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Fall 2007 Issue 2

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Fall 2007

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contents

Editorial

3 Shared Worlds

Letters

4 From the Mines

Princes of Hell

8 Belphegor, the Baron of Laziness and Invention by Tim Connors

Why is Belphegor so very French? All is revealed.

Dungeon Design

12 On the Streets Where Heroes Live by Ed Greenwood

How to make players care about what's over Yonder.

Kobold Diplomacy

17 King of All Monsters: Wayne Reynolds

The tight-lipped master of the monstrous lets slip a few words.

Character Design

20 Assassins: the Core Class by Robert Schwalb

32 From the Outside In: Character Generation by Sigfried Trent

Ecology

28 Ecology of the Barghest by Nicolas Logue

Half goblin and all mean.

Flashing Blades

26 Ask the Kobold: Q&A by Skip Williams

34 My Kingdom for a Horse by John E. Ling

36 Joining the Noble Classes by Jeff Grubb

Open Design Preview

40 Empire of the Ghouls: the Avatar of Hunger by Wolfgang Baur

Cartoons by Stan!

12 10' by 10' Toon 25 Bolt & Quiver

the Free City

42 Griffon Towers of the Margreve by Wolfgang Baur

On the Cover

Yes, there is a picture of a nightwing in your MM. That image is dead to us now; throw it away and use Aaron Acevedo as-tounding cover rendering of the nightwing instead.

SHARED WORLDS

The heart of the tabletop roleplaying world is a place where everyone shares the stage: players, DMs, and designers alike. In that vein, I'm happy to announce that with this issue, I'm stepping back from writing quite so many articles as I did last issue. There's a world of talent out there, and it's time to share some of it here.

To start things off, the kings of shared worlds are here, Ed Greenwood and Jeff Grubb. Greenwood's *Realms* are well known, of course, as are his novels and more recent *Castlemourn*. Grubb's role in creating the *Realms*, *Al-Qadim*, *Guild Wars*, and many other worlds is likewise part of gaming history. This issue, he picks up on an idea from issue #1 and runs with it, explaining how to add noble levels to your PCs and social status to your campaign. It's wonderful to welcome these talents to the kobold universe, and I hope to present their thoughts to you again in future.

Then there's Nicolas Logue, who contributes this issue's Ecology article. You may recognize him from his *EBERRON* work and from his outstanding adventures for the late, lamented Paizo incarnation of *DUNGEON* magazine. Fellow Paizo veterans Tim and Eileen Connors offer up a devil full of sloth. It's not easy to make laziness compelling, but they've done it with style, compiling hooks and tactics usable in any campaign.

In addition, I am very pleased that Skip Williams, who co-designed 3rd Edition and who got his start in the industry with TSR in Lake Geneva, now graces these pages. He's taking questions for our first regular column, "Ask the Kobold." If you have ever wondered about weapon size, the various conditions of undeath, or the triggers for traps and the point of the Balance skill, give him a shout.

I'm pleased to present two polar opposites in character classes, or at least they were in 1st Edition: the paladin and the assassin. The Assassin core class is a preview from Green Ronin's *d20 Freeport Companion*. Written by that dastardly



evil ronin J. Robert Schwalb, this is a rock-solid take on the class of scum who kill for a living. Lest you mistake this for condemnation, I say that as a major fan of assassins. Schwalb clearly has high friends in low places.

At the opposite end of the alignment spectrum, the assassin's nemesis is the worthy paladin. Relative newcomer John Ling shows us how paladins can trade in their mounts for new class abilities. I expect we'll hear more from him in future issues.

Finally, there's one piece from someone whose name may not be familiar (yet), the redoubtable Sigfried Trent from Open Design. He discusses how to make your next PC more memorable, and provides great tips for getting traction with a new character.

I hope you enjoy the wide range of voices this issue. I think you'll notice I've bumped up the page count quite a bit to make room for that extra gaming content. Yes, we're at 40 pages, and still very light on ads.

I hope to retain that higher page count next issue, but as always it depends on what articles arrive and whether the circulation numbers grow. If you enjoy *KOBOLD QUARTERLY* and are as pleased with the freelancers presented here as I am, please tell your friends — and broaden this shared world a little further.

Wolfgang Baur

Kobold in Chief

FROM THE MINES



You can write to us at koboldquarterly@gmail.com or send paper hate mail to KOBOLD QUARTERLY, PO Box 2811, Kirkland, WA 98083.

Tripping Error

The tripping article in Kobold Quarterly contradicts a rule in Complete Adventurer.

On page 27, KQ#1 said:

“A character with a very high Tumble skill can stand as a free action with a DC of 35, making it easy for them to stand up without any attacks of opportunity or using a move action.”

On page 103, Complete Adventurer says “Free Stand: With a DC 35 Tumble check result, you can stand up from prone as a free action (instead of as a move action). This use of the skill still provokes attacks of opportunity as normal.”

Notice the contradiction regarding provoking attacks of opportunity.

~Alan

Author Sigfried Trent replies: *Thanks for reading the article and taking the time to mail KOBOLD QUARTERLY about it. I mostly stuck with the d20 Hypertext SRD when researching my article. I also used the WotC FAQ to answer some of the stickier rules issues.*

Regarding the use of Tumble to stand as a free action, that's from the Epic material included in the SRD, where it is listed as one of the Epic uses of the Tumble skill. My understanding is that you needn't be epic level to attempt the epic skill uses, although with the very high DC targets it certainly helps. The SRD listing doesn't indicate whether you provoke an attack of

opportunity or not, but it is listed as a free action, and free actions never provoke attacks of opportunity so far as I am aware. Quicken Spell is a good example of this; making it a free action removes the attack of opportunity normally associated with the action.

This wouldn't be the first time I've seen different versions of the same rule in different WotC sources. The general principle is to use the most recently printed version. The Complete Adventurer would seem to override, but when writing for OGL you have to put on blinders regarding anything published outside the OGL banner.

The rules lawyer in me would tend to say it provokes an attack of opportunity due to the conflicting rules policy WotC promotes, but it seems odd to me that any free action would provoke an attack of opportunity since 1) a free action essentially takes almost no time, 2) an attack of opportunity represents you doing something that leaves you vulnerable, and 3) because in almost all cases making an action a free action stops it from provoking attacks of opportunity.

*Good Gaming,
Sigfried Trent*

Question About Derro Nets

I have a confusion about the derro poison net and the weeping poison. It states that the weeping poison is an injected poison. How does it then work on the net?

~Keith Unger

You caught us, if you'll forgive the pun. We could pretend that the nets are set with barbed hooks, but really, the weeping poison should be a contact poison.

Random Encounter in a Box

I just finished reading your first issue of KOBOLD QUARTERLY and it was great! I purchased the PDF from Paizo and on seeing the quality I am positive that I need a hard copy.

I liked all of the articles. I was most interested in your interview with Erik Mona, and it was excellent. I read your FAQ and it is understandable that adventures may not appear in this magazine for a while. However, it would be interesting if you could do a 1 or 2-page encounter. Maybe featuring a creature introduced in the issue with the encounter. Not a simple you-run-into-an-orc-and-you-fight encounter. Something requiring puzzle solving or a unique combat scenario (where the combat requires the PCs to think their way through the battle). Basically a random encounter in a box that I can throw at my PCs as they are travel overland or wander through a dungeon.

~Liam Whalen

Devoted to the Best of S&S

Not long ago, I was revisiting my DRAGON collection, and looked at the “Dragon Rumbles” section of DRAGON 1.

“That mission is to publish the best magazine devoted to Sword & Sorcery, Fantasy, Science Fiction and Role Playing gaming.... We actively encourage your suggestions, criticisms, or whatever. We can adequately serve you, the gamer/reader, only if you let us know what you like/want.”

That was 1976. I was only 4 years

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old, and it wouldn't be until the summer of 1980 that I would get my first D&D set. I am too young to remember those times, and my memories of a pre-WotC D&D are also memories of childhood, which tend to be at times unduly romantic. Still, whether correctly remembered or not, I could SWEAR I remember a time where the relationship between profits and product were a little more favorably matched. When the game producers were the biggest enthusiasts. Somewhere between 1976 and 2007, I think the mission shifted, and the dialog between the franchise holder and the gamer was lost.

Reading your publication, I was almost glad DRAGON folded. KOBOLD QUARTERLY's first issue reminded me that you don't need the trappings of a large business to put out good gaming material, and that a DIY spirit is at the heart of roleplaying. I felt as though I were reading a DRAGON magazine that didn't have the worries of a large publication, a magazine that had thrown off the worries that come with being a business, and was getting back to putting fun first and foremost.

I'm going to miss DRAGON. But I am glad that people like you are back in the driver's seat. I'm more excited about the hobby than I have been since I was a teenager, and I can't wait to see what the next few years bring.

About the magazine itself: I enjoyed every article. I appreciate the mix of DM and player attention, and it is a relief to see the "Ecology of the..." series kept alive. If I were to choose a favorite article, it would be "It's not (always) the gold". I really like practical advice that can be applied directly. The underdark monster table will be useful if I ever want to write an adventure for the underdark (not likely, but a good idea). Finally, the Titivillus article was just fun.

The production value of the periodical is very nice – I was anticipating something much less polished.

I know that you put a lot of yourself into this, and the hard work shows. After seeing the first KQ, a weight I had been feeling since the announcement of the demise of Dragon lifted, and I really, really want to thank you for doing that to me.

–Allen Hunter

Thanks for the kind words: I may just need to get them framed and placed in the office for a rainy, flame-war-filled day.

I'm honored to scurry in Dragon's illustrious shadow, and hope to keep printing as long as readers enjoy paper. While games are a business, they have to be a fun and adventurous business. I learned that from Roger Moore, DRAGON's editor during another era, and I hope to carry that spark forward in years to come.

A Little Wobbly, but Wow

Being a first issue, the magazine is – as expected of any first magazine – a little wobbly, still finding its feet. But I officially do not regret spending the money. What I've seen so far was great. Especially the interview with Erik Mona: Hands down,

my favorite part of this issue. I can't remember the last time someone made a reference about a rat's balls in DRAGON Magazine, and I'm still laughing about that one.

Another particular favorite was the article on Trip Attacks. It's always nice to see someone get back to the nitty gritty of battle tactics, as well as more clarity as to the nature of special attacks, in addition to the usual fluff. The glimpse at the City of Zobeck intrigued me to learn more about the related setting.

Additionally, what true nerd doesn't fantasize about a job in the gaming industry? Gaming sounds like a (most likely) thankless, but at the same time fantastic career, and I'd love to know more about how the industry works. I'm *not* talking about an article on "Here's how to get a job writing D&D," but more "Here is how our little world actually lives and functions." Maybe behind-the-scenes, or more interviews, insights, and observations of infamous figures of the industry?

Thanks again for providing us with some great info, and a voice to go with it. I'm looking forward to many future issues of KQ!

-Mycheal Kelly

Thanks for your letter! Yes, OPEN DESIGN does pry open some behind-the-scenes aspects of design in its design essays (which currently aren't reprinted anywhere else). And of course the project patrons see some of that in the writing process. If there's a demand, the essays may appear here as well.

The KQ interviews will mine a similar vein. I'll be asking the patrons soon about who they'd like to see interviewed next.

Non-Core WotC Material?

I bought your periodical and have read it through. It's great! There are a few details that bothered me, and as they say, "The devil is in the details." First, there was a lot of non-core content that wasn't explained in your e-zine. From the first half of the e-zine some examples are incantations, non-core domains, Knowl-

edge (Forbidden Lore), and the feat Blinding Speed.

Second, the Underdark Encounters didn't include a key to the abbreviations. I only own the MM, MM2, and FF, so I was lost when you mentioned ToH1, MGU, CS, U, Minions, and other abbreviations. I usually play FRPGs with my 10-year-old son and his friends, and my three-year-old daughter usually takes up time I'd rather spend poring over the latest FRPG supplements. So circumstances conspire to keep me dedicated to (mostly) core rules. Non-core details without some iota of explanation frustrate me.

Now the kudos: the layout is very professional and eye-pleasing. The choice of artwork was better than what can be found in the most popular FRPG magazine. I particularly enjoyed the "classical" fantasy artwork and the mix of color and black & white images.

The features were exceptional, a perfect mix of crunch and fluff. Finally, the choice of features was excellent. I'm a big fan of devils and underdark creatures as antagonists, and I love small variations or in depth explorations of standard game mechanics like rewards or combat options (tripping).

To sum up: You've got an excellent periodical, but to keep my business, keep it core or explain the non-core stuff.

One last thing: please include letters to the editor in future issues. I love to hear what other players have to say about the hobby.

-Joel Rodda
Tacoma, Washington

Letters, you say? Wish granted. I'll definitely be better about the references in future; sometimes it's a tough choice with limited space, but I should have put the key in for Unearthed Arcana and the others.

That said, the easiest way to find Open content like the incantations, domains, feats, and skill you mention is in the Hypertext SRD at www.d20srd.org; it's searchable and very useful for finding WotC's Open material.

Intrigued

I got a copy of your first issue and I am intrigued. It looks like something I and my group might be interested in. What type of content do you see as a regular feature?

My interest would be in articles that clarify rules found in the core game. Just tonight my group had questions about combat movement and how turn undead effects work (is it a cone or a radius effect?). I'd like a regular column dedicated to clarifying muddy rules so that my players and I have a better understanding of their use.

I am not as keen about published adventures because I find even the generic ones have a hard time fitting in campaigns. Or they just don't apply, since my players are at one level and the adventure is for another.

I'd rather learn how to make my games better or how players can better play the game. Ideas on how to create good cities or NPCs, or tips on knowing your character and roleplaying would be great. I know my players always have real trouble being creative when trying to come up with character histories and feel it is more of a chore than something they are excited about. Could you publish an article to get them motivated?

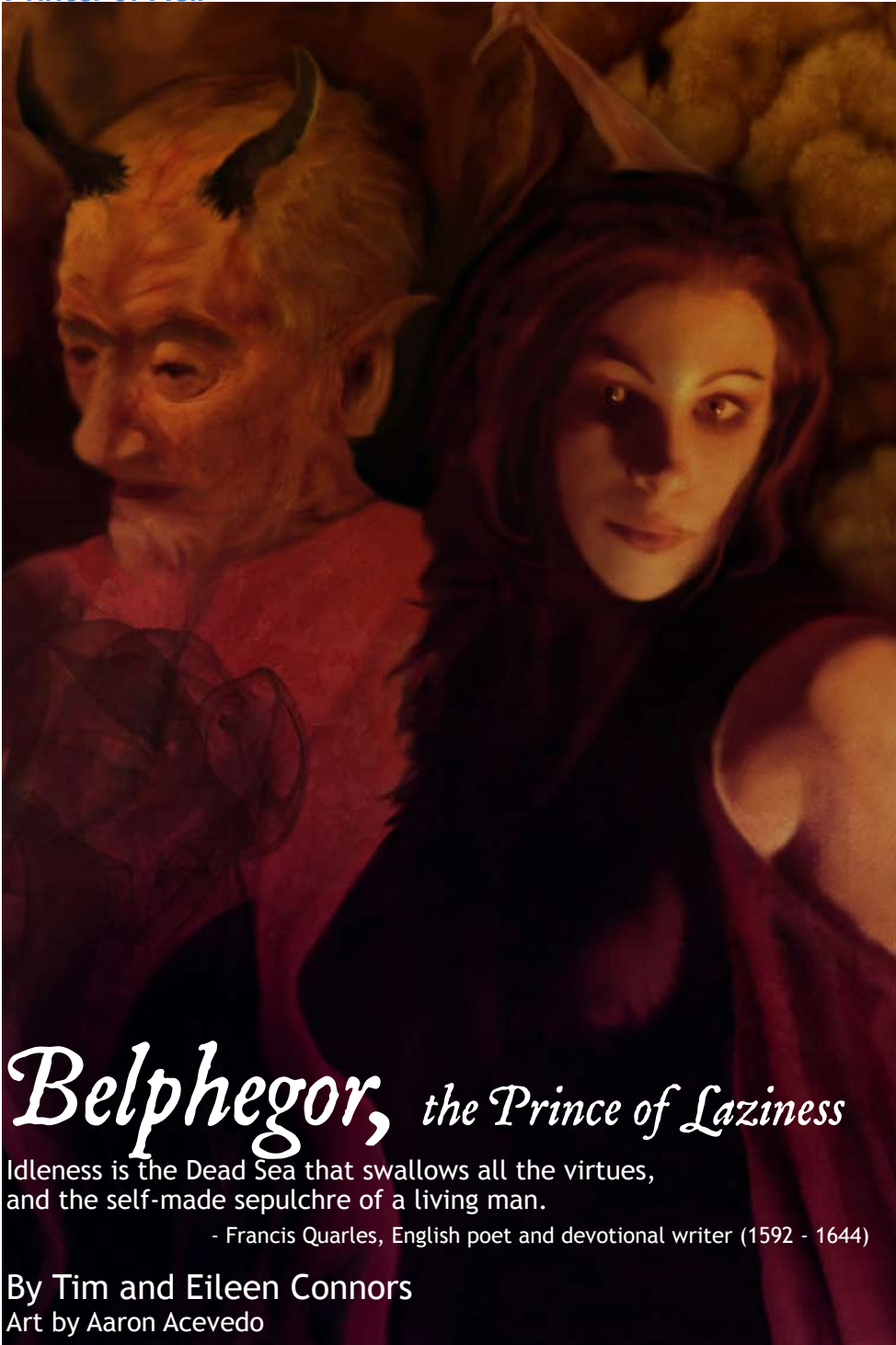
-Brendan Flood

KOBOLD QUARTERLY will offer new tactics, mechanics, and player-friendly articles every issue, as well as DM advice in the Dungeon Design column.

As to rules questions, I think that's a great idea. 3rd Edition co-author and long-time sage Skip Williams answers some this issue, and you can submit your questions to yesage@aol.com. Our kobolds are standing by.

It turns out that Sigfried Trent has written an article character generation and histories in this issue.

Thanks for all your letters and emails. Even if we don't print them all here, every one does get read and many have shaped the content of the current issue. KQ will continue to be your magazine first and foremost.



Belphegor, the Prince of Laziness

Idleness is the Dead Sea that swallows all the virtues,
and the self-made sepulchre of a living man.

