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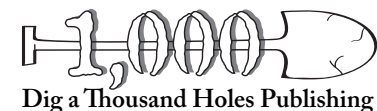
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THE SWORD IN THE WORLD

Early in the Summer of 2009, Emily Care Boss, Jason Keeley, John Stavropoulos, Jim Sullivan and I spent a single, sleepless week creating *MonkeyDome*—a game about the absurd remains of a shattered world. It tore me from my roleplaying paradigm and instilled within me the very beginnings of the game found in this issue: *Swords Without Master*.

It was the quest to create *Swords* that had me scouring used book stores, hunting the tomes of my youth, trying to distill the alchemical essence of the sword and sorcery genre. This research, in turn, set me on a path towards these *Worlds Without Master*. So it is as fitting as it is inevitable that *Swords* should debut among these ethereal pages.

The palimpsest of *MonkeyDome* remains within *Swords Without Master*. The tones, the Thunder, the Storm, Morals, stymies and the Perilous Phase were all born in apocalyptic fire. Should you desire to see this honored ancestor, it is available for free at Dig1000Holes.com/other-games/.

Your Companion,
Epidiah Ravachol
Epidiah Ravachol

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A SLAYING IN SMOKE

A tale by Epiidiah Ravachol

Illustrated by Steven Austin

Muaphet Raum strolled through the streets arm in arm with that toad-throated entity thought by scholars to be an ill-favored god of ages lost and considered by sorcerous meddlers to be a well-feared demon of some means. His bulbous eyes and swaying saunter painted a humorous picture at which few beyond Muaphet dared to laugh. Theirs was a sketchy alliance, but one that had been to the greater benefit of each. Though few should ever learn the name of this ranine alien, Muaphet was permitted to call him, affectionately, Vey Thon.

It was only here, in the City of Fire and Coin, where they could carry on as such and not incite riot. Here, among the brightly colored spires and the bazaars stocked from all corners of the world, this selcouth scene was mere spectacle. Muaphet dressed only in his purple omophor decorated with a sole green seven-pointed star, and Vey Thon

naked but for a cape of bronze scales that chattered as he undulated.

But in the neighborhoods they now strolled, in the opulent, gleaming shadows of the citadel of the Shining Lord, Muaphet and Vey Thon were considered, perhaps scandalously, overdressed. For it had been the fashion for some months now among the wealthier denizens of the City of Opportunity to dress themselves solely in smoke. The merely rich adorned themselves in brass crowns that radiated rods like flower petals from their heads. At rod's end hung censers on various lengths of gold and silver chains. Each censer fumed in rich colors and heavy scents that obfuscated the body and stung the eyes. The obscenely decadent would forego even these heavy crowns and attend themselves with slaves trained to ply patterns into the smoke with their breath.



And this is how Lanhorawhani approached them. First, a cavalcade of tall, hairless men trailed giant reams of crimson and gold cloth into the market square covering every entrance to guard against errant breeze creeping along street and alleyway. Then, a flurry of young women dressed in gossamer and armed with giant fans to chase away any lingering smoke of lesser designs. When their billowing gowns settled and all witnesses were stilled by awe, the first tendrils of ochre smoke rolled into the market, coaxed along by the gentle breath of three children. They were in turn followed by three men who held in their pained hands glowing braziers, one producing a gray-green cloud and the scent of toasted jasmine, one belching a thick and heavy sulfur, and one producing garish sparks popping into puffs of deep blue that faded into the gray of a winter sky. Two artists and their assistants silently and skillfully urged these fumes along carefully chosen paths with breath and fan to weave them into intricate, ephemeral patterns that covered the long, narrow body of Lanhorawhani.

He approached Muaphet and Vey Thon in slow, deliberate silence. His eyes were bloodshot and tears ran dark trails over his soot-stained cheeks, but these were the natural byproducts of his fashion and no indication of his mood, which was that of a controlled fear.

“You are the Raum?” The question cut a wake through his smoky shroud.

“I am,” Muaphet replied, nodding his head respectfully.

“I am a man haunted—”



Vey Thon unleashed a deep-throated guffaw that left Lanhorawhani’s frail frame naked and his fumists frantic in their efforts to re-weave his costume.

“I do not speak with the dead,” said Muaphet, stepping between Vey Thon and Lanhorawhani. “And neither should you. They have nothing to say that you desire to hear, and can only further entangle you with the inevitable.”

“I believe they have already spoken to me and it is the inevitable I wish to concern you with.”

There was no plea in Lanhorawhani’s red eyes or his stern voice. He was unused to requesting things. Muaphet had learned long ago that such men were dangerous. So it was here that he parted ways with Vey Thon, who croaked an affectionate farewell and pursued his interests elsewhere in the City, as

Muaphet consented to accompany Lanhorawhani to his spire but made no promise of resolution.

It took the whole of the afternoon to reach the home of Lanhorawhani, which was built upon the ancient ruins of the old city at the foot of the hill that led up to the Shining Lord’s citadel. Every step taken, every breath, was choreographed to preserve the ever-shifting beauty of his garb. So as to leave the air around them as little disturbed as possible, there was a strict taboo on speaking and Muaphet had to keep a good ten paces of distance between them. What time he could not occupy with conversation, he occupied with observation. It was true that Lanhorawhani was a man haunted. The signs were individually subtle, but myriad throughout the afternoon. Folds blown into the crimson and gold banners, fading billows in the gossamer dresses, and patterns appearing in the smoke that clung to him—faces, grotesqueries and

runes. Something erudite and malignant had an interest in Lanhorawhani. Muaphet was relieved to know that Vey Thon, at least, was elsewhere.

Jewelers and stoneworkers were ushered from Lanhorawhani's receiving hall as they approached. There, among ursine idols of the goddess Axlohi half-carved from jade and alabaster, Lanhorawhani finally bid Muaphet to speak.

As it often does, faith followed fashion. The lachrymations of Axlohi's devotees were said to cleanse their souls of their sins. An endeavor in which Muaphet saw some merit, for he knew that Axlohi drew her dead back through the centuries to be with her from the moment of her cult's birth. All that were delivered unto her would begin their suffering at the dawn of history and continue to suffer until the last sins of her disciples had disappeared from the world. For the smoke-stung upper class of the City, there was clear appeal in a deity for whom tears were a badge of piety.

"What is it that you are hoping I can do for you?"

"There are sorceries availed to me," Lanhorawhani said, inviting Muaphet to sit upon one of the many splendid pillows cast about the room.

"I have no doubt," Muaphet said, lounging, but remaining alert.

"There are magi in my employ," Lanhorawhani said as he sat nearby, his slaves placing around him new braziers cast in the likeness of Aloxi vomiting a sweet and obscuring blue and yellow smoke from ceramic snouts. "As well as prophets and servitors from realms unnamable. I have an entire menagerie of beasts from a world you can only see in the summer sky just after dusk."



"I hope that someday you may allow me to peruse such a collection."

The thuribles set, Lanhorawhani's slaves exited to prepare a repast. "Tell me then, Raum, why I should come to you with my troubles."

Muaphet searched Lanhorawhani's bloodshot eyes. "You do not like the answer your prophets and magi have given you."

A silence grew as Lanhorawhani let the smoke swallow him whole before speaking from within. "Do you know this answer?"

"My guess is that you are doomed."

"Yes." The voice grew weak, as if it too was made of smoke, and seemed to come from not a single mouth, but from the whole cloud that now filled half the room. "This very evening, when a certain star can be seen from atop my own tower."

"Lanhorawhani." As Muaphet spoke the name, he recognized the pattern of Lanhorawhani's face thrice as large in the growing smoke—a face that now seemed to be pleading with him. "We are all doomed. You are just blessed with the hour and the place."

"Blessed!?"

The outburst scattered the larger face that had been forming in the smoke, replacing a pleading contenance with a smaller, tangible one of tear-stained rage.

A moment later Lanhorawhani's composure returned and the smoke crawled back across his face as the slaves returned with warmed wine, bowls

of figs soaked in chili oils, and plates of nutmeats skillfully arranged in elaborate mosaics.

Muaphet took his time sampling the figs and sucking the oils from his fingers before answering, "I will look upon the signs, but I am doubtful that I will find a different answer there."

"Readers more literate than you have looked upon the signs. Forgive me, but that is not why I have sought you out. I need an advocate. One to represent me and my interests upon this tower tonight."

"I do not speak with the dead."

Among the dishes laid before Lanhorawhani there was a tiny bell which he then rang. "I am not often refused."

"Then I am pleased to offer you this unique experience before you should perish," Muaphet said, rising to his feet and preparing for movement from within the smoke.

"Please, do not leave before I have thanked you with the least glimpse of my menagerie."

Eddies of smoke poured through opening doors and light from beyond limned a pair of large silhouettes. Muaphet offered a low, mocking bow to Lanhorawhani. "Let it be said that you are a gracious host, even in these final hours."

Lanhorawhani's guards were, like Muaphet, tall and bald. Were it not for his odd manner of dress, the three of them could have been mistaken for brothers. Indeed, these two probably were brothers, one left-handed and the other right to match some symmetry of fashion Lanhorawhani was entertaining when he hired them. Each wore a broad sword on the opposite hip and kept

Muaphet far enough away to allow time to draw should he lunge. But they were not a show of force, as Lanhorawhani was too well-informed to employ such a tactic against Muaphet. They were a declaration of intent. Lanhorawhani had a greater threat to reveal. Muaphet wished to discover its nature before choosing his method of escape.

Together with Lanhorawhani and his smoke-slaves, they proceeded further into the tower, descending rather than rising. Beneath the first floor was the cellar and larder, well-stocked, but cleared of any servants before their arrival. Therein the two guards pulled away two giant flagstones to reveal a spiral staircase carved into the rock beneath. Oil lamps were already burning along the damp, otherwise unadorned stone walls. Eventually hand-carved rock opened up to a natural cavern, iridescent in the lamplight. The air, where not polluted by Lanhorawhani's garments, was hoary and damp.

"These," Lanhorawhani whispered with notable reverence, "are the primordial caves the very first citizens of the City fled to in times of war or disaster."

"Or worship," Muaphet added, noting a bear skull encased in limestone high up on a rocky shelf. "What have you been up to here, Lanhorawhani?"

"It was not your reputation that led me to you, Raum." Lanhorawhani and his slaves continued further into the cavern, which was now only lit by the dark orange glow of his braziers. "It was here, in this cavern, where I first discovered the portents."

There in the ember dark, Lanhorawhani's procession halted and none so much as coughed.

"How is the air down here?"

“Old,” Muaphet replied. “Old and smoky.”

“Hmm, yes. Old and smoky. And still. Very, very still.”

There lingered his smoke and his words, until, with startling movement, he dashed one of the braziers from a slave’s hands and scattered its coals across the cavern floor. In the dark, this sudden light and the sparkling echoes it sent across the opalescent rock proved contrast enough to reveal the signs that troubled Lanhorawhani.

There on the ground, built by centuries of drippings, was a great heptagram relief in the limestone. Alongside it, in language startlingly clear for an

omen, was Lanhorawhani’s doom written in the same relief. The day and the hour.

“These are not carved, Raum. They formed here, as stalagmites, over the centuries. And they are as they would be, were they scripted by my own hand.”

In the fading light, Muaphet knelt and traced his fingers along the cold, damp heptagram—a great heptagram like that adorning his own raiment. “This was not my doing.”

“I believe it a warning. And though that seven-pointed star could mean many things, I see it as no coincidence that today, the day foretold to be my

last by this very formation, is also the day that you arrived in the City of Fire and Coin.”

