truth about the mysterious eladrin.

BACKGROUND

You grew up in the wilder parts of the North and have learned the value of self-reliance and understanding of nature. As a child, you loved stories of ancient Illefarn.

Associated Skills: Endurance, History, Nature.

Creating a Seeker of Illefarn

Although you can build a seeker of Illefarn from several races and classes, you'll find that elf rangers offer the greatest benefit. Elves benefit most from the powers and traits offered by this theme, as well as fit the background and goals of the theme.

Class Prerequisite: None. The ranger, druid, and warden classes make sense thematically, but a character of any class might align with this character theme.

Race Prerequisite: Eladrin, elf, or half-elf. Although all elves, half-elves, and eladrin might have the cultural connections to Illefarn to drive them to seek its legacy, consider playing a moon elf and using racial background options from the *Neverwinter Campaign Setting*™, because the old kingdom of Ardeep was a moon elf kingdom. However, you could also easily play one of the other elf subraces or a half-elf. Many years have passed since Ardeep existed as a true nation, and your character's family might have centuries of connection to Ardeep Forest.

Level 1 Feature

Perhaps your people truly are closer to the elves of Illefarn than others, or maybe you boast a greater degree of fortune. Either way, the gods or spirits of your ancestors smile on your efforts.

Benefit: Once per encounter when you roll a 1 on an attack roll or a saving throw, roll again, and use the second result.

Level 5 Feature

Your knowledge of tracking grows, and you sense that there's more to it than skill alone. A spirit of the past walks with you, and magic lingers nearby as you move through the homelands of your people.

Benefit: You gain a +2 power bonus to Perception checks.

Level 10 Feature

Your connection to the ancient spirits of Illefarn grows stronger. When you walk in the former lands of your people, you sense your ancestors are with you. These helpful souls warn you when danger is near.

Benefit: While you are conscious, you cannot be surprised. You also gain a +2 power bonus to all defenses during the first round of each combat encounter.

Optional Powers

Your seeker of Illefarn might develop the following powers as an expression of his or her increasing bond with the woodland.

Level 2 Utility

Although it might be second nature to your people to move easily across terrain that would impede others, you have carefully trained in this skill. As such, you're able to help your friends for a short time move with the same ease.

Wild Guidance — Seeker of Illefarn Utility 2

You swiftly guide your companions through the rough ground ahead.

Daily ✦ Aura, Martial
Minor Action **Personal**

Effect: You activate an aura 3 that lasts until the end of the encounter. While the aura is active, you can shift 2 squares as a move action. In addition, when any ally of yours starts his or her turn in the aura, that ally can shift up to 2 squares as a move action during that turn.

Level 6 Utility

With a moment's concentration, you can attune yourself so closely to the world around you that distance and concealment cease to have meaning for you.

Hunter's Focus — Seeker of Illefarn Utility 6

Serene concentration descends upon you. You focus like an eagle on the most distant and minute details of your enemy's defenses, and then spring the attack.

Encounter ✦ Martial
Minor Action **Personal**

Effect: Until the end of your next turn, you gain a +5 power bonus to Perception checks and a +2 power bonus to ranged attack rolls. In addition, you ignore the penalty for using ranged weapons at long range, and your ranged attacks ignore partial cover and partial concealment.

Level 10 Utility

You have become the most skillful hunter your village has ever produced. You can deftly maneuver across difficult terrain, and you dodge between enemies with ease.

Springheel — Seeker of Illefarn Utility 10

Stepping lightly, you dance over terrain on which others can only stumble, leaving enemies slashing at empty air in your wake.

Encounter ✦ Martial
Minor Action **Personal**

Effect: Until the end of your next turn, you ignore difficult terrain, and you do not provoke opportunity attacks by moving.

About the Author

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History Check: Kas and Vecna

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Introduction

Welcome to a new series that explores the rich history of the Dungeons & Dragons® setting. Each installment of "History Check" will provide new insight into the game's iconic heroes, villains, organizations, and events, untangling the contradictory threads of D&D® history when possible. Throughout the text, sidebars will describe what an adventurer would know about the topic based on a successful skill check.

We appropriately begin with Vecna, the god of secrets, and the origin of his feud with Kas the Destroyer.

An Uninvited Guest

"Ah! I see that my uninvited guest has arrived, just as I expected. Yes, I saw you enjoying my dancing earlier in the evening. You're not the first *giorgio* to seek me out after a performance. But you are not here because you hunger for the pleasures of the flesh, are you? You've sought me out for knowledge. You should know that this is the only reason you stand before me now instead of receiving a beating, or worse; that,

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and your most interesting information about the oni sorcerer who lies in wait for our caravan. The Elder is reading the cards now to see if you spoke the truth. If not, you may be a guest of the Vistani for quite a while. I hear that my brother Sergei needs a new target for knife-throwing practice.

"Now, to business. You are correct: I am no mere dancing girl. I am Menodora Zarovan. My clan takes pride in its matchless knowledge of ancient history, especially in matters of the arcane. We know the truths behind a thousand myths. Sometimes we share what we know with those who are bold or foolish enough to ask, but this information comes with a price. Tonight I will tell you what you wish to know, *giorgio*. And one day I will come to you with a request, and you will return the favor.

"Tonight I will tell you a tale of foul acts and fouler betrayal. I will tell you how the master of secrets himself was misled by the warrior he trusted, *and* by his own foolish pride. It is the tale of Kas the Destroyer and the Maimed God, Vecna."

THE ZAROVANS

The narrator of this "History Check" is a member of the Zarovan tribe of the Vistani, a gypsy-like people who can cross into the Shadowfell and other worlds seemingly without effort. The Zarovans have a particular interest in arcane history, bizarre tales, and esoteric facts. A Zarovan might share this information with non-Vistani in exchange for favors, fascinating local legends, or on a whim or a darker caprice.

More information about the Vistani can be found in *Player's Option: Heroes of Shadow*™, the boxed set *The Shadowfell: Gloomwrought and Beyond*™, and the Vistani articles in *Dragon*® 380.

Foundations of Betrayal: Vecna and Acererak

"Nearly two millennia ago in a land known as the Flanaess, the name of the lich Vecna was sung by bards and cursed by clerics. How did he become a lich, and why did he seek to conquer the Flanaess? You may as well ask, 'Why is the Shadowfell dark, Menodora?' The cult of Vecna teaches that Vecna was cursed by gods who were jealous of his power. A monk who raves ceaselessly within his cell in a madhouse swore to me that Vecna confronted his own death and imprisoned it in a castle on the gray sands of an alien world, where it wails in eternal torment.

"As entertaining as these tales are, most sources agree that Vecna was a supremely talented wizard who became obsessed with overcoming death when his beloved mother died. He conquered villages in the Flanaess to use the townspeople as subjects for his necromantic experiments. After hundreds of failures Vecna devised a ritual that siphoned power from the planes to animate his lifeless body, giving him immortality as a lich. Imagine: all of those lives destroyed and a soul corrupted beyond saving, just because he missed his mother.

"There is another question that has puzzled many: why is Vecna obsessed with keeping secrets? That trait goes back to Vecna's first major assault on a city, when one of his generals—a demonic half-breed mage named Acererak—rescued Vecna from destruction by clerics of Pelor. The lich, in perhaps his first act of gratitude, allowed Acererak access to the Rotted Tower in the upper levels of his keep.

"Ah, you recognize the name Acererak. A question for you then, *giorgio:* If a crafty hellspawn possessed the will to become a powerful lich himself, and was willing to take up residence in a massive deathtrap called 'the Tomb of Horrors,' can you imagine that he would be content to serve as a mere underling to another mage? No, the truth is that Acererak *arranged* Vecna's near-destruction and rescue that day, so that he could ingratiate himself with his master and put himself in a position to steal Vecna's darkest, most powerful secrets.

"For a time, Acererak's plan succeeded. Several years passed before Vecna uncovered his general's deception. But with the prescience of a Vistani, Acererak saw his doom coming and fled.

"Vecna's rage, always a fearsome thing, rose to new heights. Not only had the powerful mage who overcame death been tricked by an underling into revealing his most closely-guarded knowledge, the thief had escaped retribution entirely. Vecna swore that from then on he would protect all of his secrets with a fervor that bordered on religious fanaticism. While Vecna's power grew, his obsession with secrecy *became* a literal religion to those who worshipped him. Among those zealots was a ruthless, cruel soldier named Kas."

HISTORY CHECK

A character knows the information above with a successful DC 25 History or Religion check, except for the involvement of Acererak. A DC 30 History or Religion check reveals the Acererak connection. A separate DC 22 Religion or Arcana check reveals that the "lich" Acererak is more precisely a demilich, whose followers founded the Bleak Academy, a school of magic and religion, directly above Acererak's trap-filled tomb.

Kas: Vecna's Bloody Right Hand

"Have you ever been in a room with a mosquito that you can't seem to kill no matter how many times you swat at it? Make that mosquito six-and-a-half feet tall, cover it in armor, and give it the cunning of an adder and the strength of a god. That's Kas the Betrayer.

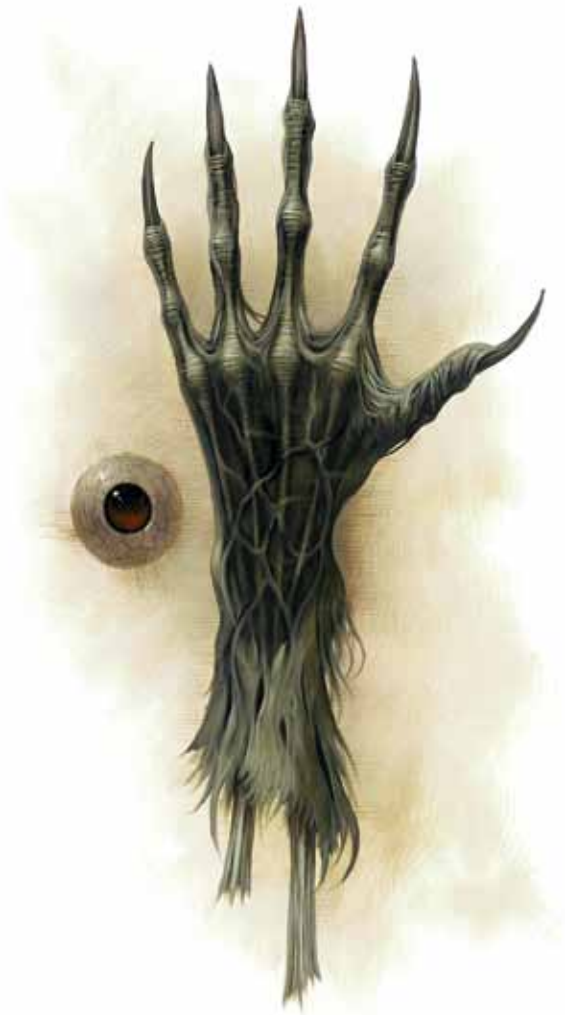
"During the time that Acererak was deceiving Vecna, Kas was a human paladin in Vecna's service, drawn by visions of blood and a thirst for foes who would challenge his prowess at arms. Years earlier he had pledged himself to a god of death, but Kas soon grew bored with mere death. It was the *path* to dying that fascinated him and the more violent that path, the better. Kas wanted to swim forever in a red sea of combat. Chaining himself to Vecna's ambition would grant his wish—in more ways than he expected.

"While Vecna assembled his forces for what would be his first successful major campaign, he became intrigued by Kas's passion for battle, his skill with a sword, and his recklessness. He was also entertained by the paladin's hypocrisy in insisting on a fair fight before he mercilessly cut down his opponents. Kas rose through the ranks of Vecna's followers—by eviscerating them when necessary—to become the Whispered One's top lieutenant. He gained the name 'Bloody-Handed' on the day he led the conquest of Vecna's birthplace. After the battle, Kas publicly tortured and then butchered an entire family chosen at random, for no other reason than to torment the city officials who were foolish enough to plea with Vecna for their citizens' lives.

"In the heady aftermath of his victory, Vecna believed that Kas would remain a reliable weapon as long as there was blood to be spilled. Oh, he hadn't forgotten the treachery of Acererak. It was an open sore on whatever piece of skin Vecna still had. But unlike Acererak, Kas had no interest in Vecna's arcane secrets: the warrior cared only for blood, steel, and dominating his enemies in combat. Vecna was confident of Kas's loyalty.

"Over the years Vecna and Kas talked often inside the Rotted Tower. They discussed future targets of invasion and rumors of recently discovered artifacts. Vecna also taught Kas to be craftier in battle: although Kas's brutality was effective, Vecna's lieutenant would master more subtle tactics in order to overcome stronger foes that challenged the lich's power.

"Vecna used necromancy to extend Kas's life, wishing to retain his trusted weapon as long as possible. When Kas's mortal form had reached the point when even Vecna's spells could sustain it no longer, the lich fashioned for him a fanged mask of silver, and channeled the energy of undeath into it. By wearing the silver mask and accepting its necromantic embrace, Kas willingly received the dark gift of vampirism."