- Francis Quarles, English poet and devotional writer (1592 - 1644)

By Tim and Eileen Connors

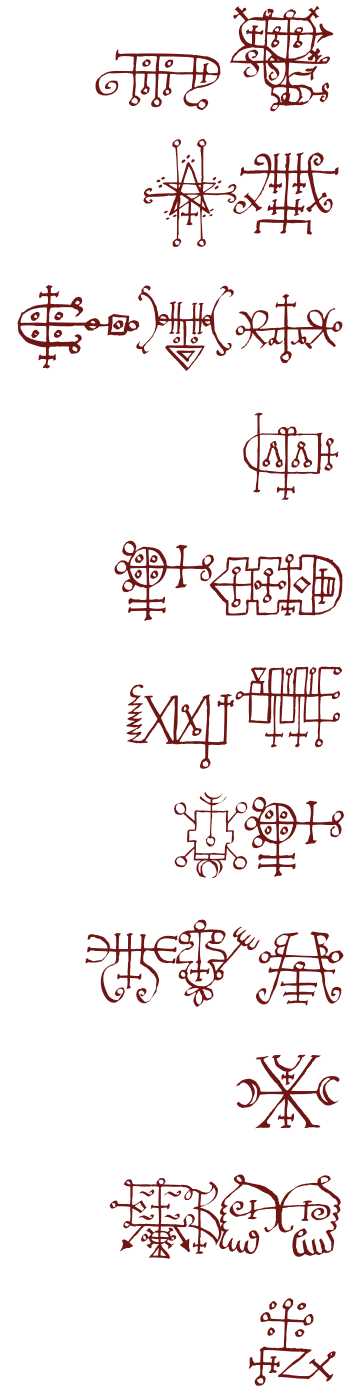
Art by Aaron Acevedo

The Archangel reprised his arguments to Belphegor. “If men produce nothing, how shall we see whether they burn for good or for evil? The laziness you preach smothers their works. Remove your influence – take your bushel from over their candle.”

“My dear Remiel, I assure you that they burn.” The devil suppressed a grin. “Hearken to your brother’s toll: Laziness is the mother of invention, the motivator of magic and science. What see you immoral in seeking the shortest, most efficient way in all things? It is simply the mark of the clever man.”

“There is no shortcut to Heaven, Baron Belphegor.”

“Yes, well, that concerns me not at all.”



Belphegor is hell’s unsung hero.

Though he gathers more souls to the Nine Hells than any other devil of equal rank, he employs a very subtle charm: Laziness.

Most mortals are quite aware of what actions lead to damnation, but fewer realize the spiritual peril of inaction and procrastination. By corrupting mortals with laziness, Belphegor prevents their virtuous plans from ever coming to fruition. Evil deeds

go unchallenged. Charitable works go unfulfilled. In the cool shade of laziness, a world of good intentions withers to nothing more than excuses.

Belphegor offers the temptation of the easy road. He presents many visions of fast fortunes, helps the virtuous monk fall asleep at vespers, or tempts the poor laborer to turn to thievery rather than work. But his hallmark is to tempt mortals with ingenious inventions that will make them rich and famous. Whether it is a masterful design for longer-range siege engines, an insightful way to concoct poisons, or an inspired con game, Belphegor's temptation always matches the tempted. Even at the cost of their souls, many embrace his offer eagerly.

Belphegor's primrose path to power, glory, and happiness is the way of least resistance. To find it, one must simply be inventive – or have an inventive teacher. Belphegor is always the inventive teacher, happy to point the way to Hell and speed mortals on their way.

History of Belphegor

While all devils bow to the tenets of Hell's rigid caste system, none of them are content with their particular place in the machine. Like the rest, Belphegor was born with a burning desire for more power and greater influence. He wanted to rule; he just didn't want to work for it.

In his early days as an imp, Belphegor's slothful nature prevented him from accomplishing much at all. He put a few devotional writers to sleep at their inkpots and encouraged village priests to trot out dull, timeworn sermons. But Belphegor spent most of his days lying about, observing the politics of Hell and wondering at his ambitious brethren.

He watched brazen devils fail to seize power by force. He watched cunning devils ply politics and duplicity for centuries, often to no effect. Considering the paltry, successful few, Belphegor sighed. Surely there must be an easier way.

In time he found one. During a reorganization of lesser diabolical fiefdoms,

Belphegor slipped into the most promising group of devils. He contributed little to the group's schemes, but, as planned, shared equally in their successes. Eventually, his partners shed his dead weight, but he had already ridden their coat tails to low-level power.

Belphegor turned his newfound power to the wholesale corruption of mortal souls. He had an inventive, even elegant, plan that required little effort. It started when a fame-seeking human named Agrippa summoned him, and Belphegor feigned subjugation.

Put to the question by Agrippa's sorcery, Belphegor confessed that diabolists of all kinds could escape from paying their portion of a pact with devils -- or at least, pacts with himself. Delighted, Agrippa promptly produced a diabolist book on the subject and gained worldwide fame. Finally, his book claimed, mortals could command a devil to work magic, win love, and find treasure, all without risk to their souls.

Escaping damnation was simple: the diabolist must share copies of the book with two or more others and convince them to enter similar pacts with Belphegor. When one mortal signed out, two signed in. Belphegor sat back and for a long stretch, rose quickly atop his pyramid scheme.

Years later, Heaven spearheaded an angelic purge of the popular book. But despite the angels' diligence, one can still find copies of *On the Subjugation of Devils* in the dark shelves of unsavory scriptoria or the sealed archives of warlocks and fiends. Belphegor's current power status renders these rarities especially potent and dangerous tools.

The angelic intervention brought Belphegor's name to the attention of more powerful devils who recognized his ingenuity and sought him out for advisory positions. Mistaking his laziness for lack of ambition, they considered him the perfect subordinate. In fact, his demeanor was so non-threatening that many spoke of intrigues and machinations well above his station in his presence. After all, they thought. Belphegor was too dull to make much of their razor-

sharp schemes.

With expanding knowledge of Hell's vast web of politics, Belphegor rose ever-higher by subtly encouraging his masters to miscalculate their positions at critical moments. This proved quite easy.

To some, he counseled laziness in the guise of caution, advising them to take no action when a preemptive strike would have been decisive. To others, he appealed to greed or pride, saying, "The meager reward isn't worth the effort," or "Rest easy, for the threat is nothing to your power." One after another, his superiors fell to their own inaction, and the well-positioned Belphegor took their place under a new, more powerful devil.

Asmodeus eventually noticed Belphegor's casual coups. He laid waste to the fools currently in the lesser devil's sway and focused Belphegor's considerable talents back at an old target: mortals. From his secret scrying chamber in the depths of Hell, Asmodeus showed Belphegor the whole of humanity and bade him, "Name the power and the license you require for their seduction."

Belphegor replied, "My lord, I need only grant them comfort to bring them to you." Asmodeus smiled, and he appointed Belphegor his Baron of Laziness, with the charge to seduce humanity through sloth.

Allies and Enemies

As one of Asmodeus's direct appointees, Belphegor is officially unassailable. Nevertheless, he no fool, and does not trust solely in the Arch Devil's protection. In Hell, no one has friends, only temporary alliances with betrayers.

By making himself valuable to the powerful, Belphegor has gained impressive allies. His greatest is Archduke Dispater, the careful schemer. Dispater values Belphegor's ingenuity and, mistaking the Baron's laziness for caution, trusts Belphegor's counsel. Belphegor brings thousands of souls to Mammon, the Archduke of greed and selfishness. He seduces mortals with instant gratification, directing their basest cravings and enlarging the domains of Mammon.

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Belphegor's enemies are devils of action and diligence. Those in the frontlines of Hell's ongoing wars have no time for Belphegor, "Baron of Armchairs." His very existence disgusts the ever-vigilant Archduke Bel and his military-minded vassals. The Baron's philosophy and purpose utterly escapes them. If it weren't for Asmodeus, they would have assassinated Belphegor long ago.

Belphegor in the Real World

In Numbers 25, the Israelites have illicit relations with the Moabite women and make sacrifices to their god, Baal-Peor, a name later corrupted to Belphegor. Up until the 16th century, Belphegor was associated with licentiousness.

In 1589, the same year Galileo began his revolutionary experiments on bodies in motion, the bishop and witch-hunter Peter Binsfield published *Binsfield's Classification of Demons*, an authoritative list of demons and their associated sins. Of the seven deadly sins, Binsfield assigned sloth to Belphegor.

In 1863, Collin de Plancy published *Dictionnaire Infernal*. That volume describes Belphegor as a demon of discoveries who seduces people to evil by suggesting to them ingenious inventions that will make them rich.

Appearance and Powers

Compared to the well-muscled torsos, pitch skin, and chiseled features of many of the other Princes of Hell, Belphegor is an

old, grey devil with a potbelly and wavy horns. What little hair sprouts from his largely bald head hovers near his fleshy, pointy ears. A beard drains from below his overlarge mouth, and when he's not twisting and pulling that beard with his long claws, he's sitting, lost in thought, holding his lion's tail. To please and distract his summoners, Belphegor sometimes appears as a beautiful, young girl or naked woman.

While Belphegor's physical prowess is no match for his princely brethren, he rarely has to worry. He has an uncanny ability to go unnoticed, even in plain sight.

When disappearing into the crowd won't work, Belphegor relies on persuasion, diplomacy, and politics. He stands close to his detractors, exposing them to his overpowering aura of apathy and resignation. Like Asmodeus, Belphegor operates on a grand scale, but also relishes focusing on a single target.

Baron Belphegor CR 23

Always LE Medium Outsider [Evil, Extraplanar, Lawful]

Init +2; **Senses** Listen +47, Spot +47; 120' darkvision

Aura apathy, unnoticed

Languages Common, Celestial, Draconic, Ignan, Infernal, Undercommon, telepathy 120'

AC 28, touch 12, flat-footed 26 (+2 Dex, +15 natural, +1 Armor Skin)

hp 353 (34d8+170+30 HD)

Immune fire and poison

Resist acid 10 and cold 10

Fort +28, **Ref** +21, **Will** +29

Speed 40 ft. (8 squares), fly 60 ft. (good)

Melee 2 claws +37/+32/+27/+22 (2d12+4)

Ranged numbing blast +36 (4d10)

Base Atk +34; **Grp** +37

Abilities Str 16, Dex 15, Con 20, Int 28, Wis 30, Cha 24

SA spell-like abilities, numbing blast, flash of insight, halt

SQ outsider traits, devil traits, see in darkness, telepathy 120', summon devils, DR 15/silver and chaotic

Feats Armor Skin, Empower Spell-like Ability (order's wrath), Epic Fortitude, Epic Reputation, Epic Skill Focus (Bluff), Epic Toughness, Improved Unarmed Strike, Magical Aptitude, Negotiator, Persuasive, Quicken Spell-like Ability (waves of fatigue), Skill Focus (Bluff), Tenacious Magic (temporal stasis)

Skills Bluff +63, Decipher Script +46, Diplomacy +58, Disguise +44 (+48 to act in character), Forgery +46, Gather Information +48, Knowledge (arcana) +46, Knowledge (architecture and engineering) +46, Knowledge (history) +46, Knowledge (religion) +46, Knowledge (the planes) +46, Listen +47, Search +46 (+50 to find secret doors), Sense Motive +49, Spellcraft +52, Spot +47, Use Magic Device +46 (+50 to use scroll)

Numbing Blast (Su): Belphegor can throw numbing blasts of cold from his claws as a ranged attack with a 120-foot range increment. They cause 4d10 damage.

Flash of Insight (Su): Three times per day, Belphegor can instill a willing subject with a flash of insight, effectively granting them *owl's wisdom*, *fox's cunning*, and *eagle's splendor*. If the subject has made a pact with Belphegor, he also enjoys the benefits of *vision* (CL 20).

Apathy Aura (Su): Belphegor can radiate a 25-foot-radius apathy aura as a free action. Creatures in the area of effect must make a DC 34 Will save or be inclined to do nothing, effectively dazed, for as long as they remain in

the area. This effect ends immediately if Belphegor attacks a foe physically. Devils are not immune to this aura. The save DC is Charisma-based.

Unnoticed Aura (Su): Belphegor can radiate a 25-foot-radius unnoticed aura as a free action. Creatures in the area of effect must succeed on a DC 34 Will save or not notice Belphegor's presence for as long as they remain in the area. Treat Belphegor as under the effects of *invisibility*, *pass without trace*, and *silence*. This effect ends immediately if Belphegor speaks or attacks or if an unaffected creature purposefully draws attention to him. Devils are not immune to this aura. The save DC is Charisma-based.

Summon Devil (Sp): Belphegor can summon 2d4 imps or 3d8 comfort devils (q.v.) with a 100% chance of success. This ability is the equivalent of an 8th-level spell.

Spell-like Abilities: At will – *greater teleport* (self plus 50 pounds of objects only), *order's wrath*, *plane shift* (Hell to/ from the Prime Material Plane only), *sanctuary*, *suggestion*, *unseen servant*. 3/day – *deep slumber*, *moment of prescience*, *symbol of persuasion*, *waves of fatigue*.

1/day – *magnificent imprisonment**, *mind blank*, *temporal stasis*, *unholy word*, grant up to three wishes (to nonoutsiders only). Caster level 20th. The save DC is Charisma-based.

Telepathy (Su): Belphegor can communicate telepathically with any creature with a language to a range of 120 feet.

* As *imprisonment*, but instead of the spell holding the victim in suspended animation in a sphere at the center of the earth, the spell traps the victim (who may move) within a permanent instance of *mage's magnificent mansion* that is contained in an amber gem on Belphegor's person. To free one of the maximum twelve creatures that Belphegor may be holding in the mansion at once, one must cast *freedom* on the gem rather than at the imprisonment locale. When bored, Belphegor imprisons mortal enemies – just for fun.

Cults and Followers

Belphegor has few active mortal followers and still fewer organized cults. Those groups that exist use the donkey, a slow-moving and lazy creature, as their symbol.

Accomplishments and Goals

Belphegor counts among his greatest accomplishments changing the world's attitude toward sloth as a sin. In a matter of mere centuries, he quietly stripped sloth of the negative, reli-

gious connotation it once had. Not only are more and more mortals consumed by sloth, many don't even consider it intrinsically evil, let alone a deadly sin. They see it as mere laziness, a perfectly natural inclination, and a common reward for accomplishment.

Encouraged by his success with the masses, Belphegor set his sights on "keystone souls", high-profile men and women who often serve as the foundation of local moral standards. By bringing a revered bishop into the fold, Belphegor ensures that his faithful flock either follows him blindly or retire from the church, orphaned and embittered. Belphegor aims to fill every parish priest with apathy and resignation, and he targets every head of state for paralyzing preoccupation with comfort, sin, and baubles. In many nations, Belphegor has already claimed the majority of nobles.

The Baron does not achieve this corruption without helpers. His syrupy blood runs through the veins of hundreds of thousands of specialized imps, finely attuned to his philosophy and wishes. These are Belphegor's comfort devils, and they're everywhere.

Comfort Devils

"Brother Accul is furious that you missed lauds. You may be our most promising acolyte, but he says, once more and he'll remove you from the Order."

"I must have fallen back asleep. It was so cold this morning. I thought you were going to wake me up, not pull up my blankets."

"I didn't pull up your blankets. Your cell door was locked, and I tried in vain to wake you from without. Brother, the devil couldn't rouse you."

Comfort devils work to fulfill Belphegor's promise to Asmodeus. Insidious and subtle, they keep mortals distracted from good and charitable works, ignorant or indifferent to the world's evils, and focused on life's simplest comforts rather than its highest ideals. As tempters to life's easy roads, they

have an encouraging hand on every addict's shoulder, every swindler's sleeve, and every pirate's wheel.

Statistics

Comfort devils are imps and share the physical description and statistics of all of that breed. Comfort devils of five or more hit dice differ slightly due to Belphegor's investment of power. To continue the pretense of their assumed forms, these advanced devils do not revert to their natural form when killed, but retain their disguises even in death.

Strategies and Tactics

Many comfort devils enjoy success as

Comfort Devil Lore

Characters with ranks in Knowledge (the Planes) can learn more about comfort devils. When a character makes a successful skill check, reveal the following lore, including the information from lower DCs.

Knowledge (the Planes)

DC Result

- | | |
|----|--|
| 14 | The devil Belphegor, Prince of Laziness and Invention, has thousands of imps at his command. |
| 18 | Belphegor's imps, called comfort devils, foster worldwide evil by distracting otherwise virtuous individuals with life's comforts and by tempting them with lives of ease and fortune. |
| 22 | Comfort devils are ubiquitous, but due to their ability to assume other more pleasant forms, remain largely unnoticed throughout the world. |

the imaginary friends of children. By encouraging innocents away from their chores, the devils foster laziness at an early age. To encourage immorality, they distract children from religious education and moral tales with their own whispered, often scandalous, stories.

Some comfort devils play dual roles in a household. They introduce themselves as superficially injured cats or dogs, and once they become the family's beloved pet, they distract child and parent alike with playful demands for attention. They are particularly vivacious during prayer and seem to have a sixth sense for detecting and preventing religious epiphanies great and small. Woe to the monastery who takes in one of these fiends.

In rural areas, comfort devils exchange their bat wings, barbed tails, and horns for the gracious forms of kindhearted fey. In this form, the adorable creatures fluff pillows, draw warm baths, and pantomime curious stories, emphasizing simple pleasures. They use their suggestion ability to encourage families to think of them as rewards, even entitlements, from Heaven.

In the worst cases, an isolated village may become utterly preoccupied with the little status symbols. Envious villagers gossip about their unworthy neighbors and secretly put out dishes of milk or honeyed water to draw the desirable pixies to their door.

Belphegor permits particularly clever comfort devils to assume the form of a humanoid. These devils use *detect good*

to locate victims. As good-time friends, they keep their victim happy and ignorant of the world's evils. They put the bottle in the ex-alcoholic's hand and excuses in the layabout's mouth. As teachers, they advocate isolationism to keep their victims from the good fight. As clerics, they preach divine but deferred justice, leaving it to gods to vanquish and punish evildoers.

Laziness of a different sort best tempts some victims. For fame and fast fortunes, these ambitious and shortsighted fools will pay anything – so long as it is paid later. To these alone, comfort devils appear in their natural, infernal form. They hand treasure maps to thieves and love potions to women who marry for money. More commonly, they commune with Belphegor to provide ingenious insight into magic and science, enough to bring their victims the worldly gold and respect they so desperately seek. The victims are delighted to gain such luxury, for the bargain price of their souls.

The most talented comfort devils, called Old Boys, work directly with Belphegor to collect keystone souls. They spend a mortal lifetime posing as humans in the upper crust of society. Old Boys are trendsetters and socialites, leading secret societies and founding annual parties. They serve as the advisors that a keystone soul needs to gain influence and realize his dreams.

