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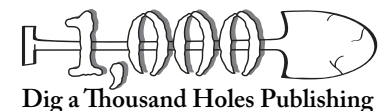
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THE LONG ROAD AHEAD

Music to begin an adventure with—not the sort you hear during a struggle high on a cliff edge or while creeping through an ancient, trap-laden temple; but the sort you hear as the would-be adventurer takes those first tentative strides toward the horizon and into their destiny—should contain a note or two of melancholy. The hint of a bittersweet goodbye. Because in the beginning of all adventures lurks the inevitable death of the Way Things Once Were.

There is no call to grieve this death. The Way Things Once Were perishes with alarming frequency. All part of the ceaseless march of time. And yet, several years ago, a chance re-reading of Fritz Leiber's *Swords and Deviltry* sent me digging through used book stores for the adventure fiction that figured so prominently in my youth. I was, I thought, deep in the throes of nostalgia—a clear lamentation of the death of Way Things Once Were.

However, my voracious appetite would not be sated by merely re-consuming my teenage library. I supped on all the genre would offer up. There was a nourishment in sword and sorcery that I craved perhaps even more now as an adult than I ever did as a teen. It fuelled all manner of schemes

and set me on this very path. This was more than just a wallowing in the past. That bittersweetness I had mistaken for nostalgia was not a looking back, but the swell of an orchestra as I peered towards the Way Things Might Become, towards *Worlds Without Master*.

And now the adventure that began with a wistful recollection a bygone time is well and truly upon us. The might of the Patron Horde has slain the Way Things Once Were and this first issue draws us ever nearer to that horizon. Within you will find several beginnings, more than a little death, and perhaps a hint of a greater destiny.

Join me on this restless quest as we ride against brutal violence and vile sorceries into unknown worlds.

Your Companion,
Epidiah Ravachol
Epidiah Ravachol



CONTENTS

IN SSEE SEAT: THE CANNIBAL QUEEN	2
A tale by Vincent Baker.	
<i>"It was a disreputable land, by word a land of murderous bandit cannibals, and he had hoped to pass by it high overhead. Night was coming, and as well a fast-moving storm."</i>	
STRANGE BIREME	6
A tale by Epidiah Ravachol.	
<i>"It should have risen an hour ago along with the rest of the wildcat. This brings dark mischief."</i>	
ENTER THE AVENGER	12
A game by Rafu.	
<i>"...the ruins of old Paristhecora, where, overshadowed by the crumbling remnants of cyclopean architectures, the ghosts appear livelier than the living."</i>	
OH, THE BEATING DRUM	17
A comic by Bryant Paul Johnson.	
<i>"We've been killing lizardmen for, like, three days now."</i>	
THREE DOZEN WONDROUS SIGHTS	19
A miscellany by Epidiah Ravachol.	
THE CONTRIBUTORS	20
THE REALMS	20

IN SSEF SEAT: THE CANNIBAL QUEEN

A tale by D. Vincent Baker

Illustrated by Storn Cook

So it was that four sailors hove Jakko Orange up to their shoulders and tipped him out over the ship's side. He fell—they must have supposed—to his death, but that he did not do so would never come to trouble them. The ship passed on, full-sailed in the lowering wild blue-plum sky.

A winged creature came to visit Jakko Orange in his fall. It was in form a young boy, with the wide splayed wings of a buzzard. These wings it folded along its sides so that it could keep pace with his prodigious descent. It regarded him with calm blue eyes.

“If it is so that you can be of service to me,” said Jakko Orange, rushing terribly groundward, “it might be so that I can be of service to you in turn, on some distant day.”

The creature croaked its agreement. It caught hold of Jakko Orange's surcoat with one hand, in what seemed no more than a child's grip, and by spreading its wings slowed his fall. It was an improbable feat, but by some twitching of Jakko Orange's sorcerer's sense he judged the creature capable of others perhaps even more improbable.

The creature delivered Jakko Orange safely to the earth. It alit beside him, its wings folded again at its side. It bowed solemnly, looked up for a moment into Jakko Orange's face with its wide blue eyes, as if to recall him to their bargain, and made its departure.

Jakko Orange was in the land of Ssef Seat. He stood on a road of yellow-golden sand, over-towered all around by red-golden cliffs, spires and murs and formations less sensible, all carved by the natural



action of ancient waters from the desert sandstone. It was a disreputable land, by word a land of murderous bandit cannibals, and he had hoped to pass by it high overhead. Night was coming, and as well a fast-moving storm.

Soon both were well underway, and Jakko Orange had found a company of murderous bandit cannibals with whom to share dinner and shelter. Their queen (for the murderous bandit cannibal companies of Ssef Seat style themselves kingdoms, though each number perhaps only a hundred souls, and ape the manners of more civilized nations) awarded him the seat of honor at her right hand, and shared her bowl with him. They ate a stew of roots and greens cooked in a crude and smoky beer, with a sort of bread or cracker of parched legumes, and for savor a paste of awful salty pungency made of fermented arthropods. In all there was no sign of the flesh of their fallen enemies. Outside, lightning flew in ceaseless arcs and sheets, so that the night was almost day, and the thunder was a continuous cracking roar. The rain pounded down.

While they ate, Jakko Orange made a polite study of his hostess. She had a manner that intrigued him but did not delight him, did not indeed, and he thought it best to understand her as well as he was able.

At first he took her to be a widow, but then that was certainly so. She was likely a widow several times over. Then he supposed her to be a mother who had seen her children die, and watched her for gestures of grief; but while he did note some, they were intermixed with a kind of gleeful brashness he found unnerving. Perhaps she was a murderer of children? He considered the child who filled their bowl, and the fathers and mothers present in her

host, and frowned thoughtfully. They held her in the regard befitting a murderous bandit cannibal queen, an awe and moral terror which did not allow more nuanced expression. Jakko Orange did not definitely understand her.

At last the cannibal queen signaled that the meal was finished.

“Jakko Orange, we will have entertainment,” she said. She spoke her words with careful intention, as it was her pride to consider herself learned, and to speak in the language of civility. He thought to detect in her tone, however, a boast, a plea, a provocation: Do not dare, she seemed to say, do not dare to be bored by me.

He resolved at once to be as bored as he was able.