“I have been to the City many times before and will likely return many times again,” Muaphet said, standing back up. “I would not look for meaning in my wanderings, Lanhorawhani. Especially not with the precious time you have left. Now, I will hold you to your promise of a glimpse at your menagerie, but then I must be on my way so you can prepare for what is to come.”

“Yes. Let us not delay a moment more.”

Slowly the procession returned from the dark to the lamplit stairs and up into the tower proper. There they crept along another, more ornate, spiral staircase that wound around an impossible waterfall cascading through the very center of the spire. A long and tedious climb through floor after floor of lavish furnishings, until they reached the penultimate floor—a place as blue as the sky just before dawn.

Vey Thon lay unconscious upon the azure tiles, his scaled cape draped over his voluminous body. Around his head, incense slowly burned with mild, fungal smell. Two robed women were busily painting sigils upon the floor around him and tying his digits together with strands of their hair. They were the only ones in the room that did not look up from the slumbering god when Lanhorawhani, Muaphet and their escorts entered.

“It is my will that should I perish, my tower and all that is within it should perish with me. Including your pet.”

“This is no pet, Lanhorawhani,” Muaphet hissed, turning close to Lanhorawhani so that only he



could hear. "You do not know what you have done. Should he awaken like this, his rage—"

"All the more reason to prevent such an outcome," Lanhorawhani said. The old man loomed from his smoke and met Muaphet's stare.

So this was his threat. To enrage Vey Thon. To unleash such a malevolent force upon the City. To feed countless lives to a god that once was.

"I am a man of many sins," Lanhorawhani said, his weeping eyes unblinking, "I will not flinch to add this to the litany."

A wisp of smoke tumbled before Lanhorawhani's whispers and brushed against Muaphet's lips. With a slow, deliberate breath, the Raum drew it in to save it for later. "This would dwarf the litany. Lanhorawhani, I would speak with you alone."

Lanhorawhani assented and his slaves scurried off to retrieve an elaborate crown of censers for him to wear in the absence of his fumists. Once properly fitted and cloaked in a pungent orange smoke, Lanhorawhani and Muaphet ascended to the observatory atop the tower. Above them was the dome of the night sky and below a sea of lights flickered across the City of Fire and Coin. This was a rare view and one Muaphet savored. Even Lanhorawhani, who had ready access to it, stood in brief awe. But the wind easily tore away his fragile garments, leaving him chill, naked and impatient.

"Do you know why you came to me with your troubles?" Muaphet asked.

"The message in stone. It is one that I have left myself. Or will leave myself. A hint that you are the key to my surviving this night," Lanhorawhani said,

as the two of them watched the horizon for a certain star. "I do not understand how or why it works, but the outcome is clear. I will pass by whatever doom creeps towards me this night, so that I may live long enough to find a way to leave myself the message in the heptagram."

"You will die here this night. You will return to the ancestral den of Axlohi where you and your fellow devotees shall begin serving your shared perdition, suffering for one another's sins until the echoes of the last of your sins fade from this realm."

"I know the tenets of my faith."

"Do you?" Muaphet turned his full rage on the frail man but he could not cow him. "Should you in your petty spite provoke what slumbers beneath us? Should you cast it upon this crowded city huddled beneath you? How loud and for how far, how long would your sins echo then?"

"Fail to preserve me this night and we shall find out."

"Lanhorawhani, in the centuries of suffering before you, you will learn regret. Your shade will cower in the dark, still cave buried beneath us. There you will find that your tears can calcify, like drops from a stalactite. With this sole means of communicating you will slowly build a message over the years. A message designed to lure you into the very arms of your doom moments before you commit the one sin that will outlast all other sins committed by those who weep in Axlohi's name.

"I will grant you this last chance. Turn from this path. Have your servants return Vey Thon to where they found him, unbound and unharmed. Then

sleep the rest of this night away so that it may fade from the memory as a dream."

Lanhorawhani pointed to a glimmer on the eastern horizon, "There is my star, Raum. I will not be denied! Deliver me!"

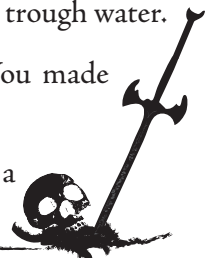
Muaphet slipped one arm around Lanhorawhani's throat while pressing the other heavily into the back of his neck. Swiftly, like a candle being snuffed, consciousness fled the old man and his frail body went limp. Muaphet removed the crown from his head and cast the body out to plummet into the City below.

He placed the crown of censers upon his own brow. Allowing the smoke to obscure him, Muaphet slowly descended back into the tower. Once he returned to the blue room, he called upon the smoky whispers he stole from Lanhorawhani when they stood above Vey Thon moments before, and parsed them out in curt commands. Unbind Vey Thon. Carry the slumberer, along with several dozen amphorae that recently held wine, to a nearby caravanserai. Leave and await him back at the tower. Should he not return in three days, they were to enjoy his wealth as best they could.

That morning, Vey Thon awoke among the empty jugs as Muaphet dowsed him with trough water.

"Are you hungover, my friend? You made quite a night of it last night."

Vey Thon could only muster a pitiful croak in reply.



IN TARUVE: THE MERCHANT TRAIN

A tale by D. Vincent Baker

Illustrated by Jeremy Duncan

So it was that Tam-tam drove the jackal-boys away, swinging a broken branch longer than she was tall and bellowing like an enraged mountain ram. Jakko Orange was still giddy from the fumes he'd been breathing and she had to half-drag him up into the tree with her. She hooked his arm well through a crook in the tree. It wouldn't keep him from falling out, but if he started to fall the pain might snap him to alertness. He was laughing softly, placid and pliant. She didn't smell any blood so concluded him unhurt.

She sat above him and settled to wait.

Tam-tam and Jakko Orange were in the land of Taruve, a dramatic region of high glacial hills with wide, deep valleys between them. It was a land considered rich for its natural splendor and supposed easy farming, but also home to a terrifying variety

of predators, each more cunning than the next. Tam-tam felt quite at ease, sitting in a lonely tree halfway up a long hill slope, drumming her heels against the trunk, watching the road, listening for the jackal-boys to return. While she watched, the sun set. The road was visible far down in the long valley, a growing darkness in the growing darkness, and she watched it as though idly. She had fruit, a stubby red specimen with a thick fibrous peel. She chewed the peel to strings, ate the sweet mushy flesh after, and spat the seeds.

Far away up the valley, where the road snaked around an intruding drumlin, lights appeared. Tiny pinpoints at this distance. They were torches on the road, soon a dozen of them, soon a hundred, soon a thousand. It was the merchant train of Alet Becrada, one of the eleven great trade-kings of Taruve.



Tam-tam roused Jakko Orange with a sharply-applied heel and they descended from the tree.

They presented themselves to the merchant train's outrider guards as uncle and niece, travelers, beset by troubles but still self-possessed. This was not much like the truth, but Jakko Orange's lingering intoxication worked in their favor, and Tam-tam portrayed herself as wide-eyed and unsettled. Soon they were admitted into the merchant train with only one suspicious guard to shadow them.

The merchant train was a town on wheels. It was a hundred gigantic two- and three-story wagons, each twelve-wheeled, each pulled by its own small herd of lashed buffalo. Its drovers, laborers, and guards slept, woke, ate, worked, and took leisure in shifts. Even the buffalo slept in turns in their yokes, dragged along by their comrades. Once underway, there was no stopping, not for night or noonday. The noise was remarkable, the ceaseless drumming

rumble of tens of thousands of hooves, the shouting drovers, the bellowing irritable buffalo, musicians, criers of food and service and news, and over all, the vast groaning and creaking of the wagons. The torchlight put out the stars and the moon.

The largest wagon was at the center of the merchant train. It had a tower and balcony, royal apartments, and an audience chamber. Tam-tam, Jakko Orange, and their accompanying guard made their way slowly alongside it.

As its rearmost wheel passed them, Jakko Orange looked down on Tam-tam fondly. He put his hand on her small shoulder, smiled at her. "Remember, niece," he said. "It is no virtue to kill."

Her smile came eager and wolfish. She spun, leapt, caught their watching guard by the face and the shoulder and bore him down. She shrieked with glee and tore the spear from his hand. He barely

moved to protect himself, but stared up at his small conqueror with dismay and incomprehension.

Jakko Orange said a word. Tam-tam heard it but could never remember it afterward. When she looked for him he was gone, and in his place was the semblance of a woman, a servant they had seen through the windows of the trade-king's royal wagon. Tam-tam watched this personage mount nimbly up to the rear platform of the trade-king's royal wagon and go within.

Tam-tam weighed the seized spear in her hand. There was a roaring in her, a joy and rage, fathomless, rising. She considered that if she allowed herself the weapon, she might kill any number of undeserving caravaneers, to her diminishment in Jakko Orange's esteem. She placed the spear-point upon the hard ground and snapped off the spearhead with her foot, and then gave herself over to her fury.

The next guard was on horse and came riding her down. She leapt to meet him. The broken spear in her hand was footed with a heavy brass knob. She thrust with this, took the guard in the cheek below his left eye and tumbled him off his horse. She caught the horse's saddle with her bare toes and threw her arm around its neck. She had never sat a horse before in this life, but her body settled low on its neck by instinct or ancient memory and she barked in its ear, and when it reared on its hind legs and came down again she clung on.

A third guard intercepted her. She leaned hard on the horse's head and it spun, kicked, bucked, and at last threw her off. The guard dove one way and Tam-tam tumbled another. She rolled up onto her feet among the steady surging legs of a drove of buffalo. She clambered up the massive side of one,



though the buffalo considered this a great indignity and would not have suffered it had he not been held rigid in his yoke and stays. He roared and shook. He tried to stop, or turn, but was dragged along, his hooves plowing furrows in the hard-packed roadbed.

Tam-tam stood on his back, rolling like a sailor on deck. Guards on horse were converging, shouting uselessly. Across a long expanse of surging backs she saw the wagon's drover come to his feet in his box. He had a whip. Tam-tam immediately recognized this weapon as her worst and most dangerous enemy, but with measured attention and no fear. In any case, the drover did not yet think to use it on a little girl.

From here she could see the order of the buffalo drove. They were yoked in columns and lines to four gigantic poles, the trunks of great straight pines, by which they carried along the enormous wagon. Each of these four masts was flexibly joined to the wagon's understructure by a complicated truck and massive chains.

Tam-tam rolled and bounced on the backs of the buffalo until she reached the nearest of the great masts. This she ran along, toward the wagon. The drover, still standing, whip still unremembered, watched her coming with his mouth agape. She reached the truck joining the mast to the wagon and crouched down. Now the drover had to lean out over the railing of his box to see her. He was high above her and Tam-tam knew that at this angle, when he saw what she was about and thought of his whip, he would have trouble hitting her with it.

She quickly identified the lynch of the truck, an innocent wooden pin with a brass loop that kept a



much larger locking structure from rattling open. She hooked its loop with two fingers and jerked it free, and all at once the drover above her screamed and uncoiled his whip. Tam-tam used her broken-off spear to lever open the locking structure, shoved it further in as a wedge to hold it open, and dropped off. She landed lightly on the ground and above her the truck she had sabotaged began to come apart. The weight of a quarter-drove of marching buffalo fell on wooden parts undesigned to bear it, on mere rings bolted to mere boards. There were grinding and splintering noises. Chains strained and popped. Tam-tam didn't wait, but ran in a crouch underneath the wagon as it rolled forward.