HISTORY CHECK

A character knows most of the information above with a successful DC 25 History or Religion check, although Kas will be known only as an extremely powerful vampire lord who is the sworn enemy of Vecna. A DC 30 check reveals Kas's history with Vecna, and a DC 35 check reveals the origin of his vampirism.

The Betrayal's True Cause

"You give me the evil eye? Perhaps you don't believe me. Possibly you have heard that Kas became a vampire *after* his famous betrayal, as a result of being imprisoned in Vecna's Citadel Cavitius, on an ash-covered world so cold that it freezes the very soul. That is what Vecna cultists quoting from the Scroll of Mauthereign would have you think, unwilling to admit that their lord so badly misplaced his trust twice. But is it so hard to believe that Vecna would choose to turn his most trusted warrior into a 'lesser' undead, in an attempt to satisfy Kas's thirst for blood and ensure that he wouldn't be tempted to steal the greater secrets of immortality?

"As Vecna's empire grew, the Whispered One recognized that he couldn't watch over all his slaves and future test subjects alone. He would need to share power with another, and Kas seemed the logical choice. But Vecna's practicality was mixed with paranoia. Even though a century had passed since Acererak's treason, the memory of that humiliation came to dominate Vecna's thoughts. The master of secrets sought a window into any seditious thoughts that Kas might have. So he made another gift for Kas: an enchanted short sword of great power forged from the frozen heart of a fallen star. As he spoke the final enchantments over it, he carefully pulled a thread of shadow from his own consciousness and wrapped it around the sword's black blade. From that point on, as long as Kas bore the sword Vecna would be able to listen in on Kas's activities, and sometimes even his thoughts.

"Kas was surprised and flattered by Vecna's offering. According to the martial code that the vampire imagined he still followed, the gift of steel from the hand of a warrior's lord was among the greatest of honors. He felt the sword's strength the instant he drew it from its scabbard made from the skin of gibbeted doppelgangers, and with his characteristic lack of imagination named it the *Sword of Kas*.

"As for Vecna, his confidence was now supreme. More lands were being brought under his rule by sword, spell, and claw. His most powerful minions were obedient, or at least controlled. He now had an unobstructed path to his ultimate goal of godhood.

"Ah, but such confidence can easily become one's downfall, and Vecna had far to fall indeed. His scheme to spy on Kas proved to be too clever. The *Sword of Kas* not only contained part of Vecna's consciousness, it contained Vecna's avarice, obsession with secrecy, and lust for knowledge. The sword's intelligence quickly wrapped itself in a mental cloak to shield itself from Vecna's detection, and it fed Vecna false thoughts of obedience from Kas while it nurtured rebellion in the vampire's heart. Ironic, no?

"The sword turned against its creator because it believed that there could be only one master of secrets, and it sought to seize that title by destroying Vecna. Perhaps the sword didn't have the loftiest of goals, but it certainly had a stronger will than its unsuspecting wielder. As the years passed it subtly influenced Kas's mind, gradually convincing him that Vecna didn't want to share power with anyone, let alone a brutal, unsophisticated paladin. It also made Kas aware of Vecna's attempts to read his mind through the sword.

"That discovery struck Kas's steadfastness like a hammer blow. Kas wanted to seek retribution immediately, but the sword assured him that the ideal time would come. Of course, Kas had no idea of the sword's true motives, believing the sword was loyal only to him. And it was loyal, in its way—as long as Kas was committed to the death of Vecna."

HISTORY CHECK

A character knows the basic facts above with a successful DC 30 History or Religion check. With a DC 35 check, a character knows of the possibility that the *Sword of Kas* was ultimately responsible for Kas's betrayal.

The Maimed God and the Betrayer

"Through the use of artifacts and rituals, his own terrible intellect, and the harvested lives of thousands of victims, Vecna had finally gathered enough power to perform a new rite that would transform him into a god. The *Sword of Kas* sensed this, and told Kas that now was the opportunity to strike. Kas would slay Vecna during the ritual, seize control of his empire, and ascend to godhood himself.

"While Vecna spoke the incantations under the stars, at the pinnacle of the Rotted Tower, Kas charged into the keep. Vecna's guards might have proven a challenge for Kas at one point, but the vampire's fury had been stoked to near-insanity by the sword's whispers. The guards fell beneath his blade like wheat at the harvest. As they died, Vecna detected Kas's presence. He saw the sword's trickery and realized too late how his paladin's loyalties had been twisted. He tried to suspend the ritual, but the godlike power he had unleashed would not be contained. Just as well, for at that moment Kas reached the top of the Rotted Tower, his blade and fangs dripping with blood. The lich would need all of that power for battle.

"And an epic battle it was! Cultists of Vecna will say that had the combat been on equal terms, Vecna would have quickly felled the vampire. Perhaps so. But whether due to the effect of interrupting the ritual, the sword's ability to anticipate its creator's attacks, or Kas's great strength and stubborn refusal to die, the combat raged on.

"Kas backed Vecna into the center of the ritual circle, its chaotic, thunderous energy now lashing them both. Vecna staggered Kas with a bolt of lightning; but as the lich moved to finish him off, Kas lunged forward, slicing off Vecna's left hand.

"The vampire, his body crumbling from Vecna's spells, pressed the attack. 'You shall not spy on me

again!' he shouted as he plunged his sword into Vecna's left eye, gouging it out. Kas's sword, sensing triumph, released a surge of radiant energy as bright as the sun into Vecna's body.

"The effect of the sword's act was like tossing a torch into a sea of oil. It set off an explosion so powerful that it destroyed the Rotted Tower, deafening creatures for miles around. Vecna and Kas, at the center of the arcane maelstrom, were sent hurtling through the abyss between worlds. Afterward the only objects that were found intact in the rubble of the tower were Vecna's severed hand and eye,

and Kas's sword. And unfortunate discoveries they were."

An Undying Hatred

"How do I know these details of the battle? Surely only Vecna and Kas themselves know what was done or said. Perhaps you think I am bending the truth, much as I bent my body during the dance you enjoyed earlier, eh? Or perhaps you are afraid to consider who, or what, the Vistani's sources of information might be.

"What matters is what's happened since. Vecna's form was destroyed in the battle, but his will survived. For centuries his essence drifted across the planes, slowly fed by energy from the worshipers in his newly-formed cult. It took a very long time, but Vecna eventually won acceptance among the Astral Sea's most depraved deities as a demigod.

"His rebellious lieutenant's path was easier, though not as rewarding. Kas survived the explosion relatively intact. His sword, using its creator's knowledge, was able to guide him through the planes to Citadel Cavitius, a castle in the Astral Sea that Vecna had established years earlier as a secret refuge. But the blade abandoned Kas shortly thereafter, perhaps in disgust at the vampire's failure, or perhaps because he offered it no further entertainment. Legends say that the black sword has appeared numerous times in different lands, enticing the foolish and power-hungry with visions of glory. As for Kas himself . . . he did not achieve godhood, but he became quite powerful. Traders in Gloomwrought claim that Kas now rules a kingdom of vampires somewhere in the Shadowfell. Though I deal in arcane knowledge, I have no wish to investigate *that* rumor.

"Vecna was also reported to have been in the Shadowfell for a time. My kinsmen tell of mighty adventurers who challenged the Maimed Lord in a shadowy demiplane, where Citadel Cavitius had been carefully duplicated near a dead valley of jagged peaks. According to this tale, Vecna was trapped in this tiny realm apparently for the amusement of powerful beings, as though the demigod were a dancer in a wind-up music box. Kas may have been imprisoned there, as well. That would have been interesting. I make no claim as to this tale's truth, other than to say that the Vistani who first heard it swear that the surviving adventurers had no reason to lie. In any event, Vecna escaped this prison, with Kas seizing the opportunity—as he always does—to escape also. Or perhaps that former prison is now his Shadowfell kingdom?

"Unlike Kas, who prefers to remain at Citadel Cavitius, Vecna travels far and wide. He is said to roam across many different worlds, still looking for secrets to hoard. Perhaps he was the first Vistani, eh? Oh, do not look so nervous—I say that only in jest.

"Vecna's cult remains active and continually seeks his lost eye and severed hand—although your interest in this history makes me suspect you know much about them already. Kas also has his followers and agents. Encounters between the two groups are rare, and exceptionally bloody.

"I do not know whether Kas and Vecna themselves have fought each other since their momentous first battle. Considering their hatred for one another, and how much more powerful they are now, anyone who was close enough to witness such a clash would probably not survive to tell the story.

"Excuse me for a moment. Yes, Lucia, what is it?

"Good news, my dear: you are free to go. The Elder has determined that your motives are honorable, and your desire for knowledge is sincere. She also says that you are a part of a—oh, you don't wish me to say it out loud? It's a *secret*, then! Have I told you how much the Zarovan love secrets? I have some excellent wine . . . ."

HISTORY CHECK

With a successful DC 25 History or Religion check, a character knows of the fight between Kas and Vecna, its cataclysmic finish, and their survival. With a DC 30 check, a character knows that the *Eye* and *Hand of Vecna* and the *Sword of Kas* exist as corrupting artifacts, along with the *Silver Mask of Kas*. A DC 35 check reveals Kas's and Vecna's current activities as Menodora describes them.

Plot Hooks

Below are suggested hooks for DMs who wish to include Kas and Vecna in their campaigns. Additional inspiration can be found both in the entries for Kas, Vecna, and their artifacts in *Open Grave: Secrets of the Undead*™ and in the article "Channel Divinity: Vecna" in *Dragon* 395.

- Arcane masters of illusion in the service of Kas find the *Silver Mask of Kas* (*Open Grave: Secrets of the Undead*). Seeking to increase Kas's influence in the world, they conceal the mask's true nature with the illusion of a lesser, but still desirable, magic item. They then arrange for it to fall into the hands of one of the party members (paragon tier) or a powerful friend of the party (heroic tier).
- A menace from the Far Realm threatens the region. The overmatched party finds unlikely allies: cultists of Vecna, who oppose the Far Realm's goal of global destruction (paragon tier).
- Rumors say that the *Sword of Kas* is hidden in the lair of a razor hydra (*Monster Manual*® 2), powerful wraith (Kravenghast, *Open Grave: Secrets of the Undead*), or similar creature. The adventurers must find it before a group of cultists can get their hands on it (paragon tier) or discover a way to avoid the creature and bury the sword forever (heroic tier).
- The land's rightful ruler begins to display unusual weakness, eventually ceding leadership to a normally virtuous noble whose behavior has recently become aggressive and threatening. The cause: the noble discovered the *Hand of Vecna* and has succumbed to its corrupting power (paragon or, if an aspect of Vecna appears, epic tier) or is being forced to magically dominate the ruler by Vecna cultists who are threatening the noble's family (heroic tier).

About the Author

Ken Hart has worked on Goodman Games's *Dungeon Crawl Classics* and *Etherscope*. His recent contributions include "Faith and Heresy" in *Dragon* 397 and "Strange Gods" in *Dragon* 398. When not teaching his preschool daughter about gelatinous cubes, he blogs about gaming, pop culture, and Survivor at ken-of-ghastria.livejournal.com.

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Bazaar of the Bizarre:
Relics of the Divine

By Jeff Morgenroth

Illustrations by Ben Wootten

Holiness does not die with the flesh, but lives on in the remains of the virtuous. Though fragments of mighty empires and ancient magic litter the world, few items possess the wonder of holy relics, which have a history and substance entwined with a deity. These objects are not only items of power, but of veneration, and they serve as symbols of their god's presence in the world.

Ashes of Royal Hubris

Wherever powerful mortals deny fate or escape the threshold of death, the Raven Queen's gaze falls upon them. This enigmatic god is normally content to allow her mortal servants to bring down such arrogant blasphemers, but sometimes the offender's insult is so great that she feels a need to make an example. Waiting until the doomed mortal's hubris reaches its apex, the Raven Queen then extends her wintry grasp, blasting the prideful heretic from existence with the flurry of an arctic gale. All that remains of these mortals are the ice-encrusted ashes of their disintegrated bodies.

The blasphemer's soul is brought before the Raven Queen for judgment, and the remains, which are called *ashes of royal hubris*, serve as a grim warning for those who cheat the god of death.

Veneration

Devotees of the Raven Queen carry the *ashes of royal hubris* in small pouches around their necks, and they frequently tuck them away from sight. These servants use pinches of the material as components for rituals, and sometimes trace ashen symbols across a face, hoping that the Raven Queen passes over the marked ones when she visits doom upon the world.

COVENANT OF THE LONGEST NIGHT

Invokers paint their eyelids with the ashes during the winter solstice, standing naked in the snowy night with their eyes closed. They say that the Raven Queen senses the presence of these ash-blackened marks and touches the mind of the invoker, imparting visions or prophecies for the days ahead.