By her jugglers, he was bored, though they juggled live glowing coals and the smell of their scorched skin reached him. By her champions, he was bored, though the winner was allowed to carve out the eye of the loser. As he hoped, the cannibal queen grew both more frustrated and more eager. She was holding something marvelous and terrible in reserve, and if he was not diverted by these more common entertainments, she would reveal it to him. So when she brought out three handsome youths and her assembled company taunted them into erotic antics, he yawned apologetically behind his hand. When she displayed to him a succession of skulls, each smaller than the one before, belonging



to her enemy and the family of her enemy, he regarded them with polite and unrepulsed indifference. When her cautered priest fell into fits and ate filth and proclaimed improbable futures, he made conversation with her, ignoring it even unto its most vulgar escapades.

The cautered priest rolled in the fire, screaming and calling out his ecstasies. Outside the storm had only intensified. The children in the cannibal company were howling with terror or laughter. The cannibal queen's musicians had never yet lulled in their appalling keening. And the cannibal queen brought silence to all with a tip of her head. Even the thunder in that moment only rumbled.

"We will see the monster," she said.

Six of her most courageous and most murderous bandit cannibals brought the monster out. They carried it in a palanquin-cage made of lashed bones,

each bone from greatest to least scratched with prayers of protection or blasphemy. The monster sat within calmly. It was a filthy urchin, small, naked except for a stinking drapery of human hide. Its bearers set it near the groaning cautered priest. They treated it with a kind of terrified cruelty, darting forward to jab it with spikes through the bars of its carriage and fleeing again, until its blood flowed.

It gazed at Jakko Orange with wide blue eyes, possessed of a vast patience, unprovoked by its attackers. At his side the cannibal queen was not exhilarated by its appearance, despite her fierce grin, but shrank back a fraction, turned her body a fraction away.

For his part, though he did not understand any of this matter with certainty, he understood his own heart and will. He stood.

"Madame Queen," he said, "I thank you for your hospitality, and perhaps I will entertain you now."

He stepped past the shrinking bandit cannibals with their bloody spikes. He stepped over the groaning, disfigured, smoking form of the cautered priest. He stood over the monster in its cage of bones. He set one hand on the cage, and the cannibal company as one took in its breath. He watched the monster consider whether to kill him, tear him, break him, eat him, but it was only its habit to consider it. Both he and it knew that it would not.

Jakko Orange said a word. It was a word he had stolen from the lips of a he-devil long ago, as it lay in debauched repose in the house in which Jakko Orange had been enslaved as a child. It was the second sorcery he had ever learned. In the morning the he-devil had been infuriated to discover it stolen, and visited terrible misfortunes upon that house, but by then Jakko Orange had fled. He had only heard of the atrocities it committed later, and felt a little remorse, a little relief that the house no longer stood.

In answer to his word, each binding of the cage, water-tightened sinew, hard as the bones, separately hissed and slacked. The cage slumped and slid; bones loosed, unbound, and then fell with a clatter into utter disarray. The monster stood up amid the heaped bones, smiling its calm smile, free.

The cannibal queen sat frozen, appalled, and wide-eyed. The monster deliberated, and took up a bone, a long thigh bone with its heavy knob at one end.

Both the night and the storm passed away in their inevitable course. In the morning, Jakko Orange and the monster stood side by side under the sun.

Unsung Tales



If you're like me, then reading all of this fantastic fiction has set your mind spinning. For me, the best part of *Sword and Sorcery* is the feeling of wonder and adventure that comes from a world that is vast and full of mysteries, and the casual hubris of those that try to make their way in the midst of it all.

I'm so captivated by this feeling that it led me to write a game. It's a card-based RPG that is centered around helping you and your friends create an emergent world that is as full of mysteries as the worlds in this magazine.

It's currently in an open beta, and I'm giving away free copies of the physical cards to people who are willing to give it a try. I hope you'll be one of them!

<http://www.unsungtales.com>



The landscape was changed. The red-golden cliffs and spires still stood, of course, but the water of the storm had turned all the sands of Ssef Seat into slurry and redistributed them wherever it chose. The yellow-golden road wandered a different way than it had. Where the roots of the stone towers had been buried before, now they were revealed, and where they had been exposed before, now they were buried.

Waiting in the shade of a high overhang was the buzzard-winged boy. It dropped lightly to ground and approached them. It took the monster's hands without minding once that they were caked thickly with every kind of gore. Jakko Orange drew away to allow them their privacy, and did not watch what passed between them, or listen to the words they said to one another. At last he saw the buzzard-winged boy depart, black-winged against the vivid blue morning sky, and at the same time heard the monster step up behind him.

"He was my brother," the monster said. "Our mother killed him long ago. Now he goes to find out what peace there can be for him. I choose to stay here, alive. You have set me free. May I walk with you?"

"Who are you?"

"I do not know my name."

"I will call you Tam-tam, as though you were only a little girl. I don't choose to remember you as you were last night, or what you did. You will pretend to be my niece and when you choose to leave me I will let you go. Yes?"

Tam-tam nodded solemnly.

So it was that Jakko Orange and Tam-tam walked together on foot through the land of Ssef Seat, and while the scouts and outwatchers of other murderous bandit cannibal kingdoms saw them coming, none interfered with them.



STRANGE BIREME

A tale by Epidiah Ravachol

Illustrated by Ed Heil

Seven millennia ago, a cataclysm fell from the firmament and slid into a ragged, northern shoreline, shattering cliffs, searing the sea, and burning a barren apron across that high land. In its wake it left a massive cavern gaping at the sea—wide enough to ride fifty horses in abreast and twice as tall. As the years rolled forward, smaller alcoves formed all along the cave walls as softer rock exposed to the ocean and weather eroded away. And a long pebbled beach stretched from beneath the shelter of the cave ceiling to where the ocean met a mur of cliffs.

Thirteen centuries ago, the ancestors of People of the Cliff fled to this broken land and settled their small tribe in this giant seaside cave, all but hidden from the world.

Seventeen years ago, Meeno was born to a seawoman whose galley spent a long harbor among the People of the Cliff and who returned five days after his birth to leave the child with his father.

Nineteen days ago, in the Pleasure Halls of the Vernal Lords far to the west, a drunk Manyara, who was employed as a bodyguard to a distant cousin of the Lords who spent his days locked in palace orgies, first met Snorri, who was bound, naked and presented as an execution for the Lords' entertainment. Each measured a doomed destiny in the other's eyes and within the breadth of a glance they sealed a wordless pact. Manyara slew the guards and armed Snorri. Together they plundered the halls until driven out three days later by a legion bivouacked nearby. They were pursued across the



scarred hills as they fled towards the star-shattered coast.

Twenty-three hours ago, the pair—after losing all they had stolen in an incident involving the hunting party of a certain exiled countess and her sorcerous consul—stumbled upon the People of the Cliff and their hidden shore. Knowing that the men who sought them believed the torn land ended in a brutal collision with the sea and held no refuge, they fell into welcoming arms and a long-needed slumber.