This advice comes from a poisoned well. These imps use *suggestion* to convince their victim to take action only from a position of power – a position attainable only through the imp's notoriety and shady connections. Over time, Old Boys tempt or blackmail their victims away from their former, virtuous paths.

Society

Comfort devils spend their entire lives amongst mortals. Because they rarely assume their natural form, they confirm suspected brethren through their *commune* ability.

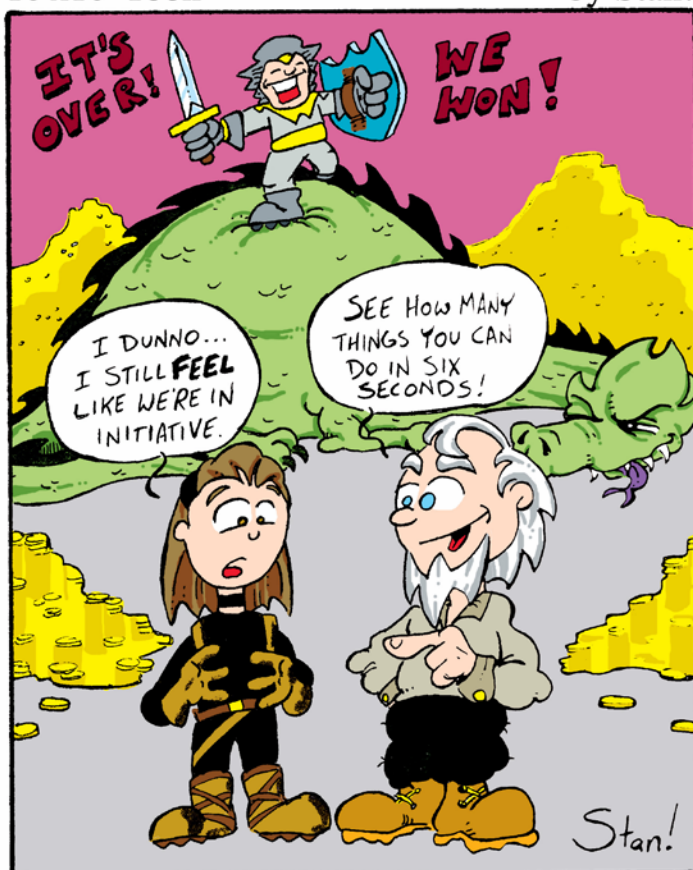
Occasionally they work together to maximize their influence. In one notorious case, they masqueraded as humans for more than a decade to orchestrate the fall of a wealthy kingdom. While a few of them convinced fellow peasants that they deserved relief from carrying the lazy ruling class on their backs, the others convinced fellow aristocrats that the lazy, peasant ingrates were undeserving of their valuable protection. The subsequent revolution featured unspeakable atrocities.

Typical Treasure

Most comfort devils have no treasure. However, advanced comfort devils have treasure appropriate to their disguise and station in mortal society.

10'x10' Toon

by Stan!



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SOMEBODY'S GETTIN' RIPPED!

FIVE ADVENTURES,
ONE CITY.
FIVE HEROES,
ONE CHANCE...

CROWN SKEIN OF SHADOWS

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On the Street Where Heroes Live

Bringing Towns to Life in a Fantasy Campaign

by Ed Greenwood



“Tired of dungeons? Well, then; head into town, where the action is!”

The grizzled caravan merchant grins, displaying decayed brown teeth, and points down the road. Just the other side of yonder ridge, waits . . . yet another town. How is this one any different?

Right now, the new town in the campaign is just a name on a map: a place where the PC adventurers want to resupply, get healing, buy some better weapons, and see if they can somehow sell six basilisk scales and a severed leucrotta paw that doesn't smell any too good. The DM wants to hit them with “The Secret of the Fanged Temple”, in a magazine he bought at the last convention.

Obviously the town is a necessary place, but it is still just a name on a map. Let's call it Yonder. Despite the waiting nastiness of that fanged temple, the GM secretly wants the PCs to stay for a bit, so he doesn't have to frantically map and create faceless town after faceless town along this road they insist on riding along, no matter what, heading... nowhere in particular.

How can he make Yonder come to life? It should be memorable enough that the PCs will want to tarry, without

turning it into a grim-foreboding, over-the-top Hollywood movie set.

The Basics

First, consider the bones of the place: the main-streets map and major industries. Creeks, wells, and horseponds; bridges; mills; market square; major intersections; castles or grand buildings of any sort; and notable landmarks such as gibbets, leaning tavern signs, sites of never-failing magical motes of light that dance or appear to burn, and hauntings. Name an inn or other place to stay, note the bed rates, stabling, what food and drink the PCs can get and the name and looks of who will serve it, and start playing. It's not subtle, but on rare occasions sufficient, unless the PCs are being chased through it at top speed by something deadly.

The only way to shirk these basics is to enshroud the place in impenetrable fog, install an officious local watch to keep PCs from exploring, and provide the PCs with just exactly what they most need (imagine a handy inn next door to a temple of priests waiting to heal). If that's what Yonder provides and you tempt the party with at least one local treasure tale, the adventurers won't stay long. The tale might be “Folk are being murdered by a flying knife that can get into the most tightly-locked chamber” or “The king's zombie-chasers are here, destroying the undead that keep crawling out of the ruined castle—and looking for whoever keeps causing

them to rise and walk”. With the local innkeeper or tavern master installed as the tale-teller, complete with colorful looks and accent to match, they'll see the hook and be out of town by sunrise.

Yet if there's no fog nor chase, you'll certainly need more. Look and feel, for one thing: what does the place smell like? What's the skyline? Is Yonder a small forest of smoke-belching forge-chimneys, or is it a cluster of overgrown shacks clustered around a way-stables, a shrine, and an all-goods shop? Are the streets dirt, cobbles, or something more formal? Do they wind as if they “grew” that way, or are they laid out in a deliberate design? Are they deserted, or bustling, or bristling with uniformed lawkeepers?

Think up a few faces and names of those lawblades or shopkeepers. Unless this is a ghost town or everyone is overgrown with the same mysterious fungus, you'll need some descriptions, at least a name and a single defining trait for each.

The Locals

The deeper, too-often-neglected stuff that shifts Yonder from being just a name on a map to being a place people call home: the locals. Who dwells in Yonder, and what do they do for a living? Are they happy? Rich? Poor? Why? Where do they get their food? Is the place a simmering cauldron of feuds, or does it stand on the howling edge of

open bloodshed (just waiting for PCs to come along and tip things into open warfare)? Does a faith or faiths dominate town life? (And if the clichéd secret cult is operating behind all those blandly smiling faces, why is it still secret until the PCs blunder along?) Why are the local crazies considered crazy? Is the place growing, or dying? (Which leads again to why: why are people dying off or leaving, or aching to come here?)

Back to the folk who are here right now, standing with hands on hips watching the PCs ride in. Are they smiling (pleasantly or otherwise)? Scowling in dislike? Or looking wary or fearful? Again (to quote little Cindy Lou Who) “Why, Santy Claus, why?”

Every local inhabitant is either drifting along through life, or working too hard to look up and think—or they have aims and dreams and goals. Things they want to achieve, and opinions about what should happen in future (and what probably will happen, instead). In other words, if PCs are openly serving or on the side of the king or the local lord or temple, they may be hated, feared, or welcomed, depending on recent past events and the resulting attitudes of the locals to authority.

Answering the Questions

Truly, Yonder is a place of many questions; herewith, let’s have a stab at some answers. Not that there are necessarily any “right” answers, but for every town a GM is detailing there are answers that go well together with other answers, to make Yonder seem believable; there are also answers that make Yonder seem appealing as a home or at least a base from which adventurers sally forth to adventures elsewhere (but want to return to); and there are answers that make Yonder come alive and generate ongoing player interest in local events.

Let us step back for a moment from Yonder, sprawled in its green, leafy, vaguely medieval fantasy-campaign valley, and consider it as the setting of a long-running television show.

Yes, a TV program. Done shuddering? Right, onward.

A sitcom, to be precise. Character-based, rather than having Yonder be the blurry, plastic-to-plot-needs backdrop for the antics of just one violent or crazy family or group of bitchily competing neighbors, or the setting for endless murders that have to be solved through intrepid forensics interspersed with car chases.

The Trick of Subplots

Yonder needs subplots. Feuds between neighbors, disputes about who will host the fall harvest festival or be named the next mayor or May Queen, and the little mysteries of who’s stealing garters or horses or prize turnips, who’s setting outhouses afire in the dead of night, and who is leaving beheaded crows on certain doorsteps.

What makes books memorable is the big scenes of battle or confrontation or heroism—and the characters. What makes television series memorable tends to be, yes, the characters. From soaps to hospital shows to countryside comedies of manners, it’s the characters.

A Cornerstone Character

So Yonder needs characters. Not just “that old innkeeper at the Broken Wheel” but Gustable Arondur, owner and master of The Broken Wheel Inn and Fine Table, who limps and aches in damp weather and stares longingly at every red-haired woman he sees, because... Well, yes, the GM needs to know what in his past aroused this longing; it might feature in play, or might not, but the DM must know. Arondur, who is in awe of elves. Arondur, who despises warriors in the army of the local king but a score-and-more years back was a hero in that same uniform, winning battles hereabouts for the king who was father to the present king.

Why does he never talk of those days, and treats today’s soldiery so curtly? Arondur, who owns all three rooming-houses in town and the brothel, too, yet dresses simply and never spends a coin he doesn’t have to; where is all the money going? And who are the masked women who ride into town in the dead

of winter and the middle of the night, once a year, to meet privately with Arondur, leaving him gray in the face and shaking when they depart? Arondur, who can read books peddlers offer him, from lands beyond the sea whose names even they can’t pronounce.

Arondur, who is unmarried but keeps an outland girl in his bedchamber who has been blinded and had her tongue cut out. Those who get a glimpse say she is covered in strange tattoos that seem to be writing of some sort.

Arondur seems more than a bit over the top, staggering through game sessions with such a load of secrets on his broad, bowed shoulders. Yet Yonder could have a dozen Arondur-types in it; characters who have secrets and pasts and varied interests, both personal and business. Who in town is Yonder’s enemy, or at least rival?

For that matter, who in town quietly or openly stands in league with who else? Not every cabal is sinister. From gossips who meet over tea in farm kitchens to the men who drift down to the stables to smoke pipes and grumble about taxes, citizens anywhere will form groups of friends or allies-of-necessity who band together to get certain things accomplished. From preventing the new mayor from building his own tavern hard by the bridge, to buying up all the turnip crop so prices will soar and they can sell at a handsome profit, locals will work together until the inevitable disagreements arise. That is when “accidents” sometimes happen that cost a Yonderman or Yonderwoman a barn, a horse, a wagonload of goods, or even their life.

Which brings us to another question: who will investigate such a crime? Not just “the town watch,” with certain stats and weapons and numbers, but are we talking bullies? Easygoing, thickheaded buffoons? Eager-for-promotion zealous suspicious-of-everyone sorts? Rulebook-followers? Can they think their way out of a one-seater outhouse, unaided? Are they competent or merely cruel?

The Law and the Lively

The nature of the law changes a place. If Lawcudgel Uldroon is a buffoon or lazy drunkard, is there an Arondar in town who will quietly enact real justice? Is this vigilante feared, and a man of unknown identity (“That demned elusive Pimpernel”)?

The law may or may not have the support of the citizenry. Is Arondar operating alone, or can he call on a band of like-minded supporters? If he has a mob or a network of whispering opinion-makers, they may cause “every man’s hand to be raised against” a criminal, or even against a notable local who has escaped formal justice.

My PCs Fought the Law

Adventurers by their nature tend to run afoul of, or at least end up watched closely by, local lawkeepers. As a result, most GMs have a vague idea of what the law looks like in town. Yet faceless professionals in uniform are inherently less interesting than a constable with a name, failings, and hobbies.

“Officer 32” may evoke just as much fear as old Uldroon, but only the locals know that old Uldroon makes his own dandelion wine, loves roast boar and sugared rhubarb-pies. If he also secretly wears silken underthings made for ladies of a certain size and high social standing, Uldroon becomes undeniably more interesting.

Moreover, both players and GMs can find ways to exploit the wine or love of pies—that is, for those traits to feature in adventures. Officer 32 is little more than a stern or shouting force to arrest, slay, or keep order, but Uldroon is alive. From his belches to his socks that need darning to his inability to cook any meat without setting fire to something in his kitchen, Uldroon sticks in memory as a real person.

Just like Arondar, and the handful of other Yonderians the DM has really detailed. The best Yonderians—back to the sitcom—keep showing up, episode after episode, or rather session after play session, to stick their noses into whatever’s

happening. Their involvement generates humor, a sense of place (“Oh, aye, we’re in Yonder, all right!”) and eventually player knowledge about who to trust with secrets, advice, or directions.

Player knowledge provides a useful gauge of success. When players around the gaming table start independently suggesting their characters go see Arondar or Uldroon or old Lady Looseskirts at the brothel to ask for rumors, rather than asking the GM out-of-character who in town they should go see, the GM has done it: Yonder has come alive.

Getting It Right

When players look forward to opportunities to roleplay just sitting down in a Yonderian tavern to talk to locals and visiting peddlers over a tankard or two, Yonder has reached the stage of helping to generate new adventures, and the trick is done.

Now, none of this is new. Veteran GMs have been doing it for decades (in my case, 30 years), and every roleplayer knows or senses it. Yet a reminder is always worthwhile: unless PCs ride away from Yonder, never to return, spending an idle handful of minutes detailing something interesting about the cast of recurring NPCs in Yonder is always worth the time.

Recurring characters provide fertile ground for adventure ideas to spring up, and new plots to come to mind: could old Angrath in the corner be sick and tired of these adventurers? Could he be thinking of ways to get them blamed for something and banished from town? Yonder, deep and rich and colorful, becomes a place that matters to players, a place worth fighting for when dragons or marauding armies or raiding orcs come to town.

One last question: what is more valuable in life than something or someone we care enough about to want to fight for?

GMs, when you create a Yonder, you are crafting a treasure. Make it valuable.

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King of All Monsters

An Interview with Artist and Impresario Wayne Reynolds

By the Open Design Inquisitors



Wayne Reynolds is the defining artist for the *PATHFINDER* series of books, as well as defining much of the look for *Wizards of the Coast* settings such as *EBERRON*. Naturally, we asked him about football.

Kobold Quarterly: Which is your favorite of your *Wizards of the Coast* art pieces, and why?

Wayne Reynolds: My favourite pieces of art are usually the most recent ones, as I've yet to spot the mistakes. I always paint an image to the best of my abilities at the time, but it is a curse that most artists are never happy with their own work as they are constantly trying to find ways to improve their skills.

If I had to choose, it would probably be either the cover illustration to *D&D Eberron – Secrets of Xendrix* or *D&D Eberron – Secrets of Sarlona*. I like *Secrets of Xendrix* because I got to paint a huge fire giant. I like *Secrets of Sarlona* because of the movement I managed to capture in the illustration — somehow making the colors and composition just right. I'm not sure how I did this exactly.

What kind of work space do you prefer?

I have a relatively small work space located in one of the rooms in my house. I prefer to work from home on my own rather than in a shared office or studio

environment. I'm much more creative and work longer hours when left to my own devices.

Do you work on multiple projects at once, or do you finish one after another?

I usually have three or four projects active at any one time, though I work on them in a rotation that is normally dictated when the deadline for each commission is due.

Unless it's an emergency, I never break off one image to work on another. Once I begin pencilling or painting an image, I will finish what I'm doing before moving on to the next image.

Do you include any "easter eggs" in your work?

Sometimes. (*We followed up. He's coy.*)

I really enjoyed the *BLACK COMPANY* cover. Can you describe how that painting came about: Did you read the novels? Did *Green Ronin* give a sketch? Can you reveal the location and identities portrayed?

I wasn't familiar with Glen Cook's novels before working on the *Black Company* cover illustration. *Green Ronin* provided me with a written excerpt of the scene describing the location and events that is depicted in the cover image.

I was given visuals of the existing novel covers as a guideline to what

some of the characters might look like. Unfortunately, I still haven't read the novel and have no idea of the location or characters other than the physical description I received.

Do you remember the first piece of artwork that you sold to a rpg company? Your first cover?

My first game commission was for a Play-By-Mail game called "The Keys of Medokh". The first RPG game I illustrated were internal images for *Pagan Shores* by Chaosium. I think my first cover was the silver anniversary edition of *L3 D&D Deep Dwarven Delve* by WotC.

Can you recall any artists that really had an impact on you and your decision to pursue your career? Are they still in the business?

Some of the artists that really influenced me when I was younger were Boris Vallejo, Larry Elmore, Clive Caldwell, Jeff Easley and Keith Parkinson. British comic artists such as Alan Davis, Mike McMahon and Cam Kennedy also heavily influenced me.

When I created painted artwork, I tried to paint like the artists I admired. My own style of work is now the result of imperfect attempts to emulate those artists.

When you're asked to draw a new mon-



Valeros, iconic fighter of the Pathfinder series, shown in the original sketch with helmet, a revised sketch, and final version. Used by permission.

ster (or new interpretation) how much input do you have with the design?

Essentially, you take the writer's description and create the look of the beastie. There are various interpretations of descriptive elements, as long as the finished creature looks like what has been described.

For instance, if the creature is described as having six eyes. There are a number of ways you can illustrate those eyes, unless there is a specific description of what the eyes actually look like and unless the creature is specified as having six "glowing red eyes" there's a certain amount of creative latitude how you might depict the monster.

You have defined the look of the new PATHFINDER series, essentially setting up the visual style for the entire setting. Was there a set of concept work involved? Or is each painting largely standalone work?

Each painting is a standalone work but each piece pertains to the series.

You've redefined goblins, which is quite a trick. Any hints about what the giants in PATHFINDER #4 will look like?

No comment due to my Non-Disclosure Agreement. (*Hey, we had to ask!*)

I know you paint over your sketches, but do you ever photograph or share a sketch?

Every sketch is scanned or photocopied. I can then place a copy of the sketch beside the actual piece of artwork during the painting process. I can then refer to it if any sections or details of a particular illustration are lost beneath the opaque layers of paint (Which they often are).



The finished image can also vary from the original sketch. The first sketch of the Pathfinder Fighter shows him wearing more armour, including a helmet.

The fighter needed to be more lightweight so his helmet, greaves, tassets and chainmail vest were removed. I slimmed him down to make him look more nimble.

What would be your ideal painting? Are there works that you do mostly for yourself, rather than on a contract?