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Ashes of Royal Hubris Level 10+ Rare

Scattering these icy ashes punishes the arrogance of those who act against you, displaying the frigid might of the Raven Queen.

Lvl 10	+1	200 gp	Lvl 25	+4	25,000 gp
Lvl 15	+2	1,000 gp	Lvl 30	+5	125,000 gp
Lvl 20	+3	5,000 gp			

Consumable

✧ **Attack Power** (Cold, Necrotic) ✦ **Consumable** (Standard Action)

Attack: Close burst 1 (enemies in the burst); the item's level + 3 vs. Will

Hit: The target takes ongoing 5 cold and necrotic damage, and cannot regain hit points or gain temporary hit points (save ends all). While subject to this effect, the target grants combat advantage to you. In addition, if the target makes an attack, it takes a -2 penalty to its next saving throw against this effect.

Level 15 or 20: Ongoing 10 cold and necrotic damage, and the saving throw penalty increases to -3.

Level 25 or 30: Ongoing 15 cold and necrotic damage, and the saving throw penalty increases to -4.

The Eleventh Rack

In a past age, the duergar legions of Tor Zarak were forced to battle an unexpected foe: Kord, god of war and storm. To deal with the mounting duergar threat, Kord single-handedly laid siege to the duergar stronghold. After a legendary and lengthy clash, Kord was finally captured and brought to the deepest vaults of the city, where the duergar treated him to all manner of physical torment. Kord laughed at their efforts. Vexed, the clerics of Asmodeus constructed a mighty rack—strong enough to quarter titans—upon which they shackled the war god. Ten such racks buckled to ruin in their stubborn attempt to break the god, but the eleventh rack finally extinguished Kord's mortal shell.

Fearing the god's wrath, the duergar disassembled the rack and split up the pieces, intending to use the fragments as weapons should Kord or his followers ever seek vengeance on the duergar.

Veneration

Pieces of the Eleventh Rack are enshrined near battlefields across the world. Visited by pilgrims and generals alike, the Eleventh Rack supposedly bestows strength and endurance to those praying to it, as long as they intend to use such gifts in battle. Cowards who pray before the Eleventh Rack are stricken with pain, as if they were suffering Kord's torment for a brief moment.

THE CRUCIBLE OF TRUTH

Warriors jest that a fortress could be built from all the supposed fragments of the Eleventh Rack if they were brought together. Devout worshipers of Kord are not kind to those they suspect of possessing counterfeit pieces. Ritualized tests of strength, duels, and open warfare are common, with the winner deciding which relic is genuine. Kord favors only the victor's claim.

Fragment of the Eleventh Rack Level 18+ Rare

This wooden fragment of an age-old torture device is stained with the blood of Kord, bestowing you with his fearsome endurance and inflicting pain upon those who harm you.

Lvl 18	85,000 gp	Lvl 28	2,125,000 gp

Wondrous Item

Properties

✦ While bloodied, you gain a +1 item bonus to saving throws.

✦ When you use your second wind while bloodied, you regain 2d10 additional hit points.

Level 28: 3d10 extra hit points.

Attack Power ✦ Daily (Immediate Reaction)

Trigger: An enemy bloodies you with a melee attack.

Effect: The triggering enemy is restrained, weakened, and gains vulnerable 5 to all damage (save ends all).

Level 28: Vulnerable 10 to all damage.

Lavanya's Shroud

Human legends lament simpler days, before Nerath's lordship over the world failed and fear rose to take its place. Out of that mythic age came Lavanya, a girl born from the coupling of a farmer's wife and the god Pelor. Lavanya was a child of purity, whose golden tresses shone like the sun and whose touch healed the sick. Summer flowers bloomed in her footsteps, and all who saw her loved her as a daughter. In the flowering of Lavanya's womanhood, her beauty was compared to Sehanine, god of love and starlight. The god was filled with jealousy, but would not directly harm to Lavanya, out of respect for her loveliness. Instead, Sehanine tricked Lavanya into leaving her people, sending her on a quest to help the downtrodden elsewhere in the Vale. Lavanya, thinking that she was departing on a mission of love and mercy, was heedless to the dangers of the road. As night fell, she slipped on the path, tumbling into the rushing waters of the river Nentir, where she drowned.

Sehanine's envy turned to regret when she saw Lavanya wrapped in a funeral shroud, the very image of tragic innocence. Divine tears fell like starlight

upon the body, which vanished beneath the shroud. Some among Pelor's faithful say that, with Lavanya's passing, the sun set on the innocence of gods and humans alike.

Veneration

Lavanya is a symbol of goodness in full blossom, before the world threatened simple folk; thus, her burial regalia evokes powerful emotions. Those seeking hope will travel any distance just to see the *shroud*, particularly parents desperate to save their children. Worshipers of Sehanine sometimes intervene on the behalf of these unfortunates; lending whatever aid they can as penance for the callousness of their god's trickery.

Lavanya's Shroud Level 20+ Rare

This simple, unadorned funerary shroud is scarcely long enough to cover a youth, but it brings life and hope to the dying.

Lvl 20 125,000 gp Lvl 30 3,125,000 gp

Wondrous Item

Properties

✦ Once per day, you can perform the Remove Affliction ritual as if you had the Ritual Caster feat. You do not need to expend components for this use, and you gain a +4 item bonus to the Heal check made when performing this ritual.

✦ When you use a healing power that allows a target to spend a healing surge to regain hit points, each target of that power regains 3 additional hit points.

Level 30: 6 additional hit points.

Utility Power (Healing, Zone) ✦ **Daily** (Standard Action)

Effect: Use this power by wrapping a dead or dying ally in Lavanya's shroud. That ally is restored to maximum hit points. The radiant spirit of Lavanya appears briefly in the ally's square, creating a zone of bright light in a burst 10 centered on the ally that lasts until the end of the encounter. The zone moves with the ally. While in the zone, you and each ally gain a +2 item bonus to saving throws. Undead enemies gain vulnerable 10 radiant while in the zone. If the undead enemy is already vulnerable to radiant damage, increase its vulnerability by 10.

Level 30: +4 item bonus to saving throws; vulnerable 15 radiant or increase vulnerability by 15.

PILGRIMS BETWEEN HORIZONS

No temple of Pelor claims to possess the *shroud*. Instead, it appears miraculously wherever it is most needed. This might be within a city stricken with plague, or in a farmer's cottage around a shivering child. Word spreads quickly whenever it appears, creating pilgrims across the world. Theologians guess that Pelor intended the *shroud* to move, so that his worshipers could bring hope and goodness to many lands.

The Lawmaker's Stylus

In the world's dim history, before the first empires raised twisting spires to the young sun, people of all races roamed the wilds and lived hand-to-mouth. Life was a constant struggle. Erathis pitied these barbaric people, and descended from the Astral Sea to lift them out of the mire of ignorance and hardship. She gathered the greatest tribes of all the races to the plains, where she inscribed in stone the first laws, using a stylus made from one of her own ribs.

The dragonborn were the first to heed these words, taking the laws and stylus to form the foundation of Arkhosia. Though the stones of the first laws were lost when that empire fell, the stylus passed among the world's people for ages, kindling the flame of civilization wherever its mark was made.

Veneration

The *Lawmaker's stylus* graces a reliquary inside a temple of Erathis, and it is sometimes carried from one temple to another by priests so that others can learn of its existence and what it represents. Steeped in the legacy of Nerath, these clerics use the *stylus* as a symbol to fight

PAGEANTRY OF THE JUST

Each quarter of the year, the clerics parade the *Lawmaker's stylus* through the streets of whichever city or town currently hosts the item. Citizens place folded pieces of paper inscribed with their prayers into a gilded box before the reliquary. Though the march is meant to maintain people's faith in the virtue of laws and civilization, some view it as the height of hypocrisy when the hosting city is also a corrupt example of civilization's decay.

back the wildness growing across the world. Kings bow before its reliquary, praying for the strength or wisdom to rule, and judges and artisans bring offerings, hoping for divine revelation concerning their trade. The truly pious are allowed to use the *stylus* when scribing contracts or laws, and they hope that doing so helps ensure compliance with the documents.

Lawmaker's Stylus Level 19+ Rare

While holding this simple bone stylus, your authority cannot be denied.

Lvl 19 105,000 gp Lvl 29 2,625,000 gp
Wondrous Item
Property
You gain a +3 item bonus to skill checks made as part of a binding ritual, and the ritual's casting time is halved.
Level 29: +5 item bonus. Once per day, you can also use a binding ritual without expending components.
Attack Power (Charm) ✦ **Daily** (No Action)
Effect: Until the end of the encounter, once per round as a standard action, you can use the following attack power. On a miss, the effect ends.
Attack: Ranged 5 (one creature); the item's level +3 vs. Will
Hit: The target is dominated until the end of your next turn.

The Oracle's Head

Among Ioun's faithful, one figure stands alone as the most gifted of all seers: Cleomenes the Blind. Cleomenes wandered many realms, foretelling doom and joy wherever he went. Mentor to champions and teacher of kings, the blind sage figured prominently in the destinies of many great heroes. His final journey brought him to a black mountain, where he met an ancient red dragon. This dragon, Syndothyx, claimed that it had outlived Ioun's planned destiny, and thus become the master of its own fate. Cleomenes knew otherwise. He revealed that the ancient wrym's days would soon be at an end, and that its fate would come at the hands of the suffering villagers who had long been enslaved by its cruelty. Indignant, the dragon beheaded the prophet with the casual swipe of a claw.

Unknowingly, the dragon sealed its doom. The people rose up and slew Syndothyx, bringing Cleomenes' final prophecy to fruition. Some say that the prophet's willing sacrifice brought the people their freedom. Others say that Cleomenes' actions were neither good nor evil, but that the dragon's end and the prophet's demise were merely Ioun's will. Regardless, the prophet is a celebrated saint, credited with the liberation of a people that would one day be governed by one of the sage's pupils.

Veneration

The *Oracle's head* is kept within the House of the All-Seeing Eye, a temple to Ioun. The relic sits in a bejeweled reliquary above the altar, where priests and supplicants consult the sainted spirit. Some gain useful knowledge of coming events, and others have grisly visions of their own future deaths—though who can say if such events are not set into motion by the viewer's attempt to avoid them?

The Oracle's Head Level 16+ Rare

Though gruesome, the austere countenance of this severed head is untouched by time. When its milky eyes open, a raspy voice details a foe's doom.

Lvl 16 45,000 gp Lvl 26 1,125,000 gp
Wondrous Item
Property
You gain a +3 item bonus to skill checks made as part of a divination ritual.
Level 26: +5 item bonus.
Attack Power (Charm) ✦ **Daily** (Standard Action)
Attack: Ranged 5 (one creature that can see); the item's level +3 vs. Will
Hit: The target is stunned (save ends).
Aftereffect: The target is dazed (save ends).
Utility Power ✦ **Daily** (Standard Action)
Effect: Until your next extended rest, the *Oracle's head* can answer up to three questions as if you had used the Consult Oracle ritual. You can spread these questions out over the course of the day.
Level 26: The *Oracle's head* can answer up to five questions.

THE NAMING OF THE DEAD

In rare instances the *Oracle's head* awakens and speaks without being approached, whispering names and events that hold dire significance for the world. Such an occurrence inspires the priests, who view this knowledge as a gift from Ioun to keep the influence of Vecna and other enemies at bay.

About the Author

Jeff Morgenroth is a regular contributor to *D&D Insider*, the digital tome he uses to share his love of gaming with his fellow adventurers. He works, thinks, writes, and tinkers on the outskirts of Seattle. Seek him wherever a chorus of frogs drown out the sounds of the highway, or where heavy-metal power chords shatter the still of dark places.

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Nerathi Legends: Adretia, the Citadel of Iron's Grasp

By Richard Baker

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"It is said that its dungeons are delved as deep into the earth as its towers rise into the sky. But who would know the truth of such a claim? Those who go into the dungeons of Iron's Grasp do not come out again."

On the southern ridges of the Altaran Mountains stands one of the mightiest fortresses in the world, the Citadel of Iron's Grasp. This is the seat of the Iron Circle, an order of cruel warlords and devil cultists who hold a dozen lands under their sway. Legions of elite Iron Circle warriors guard the citadel's black

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walls, and in its forbidding depths, black-robed adepts perform unspeakable diabolic rites, wielding infernal magic. Few outsiders who set foot within the citadel's walls are ever seen again.

The citadel is strategically sited in the heart of the wealthy land of Adretia. A mercantile, largely human realm of quarrelsome city-states, Adretia is now a land under occupation. The Iron Circle's hobgoblin soldiers patrol the streets of cities such as Nath Mornal, Jandhavar, and Bamadin. Iron Circle tax stations dot the countryside—watchtowers and barracks for companies of brutal soldiers who oppress the common people. Any nobles who opposed the Iron Circle were destroyed when that group cut its swath through the area. Many of those who are left have joined the order. The Iron Circle allows other nobles to remain independent, and alive, only as long as they continue to pay ruinous taxes (squeezed in turn from the commoners) to their evil overlords.