None of the hundred wagons of the merchant train were moving any faster than a person could walk, but their momentum was inconceivable. The disaster that followed was slow but absolute. This wagon, unbalanced, turned inexorably to its right, and before its buffalo could be brought to stop they

had pulled it off the roadbed onto the unpacked slope below, where its wheels sank. The next wagon tried to swerve and pass it on the left, but could not make so nimble a maneuver, and was forced to come to a stop itself; the wide roadway was fully blocked. The next wagon must stop, then the next, then the next, and by then the wagons that had already passed heard the overseers' blasting horns and must stop themselves too.

At this hour, only a quarter of the merchant train was about their duty. The disruption, though, and the blasting horns of the overseers, roused the rest. Soon it was a bedlam of ten thousand souls, and the roaring chaos of the merchant train before the disaster seemed like chirping birds to the chaos now. They would be seventeen days reordering themselves and getting back into motion.

Tam-tam was able to make a casual escape. She saw one overseer sobbing freely.

Sometime close to dawn, Tam-tam found Jakko Orange. She tracked him away from the disaster of the merchant train, up out of the valley. She gave one pack of jackal-boys wide lenience, avoided another creature like a tall wading crane who called like a lost child, and finally caught up with him sitting whistling cheerily beside a small pool and stream. She crept up on him but he knew she was there and made room for her to sit beside him.

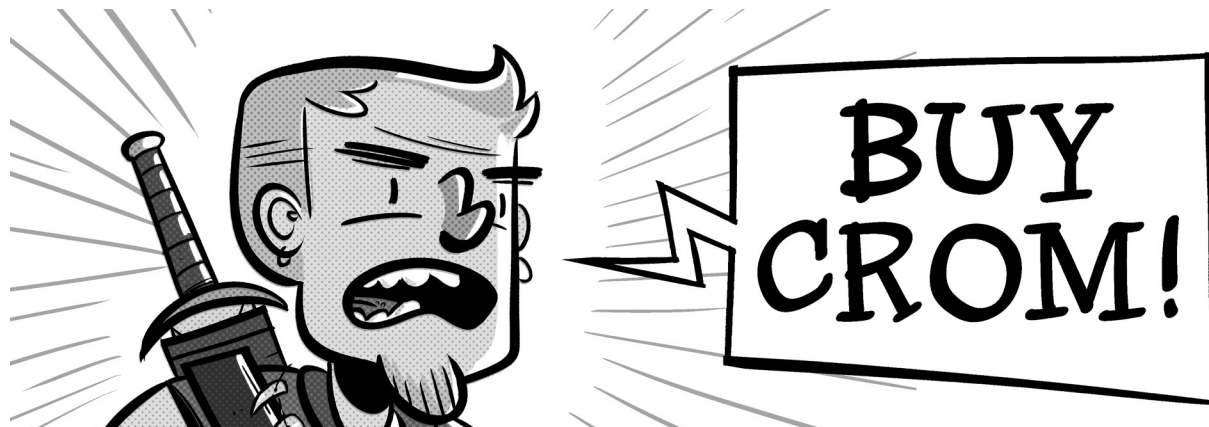
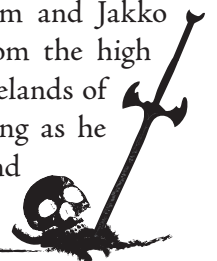
"That was very well done, niece," he said. "By the time the king Alet Becrada knew me and howled for his guards, there were none to come to him."

"It was my pleasure, uncle. Were you able to conduct your business with him undisturbed?"

"I was, and I thank you. The king, I am sad to tell you, was in poor grace! I think he found my visit an inconvenience. And perhaps your visit an even greater inconvenience. Nevertheless I brought you a present from his table." Jakko Orange gave Tam-tam a small package, a syrupy confection wrapped in an embroidered napkin.

He had a second package, also wrapped in an embroidered napkin. This he did not mention or share with her.

So it was that at dawn Tam-tam and Jakko Orange began the long walk from the high hills of Taruve north into the lakelands of the Streedings. Jakko Orange sang as he walked, and Tam-tam's hands and face were sticky.



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Oh, The Beating Drum!

by Bryant Paul Johnson.



My dearest Babs, I am so sorry to have missed you at Maslenitsa...

AND I WAS ALL, LIKE, "YER WORSHIP, I'M IN LOVE WITH YOUR NIECE!"



AND THE SPIDER-GOD LOOKED ME IN THE EYE AND SAID, "YOU MAY MARRY MY NIECE, BUT KNOW THIS: HER DOWRY IS A TERRIBLE CURSE OF A THOUSAND YEARS!"

SO SURE, MILK SPOILS IN OUR PRESENCE AND CHILDREN WEEP AT OUR PASSING, BUT WE'VE NEVER BEEN HAPPIER! AND NOW WE'RE EXPECTING SPIDERLINGS!

HO!
SWORDSMEN!



CAN YOU SPARE A PLACE AT YOUR FIRE FOR AN OLD WOMAN?

but I'm afraid I would have made for rather poor company.



OH, WE'RE NO SWORDSMEN, I'M AFRAID.

I TRADED MY SWORD FOR A LOAF OF BREAD THAT DOUBLES AS FLINT, IN A PINCH.

AND I, MINE, FOR SOMETHING THE FARMER ASSURED ME WAS CHEESE.

BUT YOU ARE WELCOME TO OUR FIRE AND OUR FOOD, HOWEVER MEAGER.



This winter has been particularly rough... what joy there once was in my life seems long gone. I don't mean to be a drag.. I am sure I'll snap out of it in time.

munch
munch



I WOULD REPAY YOUR KINDNESS.

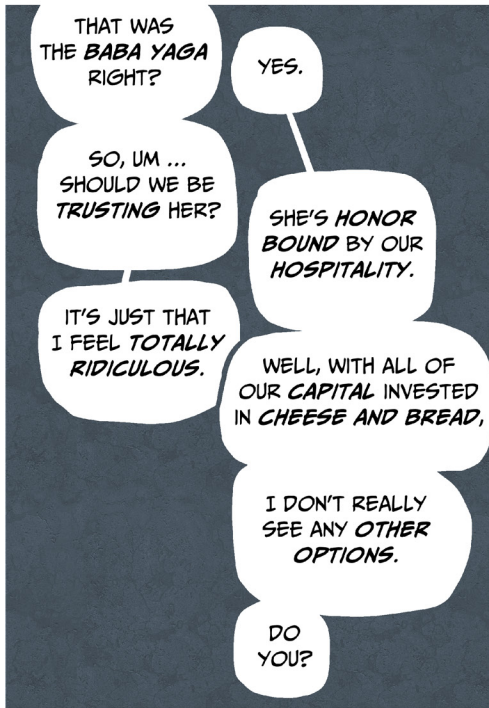
DO YOU KNOW OF THE GIANT ÖLVALDI?

OF COURSE.



So.. I guess I'll see you in the spring. If it ever actually gets here... yr friend, Öllie.

WHAT IF I TOLD YOU HOW YOU COULD STEAL HIS GOLD?



SWORDS WITHOUT MASTER

A game by Epidiah Ravachol

Illustrated by Storn Cook, Ed Heil, & Chris L. Kimball

Gather writing implements, scraps of paper, three or four of your cohorts, and two six-sided dice that you can easily tell apart to a table. A mahogany table adorned with thick, greasy candles and five human skulls. Failing that, a stout oaken table near a glowing hearth, replete with ale-filled steins and a succulent roast. Or, if you prefer, a tabletop chipped whole from a single obsidian stone, placed on the back of a coiled serpent of silver in a room high in a lonely tower shrouded in a prismatic fog.

Choose which among you is the Overplayer. The rest are the Rogue Players. Each player has their own duties and their own set of affordances to aid in fulfilling these duties. Rogue Players champion their rogues and are involved in every decision concerning their rogues' part of the story. They are charged with ensuring that their rogue befits the tale and the tale befits their rogue.

The Overplayer presents a world of wonder for the rogues to explore and perils for the rogues to face. They are responsible for threatening the rogues with violence, death, and worse; for tempting them with the spoils of adventure; and for revealing to them the mysteries of the world at large.

If a rule does not specifically state that it is for the Overplayer or the Rogue Players, then all players must take heed.

OBJECTIVE

Together you will toil to craft an enthralling short story of sword and sorcery. The game is a fickle one. It will, at turns, aid you in this endeavor and stand against you. Keep this in your hearts while playing: your fellow players are your only true allies.



ROGUES, HEROES, EIDOLONS & SIMULACRA

Rogue Creation Part I of IV

All players share a responsibility to the story as both audience and creators. Create rogues that you want to know more about. Fall in love with them. Put them in wondrous and violent situations. And ache to see what happens next.

OVERVIEW

Once you have collected your components, both material and incorporeal, your game starts with a roll. Whether the game begins on blood-caked desert sands while your rogues desperately push back against a band of screaming devils or under the aurora borealis as your rogues slip silently from chill waters to board a slumbering longboat depends upon that first roll and the tone it dictates. Throughout the game, you will be in one tone or another at any given moment. The tone inspires and constrains your narration, gives guidance to the drift of the tale, and in many cases prevents that which you most desire from occurring.

The game is played in three basic phases:

- ◆ The Perilous Phase, wherein the rogues' lives are in danger.
- ◆ The Discovery Phase, wherein in the world is seen through the eyes and experiences of the rogues.
- ◆ The Rogues' Phase, wherein the rogues are unleashed to do what they do best.

The rogues are the heroes of our stories. They are heroes and rogues in the classic sense. Heroes in that they are able to perform mighty deeds beyond the capabilities of normal man. Rogues in the sense that they own no land and are not clearly employed in any respectable sense. In a world where everyone is beholden to someone else—even the thieves to their guildmaster and the king to his subjects—the rogues stand free of such shackles. They live outside the master-slave relationship that is inescapable in the normal social order. This makes them dangerous, intriguing, seductive, and perhaps very useful.

Neither term, hero nor rogue, is a comment on the ethics of these characters. They may be pirates to some, liberators to others. They may be mercenary adventurers, pillagers, or heathens come to despoil a temple. Or they may be saviors, avengers, or godsent aid. It matters not. Rogues are rogues because they do not fit into society and heroes because they are capable of great things.

Rogue Players create their own rogues by first choosing an eidolon or simulacrum. Each rogue needs one. These are things of our world that remind the players of their rogues. It may be an illustration, a miniature, a song, a book, an actor, or any number of other things. They do not have to be direct representations of the rogues. They can be a painting of the aftermath of a battle in which the rogue's father fell, a meal commonly eaten by the rogue's people, or a song that recalls a promise once made to the rogue. All that matters is that it is of our world and reminds you of your rogue.

What happens in each phase is not as important as how it happens. Each phase has its own set of rules that govern your choices and affordances.

There is no order to the phases. It is merely the whim of the Overplayer that determines which phase follows which. You may end a Perilous Phase only to find yourself in the thick of another one.

While rolling for your tones and engaging in the different phases, you will occasionally be called upon to make a thread. These are the moments of fiction that tie our tale together. They are:

- ◆ The Moral, wherein the rogues suffer the unintended consequences of their actions.
- ◆ The Mystery, wherein the unknown briefly reveals itself.
- ◆ Motifs, wherein the moments that most exemplify the glory of sword and sorcery are recorded.

Morals and Mysteries are created when the dice say so. Motifs are created when the narration of a fellow player inspires you to create one. Once enough Motifs have been recorded, it is the beginning of the end. So keep a keen ear and be swift to record

whenever your fellow players' narration evokes that sense of wonder, danger or adventure that drew you to the sword-and-sorcery genre in the first place.

During the end game, the tones and phases work just as before, but the threads take on new purpose. They are woven back into the story, perhaps illustrating that the rogues have learned hard lessons, perhaps laying a mystery bare, or perhaps making good on foreshadowed events. When enough threads have been reincorporated, the game and your tale has come to an end.