It was on this beach hidden from the world to the west by gargantuan cavern where fair-bearded Snorri now sulked in early twilight. He stared at a tall, narrow arc of the eastern sky, boxed on three sides by rock and on the fourth by sea. The rest of night's shimmering dome was unobservable from this damp and foamy vantage far out on the shingle. It was Snorri's opinion that this alone was reason enough to barter his spear and Manyara's ample swordarm for passage on the trade galley that now harbored in the shadow of the cliffs.

Manyara was, as would become their habit, of a different mind. She warmed herself by the cliff-fires after a long afternoon of diving with young, one-armed Meeno. Though the two shared no language, there was not much else they had not shared since the sun flooded the cavern earlier that morning. All the People of the Cliff welcomed Manyara and Snorri, as it was considered an uncommon boon for the People of the Horizon to descend upon them by any route other than the vast eastern sea. But Meeno took special interest in Manyara. Possessing something of his mother's soul, the young diver listened well to the great distances that clung to

Manyara's voice and in the echo of her laughter along the cave walls. Here, in this wayfaring warrior, his budding wanderlust was made flesh.

The two—communicating largely through touch and gesture, for Manyara's tongue was not yet practiced in Meeno's speech—were sharing jokes over a feast of oysters and fish when Snorri climbed out of the tide and into their nook, one of hundreds of shallow caves that pockmarked the cliffs.

"You are wet, Snorri."

"And you, observant," Snorri said, hovering over their fire.

"And you, gloomy."

"There are reasons to be." Snorri glanced over his shoulder to the purple strip of night peering through the gap in the cliff walls.

Meeno could feel Manyara's thews coil beneath her flesh, though she remained lounging against his armless side. Following her gaze, he peered out across the sea, but could not find reason for alarm.

"What threatens?" Manyara asked.

Snorri shook his head, shivered and returned his attention to the warmth of the fire, "There is not enough sky to tell, but I read an ill message in the stars tonight. Venkares, the azure heart of the Celestial Lynx, does not show. It should have risen an hour ago along with the rest of the wildcat. This brings dark mischief."

Manyara cast her head back in a low, throaty laugh, causing Meeno to startle, "This troubles you? For the first time since I found you dragged before the Vernal Lords to be executed for their arousal, we

are among a welcoming people with food and drink and finer yet pleasures. And a bashful star has you down? Tell me, Snorri, what you lack, and with the morning sun we will set out to make dark mischief on whatever hands hold it, so that we may sate the sky's prophecy and your melancholy in a single blow."

"We should sail with yonder galley upon the morn."

Manyara laughed, "I doubt they sail so soon."

The jagged folds of the coastline were such that the night fires of the People of the Cliff could be seen far out to sea but only along the briefest of latitudes. They existed only as rumor to most sailors, but it was the custom of the People to invite those fortunate few who happened upon their haven into their cliffside homes to share bed and bounty. It was a rare sailor who heard the rumors and did not spend their nights with a weathered eye out for a twinkle on the shore. And rarer still the crew in a hurry to leave the port's embrace once those alluring fires were sighted.

Captain Vrucus was no rare sailor. Out on the stony beach, still groggy from the night's long adventures, he was making himself a breakfast of smoked fish and goat butter when Snorri emerged from the fog and made his case for Manyara and his immediate passage aboard *The Anraruvian's Shame*. The captain employed every polite excuse for his remaining in port a day or two more. The wind shifts a little too much, the sun rises a bit too rosy, the seas are perhaps too calm, his crew too worn out by the vigorous locals, brigands sail too far north in this weather, raiders sail too far south, if his cargo arrived at its destination too swiftly he could not demand a price high enough to reimburse his crew.

Snorri, for his part, listen politely to each objection before proclaiming Vrucus a liar or a coward, and either way unfit to captain, and had he thought *The Anraruvian's Shame* at all seaworthy, he would relieve Vrucus of the vessel that very morning. But as she was plainly as shabby as her captain, Snorri assured him that he would simply wait until a better ship came along. Captain Vrucus promised that if he saw any merit to Snorri's threat, and if this shore possessed a tree with limb strong enough to hold his fat head, he would have had Snorri hanged for piracy long before.

Snorri turned heel and marched across the shingle into the mist. Moments later he returned with a stout fishing spear in hand. Vrucus near fled at the sight. "Gather your rope," Snorri said with a wink before loosing the spear at the galley silhouetted against the rising sun, burying it half through the mast, "there sprouts such a tree."

Vrucus, unable to meet Snorri's violet eyes, mumbled something about not having rope to spare, and left to busy himself beyond the Northerner's glare.

Meeno awoke to the chill left by Manyara's absence. Wiping the sleep from his eyes, he caught but a glance of her prodigious frame in mail and with shield at cave's edge before she slipped into the sunlit fog. With practiced feet, she swept silently across the pebbled beach to where Snorri helped himself to the captain's breakfast. Vrucus, having abandoned the meal, was bringing discipline down upon his crew. *The Anraruvian's Shame* was to weigh anchor within the hour.

Manyara crouched to a knee and grabbed strip of fish flesh, "So we sail this morning after all?"

"I doubt they would have us."

Manyara smirked, "Poets make the worst hagglers. So we must remain in this paradise and your melancholy."

"Perhaps not," Snorri pointed to a single point of dazzling light on the horizon, "Perhaps another ship approaches."

"One whose deck lantern shines so distinctly in the sun?"

"Or more sharply reflects its rays."

Meeno sprinted up to them, planted a couple of two-pronged fishing spears in the shingle, and gazed out into the orange-gray fog, shielding his eyes with his now free hand. When his eyes fell upon the same bright spot an anxiousness grew on him. Proffering a spear to Manyara, he nodded to the water.

Snorri said, "Take care to guard your limbs from whatever lurks beneath." Among his people, Meeno was not alone in missing an arm or a leg. Manyara, who in her travels had witnessed far stranger traits in far stranger peoples, thought nothing of it. But Snorri held to his theory that some beast from the primordial depths had developed a taste for human limb.

Manyara handed Snorri her shield, "I am what lurks beneath," she said, before heaving off her mail and chasing after Meeno into the drink.