The rise of the Iron Circle is a recent phenomenon in an otherwise ancient land. In the centuries following the destruction of Arkhosia, barbaric human tribes from the south settled in what had once been the lands of the dragonborn. In the days of Nerath, the cities of Adretia were tributary states and trading partners with the great empire. After Nerath's influence in the area crumbled, the city-states of Adretia resumed their old rivalries and squabbles. It wasn't until twenty years ago that the Iron Circle rose to prominence, portraying itself as a warrior society dedicated to stamping out disorder and driving back the encroaching desert raiders and jungle monsters. City by city, the Iron Circle expanded its holdings, bringing order in exchange for subjugation to its tyranny. Eventually the goblin-holds of the desert verge fell under the Iron Circle's sway as well. Armies of goblins—bought with Adretia's gold and led by the circle's warlords and knights—have spread out to oppress the nearby lands, joining the ranks of the mercenary legions already fighting under the banner of the Iron Circle.

Factions in Adretia

To call the Iron Circle's presence in Adretia pervasive would be an understatement—little escapes the notice, and if necessary the retribution, of those who occupy the Citadel of Iron's Grasp. Even in this climate, a few members of Adretia's nobility do what they can to relieve the oppression of the common people. And, perhaps inevitably, a potent and popular resistance movement has sprung up.

The Iron Circle

The Iron Circle does not share power or otherwise compromise its stance. The group's reach and influence in Adretia have no practical limit. High-ranking nobles can be accused and arrested on specious charges, and any show of defiance is quickly crushed.

Supreme authority in the Iron Circle lies in the hands of Grandmaster Amarius Vant. He is a lean, apparently human male of seventy-five years, well over six feet tall despite a pronounced stoop. Amarius is a greedy, corrupt hedonist with perverse appetites. It is whispered that he is a cambion (or half-devil) of royal descent, or an archdevil in human guise. He displays more personal energy, restlessness, and vigorous attention to detail in his position as the leader of the Iron Circle than humans half his age are typically capable of.

Below the grandmaster is a council of twenty or so High Lords—generals and governors entrusted with great authority over the Iron Circle's activities. The four most prominent High Lords at present are described here.

Warden Tiberon: The minotaur warlord Tiberon is the warden of the Citadel of Iron's Grasp. He is a brutal disciplinarian, but competent and loyal to the grandmaster. Tiberon is the chief captain of the Iron Circle's armies, but he rarely takes the field, instead plotting his wars from behind the citadel's battlements and within its dungeons.

High Prelate Dostinian: The current grandmaster held the office of high prelate before ascending to his current position; to guard against the possibility of being replaced by the next high prelate, Amarius appointed a vain, petty individual to the position. Dostinian is the head of the Iron Circle's ecclesiastic hierarchy and the leader of Asmodeus's priesthood. He is a small, portly human of fifty years, thoroughly scorned by his subordinate prelates. He poses little threat to the grandmaster.

High Mage Sabina: A beautiful, calculating tiefling who appears to be no more than twenty years old, Sabina is the most powerful arcanist in the Iron Circle—and is older than she looks. While most Iron Circle spellcasters are infernal pact warlocks, Sabina is a sorcerer with a penchant for spells of ice and cold. She harbors a passionate hatred for elves and eladrin due to an ancient family vendetta.

High Inquisitor Harsioth: The Iron Circle's inquisitors are feared by every sentient creature that marches under the society's banner. The inquisitors constantly seek out signs of disloyalty or defeatism, and they cruelly punish any individuals who show less than absolute zeal for their duties. Harsioth is a male human cleric of thirty-five, a young crusader and firebrand whose climb through the hierarchy was marked by frequent investigations of and accusations against his superiors.

Of the other High Lords, the most significant are those who bear the titles of Seneschal (ruler of Adretia), General of the East, General of the North, Satrap of Numoth, and Spymaster.

Internal politics in the Iron Circle are vicious and unforgiving. Failure is not tolerated, although punishment is rarely lethal. Humiliation, privation, and torture are considered to be excellent methods for reinforcing the lessons of failure. High-ranking members are not immune and might be cast down the ranks as part of their punishment. Ambitious

underlings freely plot advancement through assassination, which is tolerated as long as it does not weaken the order and brings more talented leaders to the fore.

The Adretian Nobility

Before the rise of the Iron Circle, the cities and towns of Adretia were ruled by wealthy patrician families. Some of these families were wiped out or dispossessed by the Iron Circle's actions; other nobles retained their titles and property by swearing allegiance to the grandmaster. The nobles of Adretia have become accustomed to severe taxation and never-ending calls for levies of troops and goods from the Iron Circle. The less principled patricians make a public show of providing everything the circle demands while privately bribing the relevant officials to spare their lands and property. More honorable nobles seek to intercede against Iron Circle oppression and fight for justice and compassion toward the common people, with mixed results. Either way, Adretian nobles are among the few people who can move freely about the Iron Circle's lands and who still retain enough wealth to sponsor trade and commerce.

Knights of the Crescent Moon

Although the Iron Circle's power over Adretia is strong, it is not absolute. A resilient rebel organization, the Knights of the Crescent Moon, works against the Iron Circle in the heart of the country. Descended from priests and paladins of Sehanine who were driven underground by the rise of the Iron Circle, these rebels are dedicated to resisting the circle at every turn. They spirit prisoners out of Iron Circle dungeons, intercept couriers, assassinate commanders or governors who become careless, organize guerrilla resistance groups in the borderlands, and seek to hasten the day when the Iron Circle and its dark works are no more.

The knights have a great deal of sympathy from the common people of Adretia, especially out in the countryside. To help the rebels identify one another, members tattoo themselves with a small, moon-shaped mark in an easily concealed spot, or carry small silver tokens that burn the hands of the unjust.

Exploring Adretia

The rolling plains of Adretia stretch 250 miles from the barren verge of the Desert of Desolation to the steaming jungles of Rana Mor. The land climbs and becomes steeper to the east, until the traveler reaches the southern slopes of the Altaran Mountains. The lands to the south and east are wetter and more fertile than the lands to the north and west; the prevailing winds are out of the south, and bring up rain

from the expanse of Scarlet Bay. Light forest of scrub oak, ironwood, and sycamore on the mountain slopes of the east gives way to scattered groves in the center of the Adretian plains, and finally becomes sage and chaparral on the verge of the western desert. The land is fertile, with warm, rainy winters, but the summers are hot and dry, and droughts are commonplace.

Bamadin

The center of the slave trade in Iron Circle lands, Bamadin is a large, dirty, crowded city half overrun by goblinkind. Marauders from the coasts of Nera to the Saris Strait come here to sell their human cargo. Whereas Nath Mornal is prosperous and commercial, Bamadin is desperate and chaotic. Trade here is a matter of a thousand small deals struck every day between peddlers, gangs, and scheming merchants. The city is notorious for its arenas and fighting-pits, where fortunes are wagered and lost every night.

Desert of Desolation

Just beyond Adretia's western borders lies the greatest desert in the known world—the Desert of Desolation. Vast stony barrens, seas of dunes, and desiccated mountains stretch well over a thousand miles west and south, home to no one except savage gnolls, xenophobic human nomads, and a variety of deadly monsters.

The desert was not always as large or deadly as it now is. In the days of the dragonborn realm of Arkhosia, its northern and eastern verges (the area bordering Adretia) consisted of green, fertile plains. But the dark magic of Bael Turath invoked a terrible disaster, laying waste to the region thousands of years ago. Arkhosian ruins (and the remains of older, more mysterious realms) lie buried in the sand, waiting for explorers bold enough to seek them out.

Murgmar

A teeming, warrenlike goblin town, Murgmar sits atop a dusty mesa, surrounded by fields and pastureland made arable by goblin engineering. Dozens of goblin-holds scattered along the edge of the Desert of Desolation from Murgmar to distant Kharavas provide the Iron Circle with legions of fierce soldiers. Murgmar is ruled by the Great Murg, a hugely fat bugbear that gladly sells young, aggressive hobgoblins and bugbears into the Iron Circle's service. The Great Murg is careful to retain a small army of thugs and leg-breakers whose loyalty is bought with lavish gifts (by goblin standards) seized from the rabble of farmhands, goatherds, and laborers who make up Murgmar's underclass. Humans and others sometimes visit Murgmar to trade, but only those who enter the place on Iron Circle business are truly safe in the goblin town.

NATH MORNAL AT A GLANCE

The largest city in old Adretia, Nath Mornal is the gateway to the lands dominated by the Citadel of Iron's Grasp and the most important mercantile center in western Altara. Although the citadel is the political capital of the realm, Nath Mornal is home to far more people.

Population Mix: About 35,000 people live in Nath Mornal. Many are humans, living alongside substantial minorities of dwarves, dragonborn, tieflings, minotaurs, and goblinkind.

Government: Lady-Governor Irena Marmalio is the commander of the Iron Circle garrison in Nath Mornal, and ruler of the city. She is a human warlock of formidable powers, and freely employs summoned fiends to hunt down criminals or punish the condemned. Martial law is observed in the city.

Commerce: Grain, wine, oranges, and olives are produced in the countryside surrounding Nath Mornal, but are exclusively for export. The city is noted for its ceramics (both tilework and pottery) and its foundries, which rival the forges of the dwarf-kingdoms in old Nerath. Common citizens and poor travelers are limited in their ability to purchase food and goods, but a thriving black market helps to circumvent Lady-Governor Marmalio's strict controls.

Defenses: Nath Mornal is ringed by a tall, strong city wall, dating back to the days when its rivalries with Bamadin and Jandhavar occasionally flared into open war. Nowadays its defenses are focused inward, arranged to control the population rather than defend from external attack. A legion of 4,000 Iron Circle soldiers (more than half of them goblinkind) is quartered in and around Nath Mornal.

Inns and Taverns: Important travelers carrying the proper Iron Circle passes are entitled to luxurious quarters in the governor's palace, or they can commandeer lodging from any inn in the city. Travelers without such advantages find the Old Vineyard to be a reasonably comfortable, if expensive, inn on the hill overlooking the southern gate. Poor sailors (and others of little means) make do with the crowded common rooms of the Black Gull, a dismal and dangerous place near the harbor.

Nath Mornal

This great city is the Iron Circle's gateway to the lands of the Sea of Dragons and the waters beyond. Nath Mornal is a mostly human city occupied by the Iron Circle's mercenaries and hobgoblins. The Iron Circle enforces a variety of onerous taxes, tariffs, and fees on Nath Mornal's thriving commerce, which has led to the rise of a black market and a smuggling industry among the city's desperate merchants.

Sercar

Once a large, prosperous walled town located at a strategic crossroads in the middle of Adretia, Sercar now lies in ruin. Three years ago the hobgoblin garrison occupying the town, through its brutality and oppression, unwittingly provoked a popular rebellion against the Iron Circle. Under the leadership of Lord Didan Padratius, Sercar briefly threw off the Iron Circle's yoke, freeing the countryside for fifty miles around. Grandmaster Amarius acted swiftly to contain the rebellion, however, and ordered Warden Tiberon to quell the rebellion. The Sercarans fought bravely, but they were crushed by the overwhelming force of the Iron Circle. Reprisals were swift and terrible; most of the Padratius family was put to death, although Didan fled to keep fighting from the wilds of the desert. Sercar is now little more than an Iron Circle garrison town in an otherwise devastated district.

Thanulzarum

An exceedingly ancient ruin said to predate the dragonborn empire of Arkhosia, Thanulzarum is a crumbling necropolis lying in a barren vale beneath the western end of the Altaran Mountains. The place has an evil reputation, and it is haunted by numerous undead. Surviving sculptures and reliefs suggest that the people of Thanulzarum were humans ruled over by monstrous overlords, although any image of the actual rulers was deliberately defaced and obscured centuries ago.

Vathan

Small and remote, Vathan is a center of lumber and mining on the edge of the great jungle of Rana Mor. The town harbors a secret stronghold of the Knights of the Crescent Moon , and the population is sympathetic to the rebels' cause; weapons and supplies smuggled through the jungle into Vathan find their way to resistance groups throughout Adretia. The leader of the Vathan rebels is a Selunite cleric named Agathil Harstare, who maintains the guise of a dealer in gemstones from the jungle. Agathil is wary of provoking the sort of reprisals that wiped Sercar off the map, and he is careful to avoid undertaking rebellious activities in and around Vathan.

ADVENTURES IN ADRETIA

Although the Iron Circle vigilantly watches for spies and outlaws, it can't be everywhere at once.

Smugglers: The heroes are hired to bring contraband cargo into the black market of Nath Mornal or Bamadin, but when they make their delivery, they discover that their true mission is to smuggle an escaped prisoner out of the Iron Circle's lands.