Nearly all of the artwork I produce is commissioned imagery, but I consider myself lucky that I thoroughly enjoy illustrating most of the images I am asked to create. It's not often I get any time to illustrate something for myself. Though there are images I'd certainly like to do for my own pleasure.

I have plenty of preliminary sketches and ideas of paintings I'd like to work on in the future. Many get abandoned as the next idea comes along. Maybe one day I'll get time to do a series of illustrations, but I'm keeping them to myself for the time being.

What's your favorite of your own paintings?

Being my own worst critic, it's hard to say which is the favorite of my own work. It's usually more recent artwork.

I'm quite fond of the PATHFINDER artwork, and I'm also pleased with some unreleased trading card illustrations. My current favorite is one of those few images I actually had time to create for myself. It's probably because I was able to indulge myself that I like the image — plus I really enjoy illustrating snow-



Valeros final art for "Burnt Offerings".

scenes. The image was inspired by the recent work I'd been doing illustrating a number of creatures from Inuit folklore in conjunction with Inhabit Media based in Nunavut, Canada. I'd found the project extremely fascinating (as I have an interest in folklore and legends) and wanted to do something similar for myself.

The finished result is "Inuit Girl" (shown on the right). I used it as the design for my 2006 Xmas card.

What's your favorite artwork from a colleague that impressed you recently?

There are hundreds of artists whose work I really admire. Too numerous to list them all. Artists such as Todd Lockwood, Greg Staples, Kev Walker, Paul Bonner and Steve Prescott regularly produce some truly outstanding illustrations.

Among some of my favourite images are "Corum" by Jon Foster, and "Gun-slinger" or "The Lost Shrine" by Brom.

Lately you have become the new hotness, with excellent work on many covers and big projects. How's it feel to be the New Turk in the fantasy art business?

My modesty makes me question how deserving I am of such exceptionally

high praise. But thank you all the same.

I never had any idea that my artwork would become popular. I'm really just a regular guy who likes drawing. I consider myself fortunate that I have a job where I'm able to do something I really enjoy. I'm just glad that the imagery I create seems to be appreciated and hopefully inspires the imaginations of the viewers.

Finally, I had no idea you were English! Do you support Leeds United FC? How will they cope with relegation to League One?

I'm not really a big sports fan at all, though I am always pleased when my home team wins. I am concerned about Leeds United's relegation to League One because it will impact the city's revenue. A city as large as Leeds should have a team in the Premiership.

As far as we kobolds are concerned, Mr. Reynolds is in a league of his own. ♂

You can find Wayne Reynold's work online at <http://www.waynereynolds.com/onlinegamescompany.com/war/gallery.htm>. He will attend GenCon Indianapolis in 2008.



Coming Next Issue

An Arcane Extravaganza! Enough spells, magic, and mystery to power an aerial fleet of kobold commandos!

Arbeyach, Lord of the Locusts

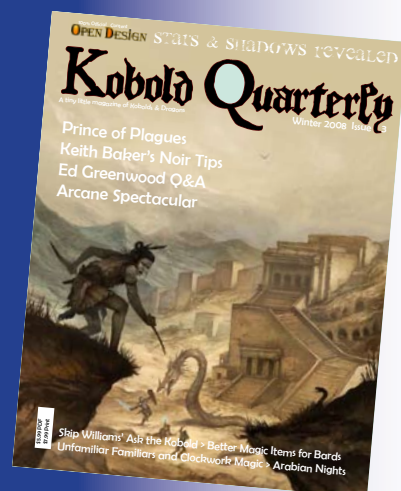
by Ari Marmell

Buzzzz! The master of famine, decay, and bureaucracy strikes down his foes like a plague. Or possibly a swarm. Is there a plague template?

Star & Shadow Magic

The secret school of Zobeck magic, found nowhere else! The heavens part, the stars descend, and we reveal the secrets of this uniquely Zobeckian form of magery.

Plus very possibly an article by Keith Baker — if only he doesn't escape from our nets this time! Seriously, if we knew which big-name submissions would arrive at our smelter for the Winter issue, we'd tell you. Would kobolds lie? C'mon, their Bluff scores suck...





"It's a good thing Freeport's nobles are all cowards. Otherwise, I'd be out of a job."

—Red Alice, Assassin

The assassin is a killer for hire, a ruthless and remorseless agent whose purpose is to rub out the opposition. The assassin's main strengths come from the element of surprise, because she has no interest in a fair fight. Such nonsense gives her prey the chance to react and poses a risk of the mission failing. The best assassins can set aside their misgivings and eliminate any target, no matter the age, the gender, or the status.

An assassin's life is no easy thing and many missions they undertake can lead them to distant cities, into the bowels of the earth, and just about any place else "adventurers" might go. Rare is the assassin who pursues adventure for the standard reasons: gold, fame, or notoriety. Instead, they see such expeditions as a means to end, a mission to advance

their training so they can get back to the business of killing for gold. Of course, an adventurer's life is often the perfect cover for the assassin: It gives her access to powerful people, a steady stream of revenue between jobs, and a means to slip out of town if a job goes sour.

Creating an Assassin

The assassin is a master of surprise and stealth, of cunning and underhanded tactics. She does not have the strength of a barbarian or fighter, the versatility of a bard, or the breadth of skills of a rogue, but she combines a potent array of combat abilities and skills, augmented by special talents to give her the edge she needs to survive.

Abilities

An assassin does her job by using the element of surprise, and she needs abilities to augment her stealthy skills. Dexterity is by far her most important ability, as it is vital to her combat capabilities as well as many of her subterfuge

skills. Wisdom is also important since it reflects her ability to perceive her surrounding, spot hidden guards, and hear the sounds of approaching foes. Intelligence is another key ability as it aids the assassin in crafting poisons, sabotaging equipment and devices, and helping her learn more about the target she is after.

Races

Any race with the capability to murder, to harness the inherent evil of the act, can become an assassin. Of the common races, humans and half-orcs are the most likely. Humans, for all their merits, are capable of great cruelty and thus produce some of the most infamous assassins in the world. Half-orcs, with their natural tendencies toward evil, find it easy to kill for money, a fact especially true for those who endured unhappy upbringings, enduring the scorn of humanity or the cruelty of orcs.

Other races are less likely to produce assassins, though when they do, they are exceptional. The natural stealth and

cunning of elves make them ideal killers, but rare is the elf—excepting, of course, the drow—who can stomach the business of cold-blooded murder. Half-elves find it easier to follow this path, but even then, they are rare.

Dwarf, gnome, and halfling assassins have a number of advantages over their rivals. A dwarf's natural resilience to poison reduces the risk of accidentally poisoning himself, and his natural hardiness and combat capabilities make him especially effective in combat. What gnomes lack in speed in strength, they make up for in magical talent and hardiness. They share the dwarf's inherent toughness, and also can spin illusions with incredible skill, masking their approach until they are ready to strike.

Finally, halflings' natural athleticism and awareness give them a slew of advantages when taking down their opponents. In all cases though, none of these races are noted for the mercilessness required by this grim profession.

Alignment

The assassin's objective, even when justified, is firmly rooted in evil. Murder, no matter what the reason, can never be construed otherwise, and so assassins are never good and nearly all are evil. In exceptionally rare cases, an assassin might be neutral, but such characters tend to employ different tactics and may confront their prey head on rather than skulking about and slipping a knife between the ribs.

Chaotic assassins are paranoid loners, unable to keep their homicidal urges in check and often ruin their own cover by acting on impulse. Lawful assassins follow a strict code of who may be killed and when. They despise slaughter for its own sake, and kill only outside a

Table 1: The Assassin

	Base					
	Attack	Fort	Ref	Will		Poison
Level	Bonus	Save	Save	Save	Special	Save
1	+0	+2	+2	+0	Ambush, contract, reputation	+1
2	+1	+3	+3	+0	Backstab +1d6	+1
3	+2	+3	+3	+1	Poison use, tools of the trade	+1
4	+3	+4	+4	+1	Shadowspawn	+2
5	+3	+4	+4	+1	Backstab +2d6, death attack	+2
6	+4	+5	+5	+2	Uncanny dodge	+2
7	+5	+5	+5	+2	Ruthless, tools of the trade	+3
8	+6/+1	+6	+6	+2	Backstab +3d6	+3
9	+6/+1	+6	+6	+3	Greater poison use, stalker	+3
10	+7/+2	+7	+7	+3	Improved ambush, uncanny sniper+4	+4
11	+8/+3	+7	+7	+3	Backstab +4d6, tools of the trade	+4
12	+9/+4	+8	+8	+4	Improved uncanny dodge	+4
13	+9/+4	+8	+8	+4	Hide in plain sight	+5
14	+10/+5	+9	+9	+4	Backstab +5d6	+5
15	+11/+6/+1	+9	+9	+5	Poison use mastery, tools of the trade	+5
16	+12/+7/+2	+10	+10	+5	Crippling strike	+6
17	+12/+7/+2	+10	+10	+5	Backstab +6d6	+6
18	+13/+8/+3	+11	+11	+6	Blindsense 10 ft.	+6
19	+14/+9/+4	+11	+11	+6	Shadow strike, tools of the trade	+7
20	+15/+10/+5	+12	+12	+6	Backstab +7d6	+7

Class Skills (6 + Int modifier per level, ×4 at 1st level): Balance, Bluff, Concentration, Craft, Disable Device, Disguise, Escape Artist, Gather Information, Hide, Intimidate, Jump, Knowledge (local), Listen, Move Silently, Open Lock, Search, Sense Motive, Sleight of Hand, Spot, Tumble, and Use Rope.

contract when they or their immediate masters are threatened.

Starting Gold: 5d4 × 10 gp (125 gp)

Starting Age: As rogue

Class Features

All of the following are class features of the assassin.

Weapon and Armor Proficiency

You are proficient with all simple weapons, plus the hand crossbow, rapier, shortbow, and short sword. You are proficient with light armor, but not with shields.

Ambush (Ex)

You are particularly skilled at striking targets unawares. Whenever you attack a flat-footed opponent, you may add your Intelligence bonus (if any) to your attack and damage rolls. Constructs, elementals, oozes, plants, undead, and creatures immune to critical hits are immune to this extra damage.

Contract (Ex)

As an assassin, you earn income by accepting commissions to kill a particular creature or creatures. Whenever you successfully complete a mission for which you were contracted, you earn an amount of money equal to your opponent's Challenge Rating minus your class level × 100 gp (minimum 100 gp or the max gold of the community).

However, you must enter into a contract to gain this gold; simply butchering commoners will not earn you extra income. To get a contract, you must name a price and then make a special

Assassins and Assassins

The assassin class presented here is intended to replace the assassin prestige class in the *DMG*, since both classes fill the same niche. This said, the differences between the assassin prestige class and the base class here are enough that you could retain the prestige class in your games. If you do so, it is recommended that you fit the assassin prestige class into a larger organization, such as an elite group of killers trained in sorcery to aid them in their missions.

Table 2: Contracts

Community Size	DC	Max. gp per Job	Modifier
Thorp	50	10 gp	–1
Hamlet	45	25 gp	+0
Village	40	50 gp	+1
Small town	35	200 gp	+2
Large town	30	700 gp	+3
Small city	25	3,500 gp	+4
Large city	20	10,000 gp	+5
Metropolis	15	25,000 gp	+6

Alignment	DC Modifier
Lawful good	+15
Neutral good	+10
Chaotic good	+5
Lawful neutral	+10
Neutral	+5
Chaotic neutral	+0
Lawful evil	+5
Neutral evil	+0
Chaotic evil	–5

*Freeport is considered a neutral small city, while Libertyville counts as a chaotic neutral village. Zobeck is a Lawful Neutral city.

Gather Information check adding your reputation (see following) to the roll.

This check requires 2d10 days minus the community's size modifier. The DC depends on the size and alignment of the community, as shown on Table 2: Contracts.

Even on a successful check, a target worth the price you set may not be available. The GM is the final arbiter of the possible marks and it may take several days before you can track down the target. Once you get a contract and eliminate the mark, you must wait 1d20 days minus the community's size modifier before you may seek out another.

Adjudicating Assassinations

Handling assassinations on the fly can be tricky, requiring you to whip up stat-blocks, locations, and all the other minor details with little or no preparation. This may be more than you, as the GM, are willing or able to handle in the middle of a game session. If a player wishes to pick up a "job," feel free to put off resolving the scenario until the next session when you're ready to deal

with the encounter. As well, you should be aware that the contract ability can give the player more spot-light than you may be comfortable with giving. If this becomes a problem, you can handle such assassination attempts "off-screen" for minor characters with a simple class level check against a DC 10 + the target's CR, consulting the Assassination Results chart to see what happens.

Reputation (Ex): Your reputation as a ruthless killer lends you a great deal of street credibility and helps you land the lucrative jobs. At 1st level, you begin with a reputation modifier of 0. Every five levels you attain in this class increases your reputation by +1. You may apply your reputation modifier on Gather Information checks to find "work." In addition, you may add your reputation modifier as a competence bonus on your Intimidate checks.

Poison Save (Ex)

Your extensive work with poisons and toxins has given you some natural resilience to their effects. At 1st level, you gain a +1 competence bonus on Fortitude saves against poison. This bonus increases by one at 4th level and every three levels thereafter as indicated on Table 1.

Backstab

By catching an opponent when he cannot defend himself effectively, you can strike a vital spot. Your attacks deal extra damage whenever your opponent is denied his Dexterity bonus to AC (but *not* when you flank your opponent). This extra damage is 1d6 at 2nd level, and

it increases by +1d6 every three levels thereafter. Should you score a critical hit with backstab, this extra damage is not multiplied. Ranged attacks can count as backstabs only if the target is within 30 feet.

With a sap (blackjack) or an unarmed strike, you can use backstab to deal nonlethal damage instead of lethal damage.

Constructs, elementals, oozes, plants, undead, and creatures immune to critical hits are immune to this extra damage. You must be able to see the target well enough to pick out a vital spot and must be able to reach such a spot. You cannot use backstab against a creature with concealment or when striking the limbs of a creature whose vitals are beyond reach.

Extra damage from backstab stacks with similar types of extra damage including sneak attack damage.

Poison Use (Ex)

At 3rd level, you complete your training in a variety of poisons and you are never at risk of accidentally poisoning yourself when applying poison to a weapon.

Tools of the Trade (Ex)

On attaining 3rd level, and at every four levels thereafter, you gain a special ability of your choice from among the following options. You may only gain each one once.

Bonus Languages: You gain fluency in a number of languages equal to your Intelligence bonus (minimum 1 language). These languages are in addition to the extra languages you gain for having a

Table 3: Assassination Results

Check Result Outcome

Success by 10+	Target eliminated. Assassin gains +1 reputation for 1d6 months.
Success by 5+	Target eliminated. Assassin gains +1 reputation for 1d4 months.
Success	Target eliminated. Sloppy work.
Failure	Mission failed. Assassin can attempt again, but at a –2 penalty.
Failure by 5+	Mission botched. Assassin injured, reduced to 50% hit points. Assassin's reputation suffers a –2 penalty for 1d4 months. May not try again against same target until reputation improves.
Failure by 10+	Mission utter failure. Assassin captured and imprisoned. Reputation suffers –4 penalty for 1d6 months. May not try again against same target until reputation improves.
Natural 1	Assassin slain.

high Intelligence score.

Deep Cover: If you spend at least one day preparing a disguise, you gain a +10 competence bonus on Disguise check.

Empower Poison: When crafting a poison, you may increase the poison's Craft DC by 10 to increase all variable numeric effects by one-half so that the poison deals half again as much initial and secondary damage as it normally would. This tool of the trade does not affect non-variable effects such as blindness, death, and paralysis.

Extend Poison: When crafting a poison, you may increase the poison's Craft DC by 5 to delay the onset of the poison's initial effects by up to one hour after the target's initial exposure. You decide the time at the time of the poison's crafting. This tool of the trade has no effect on the poison's secondary damage, which occurs one minute later as usual.

Maximize Poison: When crafting a poison, you may increase the poison's Craft DC by 20 to modify all of the poison's variable numeric effects so that the poison deals the maximum possible value. This tool of the trade does not affect non-variable effects such as blindness, death, and paralysis.

Poison Focus: Choose one type of poison from any of the following—contact, ingested, inhaled, or injury. When using a poison of this type, you increase the save DC to resist its initial effects by +1.

Prernatural Instincts: You may add your Intelligence bonus (if any) as a competence bonus on all initiative checks.

Quick Change: You may now make a Disguise check in $1d3 \times 10$ rounds by taking a -5 penalty to the check or in 1 round by taking a -20 penalty to the check.

Quickened Poison: When crafting a poison, you may increase the poison's Craft DC by 25 to force a target exposed to the poison to suffer both the initial and secondary effects at the same time. The target is still entitled to a separate saving throw to resist both effects.

Skill Savant: Select one of the assassin



class skills. You gain a +5 competence bonus on all checks using that skill.

Talented Poisoner: When manufacturing drugs or poison, for every +5 you add to the Craft (poison) check DC, you may increase the save DC by 2.

Weapon Focus: You gain Weapon Focus as a bonus feat.

Shadowspawn (Ex)

You are adept at striking from the shadows, emerging unseen to deliver a deadly blow and then melting back into the darkness. Starting at 4th level, you increase the benefits of concealment derived from low or no illumination by 10%, so that your opponents' miss chance when attacking you while in an area of shadowy illumination is 30%. In areas of no illumination, the miss chance increases to 60%.

Death Attack (Ex)

When you reach 5th level, you have learned how and where to strike an opponent to kill or paralyze her with a single attack. To use this ability, you must study your victim for 3 rounds and then make a sneak attack with a melee weapon. If the attack deals damage, the sneak attack has the additional effect of possibly either paralyzing or killing the target (your choice).

While studying the victim, you can undertake other actions so long as your attention stays focused on the target and the target does not detect you or recognize you as an enemy. If the victim of such an attack fails a Fortitude save ($DC 10 + 1/2$ your class level + your Int modifier) against the kill effect, she dies. If the saving throw fails against the paralysis effect, the victim is rendered



helpless and unable to act for 1d6 rounds plus 1 round per two class levels. If the victim's saving throw succeeds, the attack is just a normal sneak attack. Once you have completed the 3 rounds of study, you must make the death attack within the next 3 rounds.

If a death attack is attempted and fails (the victim makes her save) or if you do not launch the attack within 3 rounds of completing the study, 3 new rounds of study are required before you can attempt another death attack.

Uncanny Dodge (Ex): Starting at 6th level, you can react to danger before your senses would normally allow you to do so. You retain your Dexterity bonus to AC (if any) even if you are caught flat-footed or struck by an invisible attacker. However, you still lose your Dexterity bonus to AC if immobilized.