After sunset, Snorri found himself in much better spirits despite having spent the majority of the day carefully studying the barely perceptible approach of the will-o-wisp, which now floated on the dark evening waters. The People of the Cliff had gathered up their great stores of driftwood and erected several large fires out on the beach

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instead of in their caves, as was their usual custom. Around these fires they laid a bounty of fish, goat cheese, and a bitter, stringent brew made from the berries of a cliff grown bush. Music was played, a syncopated chant accompanied by drums and pipe, and everyone joined in an undulating dance done entirely while sitting cross-legged. During the feast, Meeno showered Manyara with gifts made of shells and shark teeth. Manyara kept slipping Snorri questioning looks, for she began to fear she may have unintentional entered into a contract.

Snorri merely laughed, and drank deep of the brew.

Eventually the fervor died down as Meeno and his people slid into humming with a lazy rhythm that, when coupled by the last dances of the slowly dying fire, further dulled the senses and brought about a near trance. Snorri did not notice when the young man seated next to him stood.

But standing he was when, from the darkness, stepped another man, shorn of all hair and adorned with a golden loincloth and a tube of bronze rings that wrapped around his body connecting an apparatus strapped over his nose to an ornate box strapped to his back. Enthralled, Snorri watched as this new man leaned in, as if to kiss the other, pursed his lips and blew out a shimmering, green-purple smoke that the other deeply inhaled through his nostrils.

The stranger spoke words Snorri did not understand, but the other obeyed and lifted his left arm out to his side and held it up with his other arm. The stranger lifted a featureless silver rod to the other's shoulder. The end of the rod produced a blue wave that cut through the other's muscle and

bone, freezing the blood into a crimson frost that drifted in the evening breeze.

Deeper instincts broke Snorri from his trance. He leapt to his feet and slashed deep into the stranger's gut with his knife. As the blade tore out of the flesh, he snagged it on the bronze tubing, severing that. The stranger fell back, spurting blood from his wound and the iridescent smoke from the end of the tube that remained attached to the ornate box. This smoke, when freed, separated into a purple wisp climbing into the air and a noxious green cloud that rolled along the ground.

It was Snorri's misfortune to stumble into this green cloud as his legs, asleep from sitting so long on the rocky ground, gave way. He took one breath that stabbed at his lungs, and rolled out of it, coughing. Focus fled from the world.

A second stranger approached Snorri's prone form, rod extended, its end glowing blue. Swift as a panther, Manyara was on her feet. Her steely grip tore the mask from this stranger's nose before she heaved him onto the fire. The thrashing, screaming and scent of seared flesh snapped Meeno from his trance. Blue dots lit up all across the dark moments before a pale blue glow emanating from a new ship on the harbor spilled across the entire beach.

Tossing the stricken Snorri over shoulder, Manyara turned Meeno and spoke one of the few words she had learned in his language: "Where?"

Meeno leading, they fled across the shingle to the open water. A stranger moved to intercept them, a woman this time, shorn and garbed like the other two. As she swung the glowing end of her rod around, Manyara wrapped her massive hand

around the woman's throat. The stranger tried to sever the arm that held her, frostbiting tissue wherever the rod connected. Unwilling to yield her momentum, Manyara dragged the stranger with her into the tide, releasing her victim only when she felt the soft crunch of a windpipe.

Lifeless, the stranger fell into the shallows, a thin, delicate layer of ice crusting over the water where her rod landed.

They swam around the cliffs, Meeno searching for a small cave to hide in and Manyara keeping Snorri's head above the water. When such a cave was spotted high above the water line, Snorri was unconscious, forcing Manyara to scale the slick rock face as Meeno did, with but one arm. Once in the cave, they huddled close to one another for warmth and kept watch until the morning sun.

Consciousness descended on Snorri in a pounding haze.

"Ah, you missed quite the night, my friend," Manyara said, her back to him. With a hand dug into the rock, she was leaning out of the alcove, peering towards the harbor. The sun was setting behind the cliffs, casting purple shadows far across the water.

"Would that I had," Snorri said, before convulsing and scrambling to the cave edge so that he could vomit into the sea far below.

"How do you feel?"

"I am suffering, but alive. How do we fare?"

"There is a bireme beached on the shingle, at least until the tide moves in. It is the source of last night's



dark mischief. This was not its first visit to this shore.”

“Meeno’s arm?” Snorri asked, rolling onto his back, “The whole plague of missing arms?”

Manyara nodded to the harbor, “The festivities were in their honor. It appears to be a sacrifice of sorts.”

They fell into a silence while Snorri righted himself. He was weak, but no longer helpless, “I favor no gods that make such demands.”

“Neither do I.”

“The People of the Cliff may not thank us for what we are about to undertake.”

Manyara pulled herself back into the cave, “Meeno may still be able to walk among them without suspicion. He swam back to secret us some weapons. The might may aid us if you are well enough.”

The two dove into the dark foamy waters. Upon the shore, Meeno greeted them with a bundle of fishing spears and two crude knives. Hotly kissing him goodbye, Manyara took a knife and slipped into the cliff shadows to set about the grim business of butchering any strangers that yet prowled the beach.

Snorri leaned heavily on Meeno’s shoulder to stop him from following. This was work she could best do alone, padding as a cat across the pebble shore. His lungs yet ached and he would need Meeno’s aid to do what he must. The two retreated into the cold water and worked their way to around to where the waves lapped at the massive bireme’s stern. Constructed from a dark wood Snorri did

not recognize, the ship’s deck towered over the shore. As they prowled around it, Snorri could see a shimmering, like fireflies, through the two rows of oar ports. Every plank and plane along all sides and angles were covered in detailed carvings that reminded him of overwrought maps, occasionally studded with tiny beads of various metals.

In the indigo glow of dusk, they could see two strangers, bald and masked, standing as statues upon the foredeck. Beckoning Meeno, Snorri ran far enough up shore to clearly see these two over the ship’s rail. He took a spear in each hand, drew in a long, painful breath, and flung them. One stranger caught a spear in the neck. A green-purple cloud burst forth from the wound, as the force of the impact spun him half over the rail.

The other spear splintered on its victim’s ribs.

Blood pounded in Snorri’s head as he charged down the shingle towards the bireme. On his heels, Meeno loosed a spear that sailed over the injured stranger who had fallen to his knees in search of the rod he dropped.

When they reached the bireme’s hull, Snorri was spent and feared he would not clamber onto the deck in time. He wheezed and bent low so that Meeno could spring off his back. Though he had but one arm, Meeno spent his life clinging to cliff sides. He was on the deck and sunk his knife into the right shoulder of the stranger, causing him to spasm and knock the silver rod at his fingertips across the deck.