Crypts of Thanulzarum: An Iron Circle expedition has discovered an ancient tomb in the haunted ruins of Thanulzarum. The heroes have to slip inside and recover the dangerous artifact inside before the Iron Circle can finish the job.

Against the Circle: The heroes join the Knights of the Crescent Moon and take up arms against the Iron Circle. Their first mission: assassinate a High Lord, then use magic or disguise to impersonate their victim during an upcoming gathering of the Iron Circle's leaders to learn the order's secret plans.

Iron Circle Encounters

Heroes skulking about in Iron Circle territory sooner or later run afoul of patrols. A typical Iron Circle patrol includes five or six hobgoblin or bugbear foot soldiers plus a couple of crossbow-armed human town guards, a bugbear centurion, and a human or tiefling Iron Circle prelate who commands the patrol.

Iron Circle Centurion **Level 6 Soldier**
Medium natural humanoid XP 250

HP 72; **Bloodied** 36 **Initiative** +8
AC 22, **Fortitude** 20, **Reflex** 18, **Will** 17 **Perception** +4
Speed 5 Low-light vision

Traits

Bushwhack
The centurion gains a +4 bonus to attack rolls against a creature that has no allies adjacent to it.

Standard Actions

⊕ **Falchion** (weapon) ✦ **At-Will**
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +11 vs. AC
Hit: 4d4 + 4 damage, and the centurion can slide the target 1 square.
Effect: The centurion marks the target until the end of the centurion's next turn.

Triggered Actions

⸸ **Centurion Challenge** (weapon) ✦ **At-Will**
Trigger: An adjacent creature marked by the centurion shifts or uses an attack power that does not include the centurion as a target.
Attack (Immediate Interrupt): Melee 1 (triggering creature); +11 vs. AC
Hit: 2d4 + 4 damage, and the target is immobilized until the end of the centurion's next turn.

Skills Intimidate +10, Stealth +11
Str 19 (+7) **Dex** 16 (+6) **Wis** 13 (+4)
Con 16 (+6) **Int** 11 (+3) **Cha** 15 (+5)
Alignment evil **Languages** Common, Goblin
Equipment scale mail, falchion

Iron Circle Prelate **Level 8 Controller (Leader)**
Medium natural humanoid, tiefling XP 350

HP 88; **Bloodied** 44 **Initiative** +6
AC 22, **Fortitude** 20, **Reflex** 19, **Will** 22 **Perception** +9
Speed 5 Low-light vision
Resist 10 fire

Traits

☼ **Dark Presence** ✦ **Aura 3**
Allies gain a +2 power bonus to Will and to saving throws while in the aura.

Standard Actions

⊕ **Iron Mace** (weapon) ✦ **At-Will**
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +13 vs. AC
Hit: 2d8 + 7 damage, and the prelate can slide the target 1 square.

⊛ **Fiery Bolt** (fire, implement) ✦ **At-Will**
Attack: Ranged 5 (one creature); +11 vs. Reflex
Hit: 2d8 + 2 fire damage, and the target is dazed until the end of the prelate's next turn.

✧ **Symbol of Dread** (fear, implement, necrotic) ✦ **Recharge** when first bloodied
Attack: Close blast 5 (creatures in the blast); +11 vs. Will
Hit: 2d8 + 5 necrotic damage, and the prelate pushes the target up to 3 squares. The target cannot move closer to the prelate willingly (save ends).
Miss: Half damage, and the prelate pushes the target up to 2 squares.

Triggered Actions

Infernal Wrath ✦ **Encounter**
Trigger: An enemy hits the prelate with an attack.
Effect (Free Action): The prelate's allies gain a +2 power bonus to attack rolls against the triggering enemy until the end of the enemy's next turn.

Skills Insight +14, Religion +11
Str 15 (+6) **Dex** 14 (+6) **Wis** 20 (+9)
Con 16 (+7) **Int** 15 (+6) **Cha** 17 (+7)
Alignment evil **Languages** Common, Goblin
Equipment chainmail, iron mace, holy symbol

About the Author

Richard Baker is an award-winning game designer who has written numerous adventures and sourcebooks, including *Manual of the Planes*™, the *Dark Sun*® *Campaign Guide*, and the *D&D*® *Gamma World*™ *Roleplaying Game*. He's a *New York Times* bestselling author of Forgotten Realms® novels such as *Condemnation*, the Last Mythal trilogy, and the Blades of the Moonsea series. Rich is currently the Design Manager for the Dungeons & Dragons® game at Wizards of the Coast.

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Making Race Count:

Utility Powers for Dwarves, Half-Elves, Halflings, and Humans

By Robert J. Schwalb

Illustrations by Eric Belisle, Adam Paquette, Jim Nelson

The stone golem advanced, its cracked fists raised. Lurri could see the glittering ruby dangling from the censer behind the guardian. The halfling knew she had no chance against the golem head-on. She had no intention, however, of leaving this room without that gemstone. She crouched, waiting for the right moment. The golem swung its arm in an arc, and for a moment it seemed the fist would strike true. But Lurri ducked at the last moment and rolled forward to vault up through the golem's grasp, putting her within reach of the treasure she sought.

Durven watched Lurri's stunt with amazement, then quickly realized that the golem she had evaded was now coming for him. The human was a capable fighter, but the creature was far more than he could handle on his own. He lashed out with his sword, chipping away at the construct's rocky exterior, and twisted away from the thing's massive fist. Durven knew his cause would be hopeless unless he could get away.

He needed to escape across the chasm, but the rope bridge spanning the gap had fallen. Durven, in between dodging the golem's attacks, searched for the place where the crevice was at its narrowest. He set off for the edge at a sprint, pushing himself harder than he thought possible. He leaped at the last possible moment, hurtling through the air to land on the opposite side.

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Character race is a key decision you make when you create a new character. The traits you gain from your race provide significant benefits, ranging from ability score modifications to potent powers that give you an edge in battle. When race is combined with class, you have the fundamental building blocks in place to carry you forward through all thirty levels of adventuring.

Yet after you choose your race and record its benefits, that choice often does not affect your character's development. It's true that certain feats might interact with your racial traits, and many races have access to racial-themed paragon paths. Although these options can help develop your character, the most interesting gains can come through the choices granted by your class whenever you gain a level.

To help you enhance the importance of your character's race, this article introduces racial utility powers. Racial utility powers represent an awakening of natural talent and capability inherent within all peoples in the Dungeons & Dragons® world. Taking a racial utility power demonstrates your character's ability to call upon his or her heritage and natural abilities.

This article presents options for many prominent races in the game, with racial utility powers up to 16th level. Future installments in this series will provide options for other races in the game. Regardless of the race you choose, to maximize your racial traits beyond those powers presented here, consider choosing a paragon path exclusive to your race when you reach the paragon tier.

Gaining a Racial Utility Power: Racial utility powers are similar to utility powers granted by a class, except that you must be a member of the race to gain and use a race's powers. Whenever you gain a level that grants you a utility power from your class, you can choose a racial utility power in place of a class power. The racial utility power must be of the same level as or lower in level than the class power you would have gained.

You can use retraining to replace a class power with a racial utility power or vice versa, as long as the new power is of the same level as or lower in level than the replaced power. You cannot replace a utility power from a paragon path or an epic destiny with a racial utility power.

Spellbooks and Racial Utility Powers: The wizard's spellbook class feature allows you to add two wizard utility powers to your spellbook when you reach a level where you would normally gain a utility power (2nd, 6th, 10th, and so on). If you choose to take a racial utility power, you do not add any wizard utility powers to your spellbook at that level. If you later use retraining to take a wizard utility power in place of a racial utility power, you do not add any powers to your spellbook.

Dwarf

"A dwarf never forgets."

In ages past, dwarves ruled the mountains from within an impregnable fortress raised to guard the treasures they wrested from unyielding stone. Their fabulous wealth drew greedy monsters to their doors and precipitated a series of wars whose results were ruin and death. Their fabulous kingdoms fell and their people scattered to the world's four corners. Although the dwarves have fallen far, they have never forgotten the ancient foes or the wonders they surrendered to the darkness.

Dwarves pride themselves on their toughness and durability. They pass on tales of the affronts against their people and use these memories to motivate them to exact vengeance from their ancestral enemies. Some dwarves further their training, feeling driven to build their muscle and endurance so they can escape the fate their ancestors faced.

You must be a dwarf to gain and use dwarf powers.

Avalanche Rush

You benefit from a strong, almost elemental, connection to earth and stone. As a doughty member of your race, you find that the rocks underfoot give you the same sort of power as that offered by the sylvan forests to the fey folk. With your strong link to earth, you can feel new strength flowing through your feet, and you use this strength to become a living avalanche, tumbling through your foes with tremendous force.

Avalanche Rush — Dwarf Racial Utility 2

The mountain's strength helps you shove an enemy from your path.

Encounter
No Action — **Personal**
Trigger: You successfully bull rush a target.
Effect: You can increase the push by a number of squares up to your Constitution modifier, shifting into each square the target of your bull rush leaves.

Dwarven Pride

A dwarf never forgets an insult, and nothing twists your beard harder than being pushed around. Although you dig in your heels to keep yourself from being moved when you don't want to be, if an enemy somehow knocks you back, you can use *dwarven pride* to show the enemy the mistake it just made.

Dwarven Pride — Dwarf Racial Utility 6

No one shoves you around and gets away with it.

Encounter
Immediate Reaction — **Personal**
Trigger: You are pulled, pushed, or slid.
Effect: Until the end of your next turn, you gain a +1 power bonus to damage rolls for each square of the forced movement.

Stone Stubborn

Mulish, obstinate, determined, bull-headed—call it what you will, dwarves are stubborn. Although this trait can make you difficult to deal with, it does have its advantages. You've learned to turn your one-track mind into a shield against the influences of others.

Stone Stubborn Dwarf Racial Utility 10

You steel your mind to the onslaught, determined to go about your business.

Encounter
Immediate Interrupt **Personal**
Trigger: An effect would dominate or stun you.
Effect: You are dazed for the effect's duration instead of being dominated or stunned.

Mountainborn Tenacity

Tough as iron, dwarves are tenacious combatants. As a dwarf, you never give ground and never surrender. You also pride yourself on the ability to shrug off injuries that would topple a lesser mortal. Even when the killing blow falls, you can find a way to thumb death in the eye and get back on your feet.

Mountainborn Tenacity Dwarf Racial Utility 16

Just as no mountain fell from a single strike, no dwarf has fallen from a single blow.

Daily ✦ Healing
Immediate Interrupt **Personal**
Trigger: An attack drops you to 0 hit points or fewer.
Effect: You can spend a healing surge. Until the end of your next turn, you gain resistance to all damage equal to twice your Constitution modifier.

Half-Elf

"Have we met? No? Well, you look like someone I ought to know. Let me buy you a drink."

Some think half-elves have a hard time in the world. After all, they are a people born from two races. Often, however, a half-elf's mingled heritage is no obstacle to success, and many half-elves find ways to put to good use the characteristics they inherit from both parents. A strong personality, wit, and insight all serve these individuals well, along with resourcefulness and guile. Half-elf adventurers sometimes develop their natural talents to help them move more easily through the world, regardless of the circles in which they find themselves.

You must be a half-elf to gain and use half-elf powers.

Help Is Here

By combining your personable nature with your versatile skill set, you can awaken talent in anyone you choose. *Help is here* gives you the tools you need to help an ally find the inspiration to succeed where another might fail.

Help Is Here Half-Elf Racial Utility 2

An encouraging word and subtle direction help an ally complete his or her task.

Encounter
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: You successfully use the aid another action on an adjacent ally.

Sudden Switch

As part of your upbringing, you were taught to be wise to the ways in which people use their body language to communicate intent—all the better to use your own body language to mislead. You use this talent to draw someone close to you during combat and then reverse your positions suddenly, surprising those who thought they knew your purpose.

Sudden Switch Half-Elf Racial Utility 6

You whirl through melee, causing another combatant to be caught up in your dance while catching your enemies by surprise.

Encounter
Move Action **Melee** 1
Target: One creature
Effect: You and the target swap positions. Until the end of your next turn, you gain combat advantage against enemies adjacent to you after the swap.

Lockstep

Your experience in battle and your instincts about your allies give you a knack for finding the right moment to move as a team. You take the lead in combat's dance, and a friend you choose can follow in your steps.

Lockstep Half-Elf Racial Utility 10

Wherever you go, your friend follows.

Encounter
Move Action **Close** burst 1
Target: You and one ally
Effect: Each target can shift up to 6 squares as a free action. The targets must end this movement adjacent to each other.

Persuasive Words

After so many adventures and after meeting so many strange and interesting individuals, you know a number of ways to overcome barriers of language and culture. You can communicate with almost anyone. You find it difficult to be at your best all the time, so you marshal your energy for the toughest social conflict of the day. In short, you save your best effort for when you need it most.

Persuasive Words Half-Elf Racial Utility 16

You summon up your personal reserves and put everything into understanding the situation and getting the results you need.

