

ROBIN D. LAWS

Art and Murder

SERIES PITCH OF THE MONTH



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Art and Murder

—Robin D. Laws

Nutshell

In a post-scarcity economy, there remain only two routes to status: art and murder. As guardians of the Great Museum, you struggle to protect the world's cultural patrimony from outside marauders—and your own ambitions.

Characters

You play members and associates of the Terradelta clan, who for centuries have ruled the hallways of the Great Museum, repository of humankind's key works of art, as a personal fiefdom. Through decades of violent strife, its role as a fortress has gone from metaphorical to actual. Today's Terradelta is as likely to be expert in anti-artillery field harmonics as art conservation.

- Family matriarch/patriarch, who dimly remembers what the world was like before the quest for status drove it past the brink of madness. No matter how great the risk, you insist that the museum's original mission be upheld, and outsiders allowed in to view the great works the Terradeltas have sworn above all else to protect.
- De facto family leader, who runs the day-to-day of the museum and cares less for ancient promises than the practical survival of its works. Of the middle generation.
- Hot shot scion, who secretly would rather be out grabbing glory in the fame wars than monitoring humidity levels in the Impressionist wing.
- Withdrawn adolescent, in love with the museum's art and what it represents. A gentle soul unprepared for the dangers of the outside world.
- Master of arms. Grizzled bad-ass who exemplifies martial values—including a

hatred of war.

- Throwback, an ancestor from the utopian epoch, recently awakened when your cryostasis art installation malfunctioned.
- Artist, more interested in sculpting your own grotesque works than protecting relics of the past. You believe that your corpse-towers belong side by side with the Michelangelos and the Rodins, but so far your relatives beg to differ.
- Spouse, who married into the clan not so long ago and has yet to fully understand it.
- New love to a younger family member. Your budding romance has earned you a spot in the fortress, but not the trust of the other Terradeltas.
- Retainer: no one has to serve anyone anymore, but you assist the family because you believe in the collection. Maybe you even believe in them.
- Disregarded visionary with a plan to lift humanity from the madness of abundance. Before you can convince the world, you have to win over your own family.

Setting

As the 32nd century dawns, material want has become a distant memory. Unlimited free energy has been a staple of life on Earth for three centuries. Four generations ago, technicians perfected replication technology, allowing anyone to dial up any physical object on voice command. You can eat anything you want at any time. Every intoxicant, from the classic to the custom-designed, awaits you as soon as you wish for it. When your liver, esophagus, or veins wear out, you simply turn the replication scanner on yourself and have



it regrow the worn-out body parts. No-muss, instant self-surgery allows you to reshape your body on demand. When a new face becomes fashionable, you simply program it on, endure a brief pins and needles sensation, and bingo—you're still as stunningly beautiful as everyone else on the planet, but in a whole new way. Until that gets boring, and you switch to another.

In boredom lay the downfall of the utopian epoch. With the need for economic activity set aside, any profession that wasn't also a vocation fell by the wayside. For several generations humanity wallowed in its freedom from want. Despite attempts to neurologically expunge it, the urge to explore, to dominate, and to erect and maintain hierarchies remained hardwired in the human mind.

When anyone could rewrite themselves to a perfect physique, sporting events lost their luster. With nothing left to promise people, democratic political power drained of prestige.

Only taste remained as a marker between the high and the lowly. If you could make a new face that the world's fashionable people all wanted on their skulls, you became the toast of every party. For a while, at least. If you kept doing it, you became a superstar.

Likewise for musicians, painters, and installation artists. The creative spark couldn't be copied. You either had it, and stood at the top of the heap, spotted when others had it and bathed in their reflected glory, or stood revealed as a hopeless clod, doomed to follow as others led.

For another generation the celebration of creativity, however decadent, remained peaceful. Then came the murder artists, who revived the long-forgotten pathology of serial killing as a bracingly terrifying performance art. You could be inwardly beautiful, or you could stalk and slay the inwardly beautiful. Either way, celebrity and status accrued.

The carefully planned and executed slaughters of the first generation of murder artists broadened in scope, becoming mass killings and then martial skirmishes. A new breed of military artist arose, waging battles not to control territory or resources, but for maximum aesthetic impact. The grander the thing your fighting cadre destroyed, the more space you earned in the history chronicles.

The name of Khessik Dimitro, the man who vaporized the Louvre will always be listed in the annals alongside the artists whose works he turned to powder.

After this and like incidents, works were moved to the world's safest institutions. Gradually the Grand Museum, constructed in the 27th century on a desolate crag by an eccentric tredecillionaire, became the obvious repository for Earth's most treasured surviving works. The Terradeltas, descendants of the museum's first curators, took on the task of installing the works and increasing the building's fortifications.

According to the museum's charter, it must remain open to public viewing at least one day a month. The Terradeltas control tickets through a lottery system. They claim that it's not rigged but manage to mostly exclude the worst threats to the collection.