BONES & TONES

There are two dice and two tones:

- ◆ Glum—cold, quiet, gloomy, dark, or ironic
- ◆ Jovial—warm, loud, joyous, bright, or mocking

Each tone is championed by one of the dice. Before your story begins, agree on which die represents which. In this text, Glum is the black die [6] and Jovial, the white [3], but this is not necessarily how you may wish to divide yours up. Glum may be represented by muted earth-tones or cooler colors such as blues or violets. Jovial may be represent by bright or garish colors. Your Glum may gleam like the starry night and your Jovial may be the dark crimson of freshly spilt blood. Whatever you choose, make it memorable, and make sure everyone is aware.

Once rolled, the high die will be your tone. Mark it well. If the Overplayer rolled, the result is the Overtone—the tone for the Overplayer and anyone else who has yet to roll. If a Rogue Player rolled, the resulting tone is their own. It may reinforce or

ALL THAT DESERVES A NAME

Rogue Creation Part II of IV

Name your rogue and record this for all to see.

Then, name all that matters to the rogue and record this next to your rogue's name. Name a weapon, a mount, a companion, a lover, a foe, a spell, a land, a song, a drink, etc.

All that is named here has the same affordances and constraints that your rogue has, and they may suffer for it. Most importantly, none may slay, maim, or otherwise permanently alter them without your permission. Additionally, you decide which of your fellow players—including yourself—plays and narrates for them at any given moment during the game.

You may add new names to this list as the tale progresses, but only after the Overplayer has answered a question about them in a Discovery Phase or they have been included in someone's demand during a Rogues' Phase.

contrast the Overtone. It remains that player's tone until they roll again or the Overtone changes.

Handling the Bones

As you play, the dice are passed back and forth between the players. Roll the dice to seize the attention of your fellow players and to bend the tale to your will. Always roll before you decide what to do. After you roll, leave the dice on the table for all to see. They serve as a reminder to your fellow players of the tone you are currently narrating in, as well as of any threads you may need to create.

Each phase has its own rules for when the dice can be picked back up and passed on to another player. Until that time, the player who rolled the dice has the narration. Attend to what this player is saying.

Affordances & Constraints

Heed the following affordances and constraints regardless of your tone or phase.

That which is permissible:

- ◆ *Overplayer's Iron Fist.* While setting up a phase, the Overplayer narrates as they please. Where the rogues are, why they are there, who is with them, what condition they are in, and what is happening is all at the Overplayer's discretion during this beginning part of a phase. This is the only time the Overplayer wields such control over the rogues.
- ◆ *Rogue Players Unbound.* After rolling the dice, all characters not named by another Rogue Player are fair game. If you are the Rogue Player rolling the dice, your focus is on your rogue and what they are doing, but you may also tell us how other characters react to or are affected by your rogue's actions, as long as these characters are not under the purview of other Rogue Players. Or you may defer this responsibility to the Overplayer. The choice is yours.

A SENSUSAL FEAST

The tones themselves are not precisely defined categories. They should be an exercise in personal interpretation. Here are just a few examples of some possible interpretations.



Still, moody, muted, cool, introspective, understated, entangled, ensorcelled, sorrowful, lonely, melancholic, eerie, chilling, foreboding, beckoning, strange.

The gray-green sky just before a storm, a starlit path, whispers from forgotten languages, the blade drawn swiftly across the throat, stifled laughing, gentle weeping, subtle enchantments, erudite conversation, the furtive glances of new lovers, a song sung in a minor key, a book enjoyed by candlelight, armies awaiting each other in the rain.



Vibrant, passionate, cacophonous, hot, boastful, seized, spellbound, crowded, mirthful, terrifying, painful, clear, cheerful, welcoming, aggressive, familiar.

Sun-drenched plains, a road heavily trafficked by trade caravans, eldritch names screamed from spire-top, the sure heft of a swinging axe, mirthful wrestling, open sobbing, flagrant magicks, carousing, a flirtatious laugh, a song sung in a major key, the swell of the sea in a storm, the chaos of the battlefield, oaths and forbidden curses, the arterial spray from a now-headless foe.

- ◆ *A Rogue Never Rests.* You do not need the dice to tell us what your rogue is doing or how they are reacting to something. You cannot boldly affect the fiction as you can with the dice and you should focus on the player with the dice, but do not let your rogue disappear whenever you do not have the dice yourself.

That which is not permissible:

- ◆ *Knowing the Mind of a Rogue.* No one may tell you what your rogue is thinking or feeling. They may go so far as to tell you what your rogue is compelled by sorcery to think or feel, but ultimately this most private of realms is yours and yours alone.
- ◆ *The Rogues of Others.* In your narration, you may not narrate the actions or thoughts of another's rogue. You may invite them to join you and even suggest how. However, the other rogues' players must narrate for their rogues. They may either narrate as invited or decline, but they cannot significantly alter your narration. If you hold the bones, you are still in charge.
- ◆ *Death is No Easy Task.* None may slay, maim, or otherwise permanently alter your rogue without your permission. Likewise, you may not sacrifice your rogue upon the altar of the tale without someone offering you a chance of death. During the Perilous Phase, this offer is always on the table.

The Tone of Your Narration

As tones, Glum and Jovial should not be strictly interpreted. Each encompasses a larger constellation of attitudes, moods, and descriptive details as suggested by "A Sensual Feast" above.

When narrating in a tone, do not attempt to incorporate all of the different elements of the tone. Instead, embrace a single point within the constellation that inspires you and really hit on it. Do not be shy or subtle about it.

You are about to enter the longhouse of a jarl who has made several attempts on your life. This is a moment of triumph and possibly revenge. Within, the jarl is warm and feasting with his men and family.

▣◻ This is not a moment for Glum's understated qualities, but you do roll Glum, so you focus on its foreboding attributes. "I open

the oak doors and the winter wind enters with me, extinguishing several candles and bringing the merry chatter to a halt. 'Leave,' I whisper, and it echoes in the silence of the hall. After a moment or two of astonishment, the children are ushered out the back, and the fighting men and women slowly arm themselves and close to the jarl's side."

If your tone is the opposite of the Overtone, the easiest way to hit it is to demonstrate how at odds it is with everyone else's tone.

The Overtone is Glum and you are in the middle of a somber battle in the rain. A compatriot is

dead, and your companions are trying to drag the body away while you stave off a pack of ravenous ghouls.

☉☐ You roll Jovial and spend a moment taking in the scene before hitting your tone. “The cold rivulets run down our backs. All we can hear is the rain pinging off our helms and shields, and the slow, labored sloshing of the body being pulled along the ground. Even the ghouls mute their slaving, as if out of respect for the meal they seek. But I, I break out in a crackling laugh. The ghouls have brought me a much desired distraction from this oppressive melancholy, and I thank them for it with my eager blade.”

Heed the tone as best you can, but do not be timid about playing with it, finding its edges and new interpretations.

After the bones are rolled, they are left on the table for this very reason. Your fellow players are made aware of your tone so that they listen more carefully for the moment you hit it. They are not here to judge how closely you hewed to the tone. They want you to hit it. They will reach with you and aid you however they can.

Ties, Stymies, Mysteries & Escalations

Whenever a tie is rolled, regardless of who rolled it, the Overtone flips to the other tone and everyone’s tone shifts to this new tone.

When a Rogue Player rolls a tie, that player stymies their rogue and the Overplayer marks this dramatic shift with an escalation.

A stymied rogue is temporarily unable to accomplish whatever it is they were attempting.

FEATS HEROIC

Rogue Creation Part III of IV

Once you have an eidolon or simulacrum and you have named all that warrants a name, you must prove your rogue’s worth. Ponder your rogue’s dual nature and consider how your rogue might behave in a dire situation. Perhaps a phalanx of spearmen have them cornered in a narrow mountain pass. Or a priest of a long-forgotten god has just whispered their names to a hunting beast. Or a rockslide threatens to entomb them in desert cave.

Think of one Glum way in which your rogue may deal with a situation such as this, and then one Jovial way. Record these. They are your rogue’s Feats Heroic. Every rogue has two: one Glum and one Jovial. They are not something the rogue has done, or will always do, but something they may do when called upon.

Once, and only once, during any given game, each Rogue Player may invoke one of their rogue’s Feats Heroic right after they have cast the dice. Ignore those dice, their tone, and whatever threads may result from them. Instead, carry on as if you had rolled the tone for whichever feat you chose to use. Then incorporate this feat into your narration.

Afterward, cross that feat out. You may no longer call upon your Feats Heroic in this tale, and if you wish to play this rogue again in a future adventure, you must write a new Feat Heroic to replace the one just used.

Each phase deals with this in slightly different ways, but for all phases that rogue’s player is the one that narrates the stymie and it does not have to mean the rogue failed outright. It can be but a setback, a tactical slip, or momentary oversight. Should the Rogue Player wish it, it can be corrected. Though, if the Rogue Player prefers, it may be an undeniable failure.

If the tie is a pair of ones, twos or threes, then the stymie is also a Mystery and the reasons the rogue is thwarted is either unknown or of supernatural origin. See “The Threads” section for more details.

The Rogue Player’s description of the stymie may be enough of an escalation, but if the Overplayer

feels there should be more, they may take a moment to hit the tone with a detail or two about the increasing tension before proceeding with the rest of the phase.

Should the Overplayer roll a tie while rolling for the Overtone, then the new tone is simply the opposite of the most recent Overtone. There are no stymies, threads or escalations for the Overtone. Should this happen on the first roll of a game, choose the tone that best fits the current mood of all the players.

☐☐ *The previous phase ended with an energetic pursuit across shifting desert sands. After rolling a tie for the Overtone, the Overplayer flips the tone to Glum and sets the new phase in a dimly*

lit tavern where the weary rogues are hoping to regroup and learn what their next move shall be.

☰ ☱ In an attempt to elicit information from another patron, a Rogue Player rolls a tie and describes the patron belching loudly in the rogue's face, hitting the new Jovial tone. To provide for the escalation, the Overplayer says it is clear that the locals do not want the rogues around and a raucous brawl ensues.

☰ ☱ A moment or two later in the brawl, another Rogue Player rolls a tie, flipping the Overtone back to Glum, and describes how their rogue's attempt to tackle a rather large local is thwarted when that local draws a knife. This escalation is clear, and Overplayer only adds that the tavern grows silent with deadly intent.

THE PHASES

Throughout the game, you will be in one phase or another. They are the beating heart of your tale. From the roll for the first Overtone until the last thread is reincorporated, you are in the following rhythm.

1. Roll for the Overtone

Begin each phase with the Overplayer rolling for the Overtone. This is the tone that will color the Overplayer's narration, the introduction of the phase, and the tone of each rogue until they have rolled for their own tone. Take a piece of paper, inscribe Glum on one side and Jovial on the other, and let this serve as a reminder of the current Overtone. During a phase, whenever someone rolls a tie, this will flip, there will be a new Overtone that all the players adhere to until they get to roll the dice again.

THE UNSURE MEASUREMENTS OF TIME & DISTANCE

Your phases need not occur in chronological order. The occasional flashbacks to explain current events and flashforwards to foreshadow inevitable dooms are welcome. More than one tale has begun with the ending and moved on tell us how our heroes got so entangled in their destiny. When setting the scenes for these phases unstuck in time, take care to also include when they occur in relation to the phases you have already played.

Within a phase, you are not moored in any particular scene. A phase—typically a Rogues' Phase, but any phase—can carry your tale across gulfs of time and space. It may begin upon a local shore, end in a foreign desert, and cross jungle and tundra to get there. The scene set at the beginning of each phase only marks where the phase begins.