Daily
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: For 5 minutes or until the end of the encounter, you gain a +5 power bonus to Bluff, Diplomacy, Insight, and Intimidate checks.

Halfling

"What lies beyond the horizon is far more interesting than what goes on here."

The halflings have never had designs on conquest, and they have never felt the urge to impose their will on others. Instead, halflings prefer the simple life of hearth and home. They take comfort from their extended families and delight from their travels. Few halflings turn down a chance to visit new lands and meet new people. Such willingness to explore goes a long way toward making halflings successful adventurers. Along the way to wherever it is they go, halflings might learn special talents that grow out of their natural agility and uncanny luck.

You must be a halfling to gain and use halfling powers.

Happy Feet

The world is a wondrous and vast place, ripe for exploration. Adventure's promise excites your imagination and draws you onward. Sometimes you find it hard to keep still.

Happy Feet Halfling Racial Utility 2

It's hard to keep your feet under control. Sometimes they feel as if they move of their own accord.

Encounter
Immediate Reaction **Personal**
Trigger: A creature you can see starts its turn.
Effect: You shift up to 2 squares.

Minor Threat

The bigger races often feel pity for halflings because of their small stature. It's ridiculous, of course, but you take advantage of this situation. Being small means you can go unnoticed. And when you're hurt, it helps to have your enemies' attention focused elsewhere. You've learned to use your perceived weakness to your advantage.

Minor Threat Halfling Racial Utility 6

Clearly you're no threat to your enemies, injured as you are. You convince them of that by affecting a small and harmless posture.

Encounter ✦ Stance
Minor Action **Personal**
Requirement: You must be bloodied.
Effect: You assume the minor threat stance. Until the stance ends and while you are bloodied, you have a +2 power bonus to all defenses and to Stealth checks.

Pay Your Debts

Repaying every debt is central to preserving a good relationship. When an ally gives you a helping hand, make sure you give back the same.

Pay Your Debts Halfling Racial Utility 10

You acknowledge an ally's assistance by making a feint to keep your enemy off balance.

At-Will
Immediate Reaction **Special**
Trigger: An enemy flanked by you moves out of the flanked position.
Effect: Choose one ally who was also flanking the triggering enemy. That ally gains combat advantage against the enemy until the end of your next turn.

Underfoot Hustle

When you combine your small size with your quickness, you are truly in your element. *Underfoot hustle* lets you maneuver through an enemy's space so you can strike from an advantageous position.

Underfoot Hustle Halfling Racial Utility 16

You roll between your enemy's legs and spring up on the other side.

Encounter
Move Action **Personal**
Effect: You shift up to your speed +2. You can move through squares occupied by enemies, but you must end your movement in an unoccupied square. Enemies whose spaces you move through in this way grant combat advantage to you until the end of your next turn.

Human

"It's time for action. Tell me about the consequences later."

Nerath was humanity's last empire. The descendants of that empire still recall the principles the nation upheld, the justice it preserved, and the virtues it championed. Like many empires, however, rapid expansion combined with human optimism made the empire vulnerable to the foes lying in wait in the dark beyond civilization's lights. It wasn't long before hordes of monsters tumbled out from the desolation to plunder and ruin all that humanity had achieved.

Defeat did little to diminish the pride humans still have in the nation they buried so long ago, and its memory inspires new heroes today. Humans are the most numerous adventurers in the lands, eager to test their mettle against myriad monsters and explore dangerous dungeons to unearth the treasures they hold. Humans bring their natural versatility to bear in the types of training they pursue and are found among every class. Some humans develop their natural talents to aid them in their adventures. Such individuals are determined and aggressive, ready to take on any challenge they might face.

You must be a human to gain and use human powers.

Extra Effort

Humans find ways to overcome adversity and adapt to any situation. *Extra effort* helps you mount the will to escape a dangerous situation.

Extra Effort Human Racial Utility 2

You dig deep to find the strength to overcome an affliction. Doing so leaves you momentarily drained.

Encounter
No Action **Personal**
Trigger: You make a saving throw and dislike the result.
Effect: Reroll the saving throw with a +2 power bonus. The next saving throw you make before the end of the encounter takes a -2 penalty.

Rapid Move

As a human, you seek out ways to succeed where others find only failure. Your ingenuity helps you push harder, move faster, and achieve more than the longest-lived races. This power demonstrates a way you can push yourself beyond your normal limits.

Rapid Move Human Racial Utility 6

You move with surprising swiftness, accomplishing more than most would think possible.

Daily
Minor Action **Personal**
Effect: Take a move action.

Flush with Success

No matter what setbacks you face, each success drives you to press on. *Flush with success* rewards you for a victorious effort by giving you new vitality and the drive to move forward.

Flush with Success Human Racial Utility 10

You feel your confidence build with each attack that hits home.

Encounter
Free Action **Personal**
Trigger: You hit with an attack on your turn.
Effect: After the attack is resolved, you gain 5 temporary hit points and can then shift up to half your speed.
Level 16: 10 temporary hit points.
Level 22: 15 temporary hit points.

Courageous Determination

The best and boldest humans learn from their errors and find ways to overcome their mistakes. If failure looms large, *courageous determination* gives you a chance to escape your doom and win the day.

Courageous Determination Human Racial Utility 16

Your enemy's success pales before your stalwart resolve. You refuse to give up.

Daily ✦ Healing
Immediate Reaction **Personal**
Trigger: An enemy bloodies you with an attack or hits you while you are bloodied.
Effect: You can spend a healing surge and shift up to your speed. Until the start of your next turn, you gain a +2 power bonus to all defenses.

About the Author

Robert J. Schwalb has contributed design to or developed nearly two 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 LLC. can be found in *Player's Handbook®* 3 and *Player's Option: Heroes of Shadow™*. For more information about the author, be sure to check out his website at www.robertjschwalb.com or follow him on Twitter (@rjschwalb).

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First Impression, Part 2

By Shelly Mazzanoble

Illustration by William O'Connor

Allow me to introduce the party.

I am Majeka Magicmaker, an 8th-level gray elf magic-user. To my right is Laura, aka Shab "Shabulous" Heanling, a 12th-level half-elf thief. Mark, to my left, plays Darg Blonke, a 7th-level gray elf fighter, and Chuck rounds out the group as Fage the Kexy, a 7th-level gray elf cleric.

"Fage," I said. "Like the yogurt?"

"One and the same," he said.

We are gathered here on a cloudy Friday afternoon due to my desire to experience what D&D was like "back in the day." All those guys who look back on their 80's dragon-slaying love affair with the same misty-eyed dreaminess that I get when I think about that day in 1986 when Jon Bon Jovi winked at me when his limo passed by on the way to the Arena. (Yes, the windows were tinted, but I'm sure I saw him wink.) Ahh, I can practically smell the Aqua Net. Fortunately, you're always a dice roll away from coworkers looking for a pick-up D&D game. Of the four of us, Chuck is the only one who has ever played 1st Edition.

There is, however, one oddity at the table.

"Our Dungeon Master isn't packing," I whispered to Laura. "He doesn't even have a screen."

"He's just like . . . sitting there with some dice," Laura whispered back. "Were we supposed to bring something?"

"I can hear you," Chris said. "And yes, you should have brought your dice, a pencil, and your characters."

We look down at the table where, under our lunches and water bottles, reside the homemade 1st Edition character sheets Chris made for us. Aside from our names and our races, there's a bunch of random numbers clumped together in a grid that rivals a mortgage securitization chart in complexity. But that wasn't even the confusing part. It was Chris's lack of props that we found most perplexing.

Mark had an array of minis laid out before him.

"I wasn't sure who I would be playing, so I bought a smorgasbord," he said. "You guys can use them too."

"If you need a *real* representation of your *fake* character, then feel free to put it in front of you and gaze upon it while we play," Chris said. "But you won't be using it in the game."

"We don't use maps either?" Laura asked.

Chris shook his head.

"Or Dungeon Tiles?" Mark asked.

"Are we Amish?" I asked.

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"No," Chris sighed, baffled by our confusion. "All you need is a good pencil eraser for all those hit points you'll be subtracting," Chris rubbed his hands together in that creepy way Dungeon Masters do when they smell a TPK.

Before we began, he instructed us to pick a party color, to which I immediately shouted, "Teal!"

My group stared at me with heads cocked and eyebrows raised.

"What?" I asked. "I'm trying to channel the 80's, and teal was a very 80's color. I had about four zillion mock turtlenecks in teal, because it went great with my peacock eyeliner."

"It's still a good color for you," Laura said.

"Thank you!"

"He said 'caller,' " Chuck offered. "Not *color*."

Oh . . . right . . .

But none of us knew what a caller was.

"The caller is the one who tells the Dungeon Master what the party is doing," Chris explained.

"Like a narc?" I asked. Because let's be clear. What happens behind the DM's back should stay behind the DM's back, and no way am I going to take on that role.

"Think of it more like the foreman of a jury. It's your party's representative."

We chose Mark, partly because he was playing the fighter but mostly because he volunteered. Then, once we had our caller, we immediately threw the whole concept out the window. When Chris told us it was time to begin, we turned into an unruly mob, a gaggle of nervous, displaced adventurers left alone in the dark.

We can't just *begin*. We need answers first!

"Where are we?" Laura yelled.

"Who are we?" Mark asked.

"Tell us what is going on!" I shouted.

Chris shushed us. "Calm down. Let's first get you in initiative order."

Ah, yes. Order. Organizing feels good and is the best way to calm a potentially riotous bunch of rabble. Every time we attend a library show and give out free books, we always make the teachers and librarians form a line. If there's one thing they like almost as much as free books, it's self-sorting. (And if there's one thing they like more than free books, it's crudités and wine, but that's another story.)

Chris started the adventure by telling us how we were recruited to help a small village that has been the victim of numerous giant attacks.

"Like really big attacks?" Chuck asks. "Or attacks by really huge monsters?"

"The latter," Chris says, moving on. "The townspeople suspect the drow are involved, so off you go into the Underdark."

"Just like that?" Mark asked. "No fanfare? No preparation? No time for goodbyes?"

For the next few seconds we sat there quietly and looked at each other until Chris cleared his throat.

"Hello?"

"Wait, are we playing already?" I asked. Usually we line up our minis on the edge of the playmat to signal it's game on.

Everyone shrugged. Chris sighed again. Apparently DMing in 1st Edition is very taxing. "Yes, you're playing. Tell me what you're doing."

I was heartened to notice it wasn't just me who had trouble grasping the lack of in-game physical representations. Man, we are spoiled. I kept resisting the urge to pluck a piece of broccoli out of my salad and call it Majeka.

"Okay, okay," Chris said, scribbling something on a piece of graph paper. "I'll start. One of the townsfolk gave you a map that looks like this."

His drawing shows a corridor about one square wide and six squares long.

"So we're just . . . there?" Laura asked. "Alone?"

"I don't know," Chris smiled. "Are you?"

"Isn't that something you would tell us?" Mark asked.

"Isn't that something you would notice if you were *looking around*?" Chris prodded.

We gave Mark encouraging nods, guessing this is something our caller might be able to find out.

"Yes." Mark spoke with an authority appropriate for a caller. "We are looking around. We are trying to . . . see stuff."

"Did you bring a light source?" Chris asked.

Oh, jeez, nothing slips by this guy. This is worse than trying to return something to Best Buy without a receipt.

Sadly, Majeka wasn't packing a light source. Why? Because she assumed no one would ask for one. And because it would take up much-needed space for all the wine she was carrying.

"I have six wine flasks," I said. "I don't even remember buying those."

"That means you probably had a lot more at some point," Laura noted.

The group, minus Chuck, decided the best course of action was to take a refreshment break. Darg and Shab were also sans a light source but had their own supplies of wine.

Chuck studied his character sheet. "I didn't get any wine."

"Aw, too bad," I said. "It's BYOB."

"Aw, too bad. It's also bring your own healing," Chuck scoffed. "My light source and I will see you suckers later."

Oh, fine. We quickly filled his cup and followed him deeper into the Underdark.

"Okay, I'm *looking up*," Laura said.

"And I'm looking side to side," I said. "While holding a lovely glass of merlot."

"Fage is looking down," Chuck added, to cover our bases.

Chris drew a few more squares of the map.

"You know what would work really well?" I asked. "Dungeon Tiles. I have some at my desk. Want me to go get them?"

"No," Chris said, pointing at me to sit down. "You're seeing exactly what you would see with the amount of light you have."

I was pondering the strangeness of making our fantasy game so realistic when an unfamiliar voice came from my right.

"Shaaaaaaaabulous is claaaaaaaaaustophic."

"What's happened to your voice?" I asked Laura.

Mark nodded sympathetically. "Dairy bubble? Happens all the time."

"Oh, no," Laura said in a weird, affected, half-British, half-theater-snob accent. "This is how Shabulous talks."