Gripping Meeno by the hair with strength inhuman, the stranger pulled Meeno’s face in close to his. Lips parted and the scintillating green-purple gas

wafted into Meeno's nostrils. The pungent scent felt familiar, comforting to Meeno.

When the stranger asked him to remove the blade, he felt a little embarrassed that he had not already done so. When the stranger asked him if he ever wondered what the knife felt like sheathed in his own flesh, a compelling curiosity overtook him. Would it not be satisfying to plunge it deep into your left breast?

Meeno had the knife half to his heart when a breathless Snorri seized his arm.

Your ally wishes to taste the blade first. Would you not oblige him?

Suddenly twisting under Snorri's grip, Meeno plunged the knife into the stargazer's hip. With the last of his energy, Snorri whipped Meeno by his arm into a mast. The collision dazed Meeno and sent the knife over the rail.

Collapsing onto the nearby rail, Snorri looked to the stranger, expecting to be poisoned or bewitched by whatever noxious fumes he would breathe. But the stranger, now slick from his hemorrhaging wounds, crumbled before him.

A figure emerged from a portal in the aft cabin, hairless and clad only in a golden loincloth as the strangers, but wearing no mask or tubing, and possessing a cold, blue radiance instead of a head. It stood almost unbearably brilliant against the early night sky. As it approached him, it filled Snorri with a sickening vertigo, as if some giant had carelessly tipped the world on edge.

"You are known to me!" Snorri shouted, "Known as the Palua the Night Gem to those who navigate

the temperate waters of the Southern Seas. Known as Gennerah, Goddess of Sowing to those who till the fertile between the great rivers of Amari and Amura. Known by more than two hundred names within the walls of the City of Fire and Coin. Known to my people as Venkares."

At these names the figure halted.

"It is true! Oh, the shame to have been found beneath the dome of the heavens instead of resting upon it," Snorri grinned. "Oh the songs I will sing of this night, when the heart of the Lynx sailed from the heavens to these humble shores."

The radiance warmed in hue and dimmed slightly. As the figure took a step back from Snorri, its body seemed incongruent to him.

"I wonder, what petty delights motivate you. Why clothe yourself in flesh and travel to these shores?"

For a moment it seemed to Snorri that the radiance was about to answer, when a fresh horror struck his eyes. In the shifting of the radiance's hue, he noted the tone and texture of its flesh was mottled along seams and fissures. It was a creature half-constructed and Snorri's desire to interview such an apparition was overcome by his desire to remain all of his own whole and not to donate to this piecemeal body.

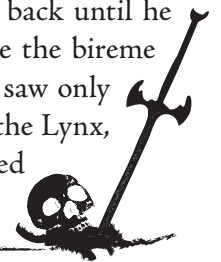
With an authority he did not feel, Snorri spoke, "It is of no consequence. I have named you. That is all that matters. Gather your shame and return to night's veil. There is nothing more here for you."

The radiance diminished into its proper place in the sky with such speed that Snorri succumbed to his dizziness and slumped over.

Manyara woke Snorri and helped him to his feet. There was a great wonder in her eyes. Wordlessly, she helped him over to a large hatch held open by Meeno, who had his face turned from it in disgust. A purple smoke billowed from the open doorway. Through it, Snorri could see below deck where it mixed with the green mist. There, where one might find galley slaves or an army at the oars, were rows of posts intricately carved in a style matching that of the boxes worn by the strangers, and attached to each post were several sinewy, disembodied arms that clutched the oars.

There struck at the wandering hearts of Manyara and Snorri a panopoly of possibilities. What bizarre seas could this bireme navigate? What strange and undreamt of shores would it bring them to? What wonders might they witness from this unearthly deck?

When Meeno saw the joy in Manyara's eyes, he let the hatch slam shut, turned from the pair, and disembarked. He could not look back until he was sure the tide rolled in to free the bireme from the shore. When he did he saw only an empty beach and the heart of the Lynx, now more flush than azure, returned to its rightful place in the sky.



ENTER THE AVENGER

An uncomplicated role-playing game for 3+ players by Rafu
Illustrated by Tazio Bettin

To my late brother E., whose untimely death cannot be avenged, and his loyal friends, some of whom went on a quest for the facts.

SETUP

–1–

Write on five blank cards: “Avenger (1)”, “Narrator (2)”, “Suspect (3)”, “Judge (4)”, “Retribution (5).” These are the player roles. Give one player the Avenger card. For the whole game, this player can hold no other role. The player to the left of the Avenger is the Narrator. To their left is the Suspect, the Judge, and then Retribution. If there are less than five players, the Narrator doubles as Judge; or, if there are only three, give the roles of Narrator, Judge and Retribution to the same person.

If there are more than five players, some will begin without a role—do not worry, they will have one soon enough. Keep a stack of additional blank cards and a pen handy.

–2–

From a regular pack of playing cards take the four aces and two jokers. Shuffle these six cards thoroughly and put them on top of the deck, face down. Put the deck in the middle of your play-space, comfortably in reach of everyone.

Prologue

“I am,” the Avenger declares...

- ♦ “...an escaped slave, bearing scars from both the inhuman cruelties of my former masters and the extraordinary ordeal I had to go through before regaining my freedom.”



◆ "...a travelling merchant by family tradition, resourceful and wealthy, and already at my young age I have visited half of the known world plus some lands beyond."

◆ "...a scholar of the darkest arts, scorned and feared by all human beings except those who partake in the same practices, but obeyed by things which are not human."

◆ "...a grey-haired witch-knight still bound by a pledge of fealty to two masters—one mundane and one supernatural—who both failed to honor their side of the oath."

...or something else of the player's invention.

"By which name are you known?" the Narrator asks. The Avenger speaks their chosen name. "And," they further declare, "I'm out to avenge the untimely death of..."

◆ "...my beloved spouse, who used to rule over a powerful kingdom, metaphorically or otherwise."

◆ "...my brave sister-in-arms, who a thousand times put her life on the line to save mine."

◆ "...my honored half-brother, nurtured from the very same breasts as me, but who was in all other ways my better."

◆ "...my long-time secret lover, whom I could only meet in the dead of night, for in open daylight we would have been punished as criminals."

◆ "...my spiritual father, who by example and charitableness redeemed me from my vicious excesses, leading me to make peace with myself."

◆ "...my one and only child, the only joy in my life, the only true family I have ever had."

...or any other character the player cares to invent.

A warning: do not go into the game holding any preconceived notions about these characters, apart from that which was just spoken aloud. You will have to play to find out who the Avenger really is, and what will become of them.

FIRST ACT

–1–

Avenger (addressing the Narrator): "In order to exact my due vengeance, I will travel to..."