Nor must there be any distance between the one phase and the next. An entire adventure can take place high upon a hill in the time it takes for the sun to set.

After making this roll, leave the dice upon the table. Do not pick them up until the Thunder roars.

2. Choose the Phase

It is the Overplayer's privilege to decide, at the beginning of your tale and whenever a phase ends, what phase will follow. There is no particular order to the phases, one phase may be followed by the same sort of phase, and there is no need to include all types of phases in every game. The Overplayer chooses a phase that best serves the story, a phase that follows most naturally from the previous phase, a phase that contrasts a previous phase, or a phase the Overtone suggests to them. If in doubt:

- ◆ Choose the Perilous Phase when you are restless or in search of bloodletting.
- ◆ Choose the Discovery Phase when you are directionless or in search of wonder.
- ◆ Choose the Rogues' Phase when you wish to wander and seek adventure.

When playing your first adventure, start with a Perilous Phase, followed by a Discovery Phase, and then a Rogues' Phase before continuing with the Overplayer's whim.

3. Set the Scene

Taking care to hit the Overtone, the Overplayer sets the scene, telling us:

- ◆ where the rogues are,
- ◆ who is there with them,
- ◆ why they are there,
- ◆ and what is happening.

Lavishly describe the world around the rogues, focusing on details that emphasize the Overtone. Do not elaborate overly much on what the rogues are doing. Merely say what is going on the moment the scene begins, why it is happening, and perhaps the condition the rogues are in. Leave what happens next to the Rogue Players.

4. Let Peel the Thunder

The Overplayer now reveals the Thunder and picks up the dice. The Thunder is some threat in the near distance that the rogues may or may not have to contend with. This could be something specific, like a dust cloud on the horizon that denotes a horde of foes riding hard to meet the rogues in battle; or it could be something vague but foreboding, such as the sound of scratching in the walls. The lives led by rogues are dangerous lives. So there is a Thunder in each one of the basic phases—a constant reminder that a threat awaits them at every turn.

The Overplayer need not be concerned about the true nature the Thunder. Offer a taste of something foreboding and leave the explanations for later. Often the Thunder will not even come to fruition, and when it does, it is just as likely that a Rogue Player will end up revealing its cause.

The dice are picked up as the Thunder is announced. This is to cue everyone at the table in on the importance of what might be as innocuous a detail as the sound of something dripping. Do not hide the Thunder from the other players.

5. Enter the Phase

Turn now to the chosen phase and follow its rules. The phase will tell you what happens immediately following the Thunder all the way through to the end of the phase. Once the phase is over, roll for a new Overtone and begin again.

Individual phases have no set time limit. You can begin a phase and end it after the very first Rogue Player has finished their roll. Or you can have a phase that lasts most of the game.

TRICKS OF THE TRADE

Rogue Creation Part IV of IV

Finally, a rogue needs a unique trick. Tricks are twists in the rules that the Rogue Player may call upon to seize the story. You will find tricks scattered throughout the sidebars in this game, each with their own rules on when and how to apply them. Choose one for your rogue and confer with your fellow players so that no two rogues have the same trick. When a trick asks you to write something down—a location, a foe, a tone, a feat—this must be created and recorded before the first Overtone is rolled.

Keep your trick close at hand. Look for opportunities to use it, to shake up the game, to bring the story back on track, or to refocus the tale on your rogue. Do not let caution hold you back. Do not wait for a perfect moment. But do not regret an unused trick. There will be ample opportunity in future adventures.

Most tricks are only used once in the course of a game. The exceptions are noted in their descriptions. Regardless, after a trick is used in a game, a new trick must be chosen before the rogue can be played again. No rogue may have the same trick twice in a row.

TRICKS OF SPACE, TIME & TONE

Locus—*Write down a setting. A longboat half-submerged in a frozen bog. An ancient and slick temple hidden by a towering waterfall. Standing stones in a warm summer storm. A site of wonder, a locale familiar to the rogue, or just a place you wish to see. Before the Overplayer sets the scene on a new phase, you may demand that it takes place here.*

Omen—*Write down a Thunder, some ill portent or distant threat. A winged silhouette in a crimson sunset. Statues that bleed when touched. A menacing glare from a blind man. Before the Thunder is provided for a new phase, you may demand that it be this.*

Unparalleled—*Replace Glum or Jovial with a tone of your own devising. Brooding. Maniacal. Enduring. Chilling. This is your rogue's tone whenever you roll this result. You still adhere to the Overtone until you roll, but should you roll a tie, then the Overtone flips to this tone. Do not discard this trick until after the game ends.*

Undenied—*Write another Feat Heroic for one of your tones. This feat may be used once in addition to the usual use of one feat per game. When it is used, the Overtone immediately becomes the same tone as this feat, changing everyone's tone to match.*

THE PERILOUS PHASE

Summary

☰☱ The Overplayer rolls a Jovial Overtone and leaves the bones where they lie. The previous phase had been a surprisingly introspective one and it is time to get the blood pumping. So the Overplayer chooses the next phase to be a Perilous one and sets the scene.

“You find yourselves, two days hence, traveling with a caravan across the jagged wastelands, having traded your skills as guards for a few meager meals and a known route to the lands beyond. The sun gleams sharply off of shattered rock that surrounds you and almost distracts you from the cacophony of chirping insects that has been slowly building since you began your journey here.”

The Overplayer then picks up the dice, indicating the rising sound of the insects is the Thunder. Time now for the phase to begin in earnest.

THE PERILOUS PHASE

No one leads an easy life. The harsh conditions under which slave, peasant, serf, and vassal toil do not make one stronger, just more gnarled and diseased with age. The soft luxuries of the emperors, sorcerer queens, and overlords make them targets of vicious jealousies and assassins. No noble, merchant, thief, heir, or journeyman is a stranger to death’s ever-present shadow, but none are more familiar with it than the rogues.

While the rogues do not always trade in violence, it is an inevitable part of their lives. Someone, somewhere, awaits them with keen blade or malicious magic. To say nothing of the myriad of beasts and abhorrent monsters that lurk in the stranger corners of the world.

The rogue’s lives are on the line.

- ◆ The Overplayer brings the Storm whenever a Rogue Player is not narrating.
- ◆ Without the dice, rogues slip and struggle against the Storm.
- ◆ Roll to interrupt the Overplayer and deal with the Storm on your terms.
- ◆ Pick up the dice when you are done.
- ◆ Do not roll the dice again until someone else has, but hold on to the dice until you feel the time is right to pass them.
- ◆ The phase ends if the Rogue Player who just rolled chooses to end it by handing the dice to the Overplayer.

Audience Desires

- ◆ To see the rogues in danger.

Rogue Players’ Duty

- ◆ To demonstrate your foes’ indomitability.

Rogue Players’ Opportunities

- ◆ To overcome the indomitable.
- ◆ To succumb to your hardship.
- ◆ To have a glorious death.

Overplayer’s Duty

- ◆ To threaten the rogues.
 - ◆ To present real and interesting foes.
-

Overview

The Overplayer puts the rogues in peril while the Rogue Players pass the dice back and forth, rolling when they wish to interrupt and briefly seize control of the narration.

Starting the Phase

After presenting the Thunder and picking up the dice, the Overplayer hands the dice to one of the Rogue Players and then brings the Storm.

Bringing the Storm

The Storm is a threat that, unlike the Thunder, is present and immediate. It could be something obvious that must be dealt with now, like a charging

boar or armed temple guards awoken after centuries of sleep; it could be a threat of violence that cannot be avoided without certain action, like sneaking past vigilant night watchmen or persuading a paranoid king to spare your life. The Storm must be something that cannot be ignored, something that must be dealt with before moving on.

During the Perilous Phase, the Overplayer has the reins until a Rogue Player rolls the dice. Use this time to describe what the Storm is doing, how it is progressing, and what effect it has on the rogues. This Storm and the rogues’ struggle with it is the focus of the phase. So give them a threat they can sink their teeth into. Describe in loving detail what it can bring to bear, leaving room for the Rogue Players to interject their own rogue’s reactions.

Be sure to:

- ◆ Present a credible threat,
- ◆ Hit the Overtone,
- ◆ And make clear the consequences of the Storm left undeterred.

The Rogue Player holding the dice will wait until they have heard something worthy of their rogue's attention or until they can suffer the Storm no longer. The Overplayer should put pressure on this player by gradually escalating the Storm and threatening their allies, wealth, lovers, or whatever they hold dear. If it is named on the rogue's sheet, it is imperiled by this phase.

Slipping & Struggling

Once the phase has begun, how a rogue behaves, reacts, thinks, and feels is entirely up to that rogue's player. While the Overplayer is bringing the Storm, Rogue Players describe the Storm's exact effect on the rogues. They may fight with it, flee from it, suffer under its blade, or rail hopelessly against it. They may not overcome or succumb to it without rolling the dice first.

The Overplayer may also ask individual Rogue Players questions about their rogues and their actions during this phase.

Keep these moments of Rogue Player narration brief and solely about the rogue's reaction to the Storm. Play to emphasize the Overplayer's descriptions. Save the spectacular moments of triumph or defeat for when the dice are rolled. You are confined to the middle of this spectrum:

Succumb—Slipping—Struggling—Overcome

DRIZZLING

Rogue Players, should you face a Storm that is unworthy of your rogue's attention, roll the dice and dispatch it immediately. Send a clear signal to the Overplayer that such opponents are beneath you. But do not cleave through a worthy threat so swiftly. Anything you deal with in a single roll the Overplayer will cast aside. So show your interest in a Storm by letting it rain for several rolls.

Overplayer, should a Rogue Player destroy your Storm out of hand, steel your heart and come at them from a new angle. They wipe clean a field of foot soldiers, only to see them rise again under eldritch command. The assassin so quickly cut down was mere distraction from the real foe now making off with the rogues' hard-earned spoils. If you need inspiration, draw the Thunder to you so that it may Storm.

Handling the Bones

Upon opening the phase, the Overplayer hands the dice to one of the Rogue Players. Who receives these dice is up to the Overplayer's whim. It may not be the rogue presently being harried by the Storm. It may not be the rogue in the best position to deal with the Storm. It may not be the rogue that makes the most sense.

As long as a Rogue Player holds onto the dice, the Overplayer is free to bring the Storm. Making sure to hit the Overtone, the Overplayer continues escalating the Storm, threatening the rogues and then following through on those threats.

Timing is everything. The Overplayer's narration must stop the moment the dice are rolled. There is no rewinding. If the Overplayer narrates a spear piercing your rogue's flesh before you rolled the dice, then you have a grievous wound to deal with.

The only thing the Overplayer cannot narrate without your permission is the slaying, maiming, or any otherwise permanent and significant alteration

of something named on your rogue sheet, including most importantly your rogue. But all manner of wounds and suffering abound.

Once those dice are rolled, the Rogue Player who rolled them seizes the reins. Now they are unleashed, free to narrate through the entire spectrum of responses to the Storm and, if they so desire, they may narrate just how the Storm reacts to their rogue's actions. As long as they hit their tone and have the permission of the players of any rogues they include in their narration, they are free to take the story wherever they please. Slay their enemy! Struggle with them! Tear them down or fall beneath their blades! The choice is now theirs.

Then, the Rogue Player who just rolled, picks up the dice to indicate they are done and the Overplayer should bring more Storm. If this Rogue Player chose not to describe how their rogue's actions affected the storm, the Overplayer starts by describing just that.

The Overplayer is still ruled by the Overtone, even if the Rogue Player just rolled a different tone for

themselves. The Rogue Player keeps their new tone for any slipping and struggling they have ahead of them until they roll the dice again.