Chuck's eyes got all wide. "Are you *roleplaying*?"

"OMG, I think I am!" she said.

As our caller, Mark told Chris what order we were walking in. With the cleric in the back and the fighter in the front, Majeka was essentially ensconced in bubble wrap, but I still had a feeling something big was about to happen and wasn't entirely sure we were prepared.

"Someone roll a d6," our Dungeon Master commanded.

"Why?" I asked.

"I'm not telling you," he said, but the way he rubbed his palms together told me everything I needed to know.

Chuck rolled a 4.

"Okay," Chris said as he leaned forward. "You hear what sounds like someone, or something, trying to get away."

"I'll run up ahead and play dead," Shabulous said in her snotty accent. "And see if they come after me. And if they do, I'll punch them in the face!"

Clearly Laura was used to playing a fighter.

"But you're our rogue," Darg said, with an accent somewhere between Irish and frat boy.

"Now what's wrong with *your* voice?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said. "But it's fun."

Chris brought out a second sheet of graph paper and drew a map that looked more like a Rorschach test than anything that might actually get us out of here.

"Did our light source go out?" I asked. "Because I'm not seeing anything helpful here."

"You have to say that in Majeka's voice," Laura said. "That's why you can't see anything."

Mark agreed.

Okay, so they've both lost their minds, but hey, I *was* a theater major. The problem is, I wasn't a very good theater major, so the only accent I can do is that of the Count from Sesame Street. I use it for everything—Italian, Southern, Elvish.

"Majeka looks up once, twice, three times. Ah, ah, ah. And she still can't see anything."

Chuck was about to say something appropriately snarky about my acting skills, but our Dungeon Master's frenzied palm-rubbing momentarily distracted us. Maybe we don't need accessories.

"You've all seen aliens," he said.

Statements like that are never questions, but rather assumptions because of where we work.

"Oh, yes," I said. "It was awful when stupid Sigourney came in and shot up all the alien queen's babies. I cried so hard."

Chris dropped a handful of dice on the table. "Then you'll love this."

We braced ourselves, because without the map and the minis (and yeah, yeah, I know I'm harping on this but it was new to me!) it really did feel like I was stuck in a dark, dank dungeon with a flimsy spellbook and some friends who speak with weird accents and giggle uncontrollably.

Chris was about to send sparks into the air with his manic hand-rubbing. "You see darts go past whizzing your heads! When they explode, noxious fumes fill the air."

"Stink bombs?" Laura asked. "They hit us with stink bombs?"

Both Shab and Darg get the brunt of the gassing. When Darg fails his saving throw, he's not only sick to his stomach but also blinded.

"That's awesome," Mark said with his now-southern drawl. "I can't see where I'm throwing up."

Chris continued. "Out of the darkness you see three creatures rushing toward you."

"You said they were trying to get away," I said.

"Guess not." He rolled more dice and concluded that Fage had been clubbed over the head for 6 damage.

Okay, so far 1st Edition seems like it's just the DM doing lots of stuff to the players.

"Do you want to maybe call us when it's our turn?" I asked.

"Hang on," Chris said, flipping through the pages of the adventure. "Those of you who can see notice a drow priestess standing before you. When she holds up her hand, a strange purple glow issues forth, catching Fage, Darg and Shab within it."

"I love this color on me!" Shab exclaimed.

"You look Shabulous," Majeka told her. "Ah, ah, ah."

And it was *still* Chris's turn! One of the priestesses' minions cast a *hold* spell on Shab.

"Well, that sucks," Chuck said, stating the obvious. "Does anyone know *dispel magic*?"

"Umm, my apologies, Shab," I said. "Must have been sick that day."

Chris laughed. "Sorry, Laura. You might be there a while. If this was the 80's, we'd be sending you on a pizza run."

Finally it was our turn. Well, for those of us who could move.

"Darg wants to stop being blind," Mark said, so he spent his whole turn washing out his eyes.

When Chuck cast a spell, he didn't roll any dice. Instead Chris rolled to see if he hits. He didn't.

Majeka found herself feeling the pressure because she's the only one in the group who hadn't taken damage, could see clearly, and wasn't immobilized. I figured:

A—There's more where these three came from.

B—We could probably handle three. Eventually. Maybe.

C—Magic-users have to be somewhat powerful because everyone says you have to protect them.

Let's see what's in Majeka's spellbook.

I chose *wall of fire* and tried to describe my actions to Chris as well as I could.

"I'll cast this . . . back there . . . where the rest of the drow priestesses and friends presumably are, in hopes it will erupt into a giant wall of flames that keeps us separated."

Instead of the usual "Are you *sure* you want to do that?" he says when I'm about to do something strategically dubious, Chris looked a little dejected as he nodded and said, "Go ahead."

And get this: Not only did it work *and* do 23 damage to everyone caught in the blast, but it was truly a good, strategic move.

"Nice job," Chuck said, looking genuinely surprised. I mean, let's be honest. I'm not the most tactical player in the bunch. Yet somehow my lack of vision made me see more clearly.

The *wall of fire* doesn't just torch a few drow, it lights a fire under us as well. We're suddenly back in this game. Darg, with his longbow and Jersey accent, deals some serious damage.

"That's what I'm talking about!" He pummeled his chest all Jersey Shore style.

Fage did 7 damage with his mighty hammer. Shab broke free from her *hold* and did 32 damage with backstabbing. Thirty-two! We never do that kind of damage in our regular game!

On my next turn I used my dog's favorite spell, *stinking cloud*. It pretty much has the same effect on the drow as Sadie's stinking clouds have on humans. The drow are gagging and helpless from nausea for the next three rounds.

While the remaining drow are stuck behind the *wall of fire*, we use the time to heal up.

"Phew!" Mark said. "I'm actually out of breath."

"Holy cow, this is fun," Laura said.

I agreed, even though I felt like I still had no idea what's going on. But wait, perhaps that's the fun part? We just had ourselves a crazy adventure, and it's not even close to over. I feel like I did after I riding Space Mountain at Disneyland. *How did we survive that thing?!*

I leaned over to Laura. "Want to come over later and watch *The Facts of Life*?"

"Totally."

We thanked Chris, took our character sheets, dice, and the remains of our lunch, and walked back to our desks.

"I can't believe how much I enjoyed that," I told him. "I feel like I was way more into it than usual. Like my D&D just got more real."

My mom always said there was a fantasy world in my head. I thought she was only referring to soap-opera characters and stuffed animals.

"See what happens when you're forced to pay attention?" he said.

I did, but more important, I was beginning to understand what all those boys in the 80's found so appealing about D&D. The danger, the excitement, the adventures as big as your imagination would let them be. Seeing is believing.

Or, in this case, not seeing is.

About the Author

Shelly Mazzanoble still loves her minis. And especially making armor and robes out of candy wrappers for them.

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Playtest: Tools of Two Trades

By James Auwaerter and Chad Brown

Illustrations by Mathias Kollros

Many adventurers choose early in their careers to concentrate either on attacking their enemies with weapons, or channeling power against them with implements, and thereafter they never switch between the two techniques. There are exceptions to this general statement, of course. For instance, divine characters can vary their choice of prayers to use both holy symbols and weapons to further their goals, and bards have a wide variety of spells that variously make use of ranged weapons, melee weapons, and implements.

Although concentrating on either weapon use or implement use has obvious benefits in the game, there are several reasons why an adventurer might want to branch out from relying strictly on one kind of tool.

One major incentive to having this versatility, especially for a melee-intensive character, is ranged capability. A warpriest who chooses to focus on honing her use of the warhammer can still benefit from having a ranged implement power to use in case she can't reach her enemies quickly enough. On the other hand, an artificer who specializes in casting spells through a rod or a wand might appreciate the ability to use melee attacks, or he might benefit from a crossbow's ability to engage foes at greater distances.

Another major incentive is the ability to penetrate a wider variety of enemies' defenses. A paladin who usually delivers his god's message through his longsword attacks might find his holy symbol holds greater sway over a weak-minded but heavily armored opponent, making it worthwhile to study a prayer or two that relies on his holy symbol.

How do characters with this sort of versatility learn these special talents? That process might be an adventure in itself. Three possible ways to introduce weapon-and-implement prowess into a campaign's story are given below, each associated with an appropriate selection of new feats.

Dueling, White Lotus Style

The White Lotus Academy (detailed in *Dragon* 374) is a well-known and highly respected school that teaches the arcane arts. Graduates of the academy are known to study—and occasionally to teach—arcane techniques that are not widely known or commonly practiced. A few of these studies are kept secret, considered to be part of the heritage of the school, but most are available, given the right incentives.

Of particular interest to the more adventurous students is Instructor Rufus Ibok, Master of Duels. Himself a graduate of the academy and a retired adventurer, the dwarf bard has an encyclopedic knowledge of the etiquette, practices, and traditions of dueling (arcane or martial) from across the world and is keen to pass on what he knows to current students. Ibok's popularity has led a large number of students to emulate the instructor's ability to engage in duels with a variety of arcane tools. One of Ibok's favorite lessons involves blindfolding two students, who each draw a random dueling instrument (a weapon, an implement, or sometimes a literal

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instrument) from a magic bag mere moments before the practice duel begins.

White Lotus Dueling Expertise

You have been trained to carry out an arcane duel using a variety of implements—often more than one at the same time.

Prerequisite: Any arcane class

Benefit: You gain a +1 feat bonus to the attack rolls of arcane powers and basic attacks that you make with any weapon or implement with which you have proficiency. This bonus increases to +2 at 11th level and +3 at 21st level.

In addition, when you hit an enemy with an arcane at-will attack power or basic attack on your turn, you gain a +2 bonus to Arcana checks and Diplomacy checks until the end of your next turn.

Eldritch Fusillade Expertise

Your hands move with surety of purpose and economy of motion as you prepare to unleash a torrent of bolts, both magical and physical, against your enemies.

Benefit: You gain a +1 feat bonus to weapon attack rolls that you make with a crossbow, and to implement attack rolls you make with a wand. These bonuses increase to +2 at 11th level and +3 at 21st level.

Also, while you wield both a wand and a crossbow, you can treat the hand holding the wand as if it were empty for the purpose of loading the crossbow.

Dwarven Rod Expertise

You have learned a dwarven technique for wielding a rod for both magical and martial purposes.

Prerequisite: Proficiency with rods

Benefit: You gain a +1 feat bonus to weapon attack rolls you make with a mace, and to implement attack rolls you make with a rod. These bonuses increase to +2 at 11th level and +3 at 21st level.

Also, when you wield a rod, you can treat it as a club when making weapon attacks. You can use the enhancement bonus and critical dice of the rod when making weapon attacks or damage rolls with it, but you cannot use its properties or powers.

Battle Song Expertise

Magic creates and is created by song, a fact that few understand better than you do. You specialize in the tools of the bard, be they weapons or instruments.

Prerequisite: Bard

Benefit: You gain a +1 feat bonus to attack rolls you make with any weapon or wondrous item that has a property allowing you to use it as an implement for your bard powers and bard paragon path powers. This bonus increases to +2 at 11th level and +3 at 21st level.

You also gain a +1 feat bonus to the number of squares that you can push, pull, or slide creatures with your bard powers and bard paragon path powers that use such a weapon or item.

Halls of Battle

Some churches, especially those in the largest cities, and certain theocracies maintain their own training programs for holy warriors. In many other parts of the world, holy warriors train alongside their martial and arcane brothers and sisters, supplementing their devotions with military training in order to learn discipline, tactics, and strategy. The names and the particulars of these institutions vary by place and culture, but they can be collectively referred to as halls of battle.

Some halls of battle have a religious bent already; in a dwarven enclave, for example, devotees of Moradin might be the hall's primary instructors in the art of weapon combat at the same time that they are implement users themselves. In contrast, a hall of battle in an eladrin society more likely separates the instruction of blade, bow, spell, and prayer into distinct times, places, and teachers.

Many of the larger halls of battle have added courses of specialized training, enabling young supplicants to combine martial and divine might. Many a worthy knight or mighty paladin began his or her career in such a place.

Devoted Priest Expertise

Even when you wade into battle with your weapon at the ready, your enemies still feel the sting of the symbol of your faith.

Benefit: When you are using a holy symbol and wielding a melee weapon with which you are proficient, you gain a +1 feat bonus to weapon attack rolls you make with the weapon and a +1 feat bonus to implement attack rolls you make with the holy symbol. These bonuses increase to +2 at 11th level and +3 at 21st level.

Also, when you hit a creature vulnerable to radiant damage with a weapon attack while you are using a holy symbol, you gain a +1 bonus to the damage roll. This bonus increases to +2 at 11th level and +3 at 21st level.

Devout Protector Expertise

The power of your faith shines from both your holy symbol and your weapon, enhancing your attacks and your shield at the same time.