◆ "...the vice-pits of Abtsibea, where all sorts of unwholesome pleasures can be enjoyed for a high enough price."

◆ "...the Towers of Silence in Seebharim, where the dead are exposed to the birds of the sky and the heat of the sun."

◆ "...the Court of Fools in the city of Mezelith, where a new king rules each day and at nightfall is taken down to be sacrificed."

◆ "...the ruins of old Paristhecora, where, overshadowed by the crumbling remnants of cyclopean architectures, the ghosts appear livelier than the living."

◆ "...the fish and spice market in the harbor of Feinai, where countless merchant ships from faraway nations and twice as many boats from the surrounding islands gather to trade."

◆ "...the mask-making ateliers surrounding the wooden temple of the Twelve Disciples in Qurrsinth, where most of the work is conducted in a religious silence unbroken for days."

◆ "...the cold, rocky shores of the isle of Gunn, where sea-folks come to shed their kelp-encrusted skins and bask, naked as the land-dwelling people, in the faint sunlight."

...or any other wondrous place of the player's invention.

The Narrator then describes this place and the people there in as much length and detail as they like. They do not yet include the Avenger in the scene. Then, as soon as the Narrator stops and turns to them—or sooner by interrupting the Narrator anytime they like—the Suspect speaks. They introduce, by name and description, a new character the Avenger intends to investigate, and possibly exact revenge upon, for this character might actually be responsible for the untimely death to be avenged.

For example:

◆ "Mage Meropheus is a false prophet and mover of crowds whom countless adoring disciples have showered with luxury and riches."

◆ "Master Hiered, second-in-command of the powerful Guild of Thieves, has fingers in every pocket; eyes and ears in every corner of this kingdom."

◆ "Shengui is a grim-looking veteran of war whose severed sword-arm has been replaced with a hollow replica of cast bronze."

- ◆ “Sigmatis the Blind is one who breeds and trains dangerous reptiles, both to entertain crowds and to distill from their noxious venom the remedy to many an ailment.”
- ◆ “There’s a nine-fingered harp-player, known by as many exotic-sounding nicknames as there are public squares and concert-halls this side of the sea.”
- ◆ “A trafficker in human flesh, half-human in heritage and half an anthropophagus ghul, masquerades as an exorcist nun and goes by the name of Sister Ruthetzia.”

The Suspect goes on, describing how this character acts before the backdrop the Narrator set, possibly including interactions with other, secondary characters. The purpose is to establish this character—make them come alive, and maybe impress the other players with expectations about their guilt or innocence (which may later turn out to be wrong, mind you).

Meanwhile, The Judge writes down the character’s name on a blank card. The Narrator says (interrupting the Suspect at any time): “Enter the Avenger.” As they say so, the Narrator takes a playing card from the pile, without looking at it, and hands it to the Suspect, who glances at it discreetly, then gives it to the Judge, who secretly looks at it and keeps it. It is especially important not to show any cards to the Avenger.

Meaning of cards:

- ◆ The ace of spades means the current Suspect is actually responsible for the untimely death the Avenger wishes to avenge. They are not necessarily a cold-blood murderer, but the death

is a direct and inextricable consequence of their willful actions.

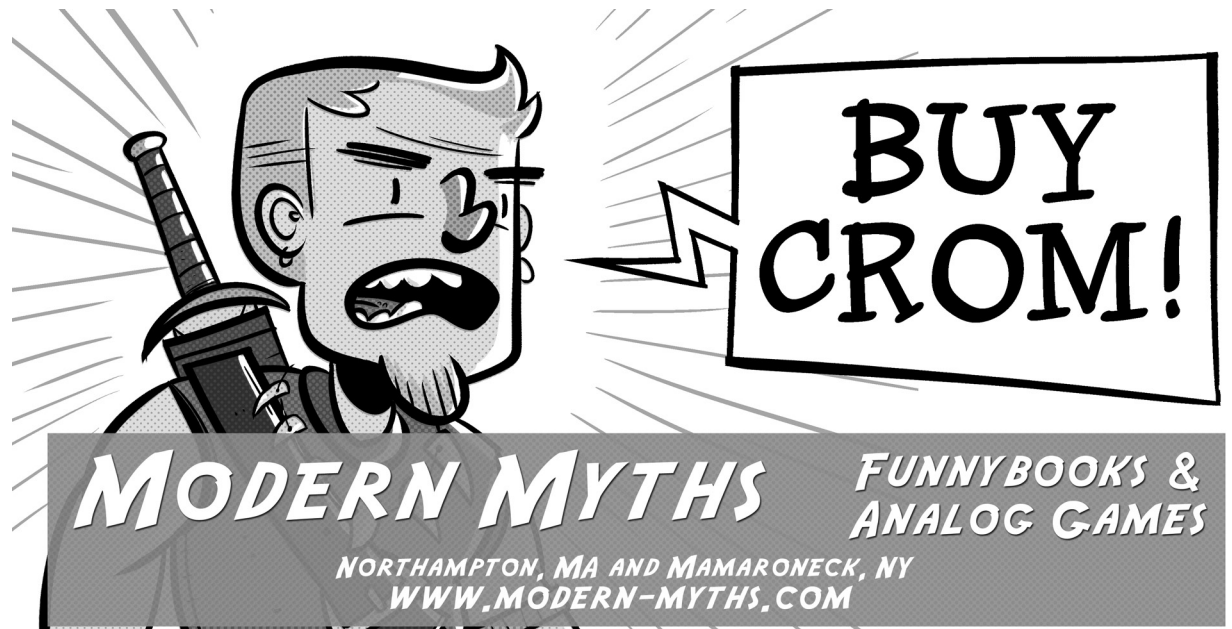
- ◆ A joker means that the character is either somehow an accomplice to the culprit, aware of the facts but not fully nor solely responsible, or for some reason feels guilty of the death while not being materially responsible for it in any way. The Suspect chooses which, immediately, in their mind, and silently commits to their choice. There is no need to think up any details right now.
- ◆ Any other card means the Suspect character is innocent.

–2–

While other players are handling cards, the Avenger describes their entrance into the scene with as much detail and as much fanfare as they like.

Hereafter, the Avenger and Suspect freely play out their interactions, each talking in the voice of and describing the actions of their respective character—up to and including the full consequences of said actions. The Narrator also participates in this as much as they like or are needed, by narrating any changes in the background, the actions of minor characters and crowds and talking in the voice of extras.