Without a social whirl to reflect it, status means nothing. The world's most acclaimed creators and sadistic murderers rub shoulders in a web of parties. The fear of exclusion from A-lists constrains marauders and performance torturers to some degree. But then a party without a few flamboyant slayers loses its edge, prompting the celebrated to elevate new hosts, willing to play footsie with the entertainingly unhinged.

In a world of total abundance, do people still have children? Are they seen as one of the few outlets for genuine fulfillment, or a vexing distraction from the pursuit of pleasure? You can't hire help any more, so what's the point of a society where everyone enjoys untold wealth if they still have to change diapers? If your offspring can be murdered in the name of art, are they no longer worth the heartbreak?

How settled is the globe in the 32nd century? With food and other resources no longer a limiting factor, is the world a densely populated conurbation? Or have art wars culled the population, leaving a plummeting birth rate to do the rest of the job of reducing Earth's population to a fraction of its size in previous eras?

Does cellular replication confer practical immortality for those who can avoid death by unnatural causes. Does it merely extend

the appearance of youth without significantly increasing lifespan? Or does each use of the reshaping technology actually shorten life expectancy?

Themes

The GM calls the opening episode theme, **Soiree at the Edge of the World**, in which the family prepares, with varying degrees of reluctance, to host a party in the museum's grand ballroom. It introduces the setting's contrast of abundance and boundary-pushing doom. Who does the family see fit to invite to this hot-ticket event? Leaving out all the marauders will enrage them, perhaps provoking an attack on the museum. Inviting too many gives them a chance to case the joint.

- **Pecking Order:** How does the family's unarticulated ranking system reflect broader society's insane pursuit of status?
- **I Reject Your Breast:** Scandalous events at an art party rocket a cast member to sudden fame. Is notoriety a blessing or a trap?
- **Spreading Wings:** A member of the younger generation gets the chance to leave the Great Museum for a new opportunity. Does the family close ranks to keep their future leader in the fold?
- **The Tyranny of Age:** The embattled museum becomes a metaphor for the crumbling body of an aged cast member.
- **The Fire of Youth:** How can the new generation learn how to protect the place, if the old guard won't grant them any authority or autonomy?
- **A Perfect Day:** The family clears its schedules for one moment of tranquil togetherness. How long before somebody ruins everything?
- **Impermanence:** Despite all attempts at preservation, the essential neon sculpture of the 20th century is falling into irreversible disrepair. Do you pass off a replicated version as the original, label the replacement as a copy, or let it fade from memory altogether?

Tightening the Screws

- A suicidal member of the family's social circle agrees to complicity in her own murder, which is to occur in spectacular fashion in front of Botticelli's *Primavera*. Can you convince her to fight for life? If not, can you protect the precious panel from blood spatter?
- A cast member learns that one of the family's most vexing rivals has been targeted for art murder. Do you let it happen? If the plot goes sideways, do you intervene to put it back on track?
- A key component of the collection goes missing. How far has the thief taken it, and how can it be recovered?
- An obscure clause of the museum's charter seems to demand a change in leadership. Does the family free itself from the crush of responsibility? Or do they cover up a mere ancient legalism that would surely leave the collection open to pillage?
- The art murderer of a cast member's loved one, struck by the sublimity of a zen portrait, undergoes an epiphany and renounces violent art. She dismisses her bodyguard of loyal groupies and seeks forgiveness from the cast. Do they grant it? Do they spot the dangers inherent in being around her when word of her unprotected state reaches relatives of her past victims?
- An art murderer announces that one canapé just now served at a reception in progress has been poisoned. He has the antidote and will dole it out if any attendee at the soiree can compose a single original thought. Which of the cast tries to think such a thought? Which tries to use the time to get the antidote by other means?
- Two generals of marauder units offer to assist the family in luring the other into a trap. Can you betray both of them in one go, or is it better to keep a safe distance from their schemes?
- The shielding unit on the Pergamon blows, leaving its key works vulnerable. In the scramble to claim a share of their treasures, how do the Terradeltas make sure the best of them go to the Great Museum?
- You find a replicated copy of a cast

member, devoid of sapience but otherwise anatomically identical, scavenging in the museum's topiary courtyard. On medical examination, it shows signs of sexual

abuse. Do you protect the creature? Put it down? Do you seek out the replicator and take preemptive action against its abuser?

Names

Names of the 32nd century art circuit tend toward the florid and dramatic, suggesting a thousand years of cosmopolitanism blurring ancient national boundaries. Gender distinctions between names have lost their tang; nearly any first name could belong to a man, a woman, or a new gender category brought into being through body resculpting.

Most PCs will be Terradeltas, so given names outnumber surnames.

Given Names

Avta
Baccatus
Dato
Elo
Fericar
Glabra
Glamifer
Hezmiram
Holmiroad
Iyonoster
Joju
Ketravin
Khandil
Kimir
Logaril
Mordifent
Mziandis
Ochi

Rabem
Rabient
Spanei
Tenga
Thogos
Verik
Zaqar
Zenna

Surnames

Clade
Gentian
Gwelnicon
Laurel
Leothrix
Olbspawn
Otara
Passiflora
Peryton
Scalopus
Shembeyn
Tavares
Terask
Tristan