Benefit: When you are using a holy symbol, wielding a melee weapon with which you are proficient, and using a shield, you gain a +1 feat bonus to weapon attack rolls you make with the weapon and a +1 feat bonus to implement attack rolls you make with the holy symbol. These bonuses increase to +2 at 11th level and +3 at 21st level.

Also, when you hit with a divine at-will attack power or a basic attack while wielding a melee weapon, using a shield, and using a holy symbol, your

shield bonus to Reflex increases by 1 until the start of your next turn.

Mighty Crusader Expertise

You use your weapon to fend off attacks while you unleash your prayers through the symbol of your faith.

Benefit: When you are using a holy symbol and wielding a melee weapon in two hands, you gain a +1 feat bonus to weapon attack rolls you make with the weapon and a +1 feat bonus to implement attack rolls you make with the holy symbol. These bonuses increase to +2 at 11th level and +3 at 21st level.

Also, when you use two hands to wield a melee weapon with which you have proficiency, ranged and area attacks that you make with a holy symbol do not provoke attacks of opportunity.

Itinerant Tutor

Though most instructors choose to settle in a particular area, hanging out a shingle or joining a college or an academy, there are always teachers who wander. One such is Nythwon Cadogan, a male voidsoul genasi with a special interest in shadow lore. Nythwon can typically be found near known or suspected entrances to the Underdark, the Shadowfell, or the Feydark. Although he is neither undead nor known to be a necromancer, Cadogan has an unfriendly, sometimes hostile relationship with those who revere the Raven Queen.

When he is encountered, Nythwon is typically gathering resources for his various expeditions. Nythwon usually demands payment in coin, but rumors suggest that he can be convinced to offer training if a would-be student willingly makes a binding pledge of fealty to some dark and secretive patron.

Among other things, Nythwon is said to be able to teach the following techniques.

Hex Expertise

You call upon a symbol of your warlock's pact to strengthen your connection with your patron—and increase your control over your Warlock's Curse.

Prerequisite: Warlock, Warlock's Curse class feature

Benefit: You gain a +1 feat bonus to the attack rolls of weapon powers and implement powers that you use with a pact blade or other weapon with a property that allows it to function as a warlock implement for you. This bonus increases to +2 at 11th level and +3 at 21st level.

Also, once per day, while wielding such a weapon, you can place your Warlock's Curse on any enemy you can see, rather than the nearest enemy you can see.

War Wizard's Expertise

While the techniques of channeling arcane power with a bladed weapon were said to have been discovered by the race that became the elves, drow, and eladrin, variants have since spread far and wide. You have mastered one of these special talents that not only enhances your attacks but gives your friends a measure of protection from those same strikes.

Prerequisite: Any arcane class

Benefit: You gain a +1 feat bonus to the attack rolls of arcane attack powers and basic attacks made with a light blade or a heavy blade. This bonus increases to +2 at 11th level and +3 at 21st level.

Also, when you use an arcane attack power with a light blade or a heavy blade and hit one or more allies, you reduce the damage dealt to those allies by that attack by 4. This reduction becomes 6 at 11th level and 8 at 21st level.

Weapon Ki Technique

You have learned to further blur the already hazy boundary between the use of your weapons and the use of your ki focus.

Benefit: When you wield a weapon and a ki focus, you gain a +1 feat bonus to the attack rolls of implement powers or weapon powers that you make with either the weapon or the ki focus. This bonus increases to +2 at 11th level and +3 at 21st level.

Also, when you wield a weapon and a ki focus, you gain a +1 bonus to the damage rolls of at-will attacks you make against bloodied enemies. This bonus increases to +2 at 11th level and +3 at 21st level.

About the Authors

Jim Auwaerter has probably returned from GenCon by this time, back to his small village off the coast of the Lugotak Sea. Please feel free to give him feedback on the Wizards Community forums. Follow Jim online at www.twitter.com/heridfel.

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Neverwinter Factions

D&D Alumni

Bart Carroll

Those attending Gen Con will see that we have a lot of activities taking place around the former "Jewel of the North." Our focus on the *Neverwinter Campaign Setting* includes the *D&D Game Day* event, *Gates of Neverdeath*. This adventure takes characters from Waterdeep to Neverwinter, and it allows them to be used in the upcoming *D&D Encounters* season, *Lost Crown of Neverwinter*. Those who want to throw themselves fully into all things Neverwinter can even take part in events at Gen Con, with participants able to join one of three factions: New Neverwinter, Thay, or Bregan D'aerth (see more about the factions below).

With events focusing on Neverwinter, we wanted to offer a brief tour of the city (and why it's called Neverwinter in the first place) here in our *D&D Alumni* column. Then, after you know the city and have learned of its factions, you have this decision to make: Which of its factions will you join?

The Founding of Neverwinter

According to the 1st Edition *Forgotten Realms Campaign* boxed set, Neverwinter is listed among the "good" cities of the North, along with Waterdeep, Silverymoon, and Sundabar. As Elminster himself notes, "Neverwinter is a friendly city of craftsmen, who trade extensively via the great merchants of Waterdeep; their water-clocks and multi-hued lamps can be found throughout the Realms. Neverwinter gained its name from the skill of its gardeners, who contrived to keep flowers blooming throughout the months of snow -- a practice they continue with pride."

Although that's but one of several explanations for the city's name, it is noted that "by the clocks of Neverwinter" became a known watchword (no pun intended…we think) for accuracy and delicate precision.

Turning to the *Grand History of the Forgotten Realms*, we discover that the city was founded back in 87 DR, Year of the Hoar Frost. Located along the Sword Coast, Neverwinter has continually faced the harshness of the Savage North, whether from the climate (another explanation of the city's name derives from the warm waters of the Neverwinter River, which keeps it from freezing over) or the nearby inhabitants (still another explanation is the heroic stand Lord Never took against marauding orcs, claiming the place would be Never's Winter).

Yet however resilient its people, Neverwinter could not withstand coming events.

Neverwinter Ruined... and Reborn

Also known favorably as the City of Skilled Hands and the Jewel of the North, Neverwinter was largely destroyed thirty years ago, following events of the Spellplague. Mount Hotenow, the nearby volcano, erupted and damaged much of the city in a flash, opening the great rift known as the Chasm. This year's *D&D Open Championship*, the *Fires of Mount Hotenow*, is set on the eve of the volcano's eruption -- with characters needing to escape the city to survive.

However, this resilient city would not only survive, but it is currently in an active state of repair under the rule of its Lord Protector, Lord Neverember. As described in the 4th Edition *Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting*, "Dagult 'Dagger' Neverember, is a hard-drinking, eloquent, and impressive lion of a man. Tall, broad-shouldered, and forceful, he is a master manipulator and looks the part of a strong ruler; he was chosen to be Open Lord for this reason. Neverember is one of the richest men in Waterdeep. He prefers straight dealing to intrigue and genuinely wants to do what's best for the city."

The Three Factions in Play

Now, you have the background of the city. But what of the background of the event?

Several months prior to the convention, Wizards R&D devised this activity for Gen Con (the development of which we'll detail in a future *Design & Development* article). James Wyatt (with help from Mike Mearls, Chris Tulach, Toby Maheras, and yours truly) concocted the premise of three factions searching for notoriety within Neverwinter.

The event in a nutshell:

> With the appearance of the Lost Heir of Neverwinter, the city is thrown into chaos. Is Lord Neverember the rightful ruler of the city, or is the mysterious Lost Heir's claim true? With everyone off balance, factions that normally scheme in the shadows come to the forefront, hoping to claim the rule of the city—and the power it contains—for themselves.
>
> Join a faction and influence who will gain control of the Crown of Neverwinter and the power it holds!

The three factions, we decided, had to be far enough apart in their ideologies to have separate identities and leadership. Those who want to take part in the event might want to read brief descriptions of each, as presented below.

New Neverwinter

New Neverwinter is the faction of Lord Neverember, who returns in the *Neverwinter Campaign Setting*, along with his administrative mayor, Soman Galt. Neverember's New Neverwinter movement is a deft political tool, leveraging the spirit of the people to rebuild the city to its former prosperity, prestige -- and security.

Of course, it is not the only faction in town. Two others vie for the crown, and they feature much longer histories. But for those who want to quest for honor and stand by the side of Lord Neverember: We suggest joining **New Neverwinter**.

Thay

From the 1st Edition *Forgotten Realms* supplement, *Dreams of the Red Wizards*, we learned about Thay: "About four hundred years ago, a sect calling itself the Red Wizards declared its freedom from the godkings of Mulhorand. They rebelled from the rule of the theocracy and demanded more freedom for magic research. The sect originally sprang up all over the old kingdom, but its center of strength was in the northern provinces, where the natives did not have the inbred reverence for the god-kings. The wizards led an army to raze the capital city of Delhumide and declared themselves the free nation of Thay."

The lich and archwizard Szass Tam leads the nation of Thay, along with the Council of Zulkirs. (If the Zulkirs, or archwizards, formerly represented the eight schools of magic, Szass Tam represented the necromancy school.) With their connections to slavery and necromancy, Thay has long been a feared and reviled nation. If rumors are to be believed, Thay is secretly responsible for Neverwinter's destruction, with their agents still looking to take advantage of the situation.

In R.A. Salvatore's *Gauntlgrym*, Szass Tam ordered Dahlia to create the Dread Ring in Neverwinter Woods. And Szass Tam also deployed his fellow lich Valindra Shadowmantle to the region (partially to see if the ring can be restored, plus to raise more undead, including dracoliches, to place under her control).

Although Valindra doesn't share the full power or the long backstory of Szass Tam, she has likewise appeared in *Gauntlgrym*, as well as the *Neverwinter Nights* video game. (You can find her in Luskan's Host Tower of the Arcane.) Even as Szass manipulates his plots behind the scenes, Valindra works more directly out in the world, which makes her an excellent choice to lead this faction.

That said, the final faction might be even more deeply entrenched in the game of machinations. But for those lured by wizardry and the temptation of power, we suggest joining Thay.

Bregan D'aerthe

The 4th Edition *Forgotten Realms Campaign Guide* describes Bregan D'aerthe as "a company of mercenaries, assassins, and scouts founded and still led (though from afar and through intermediaries) by Jarlaxle Baenre. The company absorbs houseless males and unaligned graduates of Melee-Magthere, making their services available to the highest bidder -- and sometimes to every bidder. It's not at all uncommon for Bregan D'aerthe agents to be working on both sides of a struggle between warring houses, but they never side against House Baenre."

These drow mercenaries first appeared in R.A. Salvatore's *Exile*, the second novel in the *Dark Elf* trilogy, which saw Drizzt Do'urden make his way from Menzoberranzan to the surface world. Then they sold their swords to various houses wrestling for position in Menzoberranzan's hierarchy (with much at stake: losing houses were slaughtered, down to the last drow).

Since that appearance, Bregan D'aerthe would seem to have followed Drizzt to the surface. As the *Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting* states: "Bregan D'aerthe actively pursues contacts with thieves' and assassins' guilds of the World Above, sometimes providing drow mercenaries to supplement their operations."

This involvement in the surface world has drawn Jarlaxle to Neverwinter. As depicted in the various novels, he has since traveled with the assassin Artemis Entreri (archrival of Drizzt), sought Crenshinibon the Crystal Shard, and been involved with the destruction of Luskan's Host Tower. He has even appeared in the *Baldur's Gate II* video game (coincidentally sending you on a quest against a lich). And, as noted by various sources, he certainly suffers no shortage of tricks -- especially when it comes to magical cards up his sleeve.

Although Bregan D'aerthe remains headquartered in Menzoberranzan, led by the psionicist Kimmuriel Oblodra during Jarlaxle's frequent and long absences, Jarlaxle has remained his faction's chief schemer and player. In recent years, Bregan D'aerthe has worked for surface interests from Luruar to Tethyr, and as far to the northeast as Impiltur, with contacts in cities such as Waterdeep, Baldur's Gate, Athkatla, and Darromar, as well as Mulmaster and Lyrabar.

And now, they've come to Neverwinter. As shown in the *Neverwinter Campaign Setting*, Bregan D'aerthe has established a camp in the courtyard of Castle Never, which is also frequented by Drizzt now that his interests have seemingly become entwined with Jarlaxle's.

So, for those of you swayed by riches and treasure in the shadows and ruins, join Bregan D'aerthe.

But What of Endings?

Although the mass adventure concludes at the end of Gen Con, we look forward to congratulating the winning faction and following their influence in the next season of *D&D Encounters*, *Lost Crown of Neverwinter*. There, it seems, the intrigue continues.

> *Missing for decades, the Crown of Neverwinter, symbol of the former ruling family, has emerged at last. Yet not all are pleased with the crown's reappearance. Beset by rebels and plaguechanged, Lord Dagult Neverember must hire a group of adventurers to track down the so-called Lost Heir and discover his intentions for the city. The stakes are no less than the lives of the citizens of Neverwinter, for if the heroes fail, Neverwinter seems doomed to descend into civil war.*

Best of luck and good hunting!

Bart Carroll
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