If you already have uncanny dodge, you automatically gain improved uncanny dodge (see below) instead.

Ruthless (Ex)

At 7th level, you no longer provoke attacks of opportunity when making coup de grace attacks. You are quick and business-like when snuffing out a foe's life. In addition, you can kill your opponent brutally. This functions exactly like a normal coup de grace attack, but you provoke attacks of opportunity as normal and the DC to resist this attack increases by 5.

Greater Poison Use (Ex)

By 9th level, you have learned to apply poison more quickly to your weapons. You may apply contact or injury poisons to a weapon as a move action. Alternatively, you may apply these poisons as a swift action, but the save DC to resist these toxins decreases by 5.

Stalker (Ex)

Also at 9th level, when hiding and moving more than half but less than full speed, you take no penalty to your Hide checks. When running (but not when attacking or charging), the penalty to your Hide checks drops to -10.

Improved Ambush (Ex)

Starting at 10th level, you may add your Intelligence bonus (if any) to your attack and damage rolls whenever you flank an opponent as well as when you are attacking a flat-footed opponent. In addition, when making a death attack, you may sacrifice 1d6 points of backstab to increase the save DC to resist the attack by 2.

Sniper (Ex)

Whenever you have successfully hidden from an opponent that's at least 10 feet away, you can make one ranged attack and then immediately make a Hide check to conceal your position. You take a -10 penalty to this check instead of the normal -20.

Improved Uncanny Dodge (Ex)

At 12th level, you can no longer be flanked. This defense denies another rogue the ability to use sneak attack against you when he flanks you, unless he has at least four more rogue levels than you have assassin levels.

If you already have uncanny dodge (see above) from another class, you automatically gain improved uncanny dodge instead, and the levels from the classes that grant uncanny dodge stack to determine the minimum rogue level required to flank you.

Hide in Plain Sight (Ex)

Beginning at 13th level, you can use the Hide skill even while being observed. As long as you are within 10 feet of some sort of shadow, you may hide yourself from view in the open without having anything to actually hide behind. You cannot hide in your own shadow.

Poison Use Mastery (Ex)

At 15th level, you may apply poison to a weapon as a swift action without reducing the poison's save DC. In addition, if you spend a standard action to apply poison to a weapon, the weapon retains its virulence for two successful hits or two touches.

Crippling Strike (Ex)

Starting at 16th level, you can sneak attack opponents with such precision that

your blows weaken and hamper them.

An opponent damaged by one of your sneak attacks also takes 2 points of Strength damage. Ability points lost to damage return on their own at the rate of 1 point per day for each damaged ability.

Blindsense (Ex)

On attaining 18th level, your senses become so acute that you can now notice things you cannot see. You usually do not need to make Spot or Listen checks to pinpoint the location of a creature within range of your blindsense ability, provided you have line of effect to that creature.

Any opponent you cannot see still has total concealment against you, and you still has the normal miss chance when attacking foes that have concealment. Visibility still affects your movement. You are still denied your Dexterity bonus to Armor Class against attacks from creatures you cannot see.

Shadow Strike (Ex)

Finally, at 19th level, whenever you successfully kill, disable, or reduce an opponent's hit points below 0, you may make a Hide check as a swift action and move up to 10 feet in any direction. To use this ability, you must be within 10 feet of a shadow. As with hide in plain sight, you cannot hide in your own shadow.

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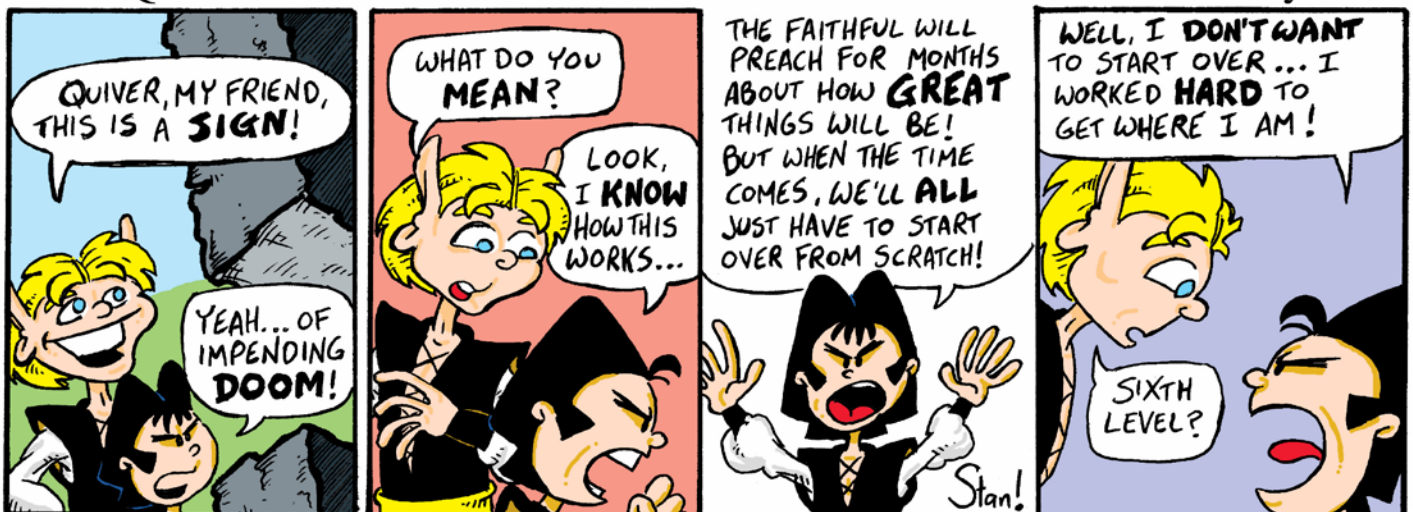
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Ask the Kobold

Miss Chances and Design Strategies

by Skip Williams

Skip Williams is a co-author of 3rd Edition and the author of the world's longest-running rules advice column. We are delighted to welcome him to the pages of KQ. If you have a question for the kobold, send it to yesage@aol.com. We'll share the most relevant or interesting ones here.

Why does concealment, with its associated miss-chance, use a different mechanic (that is, a percentage chance rolled with percentile dice) than the core combat mechanic (that is, 1d20 with a bonus or penalty)?

Would there be anything wrong with converting the percentage miss chance into an equivalent bonus to the target's Armor Class? For example, a 20% miss chance might become +4 bonus to Armor Class for the target.

A miss chance represents a situation in which an attacker faces some extra difficulty or stumbling block for which the attacker's skill just can't compensate. A miss chance gives virtually every attacker the same chance for an outright miss. Characters who manage to overcome the miss chance are allowed attack rolls.

While there's nothing wrong with replacing a miss chance with an attack roll penalty or Armor Class bonus, you would no longer simulate the same kind of situation. A sufficient amount of skill (as represented by the attacker's attack bonus) always could render the increase in difficulty moot. And in any case veteran characters would be less likely to miss than neophytes would.

This question touches on a brief, but fairly intense debate that occurred

during the design process. Check out the sidebar for the details.

The SRD says that Charisma measures a character's force of personality, persuasiveness, personal magnetism, ability to lead, and physical attractiveness. It also says Charisma represents strength of personality, not merely how others perceive one in a social setting.

Why then are dwarves, half-orcs and myriad monsters shackled with Charisma penalties?

I would not argue that traditional dwarves, for instance, are lacking in this department. They are a driven race, hardly something that begets weak personalities.

Every race responds differently to persuasion. A human might find a smooth tongue or a warm personality persuasive, but a tiefling might respond better to a swift kick in the pants. Among humans, the tiefling might not be very persuasive, but when interacting with others of his kind, the tiefling might have a distinct advantage.

Any Charisma penalty translates into a penalty to the character's Leadership score. Why would a dwarf make a poor leader? I'm sure there are races (the drow come to mind) where a penalty might be applicable, even among their own kind. But a blanket reduction makes no sense.

I'm ignoring the reference to physical attractiveness, since it just makes no sense.

Things get worse when you consider Charisma's effect on sorcery and on a cleric's ability to turn undead. It comes



down to this—Charisma affects too many aspects of a character's abilities. It needs to be retooled. Do you agree?

I don't agree that Charisma has too big an effect on characters or on play. Unless you have a character with a class that depends on it (such as a sorcerer or paladin), Charisma is your dump stat. That is, your lowest score usually goes into Charisma. That suggests to me that Charisma doesn't have enough impact on the game.

I think Charisma belongs in the game. As things stand now, a character's mental makeup has three parts, just as the character's physical makeup has three parts. You'll note that I'm treating Charisma strictly as a mental stat. Physical attractiveness seems to have been lumped into Charisma simply because it won't fit anywhere else.

In any case, pairing force or personality to the ability to channel magic or divine power seems like a natural to me. (If your personality is weak you ought not to be so good and projecting or shaping magical energies.)

As for the racial list, first consider tradition. Literature and myth (at least in Western tradition) have always depicted dwarves as gruff and off-putting or worse. The socially dysfunctional group of dwarves presented in the Disney movie *Snow White* certainly helped cement that notion in most people's minds. Half-orcs have always been just plain hard to abide.

Also keep in mind that a deficit in any area of Charisma tanks the whole

score. In the case of dwarves, they lose out in persuasiveness (most dwarves don't bother to persuade, they hold their truths to be self-evident) and personal magnetism (same basic problem, some folks might find dwarves endearing, but aren't really attracted to them). I'd agree that dwarves are driven, but that doesn't help their Charisma scores—nobody likes a workaholic.

Half-orcs are just plain all over crude. They have an animalistic nature that's off-putting.

In either case, the character's asymmetrical personality lacks strength and force, persuasiveness, or the power to manipulate magical forces in the same way that a lopsided pitcher proves hard to use.

You, might, however, give a small bonus (say +2) on interaction checks involving characters of your own race. This would include Bluff, Diplomacy, and Gather Information checks. Once upon a time, the game included a big table of racial preferences that provided a big range of interactions modifiers. Humans, elves (except drow), and half-elves did the best there. Drow and half-orcs did the worst. You could recreate that table to bring a whole range of modifiers into play, say as much as +4 on interaction checks for members of preferred races and as much as -4 for interactions with hated races.



The Secret History of Miss Chances

The debate over an extra mechanic for just plain missing with your attack became quite heated at one point, and the idea was not guaranteed a place in the core rules. Here's the "thought experiment" that convinced us that the game needed such a mechanic:

Suppose you're traipsing through the fields one day and Robin Hood starts shooting at you. Robin Hood, you may recall, is deadliest archer merry olde England. In the traditional legend, Robin was able to split a willow wand in half at 300 paces, and that was with a wind blowing. In a more popular version of the tale (with Errol Flynn playing the sharp shooting archer in a movie), Robin aimed his shot so precisely that it split another arrow which already had made a perfect bull's-eye in a target. Clearly, this is a fellow whose arrows land where he aims them.

Knowing all that, where would you hide from Robin's arrows? You have two choices: behind a stone wall or in a bank of pea-soup fog. Obviously, you'd pick the wall if it covered you from head to toe. It's tough for even Robin Hood to drill through a stone wall with an arrow. But suppose this wall was only chest high and you didn't have time to duck down behind it? Does the fog bank seem like a better bet? After some discussion,

the designers chose the fog bank. Here's why:

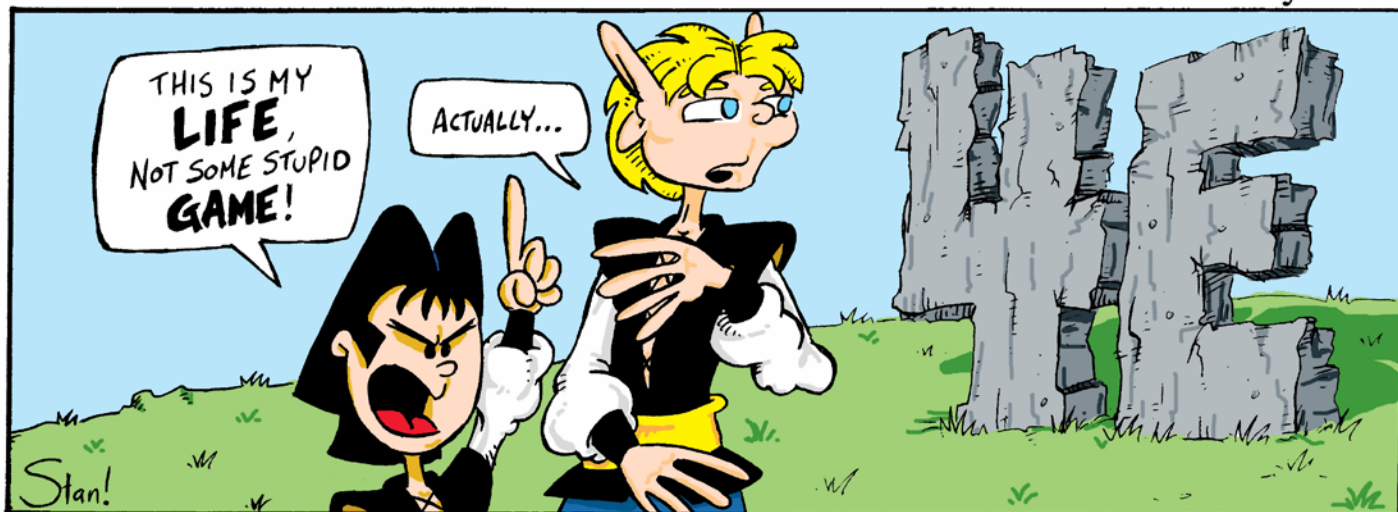
Our friend Robin Hood has a talent for hitting even very small targets at even great distances, provided that he can account for all the variables involved. In that case, he's likely to hit you if you have even one eye exposed. In short, no matter how difficult you make the shot, say -12 or even -20 for nearly total cover, Robin is skillful enough to shoot you anyway.

The fog, however, is a real equalizer. Robin's arrows go where he aims them, so the best defense is to make sure he can't aim properly. Even if you're wearing a cowbell, so that Robin can hear it and guess about where you are, he still doesn't know which way you're facing or even if you're standing or sitting. When shooting into an opaque fog, even the vaunted Robin Hood must trust to luck.

So, the miss chance was born. It represents any condition where sheer chance takes the upper hand and skill takes a back seat. Robin, no doubt, has a wealth of experience when shooting in bad conditions, and might well know just how to shoot that arrow so that it hits something, whereas a novice archer just shoots and hopes. That's covered by the attack roll Robin gets to make if, through good fortune, he overcomes the miss chance.

Bolt & Quiver

by Stan!



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Ecology
of the

BARGHEST

Looks like a goblin.

Kills like a fiend.

By Nicolas Logue
Art by John Carimando

A grey shadow darts from tree to tree, and low snarls echo softly through the snow-laden forest. No tracks mar the white shroud of freshly fallen snow, but fiery eyes burn in the misty woods: Barghests. Vicious fiends in the guise of worgs, their appearance spells doom to onlookers.

These wolfish monsters run through glades leaving no trail for the ranger to track. By taking the form of simple goblins, these sinister shapechangers mask their darker nature and prey on the unwary. They appear by magic, terrorize their foes, and then gorge themselves on flesh ripe with the taste of fear. Once both flesh and souls are devoured, the barghests vanish into the night.

With every victim they devour, their infernal power grows.

Myths and Origins

In a time before men immortalized their deeds with written word, when the shape of the planes were less well defined, the first barghests came into existence. Great goblin kings of old served abominations of Gehenna with more than just their swords and strength; they also mixed their blood with worg pack-lords, creating the potent bond between the two species.

These mixed-blood outsiders were the first barghests, great overmasters of the goblin and worg races who cut a swath of carnage and terror across the planes. Their hunger could not be slaked, and entire races were erased from existence, devoured in their entirety by great packs of demon-dogs and leaving behind nothing but stones.

Many of Gehenna's native species were culled, and the barghests' gluttony brought them victory after victory. Planar travelers returned with tales of vast realms, emptied of all inhabit-

ants, whose entire civilizations fed the barghest overlords of old. The carnage the barghests wrought was well known among demons, angels, and the great races of the multiverse, and the sight of a barghest became synonymous with desolation and death. Even to this day, they remain a horrific portent of doom to all unfortunate enough to meet one.

Their ravenous appetite was their undoing. With nothing left to eat, the great barghest packs turned on one another. The barghests devoured enemies, allies and kin alike in a brutal civil war, a time called the Bitter Feast.

Many packs fled the planes, and others were forced to make alliances with other powerful entities and organizations to survive. These barghests made dark compacts, binding themselves to other powers to avoid enslavement at the hands of devil princes and demon lords. Some even swore service to powerful mortal warlocks and wizards among House Stross, or to the undead

princes of Morgau.

During this hungry war of attrition, their goblin and worg minions fled their masters' sides, most ending up in the Prime Material Plane. Many goblin clans still worship their "dark ancestors." Most goblin tribes and worg packs pay homage to patron spirits in the form of their ancient kings – the first barghests, including Tordaccan the Vile and Mistrokesh, the Ravening King.

For this reason, few goblinoids and worgs can resist the call of a barghest, and often bow down in servitude to these fiends when they appear. Fewer in number now, most of the remaining unbound barghests hide from their many enemies. Rather than lording it over the planes, they appear only rarely to herald death and feast on souls.

Physiology

Barghests are shapechangers able to assume two forms: that of a larger specimen of goblin, or a wolf with a feral humanoid visage. These two guises allow a barghest to infiltrate groups of either wolves or goblins, catching the party off guard and unprepared to face so formidable a foe. A few telling differences can save a group of heroes' lives. In goblinoid form, barghests have a stronger build than mundane goblins, and a distinct shade of skin. Young barghests in humanoid form have the greenish skin of their goblin relations, but as they age, their skin darkens to a deep blue.

In wolf form, barghests resemble wolves physically. However, they are much more aggressive, and they retain vaguely humanoid faces. In either form, the creature's eyes glow with a hellish red fire, especially when they are excited at the prospect of a kill.

A greater barghest is easy to distinguish from its brethren. In humanoid form the greater barghests are much larger than any goblin, standing around eight feet tall. They often weigh over 500 pounds, and run to fat.

While young, barghests stay in their hybrid, goblin form most of the time. Whelps in this form appear no different from a common goblin; wolfish features

appear only after the age of 10, when young goblins go on their first raids.