No Rogue Player may roll the dice twice in a row. The Rogue Player who just narrated and picked up the dice must pass them off to a new Rogue Player before the Storm can be interrupted again. But they do not have to pass right away. As long as they hold the dice, no rogue may do better than struggling against the Storm. The Overplayer should seize this opportunity and push the Storm until the dice are passed and the new Rogue Player feels they can wait no longer to roll the dice.

This is the deadly dance of the Perilous Phase. The Rogue Players holding the dice, daring the Overplayer to lunge at them with the Storm, and then rolling to lay into it. Back and forth to the rhythm of the battle until . . .

Ending the Phase

It falls to the Rogue Players to decide when the Perilous Phase ends. End it by handing the dice to the Overplayer instead of another Rogue Player.

What is happening in your tale the moment you choose to end it could have considerable impact on how the Overplayer begins the next phase. You may choose triumphant moments, Pyrrhic moments, or moments of defeat. You may wait until you are satisfied, but do not wait until you are bored with the battle. Above all else, choose interesting moments.

The decision of when to end the phase lies solely in the hands of the Rogue Player about to pass the dice. It is the Overplayer's duty to interpret what that moment means.

SHIELDS, SCARS & OTHER GLORIES

When a rogue can afford it, when weather and conditions allow for it, she will always opt for a decent suit of mail and a sturdy shield. To do otherwise is to invite your enemy's blades into your belly.

A shield is an investment in future glory. While slipping or struggling, a shield can be battered, wrested from a rogue, cleft in half, or scorched. A shield becomes a near miss, a hair's-breadth escape. It becomes an unambiguous demonstration of the present peril.

The more dangerous a foe, the more armor it tears away, the more scars it carves into the flesh, the more of your allies lie in its wake, the greater the glory to be had in its defeat. So look for opportunities to better equip your rogues and surround them with armies. Then seek challenges that will tear and rend those armies and that gear away.

Perilous Stymies

Intentions are never declared before the dice are rolled in a Perilous Phase. When a tie is rolled and a rogue is thwarted from doing what they had planned to do, their Rogue Player should honestly assess what that means. Here is an opportunity for the Rogue Player to invest their foe with glory. Demonstrate a foe of lethal cunning, brute strength, unmatched sorceries or sheer indomitability and you will be richly rewarded when they are finally vanquished. Use your stymies well.

☐☐■ A Jovial Overtone is rolled. The Overplayer sets up a Perilous Phase, "Jewels, gems, and ancient coins are piled as high as your brow in the center of the chamber. You have traveled far and fought long to reach this moment here, in a long-forgotten temple. But you are here now and treasure glimmers before you in the sunlight that seeps through the cracks in the crumbling stone walls."

The Overplayer picks up the dice, indicating the crumbling stone walls are the Thunder, "Thoton and Mareve run through the bones and scattered detritus of long past sacrificial rites and greedily pounce upon the hoard, while Sussuan is engrossed by the worn glyphs on the temple walls. None of you give heed to the giant malachite statue that begins to shift in the dusty corners of the room."

The Overplayer hands the dice to Thoton's Player and brings the Storm, "At first the statue moves unheard over the cacophony of your celebrations, but soon the sunlight glints off of its polished surface and draws your attention."

Mareve's player slips, "I scurry to where I dropped my shield at the foot of the treasure pile."

"The statue pins the shield to the ground with a massive foot and brings its spear to bear upon you." The Overplayer glances at Thoton's player, but they are not ready to roll the dice just yet. "It strikes with uncanny speed—"



Unwilling to perish here, the Mareve's player struggles some more, "Back-peddling on all fours, I clamber up the treasure pile."

The Overplayer continues with the Storm, "The statue misses you, its spear plunging into the pile and showering you with coin and gems. As you scramble, its strikes get closer and closer and start to draw blood until—"

❖❖ Thoton's Player rolls Glum and interrupts the Overplayer, "Its world goes dark! While the statue was preoccupied with Mareve, I leapt from the top of the pile and covered its head with the sack I brought to haul away my share of the treasure. The sudden darkness causes it to pause and take stock of the situation."

Thoton's player picks up the dice and the Overplayer returns to the Storm in the Jovial Overtone. "The statue howls a sickening sound and claws the sack off its head. It cranes its neck, spots Thoton and—"

The dice are swiftly passed from on Thoton's player to Mareve's.

"—drives the butt of its spear—"

❖❖ Mareve's player interrupts, but rolls a tie. Mareve had intended to return the favor and save Thoton, but a tie means this is thwarted. It also means the Overtone has flipped to Glum and this change in tone is part of an escalation. "Before it hits Thoton with the spear, I try to kick the shield out from underneath it to knock it off its balance, but it sees me coming and knocks me out cold." With a mischievous grin, Mareve's player hands the bones to the Overplayer, ending the phase on this low note.

THE DISCOVERY PHASE

To wander the world and sample its great and mysterious wonders. To unearth lost and forgotten treasure or lore. To witness the astounding, vile, or bizarre. To foresee treachery and brutality before it becomes reality. There are secrets tucked into every corner of the world and the rogues often have sharper eyes than most for such things, honed to seek out the slightest sign of danger and the promising glint of reward.

Discoveries can occur anywhere, in a dusty library of scrolls made delicate by age, amid the din of an active battlefield, in a solitary prison cell, or in a crowded tavern. Any location is ripe for exploration or revelation. Do not wait until the story has reached the proper place for a Discovery Phase. Turn to this phase whenever you are unsure of where the story should lead next, regardless of where the rogues are or what is happening.

Overview

The Rogue Players pass the dice back and forth revealing details about the world or plot through the experiences and knowledge of their rogues. For each of these details, they ask a loaded question of the Overplayer.

Starting the Phase

After providing the Thunder and picking up the dice the Overplayer passes them to a Rogue Player.

Revelation

Unlike the Perilous Phase, there is no Storm to interrupt in the Discovery Phase. The Rogue Player with the dice rolls immediately.

THE DISCOVERY PHASE

Summary

The world or plot is revealed through the experiences of the rogues.

- ◆ A Rogue Player immediately rolls the dice and reveals something their rogue knows or is just now discovering.
- ◆ Then the Rogue Player asks the Overplayer a loaded question about their revelation.
- ◆ The answer the Overplayer gives is known by the rogue.
- ◆ After answering, if the Overplayer chooses to continue the phase, the Rogue Player passes the dice to a new Rogue Player who immediately rolls.
- ◆ After answering, if the Overplayer chooses to end the phase, it ends.

Then, taking care to hit their tone, the Rogue Player describes some significant detail about the world or plot that their rogue either already knows or is just now discovering. This may be whatever strikes their fancy. They can unearth a plot to assassinate an emperor, hear rumors about a distant and unguarded treasure, learn of a lover's betrayal, read omens in the stars, or find a powerful and willful sword at their very feet. They are limited only by the usual affordances and constraints.

Interrogation

Once they have made their revelation, the Rogue Player picks up the dice and then asks the Overplayer a loaded question about the revelation. Do not ask a question that can be answered with a

Audience Desires

- ◆ To learn about the story or setting.

Rogue Players' Duty

- ◆ To bring to the story that which interests you most.

Rogue Players' Opportunities

- ◆ To shape the world.
- ◆ To find the strange and exotic.
- ◆ To shape the plot in unexpected ways.

Overplayer's Duty

- ◆ To place interesting twists on the discoveries.

mere "yes" or "no." The best questions are ones that lead the Overplayer.

I know a ship that will take us as far south as we wish. What vile price will the captain ask of us?

This horn we have found will allow us to hear the private thoughts of any man but one. Who?

The Old Queen has risen after all these centuries and her unliving army marches even now to this very town. Whom does she seek for a groom?

The Overplayer answers the question in the Overtone. These answers are known to the rogue of the player who asked them. They may reveal any or all of these details to their companions, or they may keep their secrets. Either way, the other

players should hear all of it. There may be secrets among rogues, but never among players.

That Which Is Named

During your adventures you may become attached to some new person, place, or thing. You may use the Discovery Phase to offer this new person, place, or thing all the protections and perils that come with being named. Make a revelation about the named and ask the Overplayer a loaded question about it. Upon hearing the Overplayer's answer, you may record the new name next to your rogue's.

Ending the Phase

After answering the loaded question the Overplayer decides if they can see a clear path forward. If they cannot, then the Rogue Player with the dice passes them to a new Rogue Player who immediately rolls.

However, if the rogue's discoveries have revealed to the Overplayer the obvious next step in the tale, if the Overplayer feels they have enough grist for their story mill, then they take the dice and move on to the next phase.

Stymied Discoveries

When a tie is rolled during a Discovery Phase the Rogue Player reveals what their rogue should have known or noticed, but failed to. The Overplayer is still asked a loaded question, but the answer is known only to the Rogue Players, not the rogues.

Like any tie, the Overplayer should note the change in Overtone with an escalation. A brief, ominous detail hitting the new tone should do.

THE UNDREAMT REALITIES

Somewhere across the great gulfs of time and dimension there is a world within which your adventures are just now occurring. What is spoken at your gaming table finds bone and flesh in this strange universe. But what is unspoken remains yet unrealized, even on this distant shore.

Describe to your fellow players a skull encrusted in jewels that shimmers only in moonlight and it exists. Tell them no more and the origin and purpose of the skull remains unwritten, perhaps awaiting another player's voice. Since only that which is spoken is real, all may narrate without fear of treading on another player's unspoken plan, and the voids you leave in your narration can be filled by any player—or left empty for a tale told another day.

There is power in this. Foreshadow, drop hints, deliver half the story and let the other players surprise you with an unexpected reality.

❑❑ A tie is rolled for the Overtone. Since the previous phase ended on a Glum note, this new phase is Jovial. The Overplayer sets it up, "A Discovery Phase. Sore from your battle with the giant statue, you awaken to the sounds of chanting. Each of you are bound to thick stone tables. Dancing above you is a man in a golden reptile mask who is shouting in a strange tongue and waving about an ornate, curved knife."

The Overplayer picks up the dice, indicating that this man, or his knife, is the Thunder. The dice are then passed to Sussuan's player who immediately rolls them.

❑❑ A Glum tone. "With a calm, steady mind, Sussuan whispers the syllables to unlock this alien tongue so the masked man's words can be understood. The intention here would have been obvious even if we could not comprehend his language. We are clearly offerings to be made to his reptile god. This is not the first time Sussuan

has been in this position. Probably not the last. What is most disturbing about his shouting?"

The Overplayer ponders for a moment before answering in the Jovial Overtone, "Though your magic reweaves his words into something you and your companions understand, several of his exclamations remain unaltered, for they are oaths and curses that have survived through the centuries as vile blasphemies though their original meanings have now been lost. The masked man is fluently speaking in a language unheard upon the world in hundreds of years."

The Overplayer is not yet ready to end the phase, so Sussuan's player hands the dice to Mareve's player who immediately rolls them.

❑❑ A Jovial tone. "I thrash against the bindings and crane my head to look about the room, which is no easy task because my left eye is almost swelled over by injuries sustained in our recent tangle with the giant statue. And I laugh

with relief when I spot the nearby pile of coins and gems. It is still here! What do I see that tempers my mirth?"