There are but a few limitations to what the three of them are allowed to enact: neither the Avenger nor the Suspect’s character may be killed, and the Avenger cannot be conclusively overpowered by the Suspect (if held, imprisoned, or wounded, the Avenger will nonetheless always succeed at regaining the upper hand). While playing out the scene, it is most likely that the Avenger or Suspect will talk about the untimely death, its victim, and the facts surrounding it, as well as the background



and past deeds of any character. In doing so, they can freely invent pieces of truth—or falsity!—as they please. This is how we all find out about those things.

–3–

Eventually it will come to the Suspect either affirming their innocence or declaring their guilt (truly or otherwise). When this happens, the Judge addresses the Avenger thusly, speaking as their inner voice and power of intuition:

♦ “This scum is blatantly lying to you.”

or:

♦ “This poor wreck is obviously speaking the truth.”

...or something of similar content.

In saying this, the Judge is not, in any way, bound by the truth of the matter as shown them by the card. At their discretion, the main character’s perception may as well be mistaken!

The Avenger and Suspect and Narrator go on playing as before, with the implication that the Avenger is going to act on their perception of the Suspect’s guilt or innocence somehow. The Avenger is under no obligation to believe their inner voice as delivered by the Judge. They may as well second-guess it and decide their intuitions were wrong. But now, unlike before, as soon as the Avenger describes initiating actions whose consequences target or include the Suspect’s character, they have to stop and defer to Retribution. Note that simply walking away is also an action whose consequences affect the Suspect. The Avenger is leaving them alone. Under most circumstances this would be the

kindest thing to do, but sometimes it can actually spell their doom.

–4–

After the Avenger has declared actions which affect the Suspect, Retribution speaks. They describe the consequences of such actions, in full, as they concern the Suspect or any other characters, Avenger included. Such consequences can—but do not necessarily have to—include the death of the Suspect, at Retribution’s whim. There is only one thing Retribution is not allowed to do: render the Avenger unable to further pursue their vengeance. While Retribution speaks, other players have to listen intently and keep silent until Retribution is done speaking. Retribution concludes their part in the act by addressing the Avenger and asking them: “Are you satisfied, at last?” To which the Avenger answers either “Yes” or “No.”

SUBSEQUENT ACTS

If the Avenger is not yet satisfied with their vengeance, a new act will follow. The Judge still holds a playing card in their hand: they put it down on the card with the last Suspect’s name, face down: it can’t be looked at until after the game is over. Rotate roles other than the Avenger clockwise around the table, so that the former Suspect becomes Narrator, the former Judge is now the Suspect, and so on. In this rotation, though, skip the Avenger player entirely. Make them stand up from the table or otherwise occupy themselves. They are still the Avenger and they take on no other role. Or, if there are any players who have not held any role at all yet, make the first of them the new Narrator and go clockwise from there. In a three-player game, the Narrator/Judge/Retribution player and the

Suspect simply switch roles. Follow through the same instructions as the first act again, beginning with the Avenger declaring: “And now, in order to exact my due vengeance, I will travel to...”

EPILOGUE

If the Avenger is finally satisfied, rotate roles as you would for a new act, but this is the last time you do. Exception: in a three-player game, do not exchange roles now, but give the Retribution role to the Suspect player instead of leaving it with the Narrator/Judge. Together, you will now create an epilogue for the tale, in which the Avenger’s future fate is described. Avenger, say where your character goes after accomplishing or abandoning their vengeance, and what they do. This can range from a span of minutes or hours to a span of years or decades. Narrator, say how it goes for them, but never including death of the Avenger—though you may stop minutes short of their death. Suspect, if any of the Suspect characters survived, say what becomes of them. Judge, say whether the Avenger lived a happy or unhappy life up to this point, and how. Retribution, narrate the Avenger’s death. Narrator, declare “the end.”

DEBRIEFING

Now that the Epilogue is over, do not hurry away from the table. Stay for a few more minutes instead, and talk about the story you just told. This is the time to step back from your various characters and roles. To signify this, remove the role cards entirely. Now, you all share the same role: that of the audience after a play. What kind of person did the Avenger show to be in the end? Were they correct or mistaken in their dealings with each Suspect?



If you know of a terrible mistake the Avenger has committed, this is finally the time to say it aloud. There is no better time to finally look at the cards associated with each Suspect. What did you think of the various characters? Have you been able to form an opinion about the avenged and the actual circumstances of their death? These and more questions you are going to ask each other and each find, deep inside your heart, an answer to—before you finally bid farewell and part ways.

SPECIAL CASES

Judge's time to speak not coming up: If the Avenger does not question a Suspect about their guilt or innocence, but maybe works with them to destroy a secondary character or otherwise trusts them beyond questioning, this may feel like stalling the game. Actually, the Judge is welcome to come forward and speak, regardless of direct questioning, as if the Suspect's silence on the matter were an implicit statement of innocence. Maybe the Judge should simply instill doubt, like, "It does not feel 'right' to trust this person blindly."

Recurring locations and characters: If the Avenger asks to revisit a location, alright; but the Narrator should highlight a different facet of it than before, making it almost a different place. A former Suspect character who survived retribution cannot be chosen as the Suspect again. Such a character can be present in subsequent acts as one of the Narrator-controlled characters, and thus beholden to Retribution's whim as much as any extras.

Length of a game: Should a game last more than six acts, it becomes pretty obvious to everyone including the Avenger that they are sticking it to

innocent people now. Not that they must stop because of it.

CREDITS

Sources of Inspiration:

Games & game texts by Ben Lehman (*Polaris*, *The Drifter's Escape*), Eppy Ravachol (*Swords Without Master*), Iacopo Frigerio (*Ravendead*), James Wallis (*The Extraordinary Adventures of Baron Munchausen*), Jeff Himmelman (*Kingdom of Nothing*), Jim Raggi, Jonathan Tweet (*Everway*), Jonathan Walton (*KkKKKK*), Matthijs Holter, Paul Czege (*The Clay that Woke*), Ralph Mazza (*Blood Red Sands*), Ron Edwards (*S/lay w/Me*), Simon Carryer (*On Mighty Thews*), Vincent Baker. Music by Black Sabbath, Blue Öyster Cult, Cathedral, Edge of Dawn, Igor Stravinsky, Johann Sebastian Bach, Manowar, Stone Temple Pilots. Fiction by Edgar Allan Poe, Fritz Leiber, Howard P. Lovecraft, Italo Calvino (*Le città invisibili*), Michael Moorcock, Robert E. Howard. Comics & illustrations by Hiroaki Samura (*Blade of the Immortal*), Möbius, Vaughn Bodē. Nonfiction by Erich Auerbach, Ron Edwards, Walter Benjamin.