A fiendish patron or pack leader often leaves a young barghest with a community of goblins to foster the child. A barghest typically does this by stealth. To make room, the fiend devours a young goblin and leaves its own pup to be raised by the goblin family; goblin mothers are either enchanted or intimidated into accepting the child as their own. T

The whelp grows normally until around age 10 or 11, when it develops into a hideous monstrosity with the body of a wolf, a goblin-like face and long cruel-taloned hands growing from its forelimbs. At this time the whelp discovers its infernal abilities, and rarely hesitates to devour its foster guardians. The young barghest's hunger also grows unnatural at this age; it can eat without pause for hours or even days.

Barghests are eating machines. Their fiendish anatomy is suited to their ravenous appetites, and it allows them to devour foes in their entirety. To do so, the jaws of a barghest open wider than any wolf's, to reveal a gaping maw is filled with row after row of razored

teeth. These triangular fangs are perfect for flensing muscle and crunching bones. With its unhinged jaw, a barghest can consume a humanoid victim in a matter of seconds (typically, 1 full round action is all that is required).

A barghest absorbs the essence of its devoured foe, fueling itself with the souls of their victims. Particularly potent barghests absorb their prey's souls into their own, trapping their spirit for all eternity, unless the barghest who consumed them is slain. The sight of a barghest feeding is disturbing, both in its speed and its intensity. Even seasoned veterans have been known to flee in terror at the grisly sight, and the bone-gnashing cacophony, of a barghest devouring human prey.

If forced to flee from barghests or even goblins, wise adventurers do not leave any wounded or fallen comrades behind. They will be devoured, making it difficult to return them to life. In the case of a barghest this happens quickly, but goblins following barghest custom often consume foes as well, as a tradition with roots in barghest feasting.

In either case, a comrade's body is completely consumed. *Raise dead* spells

Knowledge of the Barghest

Characters with ranks in Knowledge (the Planes) can learn more about the barghest. When a character makes a successful skill check, reveal the following lore, including the information from lower DCs.

DC	Result
10	Barghests are evil wolfish creatures whose appearance is said to bring death or ill luck.
15	Barghests are shapechangers who can assume either goblin or wolf form. They live on a distant plane of war.
20	Barghests have powerful spell-like abilities, and the greater barghests are much more powerful than lesser barghests. Both are difficult to harm without magical weapons. The PC can also identify a barghest in natural wolf-goblin form, though not in goblin form.
25	Barghests grow in power by consuming the bodies of their foes; lesser barghests may become greater barghests this way. Barghests can <i>pass without trace</i> , and are often sent to the Material Plane in hunting packs to hunt victims and gain power. These victims must be weaker (less HD) than the barghest.
30	The PC is familiar with all the specific spell-like abilities of barghests and greater barghests and can distinguish a barghest from a goblin or wolf even at maximum Spot range.

will not restore them and their fellow adventurers are forced to *resurrect* them. When faced with a barghest with the Soul Feed feat, even this is impossible.

Psychology and Society

Barghest society is hierarchal and organized into packs. This stratification stemmed the feeding frenzy that culled so many of them during the Bitter Feast. Pack lords oversee every barghest pack; these are greater barghests of extreme power who require utter subservience from they lead. Pack lords rule through fear and are watchful of their charges. They make examples of agitators by devouring them in full view of the others.

A barghest's only means of advancement is to kill and consume its superior. These cruel monsters have no sense of family, loyalty, or compassion. Barghests do not hesitate to devour their own young if they feel the children are a threat to their power.

The greatest rite of passage for young barghests is the transformation to greater barghest. Elders place several whelps into loose hunting parties and send them to the Material Plane to engage in the Great Hunt. One or more of the pups will consume enough victims to make the transition to greater barghest. The strongest or most cunning barghest proves itself and dominates the group. Its commanding position becomes permanent when it becomes a greater barghest. It then forces the rest of the barghests to do its hunting and bring suitable victims for it to consume.

Lazy by nature, barghests retain minions to serve their needs. They make good use of their *charm monster* ability to secure human, goblin, or even ogre servants who can find meals for them or investigate an area's power structure without attracting undue attention.

Barghests on the Material Plane are known to subjugate entire tribes or even nations of goblins to serve them, claiming to be deities or powerful heroes of legend in order to gain their loyalty. If this fails, the barghest simply devours the tribal elders and assumes control. Whether through force or guile, once

the barghest has control of a tribe it uses its goblin pawns as fodder, forcing them to track down and waylay individuals powerful enough for the fiend to feed off. Barghests are often responsible for unexplained disappearances. When adventurers investigate a rash of bizarre kidnappings and goblinoids are involved, they should be wary of possible barghest activity.

Barghests hiding among goblins or worgs sacrifice many of their minions simply to lure a party of adventurers into a false sense of security. Once the heroes are certain they are facing a pathetic rabble of goblins and worgs, the fiends pounce. The barghests often use *invisibility* to observe the fray, and when the party is sufficiently weakened by their minions' onslaught, the slaving fiends close in for the kill.

Barghest Feats

Soul Feed [Monster]

By devouring a foe, you absorb their very soul into your being, feeding off their spirit as well as their flesh.

Prerequisites: Greater Barghest, gained at least 3 HD through feeding.

Benefit: When you feed on an opponent, their soul is trapped in your own spirit, and the victim cannot be *resurrected* unless you are first slain. If the victim's hit dice are equal to or greater than your own, you immediately gain a *death knell* spell-like ability. These benefits are in addition to the normal results of the Feed ability.

Portent of Doom [Monster]

The sight of you speeds onlookers towards their doom.

Prerequisites: Greater Barghest or 10 ranks in Intimidate.

Benefit: Anyone who beholds you must immediately make a Will save (DC equal to 10 plus ½ your hit dice plus Charisma modifier). If they succeed, they are immune to this power for 1 day. If they fail, they immediately feel death's claws tearing their soul from their body, becoming shaken for 1 round. In addition, the next time they make a saving throw vs. a death effect,

they must roll twice and take the lower of the two results.

Harbinger of Death [Monster]

The blood of your ancestors flows strong in you. Where you lead death follows, and you terrorize foes.

Prerequisites: Greater Barghest, Portent of Doom, 20 Cha, must have advanced 5 HD by feeding.

Benefit: You add the following spell-like abilities to your list:

At will—*deathwatch*, *doom*.

1/day—*death ward*, *nightmare*, *slay living*.

Howl of the Worg King [Monster]

Your fearsome howl inspires fear in foes and calls worgs to your defense.

Prerequisite: Barghest.

Benefit: While in wolf-like form, as a standard action, you may raise your head high and howl fiercely into the night. Any foe within 60 feet must immediately make a Will save (DC equals 10 plus half your Hit Dice plus your Charisma modifier) or become shaken for 1d4 rounds.

All worgs within 1 mile hear this call and must make the same Will save or travel to your side by the fastest possible route to defend you against your enemies. Worg allies who hear the howl gain +2 to attack, damage, and saving throws until the encounter ends.

History of the Barghest

The myth of the barghest originated in England, most notably in Yorkshire, though legends of black dogs of death, and spectral hounds exist in several cultures the world over. The word's origin may be derivative of north England's pronunciation of the word ghost as *guest*, naming this ghostly black dog as a *burg-guest* (town ghost). It may also sprout from the German *berg-geist* (mountain ghost) or *Bar-geist* (bear ghost) in allusion to its alleged appearance as a bear.

Britain is rife with these death dealing fiendish goblin-dogs, and the barghest of York is joined by the Demon of Tedworth, the Black Dog of Winchester, the Lancashire Striker, and the Padfoot of Wakefield. In each case this large, usually black, wolf or dog with huge fangs and claws is a reputed omen of death and ill luck.

In Jersey folklore, the Black Dog of Death is a phantom whose appearance presages storms. Smugglers may have spread the story to discourage people from leaving their homes at night and witnessing illegal transport of contraband.

The barghest makes an appearance in several works of literature, most notably in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's most famous Sherlock Holmes story, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, the supposed phantom dog of which is no doubt inspired by barghest tales. The "Grim" of *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, is a nod at England's classic ominous ghost-dog tale. Sirius Black transforms into a black dog and is named for one; his nickname just happens to be Padfoot (of Wakefield perhaps?).

Greater Barghest: Vralgor Szarn

Vralgor rose to power by ambushing and consuming a powerful priest and his paladin guards during a Great Hunt. Vralgor moved the hunting party into the sewers below the Free City of Zobeck. Now Vralgor and his lessers feed on the city folk at their leisure.

The greater barghest curtails any threat to his position as pack leader by devouring lesser barghests. Vralgor has *charmed* the guildsmaster of a small rogue's guild, and he uses the rogues as his private spy network. With plenty of victims delivered to his waiting maw, Vralgor grown too huge to leave the sewer tunnels without using his *dimension door* ability. His *ring of x-ray vision* helps him keep tabs on the streets above.

VRALGOR SZARN CR 10

Male advanced greater barghest rogue 2

CE Medium humanoid (shapechanger)

Init +4; **Senses** darkvision 60 ft., scent, Listen +27, Spot +27

Languages Abyssal, Common, Giant, Goblin, Infernal, Worg

AC 23, touch 9, flat-footed 21

hp 205 (17 HD); **DR** 5/magic, evasion

Fort +16, **Ref** +14, **Will** +16

Spd 40 ft.

Melee +27 large adamantite greatsword (3d6+20/19-20) and +23 bite (2d6+4), or +25 bite (2d6+9) and 2 claws +23 (1d8+4)

Base Atk +16; **Grp** +29

Atk Options feed, Harbinger of Death, Improved Sunder, Portent of Doom (DC 26), Power Attack, sneak attack +1d6, Soul Feed

Spell-Like Abilities (CL 17):

At will—*blink*, *deathwatch*, *doom* (DC 19), *invisibility sphere*, *levitate*, *misdirection* (DC 20), *rage* (DC 21)

1/day—*charm monster* (DC 22), *crushing despair* (DC 22), *death ward*, *dimension door*, *mass bull's strength*, *mass enlarge*, *nightmare* (DC 23), *slay living* (DC 23)

Abilities Str 29, Dex 14, Con 24, Int 22, Wis 24, Cha 26

SQ alternate form, trapfinding

Feats Harbinger of Death, Improved Sunder, Multiattack, Portent of Doom, Power Attack, Soul Feed

Skills Bluff +28, Climb +19, Concentration +25, Diplomacy +22, Disguise +18 (+20 acting), Hide +18, Intimidate +30, Jump +23, Listen +27, Move Silently +22, Sense Motive +27, Spot +27, Survival +20, Swim +19, Tumble +19

Possessions +2 large adamantite greatsword, +3 amulet of mighty fists, +4 bracers of armor, minor cloak of displacement, ring of x-ray vision, a human skull studded with sapphires (1,200 gp), map of Zobeck tunnels and town above, sack with 235 gp.



FROM THE OUTSIDE IN, CREATING VIBRANT CHARACTERS



BY SIGFRIED TRENT
ART BY SHELLY BAUR

Even experienced gamers can find it challenging to create vivid characters, the kind that everyone talks about. Most gamers are imaginative and full of interesting ideas, but sometimes when you sit down at the table you aren't sure exactly what to do. You may have trouble making the character in your imagination come alive for everyone else. You may just want to play a variation from your usual PC.

Some players are blessed with more charisma and acting skills than others, but you don't need those talents to create and portray a memorable character, a character that others will talk about. If you find yourself struggling to shine in your games, here's how to bring your characters to life.

The Outside-In Approach

Kale Dranor was born as the vessel of a dark and terrible god. His parents were chosen for their beauty and power. His birth coincided with the alignment of the proper stars. But on the night of his unholy baptism, agents of the King's Watch attacked the cult. All the adults were killed, but the small nameless child was given to the Tirenian monks. The monks raised him in their orphanage, unaware of his sinister origins. Under their watchful eyes Kale reached adolescence and showed amazing skill in unarmed combat and surpassing insight into the path of lotus wisdom. A true prodigy, he joined the order at age 17 and showed great promise as a warrior against the forces of darkness.

What we have here is an interesting and dramatic back story for a new character. It has plenty of intrigue and mystery. It grounds the character in the gameworld, and it has that cool factor. Unfortunately, it doesn't tell you what Kale Dranor is like as a person. We don't know how he behaves, what his motivations are, or what he does on a day to day basis.

Many role players start the character building process by creating a back story like this. It's a useful tool for the DM to work them into the story and to spark their imagination. It can also help you decide on your character's basic personality, but it is not exactly direct. For instance, Kale Dranor could be harboring an evil god and unwittingly doing its bidding. He could be evil and simply fooling everyone. He may have no taint at all and simply has nightmares of his birth. He may have a split personality. The story itself doesn't really tell us who he is, only offers possibilities.

When you meet someone for the first time, be it in real life or in a story, you don't know their life history. What you experience is their general appearance, mannerisms, and whatever they talk about. If you were to later describe them you would pick out their most distinguishing and unusual features, the things that make them distinct. If asked to imitate them you might adopt their posture, mimic their accent, and cover their topics of conversation.

The outside in approach to character building starts with first impressions and then works inward from there. You decide how your character behaves in the most common situations rather than focusing

only on dramatic moments. From there you can easily add layers of nuance as you play the game and discover how your basic personality interacts with the unfolding story to become a rich and lively character that you and others will remember.

Start with a Theme

Much like good art, a good character has an overall theme or central idea they embody. It can be almost anything, but a good theme can be summed up in very few words. Themes can come from the character's role in the party, an emotion, a philosophy, an image, and so on.

If you are stumped, just pick a compelling word and think about what it means to you. This is the starting point for your character and will guide you when making further decisions. Once you have a theme selected, write it down in big letters to remind you where you are going if you get lost.

Sample Themes: The loner, hope, bastion of law, the innocent, lust for power, quest for truth, party girl, big dumb fighter, indestructible, hero, lost and confused, revenge, passion, money, hunting, harmony, growing old, glory, responsibility, decent into madness, finding purpose, underdog, guilt, darkness, duty, fire, hairy, Jack Nicolson, friendship, stuttering, cats, cooking

Establish your Appearance

Generally the first thing you do in a game is describe what your character looks like. Imagining their appearance connects you to who they are. Because role playing is a game of language, words are a good place to

start. Pick some simple adjectives that describe your character and mix them with the nouns for your sex, race, and class.

For instance, “Rake is a tall, athletic young man with broad shoulders, dark hair and a sinister smile.” You don’t need to go into great detail, your mind will automatically sketch out an mental image based on your description. Words like “young” and “sinister” imply a range of ideas and details without the need to specify them.

Once you have the broad strokes of your character’s appearance, come up with a few features that really stand out. These will set you apart from every other party member and serve as an icon for your character. Mention these when describing what the character looks like, and remember that the character may be proud of these features or may be self-conscious about them.

Sample Features: Big nose, limp, nearly bald, prominent tattoo, unusual piercing, square jaw, huge braided beard, runny nose, especially fat, bony fingers, bug eyes, large breasts, mono-colored clothing, strange hat, bad hygiene, unusual armor, pouty lips, unusual hair color, huge feet, prominent scar.

Consider Motivations

A big part of who you are is what you do. Motivations are possibly your most important consideration. Every action your character takes is driven by some motivation. One of the big differences between playing and role playing is acting on your character’s motivations rather than your own. If you find yourself wondering what to do in the game, consider what your character wants and how they can go about getting it.

Motivations can range from very specific goals, to very broad attitudes. Both types are extremely helpful when portraying your character. Be sure to record your motivations on your character sheet to remind you any time you feel directionless. Just pick one of them and try to satisfy it in the current situation. While motivations can change as you play, select a few to start the game with.

Sample Motives: Become rich, find a wife, avoid working hard, achieve fame, make the world better, eat tasty food, discover a new species, learn about the world, change your profession, get more sleep, learn to paint, make people laugh, get attention, be desired, get revenge, live forever,

buy clothes, help others, become closer to god, stay in control

Talking the Talk

Accents and voices are often the first things people think about when portraying a character. While they can add flavor, they are far from essential. It is better to simply tell everyone your character speaks in a high lilting voice than to do a bad job portraying it. Players can easily imagine the voice you describe so long as you remind them from time to time. If you can pull off a consistent voice or accent it can be a lot of fun, but it is usually best to stick to ones you are well practiced at.

What your character says is at least as important as how they say it. Nothing establishes a character quite so well as dialog. You need not speak word for word as your character if you find it difficult to invent dialog on the fly. You can simply say that your character says something. For instance you might say, “Grogna insults the king’s mother by comparing her to various herd animals.” Everyone can imagine how that sounds without actually hearing the words.

People often repeat themselves or use specific words in conversation. Coming up with a catch phrase, favorite word, subject, or story can help define your character for others. You might want to practice this a little. Start talking about any subject and work in your word or phrase as much as you can without sounding like a broken record.

If you have a favorite subject, try to introduce it whenever something even remotely related comes up in the game. When other players groan or tease you about your character’s obsessions, you know you have made an impression with your character.

Finding your Quirks

Everyone has unusual behaviors that set them apart. Coming up with a few character quirks can help define your character and make them unique. A good quirk strikes a balance between being unusual and being relevant. If a quirk is too obscure you might never use it, but if it is too mundane it won’t stand out. Contrast is a powerful tool here; you might benefit by finding a quirk that goes against your character’s theme. For instance, your character may be very sophisticated and well-mannered but has a

bad habit of spilling his drinks at the table. Don’t go overboard with these. Start with just one or two and develop new ones based on things events during the game.

Sample Quirks: Stares, must use the bathroom often, takes notes, hates a certain food, whistles in combat, has an imaginary friend, grunts, likes to smell things, constantly cleans his gear, hugs people, steals small things, collects stones, likes reading, hates cats, loves horses, forgets names.

Putting It All Together

Using this “outside in” method you can quickly create memorable characters that are easy to play. Here is a quick example of a new character.

Theme: Innocent youth

Appearance: A strapping teenage lad with messy red hair and freckles. He seems a bit awkward, as if still getting used to his growing body.

Motivations: Always eager to prove himself, especially to women. He wants people to think he is an adult. He is tempted by “forbidden fruit.”

Speech: He says “umm” a lot when asked questions. He says “did you see that?” when he is successful at something. He likes telling stories about his baby sister Angelica. He tends to pick up on words his companions use, but uses them out of context.

Quirks: Sings himself to sleep, doesn’t trust bards, yawns a lot when others are talking.

Final Thoughts

Don’t be afraid to borrow ideas from your favorite actors, literary characters, or even your real life friends and acquaintances. These are excellent starting points and you can simply mix and match interesting traits.