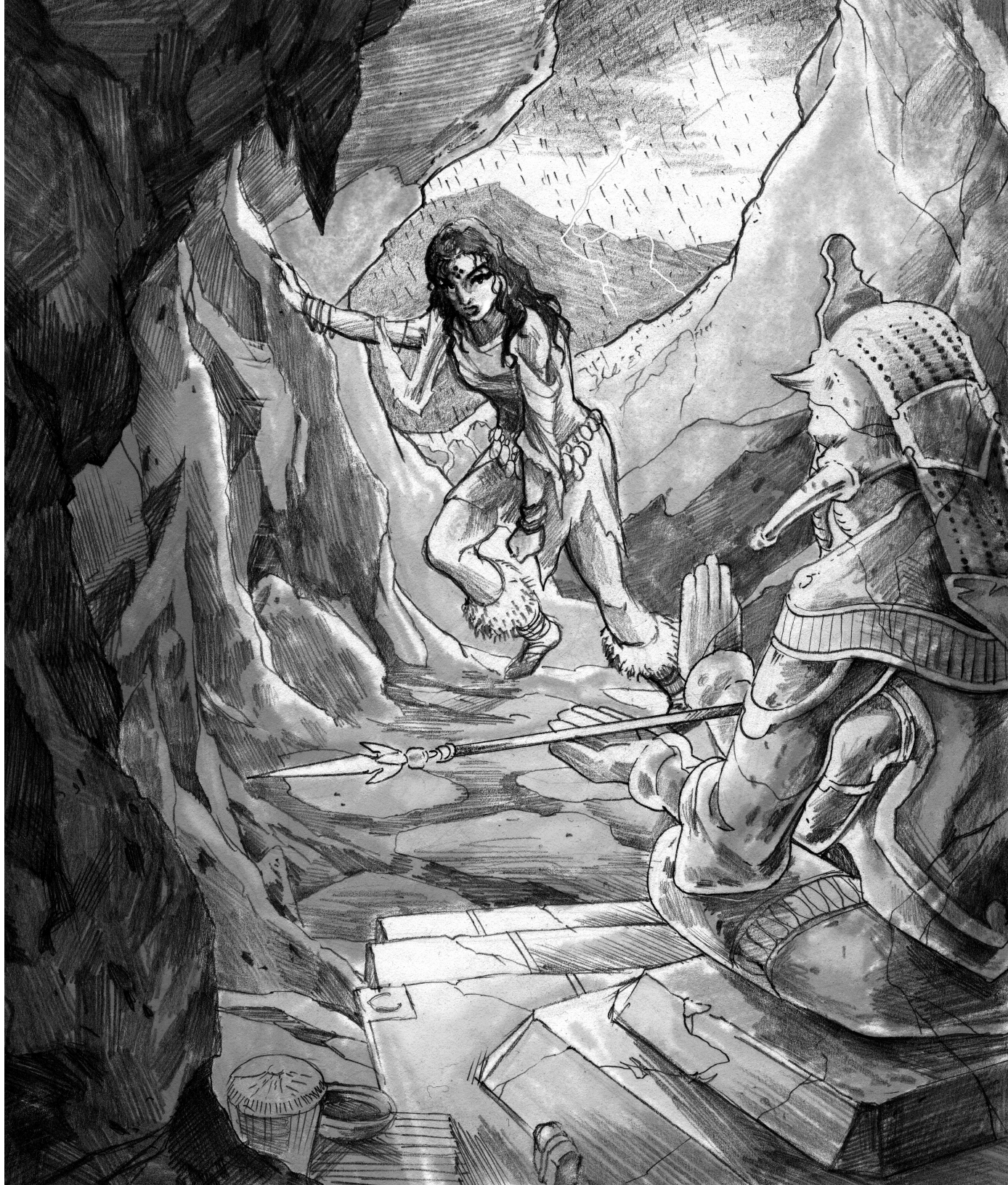
The Overtone is still Jovial, so the Overplayer replies in kind, "There are now two giant malachite statues standing guard over you and observing the ceremony where before you tangled with but one."

Again, the Overplayer wants just a little bit more before ending the phase, so Mareve's player hands the dice to Thoton's player who rolls immediately.

❖❖ A tie. The Overtone flips and everything is now Glum. What's more, Thoton has failed to recall or notice something of import. "The chanting has ceased and the masked man is now slowly waving the curved blade overhead, distracting Thoton from the walls that were once decaying are now solid and sturdy and the lack of dust on everything and that the scattered pile of bones from ancient sacrifices is nowhere to be seen. This is the same room we fought the statue in, just a thousand years earlier. Why have we been drawn back into the past?"

To emphasize both the escalation that follows a tie and the new Glum tone, the Overplayer answers, "Your blood is the blood of an age yet to come. It is meant to appease an alien god and to ensure its slumber so that the world may continue its existence for another thousand years. So that your age may come about."

Satisfied that there is now plenty of potential energy in the story, the Overplayer ends the phase by asking for the dice back.



THE ROGUES' PHASE

Even if the wyrds could seal the rogues' destinies at the moment of their birth, none can predict the exact path they will take to their fate. The unsure and unexpected are as food and drink to the rogues. To live such lives, they must be capable of facing more possibilities than can be accounted for in even the vastest of libraries.

This is the most versatile of the phases. Entire battles are resolved in a single roll. Jealously guarded secrets are aired in the blink of an eye. There is nothing done in another phase that cannot be done in a Rogues' Phase. But it is how a phase does something and not what it can do that makes it important. If you seek the moment-to-moment exchange of a melee or the creeping awe of the witnessing the unknown becoming known, look to the other phases. For everything else adventure can bring, turn to the Rogues' Phase.

Overview

The players hand the dice back and forth making and answering demands to see their rogues take specific actions.

Starting the Phase

After describing the Thunder and picking up the dice, the Overplayer hands them to a Rogue Player while making a demand.

Demands

When you make a demand of a Rogue Player, you are asking them to illustrate their rogue in action. Test their mettle. Seek a demonstration of what you love most about the rogue. Push against the rogue's flaws. Put the rogue in a quandary.

THE ROGUES' PHASE

Summary

The rogues' prowess is illustrated through the demands of the players.

- ◆ *The Overplayer hands the dice to a Rogue Player making a specific demand to see that player's rogue in action.*
- ◆ *The Rogue Player immediately rolls the dice and answers the demand in that tone.*
- ◆ *The Rogue Player may then hand the dice to a new Rogue Player, making a specific demand of their rogue.*
- ◆ *The dice are rolled, the new demand is answered and the cycle continues.*
- ◆ *Between the time when a demand is answered and another is made, any player may request the end of the phase.*

Demands are specific about what is to happen, but leave the how and why it happens up to the player answering the demand.

Typically, demands begin with the ritual phrase "Show us how you..."

Show us how you manage to steal his sword unnoticed.

Show us how you sink the fleet that pursues us.

Show us how you sneak into the camp and seduce the legate.

Show us how you prove to the empress that she can trust you.

Audience Desires

- ◆ *To witness the rogues do what they do best.*

Rogue Players' Duty

- ◆ *To highlight what you love about the other player's rogues.*

Rogue Players' Opportunities

- ◆ *To wander the world.*
- ◆ *To put rogues in intriguing situations.*
- ◆ *To play to the rogues' flaws.*

Overplayer's Duty

- ◆ *To present a wondrous & dangerous world.*

When making a demand, you are not bound by tone, but you must still abide by the affordances and constraints.

All demands made to a Rogue Player must be about their rogue, but they do not have to be about a rogue's action. Some may be purely descriptive.

Show us the weapons you bring with you.

Show us how exhausted you are after that battle.

Show us the way she looks at you.

Most, however, should be about what the rogue does or what is happening to the rogue.

As you are making a demand of a player, hand the dice to that player.

Answering

When a demand is made of you and the dice are handed to you, roll them immediately.

Now describe to the rest of the players just exactly how your rogue makes the events of the demand come about. This is entirely up to you. It may follow from your rogue's prowess, or some spell known to them, or be the result of your rogue's clumsiness. As long as you hit your tone and mind the affordances and constraints, you are free to narrate as you wish.

Some demands may carry with them a very clear offer of death or other permanent change to the rogue.

Show us how you sacrifice yourself so that the villagers may evacuate in time.

Show us how you lost your arm in a bet.

When answering these, you decide whether to accept the offer or to find a different, looser interpretation. A demand can never force you to kill, maim, or otherwise permanently alter your rogue. It can only offer you the opportunity to do so.

Some demands may not carry such a clear offer, but still present a potentially lethal situation.

Show us how you track the macabre beast back to its lair and put an end to it.

In such cases, you may consider death on the table as it is in the Perilous Phase.

Pick the dice up to indicate you have finished answering the demand. If no one requests the end of the phase at this time, make a demand of another player while handing them the dice.

TROOPING & SCALE

By demanding with the ritual phrase "Show us how we..." you are allowing another Rogue Player to include your rogue in their answer. The usual affordances and constraints apply, but the answering player now has permission to suggest ways your rogue is involved in that answer. You may accept or reject these suggestions, but you must still rely on the other player to include your rogue. It is their choice.

When answering a "Show us how we..." demand look to the remaining Rogue Players to see if they wish you to include their rogues as well.

There is much that can be covered with a single roll in the Rogues' Phase, especially while trooping. There will be times when resolving a great many things with a single roll is desirable. But consider first if there is not some smaller part of the task at hand that you are more interested in. "Show us how we storm the tower and slay the sorcerer within" leads to a far different tale than "Show us how you evade its spectral guardians and let us into the tower." Demand the tale you wish to see.

Answers from the Overplayer

Demands may be made of the Overplayer. They are not about a rogue's action, but about the actions and reactions other characters in your tale or about the world at large.

Show us how the Shining Lord receives the gift we left him.

Show us what weather lurks on the horizon.

Show us what foul fate the villagers have met.

The rogues need not be witness to these events.

The dice are handed to the Overplayer, but the Overplayer does not roll them to answer. Instead, the dice are set down and the Overplayer answers in the Overtone. Upon finishing, the Overplayer picks the dice back up and, if no one requests an end to the phase, passes them to another player while making a demand.

That Which Is Named

As you play, a new person, place, or thing may become important to your rogue. You may use the Rogues' Phase to offer this person, place, or thing all the protections and perils that come with being named, but only if someone makes a demand of you that illustrates your rogue's relationship to it.

Show us how the barkeep treats you differently from the rest of us.

Show us why you have named this sword Dancing Flame.

Upon answering such a demand, you may record the new name next to your rogue's.

Because this requires another player making such a demand of you, let your fellow players know when you want one. And look for opportunities to make such demands of other players.

Ending the Phase

In the brief moment between when a player has picked up the dice to indicate they have answered a demand and when they pass those dice making their own demand, any player at the table may end the phase. Do so when it is clear you need one of the other phases, or when you just want the Overplayer to set a new scene, like when a chapter breaks in a novella.

Stymied Rogues

More so than in other phases, a rogue's intent is clear when the dice are rolled in a Rogues' Phase. But several types of demands lead to intriguing situations when a tie is rolled and that intent is thwarted.

Be wary of demands that ask how a rogue survives some hardship. These can lead to tragic stymies. Better to ask how a rogue endured the hardship and leave a bit more breathing room should a stymie occur.

Demands that ask for the rogue to fail at something or suffer a setback are reversed upon a tie.

Show us how you are caught by the thieves' guild.

Becomes...

Show us how you narrowly avoid being caught by the thieves' guild.

And many demands will leave ample room for interpretation when stymied.

Show us how you emerge from the jungle with nothing but the clothes on your back.

When this is stymied, it could be answered by showing how the rogue ends up trapped in the jungle. Or by showing how the rogue emerges with his sword and mount still intact. Or by showing how the rogue fails to retain even their clothes.

The decision of how to respond to a tie in the Rogues' Phase belongs entirely to the Rogue Player that rolled the tie. But before the dice are passed and new demands are made, the Overplayer is allowed a moment to ensure that the change in Overtone that results from a tie is also an escalation.