And the sad facts of real life.

Playtesters:

Agnese Sgarbi, Alex "il Mietitore" Isabelle, Barbara Fini, Carlo Bombonati, Dennis Cogo, Max Lambertini, Michele Manzo, Paolo Guccione, Patrick Marchiodi, Pietro Galiazio, Riccardo Zulian.



Oh, The Beating Drum!

by Bryant Paul Johnson.



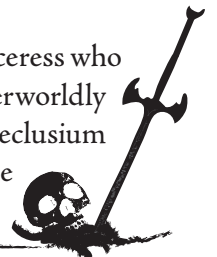


THREE DOZEN WONDROUS SIGHTS

A miscellany by Epiidiah Ravachol

- ◻—The battlefield where two armies stand, blade pressing against flesh, covered in vines, lost in the infinite moments between intent and execution by ill-considered spell.
- ◻—A beetle attracted to an opulent perfume currently in fashion that has been trained by children to steal loose gems from the brooches and necklaces of the decadent.
- ◻—Dawn through the stone gates of Tanuhur, where one's sins are plainly illuminated.
- ◻—A city built by seafaring nomads on the back of an enormous, lumbering prehistoric fish.
- ◻—A choir raised from birth to sing a single song that has held six armies at bay with its beauty.
- ◻—A thunderous rain of venomous serpents.
- ◻—The last words spoken by a long dead scholar, frozen still in his hermitage.
- ◻—A river that flows up a mountain into the maw of a petrified devil.
- ◻—The supplicants of a spider goddess who have forgone their skin for spider silk.
- ◻—The cursed flats where geysers of wine and blood feed greedy ferns.
- ◻—Seven giant prisms placed on a high plateau that cast searing rainbows into the valley floor every morning.
- ◻—Herds of brightly dyed aurochs roaming the obsidian plains.
- ◻—The menagerie of the Silent Emperor's taxidermist where one can find every creature that ever was.
- ◻—The epic poems whispered by the shifting sands of the Purple Dunes.
- ◻—The great winter wedding orgies of an ice-bound ocean cult.
- ◻—The white arches of Halulet that span mountain ranges and are mortared with storm clouds.
- ◻—Tigers that have learned to mimic the sounds of songbirds and children to lull their prey.
- ◻—Three massive, walking ziggurats, each with six cursed priests trapped inside.
- ◻—Wildflowers that bloom with the faces of the viewer's ancestors.
- ◻—A small, orange pepper of such heat that it awakens your senses to unknown flavors.
- ◻—The coral palaces of the eight-limbed lords of the deep.
- ◻—Crossroads that connect a thousand disparate planes at the only spot where they are exactly the same.

- ◻—A boulder that no one can move, but the wind freely batters around.
- ◻—The fruit of lovers' tree that inspires a blind lust in any who eat of the same fruit and aching loneliness in any who do not share.
- ◻—A vale where the planets may be watched when they believe themselves to be unseen.
- ◻—Crystal bells that hang over still waters from cords that extended forever into the firmament.
- ◻—The alien wares of a mute merchant that everyone else politely ignores.
- ◻—A limpid pool that still reflects the moment of creation.
- ◻—The Silent Emperor's Garden of Foes, where the fleshy heads of his enemies scream upon bodies chiselled from stone.
- ◻—The waking dreams of fasting monks made manifest by swarms of crickets.
- ◻—A well, dark and silent, that reflects the stars of an alien sky and saps the warmth of all who stare into its depths.
- ◻—The horrid tomb sports played among forgotten graves on nights with no moon.
- ◻—The vast, unsorted libraries of all knowledge.
- ◻—Icebergs that float like clouds, casting indigo shadows upon the world.
- ◻—Howling caverns that still echo the prayers of those who were massacred there over a generation ago.
- ◻—The inverted tower of a sorceress who hid from her many otherworldly enemies by flipping her seclusion so that it stretched into the earth rather than the sky.



THE CONTRIBUTORS

D. Vincent Baker is a game designer who hails from Western Mass. His works include *kill puppies for satan*, *Dogs in the Vineyard*, *Apocalypse World*, and *The Sundered Land*. <http://lumpley.com>

Tazio Bettin is an illustrator and comic artist who hails from Padova, Europe. He has created freelance artwork for publishers like White Wolf Game Studios, Evil Hat Productions, Zenescope Entertainment and Titan Comics. <http://taziobettin.deviantart.com>

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Rafu (real name Raffaele Manzo) is a freelance translator and unemployed scholar of Japanese history who hails from the beautiful, penniless lands of Italy. Most recently, he's daring to tread the perilous path of the game-designer, but can't accomplish such a feat without support. <http://www.patreon.com/rafu>

THE REALMS

You do not take up sword and spell to tag along with someone else's adventure. You do it to change the course of your destiny. To mold the world to your wants and desires.

Listed below are the stories, games, articles, and miscellanies in this issue that represent worlds available for you to craft your own adventures in. If you should so desire, you may take the characters, settings, and situations from any of these, create something new, and submit it to *Worlds Without Master*.

By default, any submission to *Worlds Without Master* is not part of any shared world. Creators have the usual controls over their creative properties. The following options exist only for creators who expressly want to take part in this endeavor.

Additionally, the following agreements exist solely between the creators and *Worlds Without Master*, and do not govern the creators' rights in regards to any other publication.

The Free & Chaotic Realms

Anyone may submit material using the characters, settings, situations and any other part of this body of work as if it were their own as long as they also agree to make their work part of this Free & Chaotic Realm. This is as open as it gets, with the only curation being the *Worlds Without Master* submission process.

The Curated Realms

Material submitted using the characters, settings, situations and any other part of this body of work will be sent to the original creator or the creator's designated curator for approval before being accepted by *Worlds*

Without Master. If accepted, this new material is bound to that particular curated realm.

Other Shared Realms

Groups of creators who wish to find their own agreement on how to share their worlds are welcome to do so however they wish.

Edicts

Creators are welcome to make up a list of rules other creators must follow while using their works. These rules are set in stone. *Worlds Without Master* will not accept any work that appears to violate an applicable edict that is not also created by the original creator.

More about the realms policy can be found at: www.Dig1000Holes.com/words/realms

Enter the Avenger and "Three Dozen Wondrous Sights" belong to the Free and Chaotic Realms.

"Strange Bireme," Manyara, Meeno, and Snorri belong to the realms curated by Epidiah Ravachol. Their edicts may be found at: www.Dig1000holes.com/words/edicts