The key is to not get too hung up on details and minutia. Remember that a couple of simple words can be far more defining than a whole bunch of detailed description. It is often much easier and more effective to simply say you “look sad” than describe exactly how and why you look sad. Don’t be afraid to let your own personality infect your character; that can add a lot of depth to them. Just remember your character’s stated motivations at all times during the game, and it should keep you on track.



A Kingdom for My Horse

Paladin Alternate Class Abilities

by John E. Ling, Jr.

Art by Vittorio Carpaccio

Heavy armor; sword and shield; warhorse. These are the defining, iconic symbols of a paladin, her tools to fight evil, suppress tyranny, and protect the innocent.

For various reasons, though, not every paladin uses the stereotypical tools of her trade. In particular, the paladin's mount is not always a viable option. Paladins who spend their careers crawling around in dungeons tainted by evil or smashing evil temples quickly learn their trusted mount typically doesn't fit in these places. For some, the summoning of beasts for any purpose is forbidden, as some orders consider it tantamount to slavery.

For these paladins, the three alternate class abilities presented here provide interesting options. In addition, the article presents feats to further allow a paladin to develop these alternate abilities. They all become available at 5th level and all replace the ability to summon a special mount.

The Bonded Weapon

In place of her celestial mount, a paladin may undertake a ritual to strike a holy bond between her soul and her weapon of choice. This bond grows as the paladin increases in power.

Benefit: You form a holy bond with a weapon of your choice. In order to forge this bond, you must spend 24 hours in quiet meditation and prayer. Should you ever lose your bonded weapon, or if it is ever destroyed, you may undergo the ritual again. A bonded weapon may be enchanted with magic abilities as normal. The special abilities are cumulative based upon your level; the hardness and hit point values are not cumulative. **Improved hardness and hit points:**

Holy power infuses a bonded weapon, making it sturdier and more durable than other weapons of the same type. Add this amount to the weapon's hardness and hit point totals.

Light (Sp): You can opt to have your weapon shed light, as the light spell. Activating and deactivating this ability is a standard action. The caster level is equal to your paladin class level.

Tightened Grip (Ex): The process of bonding with your weapon allows you to maintain a grip on the weapon that others find extraordinary. Whenever you are defending against a disarm attempt, you gain a +4 sacred bonus. At 13th level, the bonus increases to +8. This bonus only applies to your opposed

roll to avoid the disarm.

Focus of the Master (Su): The holy bond between you and your weapon is strong. You may use your bonded weapon as a divine focus component any time one of your spells requires one.

Merciful Strike (Su): Paladins make amazing displays of mercy, even when facing hardened criminals. When wielding your bonded weapon, you may strike for nonlethal damage without incurring the normal -4 penalty.

Sacred Defense (Su): Power from the celestial realms infuses you and protects you. Beginning at 8th level, you gain a +2 sacred bonus to your armor class against evil foes. At 16th level this bonus increases to +4.

Undead's Enemy (Su): Holy power suffuses you when you wield your bonded weapon. Against undead foes, your bonded weapon does 1d6 holy damage and is a good-aligned weapon for the purposes of overcoming damage reduction. If your weapon has the holy ability, this bonus damage stacks. At 17th level, your bonus to damage from this ability increases to 2d6.

Improved Smite (Su): A paladin with a bonded weapon is devastating against evil. Whenever you use your smite evil ability with your bonded weapon, you gain a +4 sacred bonus to both your attack and damage rolls.

Guardian Archon

You forge a strong bond with an archon, who agrees to protect and aid you.

Benefit: Through prayer and supplication, you form a special bond with a lantern archon (MM, page 16). The archon agrees to aid and protect you a number of rounds per day equal to your paladin level. These rounds need not be used consecutively. However, if your guardian archon is slain, you cannot summon it again for 24 hours, regardless of how long you have remaining.

The lantern archon is in no way under your control when you summon it from the celestial realms; it uses its own judgment to determine how to best protect you. It arrives with hit points equal to one half your normal amount, and it is treated as though it had hit dice equal to your character level. The lantern archon may use any of its abilities normally while in your service.

This spell-like ability has a caster level equal to your paladin level.

At 12th level, a hound archon replaces your lantern archon. All other benefits (HD, hp, etc) remain the same.

Resistance of the Heavens

Like a celestial being, you can shrug off some elemental damage.

Benefits: Your deep bond with the celestial realms grants you resistance to energy damage, which increases as you become more powerful. At 5th level, you gain resistance 5 to acid, cold, or electricity (your choice). At every fifth

level (10th, 15th, 20th), you may either increase one resistance by 5, or add a new element. Resistances gained from this ability cannot rise above 20.

For example, at 5th level the paladin Drusai selects this class ability in place of his special mount; he chooses electricity as his energy type. At 10th level, he can either select to gain resistance 5 to cold or acid, or he can increase his existing electricity resistance to 10.

These resistances do not stack with those gained from other sources, such as the celestial or half-celestial templates.

Special Feats

The following feats further improve on the abilities presented here.

Beacon of Hope [General]

Your bonded weapon improves your ability to boost the courage of your allies.

Prerequisites: Aura of courage, Bonded weapon, paladin level 10th.

Benefits: While wielding your bonded weapon, you grant great courage to your nearby allies. Your aura of courage ability doubles to a 20 foot radius, and the bonus granted by that ability increases to +6. Your allies must be able to see you and your bonded weapon to gain this increased bonus, and your weapon must be unsheathed.

Improved Guardian Archon [Epic]

The most powerful of archons agrees to aid you in your fight against evil.

Prerequisites: Guardian archon special ability, paladin level 21st.

Benefits: You may forge a bond with a trumpet archon (MM, page 18) in place of your hound archon guardian. The duration, hp, hit dice, and other benefits of your class ability are unchanged.

Spell Protection of the Heavens [General]

Your bond with the celestial realms grows stronger.

Prerequisites: Resistance of the heavens special ability, Spellcraft 5 ranks, Wisdom 17+, paladin level 12th.

Benefits: You gain spell resistance equal to your paladin level plus 5, to a maximum of 25.

Sundering Wave [General]

Those who attempt to sunder your bonded weapon suffer the same fate to their own weapon.

Prerequisites: Bonded weapon special ability, paladin level 12th.

Benefits: When a foe tries to sunder your bonded weapon, the weapon's holy power reverberates, causing the same amount of damage to the attacker's weapon as your weapon takes.

Superior Defense [General]

The holy power of your bonded weapon protects you or an ally.

Prerequisites: Bonded weapon, paladin level 14th.

Benefits: Your sacred defense ability bonus increases by +2, and you may grant your sacred bonus to an ally's AC instead of your own. The ally must be within the radius of your aura of courage ability and must see both you and your weapon.

This bonus applies only to attacks by evil-aligned foes.

Superior Spell

Protection of the Heavens [Epic]

Your holy bond with the celestial realms is pure and deep.

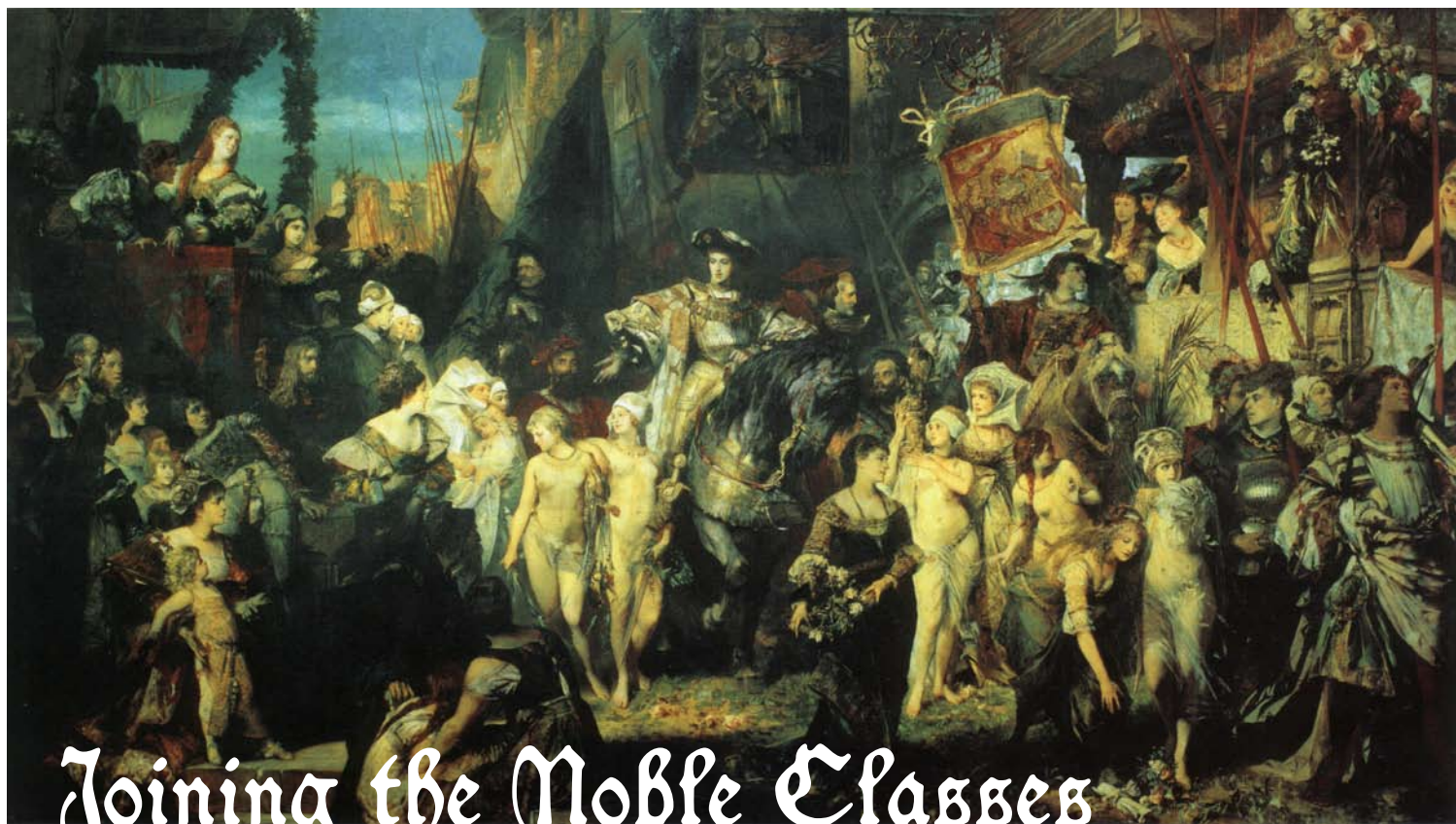
Prerequisites: Resistance of the Heavens, Spell Protection of the Heavens, Spellcraft 10 ranks, Wisdom 21+, paladin level 21st.

Benefits: The spell resistance gained from your Spell Protection of the Heavens feat increases to paladin level plus 10. This spell resistance has no upper limit.



Bonded Weapon Table

Paladin Level	Improved Hardness	Improved Hit Points	Special
5th-7th	+2	+2	Light, tightened grip, focus of the master
8th-10th	+4	+4	Merciful strike, sacred defense
11th-14th	+6	+6	Undead's enemy
15th-20th	+8	+8	Improved smite



Joining the Noble Classes

Using Aristocrat Levels as PC Rewards

by Jeff Grubb

Art by Hans Makart

In *Kobold Quarterly* #1, Mr. Baur suggested that noble arms and titles are suitable awards for player characters, and he mentions that a free level of the Aristocrat NPC would be a suitable bonus to that award.

Maybe.

Granting such a title is more than a mere welcome-to-the-kingdom gift, and the importance of these two grants should be reversed. The level of aristocrat is the cool award; the noble title that goes with it a potentially nasty fish-hook that the DM can use as a springboard for further adventures.

The first level of Aristocrat is fairly butch; it provides +1d8 hit points, four skill points, and a +2 on the Will save. In other words, imagine a magical hat that gave you the Feats of Toughness, Negotiator, Persuasive, and Iron Will in one fell swoop. Actually, it's better than the magic hat, since you control where the skill points go, and both they and the hit points may be increased by

above-average stats. Not a bad little haul for bumping off the local dragon and saving the monarch's first-spawn.

After the first level of Aristocrat the benefits slack off just a bit, but increased base attack bonus, saving throws, skill points, and new available skills are nothing to sneeze at. The last is particularly attractive to classes that are limited as to their potential skills, such as the Fighter.

But how do these NPC levels work in connection with the "real" levels (where "real" means "earned the hard way with experience points")? Do you have to worry about the penalties for multi-classing? Does an encounter with a vampire remove aristocratic levels that have been awarded?

Any NPC levels presented as a reward should initially be considered *honorary* in nature. The base attack bonus, saving throw bonus, and new skill points of the non-heroic levels would be in place, but the honorary levels are not counted when dealing with total character levels.

While these honorary levels do not count against multiclassing penalties, they don't contribute to effects that depend on the total level of the character (so you can't get around a *sleep* spell through aristocratic entitlement). Honorary levels do not count when figuring maximum skill points, and they offer no added protection to level-draining attacks. True, you still have better hit points when you drop to 1st level, but having honorary levels will not keep you alive. They don't count when figuring your bonus feats for levels. You can lock in previously awarded honorary levels, making them "real", but more on that wrinkle later.

Having sorted out what these honorary NPC levels do, the next big question is — who gets to make these cool aristocratic awards, and what must I do to get them? The answer is that rulers who are themselves not ruled may grant them, and they themselves do so under limitations. The ultimate price may give some

adventurers pause about accepting the levels and entering into the bare-knuckle politics of the local noble court.

The King's The Thing

The local supreme ruler can promote individuals of merit by awarding titles and making them peers of the realm. Treat this as a royal bonus feat that the local monarch gains when he reaches the top of the heap, whether through conquest, by ability, or after Dad, the old king, kicks off. Other royal feats might include declaring war, raising taxes, or summoning vassals to fight, but that would be another article.

GRANT PEERAGE [ROYAL]

You have the ability to award honorary levels in the Aristocrat NPC class.

Prerequisites: Rulership of the land without being vassal to a greater power.

Benefits: You may award honorary NPC Aristocrat levels to others. You may award as many levels up to your total (Aristocrat and other) levels over the entire span of your rulership. You cannot award titles to an individual who already holds another title from another ruler unless that individual rejects his previously awarded title and with that the honorary aristocrat levels so gained. You cannot award honorary levels to an individual beyond half your total levels.

Normal: You may award any number of fancy-dancy titles you want, but they have no effect on game play. So there.

Note that the monarch has a limited number of these plums to pass out, and he will do so with an eye towards his or her own goals. The Royal Heir is probably due for a goodly number of these (up to maximum of half the total levels available). This makes the competition for the remainder even dicier. Your 12 level Aristocrat monarch will probably hold onto 6 levels for her son, leaving 6 levels as favors. They won't be passed out as door prizes but saved for real awards, and your local royalty will want something in return.

While this example assumes the local realm is a monarchy, the same principle and the royal feat can apply to any state

with lifetime job descriptions, such as tribes, magocracies, or theocracies. A republic would have as many available levels as its initial chief executive, plus one per year (since the ruling politicians may change over time). As a republic, they may be even charier of giving out aristocratic titles. Regardless, such awards are not given lightly.

So what influences such awarded titles, in particular the awards beyond the initial knighting? Service to the crown is foremost. While the local queen may be happy to grant knight-hoods to those who performed an extraordinary act, additional levels will come only if the individual hangs about at the crown's beck and call.

Any monarch worth his rule will demand fealty from those he admits to knighthood. The recipient swears to serve the monarch before any other ruler (hence the limitation on awards to those carrying awards from others). This makes for an easy springboard for adventures, but often the throne holds the reigns just a touch tight.

The Making of Lists

So you've gained a title – what is it and what does it mean?

The nature of the titles will vary according to the particular kingdom and campaign, but here's a good list for your typical western fantasy setting.

Aristocrat

Levels	Title
1	Knight (Banner Knight)
2-3	Knight (Knight Minor)
4-6	Knight (Knight Major)
7-8	Baron or Baroness
9-10	Count/Earl or Countess
11-12	Duke or Duchess
13-14	Grand Duke, Grand Duchess
15+	King, Rajah, Emperor, Kaiser

From this list, you can gather that most awarded and honorific levels are in the knight category. Only if one has a particularly powerful lord (and is beloved by that lord) can you gain easy entry into the Baron or Duke levels.

In addition to the abilities provided

by the aristocrat level, your character also gains access to the monarch's ear – or rather, more access than those hoi-polloi adventurers who clutter up the court. A noble PC can expect to be called in on matters that threaten the kingdom, particular those matters which require your special talents.

Knights, regardless of level, are addressed as "Sir" or "Madam", while Barons and higher are greeted as "My Lord" or "My Lady" (finer points may exist for your campaign). Within the pecking order of the court, aristocratic level does matter, and a level 8 Aristocrat always enters the room first, sits closer the head of table, and speaks first, over his level 7 (and lower) brethren.

Among the levels, there is a marked difference between real and honorary levels. Your fighter may be 14th level, but with only two levels of aristocrat, you may offer your advice only after any "real" Knight Minors. Worse, you are probably seated at the royal banquet below the salt. (Note that if multiple knights hold the same level, the individuals who have held their titles longest are given precedence).

All this creates some friction between newly promoted adventurers and those who received their titles the old fashioned way (by inheriting them). The newcomers additional "real" levels makes things even more interesting. Not all the established nobility view the newly entitled with pleasure, and plenty of backstage politicking may be involved to get the adventurers to leave court, to embarrass themselves, or to fall out of the monarch's favor.

Land and Permanent Nobility

One thing that title does not grant is land. One can be an unlanded noble, or one can hold land in the name of the crown without holding any title, as a castellan. Land is a separate matter, and customs vary from kingdom to kingdom. Some rulers grant land when they would rather not spend titles, or chose to grant a title to those brave souls who conquer a particular monster-populated chunk of territory.

But how does one gain a “real” title? By taking a level of aristocrat when one gains a level (with the DM’s approval, but since he was ultimately responsible for that first level, he should be good with the idea). NPC titles are, pound for pound, weaker than their player character equivalents. However, if a character is granted four honorary levels, and then the player takes a fifth level of his own volition, all five levels are suddenly locked in and become real levels. They count toward total levels for spell effects and maximum skill levels, and they are real class levels for the purposes of multiclassing. You may get a bonus feat out of the deal. At this point, the granting monarch cannot take away the previously awarded levels (see below). They still count against the monarch’s available total for his reign.

Making the honorary levels real sends up a flare to the established nobility that a new contender intends to hang around. The nobles figure this out fast – the monarch knows, and gossip spreads quickly through the upper classes. And they may not like the change.

The Good King Giveth, and the Good King Taketh Away

Great, the king gives you a shiny title and an honorary NPC level. You give him hearty thanks and ride off, looking for new adventures, right?

Well, wrong.

The king gives you a level and the king can take it away from you if you don’t show up for work, or jump to his commands, or if he just doesn’t like your attitude. Usually he will provide a warning, but he can pull his awards at any time. Only half of those levels return to him for grants to someone else (rounded up), so it is not something he will do on a whim, but it’s a very real possibility for misbehaving nobles.

If your feudal lord gives you the heave-ho, you lose the BAB bonus immediately. Hit points from honorary levels that are pulled become temporary hit points – once lost they cannot be regained. You keep any skills gained, though those skills are no longer con-

sidered class skills (unless you have the appropriate class). If you swear fealty to another lord and gain new aristocratic levels, you gain additional skill points only after you rise above the previous, now-lost levels.

You suffer the same penalties if you voluntarily forswear your lord (“You can’t fire me, I quit!”). This leaves you free to swear new allegiances, such as to the lord leading that invading army. In voluntary withdrawals, the monarch gains all the levels back to re-award elsewhere. Note that this may create times when a disenchanted ruler may seek to force an unwanted noble out.

After a character’s (permanent) death, half the deceased’s aristocrat levels may pass to an heir as honorary levels. These follow the inheritance laws of your campaign. The other half (rounding up) return to the Crown. One reason that titles can be kept in the family.

If the monarch dies, all honorary titles revert to the throne. They may be re-awarded, at no cost to the new monarch, to the individuals who held them previously, or they may be kept and added to the NPC levels the new monarch may later dispose of to his favorites. For those who have served the crown (and the new head that wears the crown), this re-awarding is automatic, though it may involve a ceremony where fealty is sworn anew. For others who may have crossed the heir, the former monarch’s death may lead to a re-evaluation of the adventurer’s contribution to the kingdom.

If your monarch is conquered, or forced to swear fealty to another, greater king, the honorary titles are similarly reviewed – by the new ultimate ruler. One nice bonus of attacking the kingdom next door is you gain a raft of new honorary levels to shower upon your loyal generals and captains.

If the awarded aristocrat levels have been locked in by a character gaining a real aristocrat level, the crown can’t get them back, except if the individual holding them dies.

And before you ask, yes, the throne may grant additional titles to itself. This

granting of titles to oneself must stay within the limitations of the monarch’s initial level, but it is good to be King.

Support Your Local Monarch

The presence of an established, feudal organization within a game filled with powerful, high-level adventurers suddenly makes more sense. A powerful office which hands out free levels, even within limited resources and restrictions, is nothing to sneer at. Similarly, the local nobility may be quite willing to support this office in the hope of a free level or two for little or no work (Or as they would call it – “Long and invaluable service”). They certainly look askance at the barbarian who threatens to roll in and upset the applecart (Or as they would call it – “The long, proud heritage of the peerage”). The exception is when a higher-level noble seeks to seize the throne, and needs a cat’s-paw.

Adventurers are drawn to the rewards as well, but unless they make this kingdom their base of operations (and deal with the local politics), those “free levels” can come with a hefty price tag. It is suddenly in their best interest to keep the royal family healthy and happy, lest their boon evaporate. Wise and good rulers give their vassal knights a long leash, approve extended leaves of absence, and make few demands. Less wise rulers need their knights nearby, and they have an annoying habit of starting a war at inopportune times.

Nobles are more than willing to tolerate a few talented upstarts with a level or two of honorary aristocrat, as long as they know their place and don’t track in any mud. But as soon as they start rising in levels (or, gods forbend, make those levels *permanent*), there may be more skullduggery afoot.

The result is a series of springboards providing new directions for the adventurers or for political intrigues within the castles. They accepted the reward of a grateful crown, knelt, and were tapped upon the shoulders by their local monarch – and then the fun really begins.





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The Avatar of Hunger

Hidden Origins of the Ghoul Empire

by Wolfgang Baur
Art by Kraig Horigan



The history of the Ghoul Imperium is a recent one, an explosion of undead power from a direction unlooked-for: the lowly ghoul raised from a skulker in the graveyard to a force that destroyed the mighty drow stranglehold on the underdark, and brought many underground civilizations to the brink of annihilation.

Children of the Hunger God

How did it happen? The ghouls themselves do not know for sure, and a great deal of myth, legends, and sacred lore has grown up around the topic. Some of these stories claim divine intervention by the Death God or Hunger God, other elements drawn from a pact with the derro, other tales claim demons were somehow responsible. All make it clear that a magical strain of ghoul fever was the catalyst for the Empire's rise. None know the truth.

The ravenous hunger and ambition that define the Empire of the Ghouls come from a hunting expedition 200 years ago. A priest of the Death God led a pack of ghouls and ghosts into the underdark in a hunt for new sources of meat. The hunters met and devoured a few of the weaker residents of the deep lands, but then met a horror they were woefully ill-prepared to fight, a

cave dragon in its prime. Its darkness filled the tunnels, and its jaws devoured ghouls by the dozens.

Strengthened the Death God's blessing, one ghast struck a crucial blow with its paralyzing claw, and the dragon was rendered immobile for a dozen heartbeats. The frenzy that followed infected the dragon with ghoul fever. The rest of the ghouls and ghosts died before the dragon could be slain, but the priest of the Death God survived and became the ghoul-dragon's minion and chief servant. The dragon grew powerful in undeath. Though its growth stopped, its power was greater than any others of its kind.

Charon and Darrakh

So was born Darrakh, Father of Ghouls, the Great and Unending Devourer. Of all dragons below the earth, he is the greatest. He receives ghoul petitioners in a deep cavern perpetually wrapped in darkness, and when he is displeased, he dines on the flesh of the ghouls, his followers and children.

The cult of the Hunger God reveres him as an avatar of their diety, an earthly manifestation of the endless gnawing need that drives ghouls to consume corpses. Darrakh is fast, tough, and powerful — and as an undead dragon,

extremely lethal.

As he created ghoul followers, Darrakh and the priest learned that the form of ghoul fever the dragon carried was magically strengthened. Darrakh has always claimed he bathed in the River Styx and struck a bargain with Charon the boatman. The terms seemed to be that to return to the mortal world, he would raise up a race of followers of the Death God. That story is among the secret lore of the Imperial priesthoods. It's truth depends on what one thinks of the veracity of the undead and the trustworthiness of dragons. Most are sure it's sheer puffery.

Darrakh himself manipulates his ghoul followers shamelessly, both those of the Death God (whom he seems to regard fondly) and those of the Hunger God (who seem to annoy him). The noble ghouls who know of him serve him out of fear; the priests do so out of joyous devotion. The ghoul-dragon could play merry havoc with the empire's holdings if it were ever provoked.

The majority of the Empire's population, though, think of Darrakh as a legendary figure long dead, a demi-god rather than a living presence. He may be both; some believe he dwells near the gates to the underworld because it is a good place to acquire divine power.

Darrakh, Father of Ghouls

Darrakh is an eyeless, heavy-winged dragon with many projecting spines and a hide of dark brown, much the shade of many cavern walls. He speaks with a whispering menace. Darrakh's vestigial wings serve as an additional set of legs, and his narrow snout can poke into narrow passages which his tongue scours free of bats and edible vermin.

Darrakh's cavern is a place of echoes and darkness, so black that no living creature's eyes have ever seen it. Liches, ghouls, and others visitors attest to the layered bones and coins that cover the floor. More than 100,000 bats who live there, a swarming group who act as his sacred animals and familiars. All others stumble through it very carefully, and are happy to walk out alive.

Darrakh, Adult Darakhul Cave Dragon CR 18

NE Large Darakhul Undead

Aura darkness, fear DC 27

Init +6 (+4 Imp Init, +2 Dex); **Senses** blindsense 120 ft, Listen +32, Spot +32

Languages Darakhul, Derro, Draconic, Infernal, Undercommon

AC 44 (-1 size, +2 Dex, +29 natural, +4 deflection), touch 15, flat-footed 31

hp 186 (24d12+30 HD); **DR** 10/magic and daylight

Immune sonic, acid

Fort +14 **Ref** +16 **Will** +20; **SR** 18

Speed 40 ft. (8 squares), burrow 20 feet

Melee +43 bite (4d6+24+1d4 Con from Devour*) and +43/+43 claws (2d6+8+paralysis) and +43/+43 wing (1d8+8) and +43 tail (2d6+8)

Space 10 ft **Reach** 5 ft (10 ft with bite)

Base Atk +24; **Grp** +44

Spell-Like Abilities (CL 7) at will – *darkness*, *deeper darkness*

Special Atk breath weapon 12d6 (DC 33), spells

Abilities Str 42, Dex 14, Con —, Int 24, Wis 21, Cha 27

SQ blindsense 120', immune to sonic and acid, darkness aura, earth glide, ruff spikes, +4 turn resistance, paralysis, darakhul fever, DR 10/magic and daylight

Weakness daylight

Feats Cleave, Devour* [Monster], Epic Toughness, Great Cleave, Improved Bull Rush, Improved Initiative, Improved Multiattack [Monster], Improved Natural Attack (bite), Iron Will [b], Multiattack [b], Power Attack, Track [b]

Skills Appraise +34, Bluff +35, Climb +24, Concentration +27, Intimidate +43, Listen +32, Move Silently +29, Knowledge (Arcana) +34, Knowledge (Dungeoneering) +25, Knowledge (Religion) +34, Search +34, Sense Motive +32, Spellcraft +28, Spot +32, Survival +32

Breath Weapon (Su): Darrakh breathes two types of breath weapon, a cone of pure black poison whose toxic stew of minerals burns and destroys any target, and a line of invisible sonic energy bolt that stuns foes. Creatures within the poisonous cone must succeed on a DC 33 Fortitude save or suffer 1d8+3 initial and 1d4+3 secondary Strength damage. The sonic line blast causes 12d6 sonic damage and stuns all those it strikes for 1 round if the victim fails a DC 33 Reflex save.

Deeper Darkness (Sp): Darrakh can cast *deeper darkness* 3 times per day.

Spells: An Adult cave dragon casts spells as a divine

caster of 7th level. Its preferred combat spells are *poison* and *armor of darkness* (from D&DG and in the Hypertext SRD). Its domains are Knowledge and Darkness.

Darkness and Deeper Darkness (Sp): Darrakh can cast *darkness* and *deeper darkness* 3 times per day.

Ruff Spikes (Ex): As a free action, a cave dragon can block movement using its many feelers and spikes within 5 feet of its body. This includes attempts to withdraw, flank, or spring attack.

Blackness Aura (Ex): Darrakh can generate an aura of darkness with a 60-foot diameter. This is always centered on the dragon itself and prevents normal vision, darkvision, and lifesense from working. Blindsense still functions normally. Light spells cast into the area must overcome the dragon's SR +4, or they fail.

Earth Glide (Su): A cave dragon can glide through stone, dirt, or almost any other sort of earth except metal as easily as a fish swims through water. Its burrowing leaves behind no tunnel or hole, nor does it create any ripple or other signs of its presence. A *move earth* spell cast on an area containing a burrowing cave dragon flings the dragon back 30 feet, stunning the creature for 1 round unless it succeeds on a DC 15 Fortitude save.

Darakhul Fever (Su): Magical disease—bite, Fortitude DC 30, incubation period 1 hour, damage 1d6 Con and 1d3 Dex. Requires a DC 16 level check to cure magically. A creature which dies while infected with darakhul fever may become a more powerful form of ghoul (see *Empire of the Ghouls* for details).

Paralysis (Ex): Those hit by Darrakh's natural weapons must make a Fortitude save (DC 30) or be paralyzed for 1d4+1 rounds. Elves are immune to this paralysis.

Turn Resistance (Ex): Darrakh has turn resistance +4.

Damage Reduction (Ex): Darrakh has DR 10/magic and daylight.

Weakness: Darrakh is vulnerable to daylight and suffers a -4 penalty to attack and saving throws when in full daylight. Even a *daylight* spell inflicts a -2 penalty.

Skills: Darakhul have a +8 racial bonus on Climb, Intimidate, and Knowledge (Dungeoneering) checks.



New Feat: Devour [Monster]

Prerequisite: Corporeal undead, Str 13

Benefit: Whenever you successfully damage your opponent with a bite attack, they must make a Fortitude save (DC 10 + half their HD + their Strength bonus) or suffer an additional 1d4 Con damage.

Special: Creatures immune to critical hits are immune to this feat. If you have the Eater of the Dead feat, you regain 1d8+5 lost hit points when your victim suffers Con damage.



Griffon Towers of the Margreve

Forests, Hunters, and Miners

by Wolfgang Baur



The city of Zobeck is defined by its river, the great forests, and the wide moors to its north. Long the private property of House Stross, the Margreve Forest retains a certain hushed atmosphere of wild decay and noble privilege. Travellers go quietly through the deepest woods, seeking to avoid throat-slitting bandits, howling barghests, and even kobolds bitterly defending their secret mines.

At the same time, the untamed regions of the Margreve are under assault by Zobeck's lust for wealth. The forest provides the timber that drives its barges, fuels its smithies, and braces its kobold silver mines. The noise of kobold miners, timber-cutters, and merchants rumbling along the great northern road grows each year. Silence returns only in winter.

The northern road is the only passable route to the rich cities of the Red Queen and the undead princes of Morgau and Doresh, not to mention the Bemmean magocracy. The road is the second source of wealth for the city; connecting that land route with the river route makes Zobeck a fortune as a trade center. Naturally, the road is defended by castles and towers.

The most famous of these are the dozen Griffon Towers. Eight of them are on the road itself; others guard hunting lodges, mines, or powerful wellsprings of magic. Most people assume that they got their name from the griffon blazons carved in their walls, but that is merely the mark of the Stross border guards. The towers themselves have a much closer connection to the animals, as their stables, roosts, and shelters.

House Stross built the towers for its griffon riders, an elite company of couriers and shock cavalry. The parsimonious council of the Free City has done away with that tradition in recent years.

Now the Margreve griffons run wild, and they come in both black and speckled varieties. Knowing the difference is important. The black griffons are more aggressive and very fond of horseflesh; some claim they are faerie steeds. The speckled ones are shy, tameable, and can serve as animal companions to suitable heroes.

Griffons for Adventurers

With griffon eggs for the taking, adventurers often wander the Margreve, sure they can make their fortune. These expeditions rarely end well.

The problems are severalfold. In a vast forest, landmarks attract attention, so the towers are always inhabited by men or monsters. The towers are more than 50 feet tall, and half that wide. Most have no easy way up; their wooden staircases are long since rotted or burnt away.

The griffons themselves are vigilant about who or what may approach a tower during nesting season. The merchants who travel the great northern road know this all too well, and many refuse to travel there in spring. Griffon attacks are common; pikes are the preferred weapons to keep them at bay.

Tower Encounters

Here are three encounters for PCs exploring a Griffon Tower in the Margreve.

1. Easy Money. An abandoned tower

contains a treasure cached here by adventurers who never returned. Unfortunately, centaur bandits have discovered this particular tower and claimed its goods for themselves. Their leader, Radu Voinod, is using the money to buy kegs of ale from the kobold miners near Shadowcrag to reward his followers.

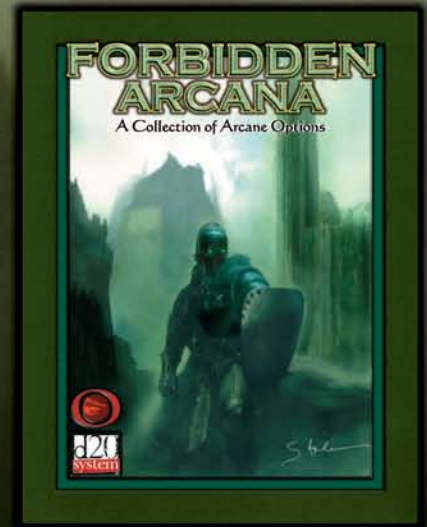
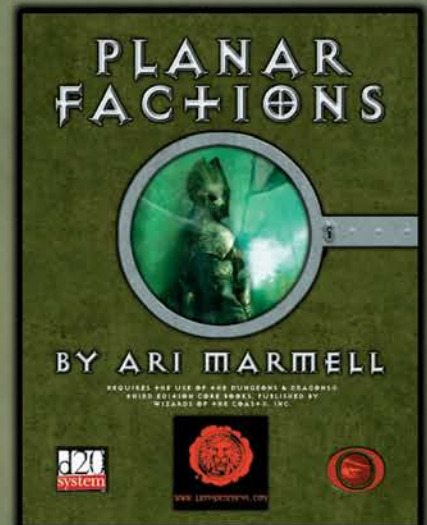
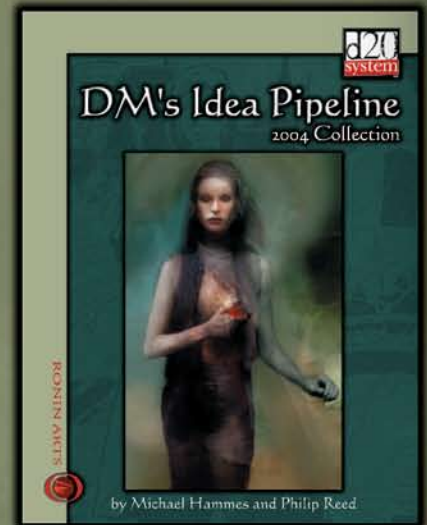
If the party takes some of the cash, the centaurs have excellent tracking and ambushing skills, and will try to cut off their escape at several points in the forest.

2. Hunting Party. Though the forest is dangerous and the undergrowth is very thick, a few young, rich and stupid sons of the Zobeck merchant houses always try to prove themselves by hunting Margreve deer, boar, or the fabled White Hart. To guide them on these hunts, they usually hire a ranger, barbarian, or druid adventurer.

Once the young hunters set out, they make a mess of things and often lose a horse to a boar attack. In the worst case, a hunting party may be led astray by the shadow fey, who resent this poaching on their lands. The moment of truth comes when arrows shot to kill a deer are returned with interest by the fey folk.

3. The Margreve Witch. Stories tell of a hag of the greenwood who helps travellers caught in rainstorms or stuck in the moors and mires of the wetter sections of the road. This help usually involves bringing them to her modest hut and feeding them a hot meal, while pleading for help against the "kobold bandits" who plague her life as an herbalist. In fact, she is quite familiar with monkshood, hemlock, and other poisons, and usually attempts to kill one or more of her guests during the night.

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