☹️☹️ A Glum Overtone is rolled. Unwilling to abandon the situation the rogues were left in at the end of the previous phase, the Overplayer sets the scene right there, "You are where we left you, still bound to thick slabs of stone with a masked priest brandishing a ceremonial dagger above you. But now that the chanting has ceased and the priest is whispering prayers as he cuts his hand and dribbles his blood on each of your foreheads."

The Overplayer picks up the dice, indicating that the Thunder is the blood on the forehead. Then the Overplayer hands the dice to Thoton's player while making a demand, "Show us how you free the three of you from these bindings."

☹️☹️ Rolling immediately, Thoton's player gets a Jovial tone. "I am the first he anoints with his blood. As he busies himself with the others, I struggle against my bindings and discover my stone slab is not entirely stable. Rocking it with my full weight, I cause it to tip over the dais. Crashing terribly down the steps, I am tossed about and surely break a few bones, but the

stone on my back cracks and with a mighty coil of my thews it shatters.

"With no time to nurse my wounds, I spring up the dais and swing a hunk of rock still bound to my arm. It smashes the priest's reptile mask into his face. He drops the knife. I quickly pluck it up and cut my companion's bindings."

Handing the dice to Sussuan's player, Thoton's player makes a demand, "Show us how you keep the statue guardians at bay while we make good on our escape."

☹️☹️ Sussuan's player rolls immediately and gets a tie. The Glum Overtone is now flipped to Jovial and Sussuan is thwarted. "The moment I am free, I call out to an ancestor of mine who was known to be a slayer of giants and a welcome her spirit into my body. But my cries only echo unanswered in the stone halls of the temple. 'Make haste, my friends. My ancestors have finally abandoned us,' I say, unaware of the fact that we are currently trapped hundreds of years before my ancestor's birth."

Sussuan's player picks up the dice, but before they are passed the Overplayer interrupts with an escalation, "The throng of worshippers who had been chanting now flee screaming before you as the malachite statues come to life and charge towards you."

Sussuan's player then hands the dice to Mareve's player and makes a demand, "Show us how we fall prey to one of the many temple traps we eluded earlier."

☹️☹️ Mareve's immediately rolls a Glum result and looks to see if Thoton's player wants a part

of this. All agree. “The three of us flee into an antechamber where the lower ceilings hamper the progress of the giant statues. Thoton flips the flagstone that covered the secret tunnels we used to access the temple in the first place. We slip into the darkness below and seal the entrance behind us. With nary a torch between us, Sussuan and I start feeling along the walls, trying to recall our exact path here and arguing in heated whispers along the way.

“After hours of crawling in the dark and a several near misses, my stubbornness wins out and we follow my lead right into a pit of vipers.”

As Mareve’s player picks up the dice, Thoton’s player calls for the end of the phase.

THE THREADS

It is through the threads that your story is bound together. Between the rogues, tones, and phases, you have all you need to create characters, settings and plot, but the threads offer you purpose.

Each thread is a scrap of paper with something written upon it. This may be a lesson, a question, or a list of evocative details. All threads, once created, are placed in the middle of the table for all to see. As the game winds down, you whittle away at those threads, reincorporating them and proving that they were what the tale was about all along.

Morals



Whenever a Rogue Player rolls the dice, neither die is greater than three, and there is no tie, a Moral

must be made. A Moral is made of two parts: the unintended consequence and the lesson.

When you roll a Moral, continue as you normally would, playing out your part in the phase in the tone that you rolled. Your rogue will do what your rogue will do. But something unfortunate, unwanted, or horrible will result from your rogue’s actions. As the Rogue Player, you may weave this unintended consequence into your description, but you do not have to.

As with the escalation on a tie, it falls to the Overplayer to ensure that there is an unintended consequence to the rogue’s actions and that the consequence has sufficient bite. If necessary, give the Overplayer a moment to add to the narration before continuing with the phase. Here the Overplayer is unshackled from the Overtone and may offer a consequence in whatever tone they choose. Indeed, often the consequences that come swiftest to the mind are ones that demonstrate how a Jovial rogue should have been more reserved or how a Glum rogue should have let loose.

Unintended consequences need only enough bite so as not to be ignored, but they may be a severe as the Overplayer sees fit, within the usual confines of the affordances and constraints.

“In the darkness of the pit, surrounded by the slithering mass, Sussuan loses it and calls down a burst of starlight that burns the vipers away, scorching Thoton and Mareve in the process.”

The Overplayer considers the consequence Sussuan’s player has already narrated a bit toothless and adds, “The light shines too perfectly

and too true, alerting the temple guardians to your exact location. You will not be able to sneak out now.”

After the consequence is settled upon, the player who rolled the Moral must now write a lesson. This is something that the rogue could have learned from the experience were they so inclined to be taught.

Sussuan’s player takes a scrap of paper and writes, “The stars belong upon the dome of heaven and not beneath the earth.”

Once it is written, place the Moral in the middle of the table for all to see and continue with the phase.

Mysteries



Whenever a Rogue Player rolls a tie where both dice are three or less, a Mystery must be made. A Mystery is a stymie caused by something unknown or supernatural and it produces a question about this strange cause.

When you roll a Mystery, follow the usual procedures for a stymie: the rogue is thwarted, the Overtone flips, and this change in Overtone denotes an escalation. But shroud the causes of the stymie in mystery or unexplained sorceries. Hit the new tone and give your fellow players just a hint of why your rogue was thwarted. Then, if needed, give the Overplayer a moment to ensure an escalation in the new Overtone.

Later on during a Rogues’ Phase, the rogues find themselves in an unfamiliar port and Sussuan’s player demands of Thoton’s player, “Show us how you steal a boat for us.”

TRICKS OF PHASE & THREAD

H h Thoton's player rolls a Mystery which flips the Overtone to Glum. "The cool waters feel good on my bruised and singed flesh as I slip soundlessly into the harbor. I swiftly swim to a quiet-looking vessel that we may be able to manage with a crew of just three. As I try to climb from the waters I find a myriad of sufficient handholds, but none will give me purchase. They are as frictionless as the water itself."

The Overplayer feels that a little bit more is needed for the escalation, "As quiet as you are, it becomes obvious that your attempts have awoken something in the vessel as a lantern on its bow is lit with a sallow radiance."

The player who rolled the Mystery must now write a question about the nature of the mystery.

Thoton's player takes a scrap of paper and writes, "Who commands such a wondrous vessel?"

Once it is written, place the Mystery in the middle of the table for all to see and continue with the phase.

Mysteries in the Discovery Phase

Like any stymie during a Discovery Phase, a Mystery means your rogue has overlooked an important detail. If you roll a Mystery during a Discovery Phase, keep this distinction in mind: A loaded question is about the overlooked detail itself and the Mystery question is about the reason the detail was overlooked.

Motifs

Each Motif is a scrap of paper with three evocative details written on it. These details, called elements, are collected from the descriptions and narrations

of your fellow players. The dice will not warn you of an imminent Motif. You must heed well your companions and search their words for the elements you seek.

Before the first Overtone is rolled, take three slips of paper and make three dots down the side of each:

- ◆
- ◆
- ◆

Inevitable Foe—Write down an enemy you wish to face. An assassin stalking your rogue. A winged beast of frost. A band of brigands led by your brother. Before the Overplayer chooses a new phase, you may demand that it is a Perilous Phase and your foe is the Storm.

Canny Cognition—Write down a pathway to knowledge your rogue possesses. A familiarity with forbidden tomes. A merry way with gossipy folk. A keen nose for tracking prey. Before the Overplayer chooses a new phase, you may demand that it is a Discovery Phase that will not end until you have demonstrated your rogue's unique insight.

Adroit Prowess—Write down an astounding capability your rogue possesses. An all-consuming battle frenzy. A whisper-quiet tread. A tongue that speaks with devils. A well-trained leopard. Before the Overplayer chooses a new phase, you may demand that it is a Rogues' Phase and that the Overplayer opens it with a demand that highlights this feature.

Ill Fate—Write down a lesson. Do not underestimate the inexperienced. Heed the prophecies. Tempt not Fate's sense of irony. You may ignore one roll you just made and instead hit the Overtone to suffer a Moral with a consequence that leads to this lesson.

Doom—Write down a question. Why does this ethereal youth haunt me? What is unsettling all the beasts of burden? How is it that every weapon I seize turns to ash? You may ignore one roll you just made to suffer a Mystery that leads to this question.

Destiny—On each Motif, fill in one element before the first Overtone is rolled. Walking castle. Serpent-drenched altar. Roads muddied with blood. In addition to filling in the other two elements on the Motif as you play, someone must include your element in their narration before the game can progress beyond the Motif.

Stack the Motifs on the table so all can see the top one.

Whenever another player says something that gives you pause, that exemplifies the wonder, violence, or adventure you desire in the genre of sword and sorcery, then seize the current Motif and record it.

Any player may record a Motif element, but the element must be something said by another player. You may not record your own poetry.

Paraphrasing and summation is acceptable, as long as you record what strikes you most about the imagery.

❖ □ *The Overplayer sets a Glum scene by the docks, “To the east, the largest moon is the first to rise, red and waxing, like an angry eye opening over the night waters.”*

Sussuan’s player is particularly taken by this imagery and records it as the last element of this Motif:

- ◆ *Guardian statues awaken after a millennium.*
- ◆ *Ceremonial golden reptile mask.*
- ◆ *The moon like a red, angry eye opening over the water.*

A Motif element does not have to be recorded the moment it is spoken. For your first few adventures, you may wish to pause between phases and review whether something worthy of a Motif has already been said. It is vital to the pacing of your story that you do not let a Motif languish, unadorned by elements, for too long. But the best way to ensure a well-paced tale is to cram your description full of imagery that will compel your fellow players to record on a Motif.

Once a Motif has collected three elements, reveal the Motif below it. This new Motif must also collect three elements, but at least one of those elements must be an echo of an element on the previous Motif. You must find something in your fellow players’ words that reminds you of an element previously recorded. To aid this, keep the previous Motif where everyone can see, so that everyone may look for opportunities to echo its elements.

Echoes call your mind back to the original element. They are not the same element reintroduced into the story. A serpent-drenched altar can be echoed by an altar made of human skulls, or a giant boa, or a snake cult, or perhaps even a venomous blade used in an assassination attempt; it cannot be echoed by another altar covered in serpents.

A bit later, working on the new Motif, Mareve’s player looks over the previous one for elements to echo. The angry eye opening over the water seems apt as the rogues are now swimming into a grotto.

“Crocodile-like, I raise only my eyes above the water and let them adjust to the light so I can catch my prey unaware.”

Pleased with how the image echoes both the moon over the water and the reptile mask, the Overplayer records it as the first element on the new Motif:

- ◆ *Rising, crocodile-like, out of the water.*
- ◆
- ◆

If you have not echoed an element on the previous Motif after recording two elements on the current Motif, your third element must be an echo and you cannot move on to the next Motif without it.

After the second Motif has collected three elements, reveal your third Motif. As before, at least one element on this Motif must echo an element from a previous Motif. This may echo an element from either of the previous Motifs and it need not echo an element that has already been echoed.

Upon finishing the third element on the third Motif, the End Game begins.

THE END GAME

By now, you will have three full motifs and very likely several other threads on the table before you. Continue playing as you have been, uninterrupted. But know now that the end is near.

During the End Game, you play as before, but now when Rogue Players roll the dice, they have the option to reincorporate a thread into their narration. This is a moment where you take what has been marked before and recall it, making it a larger part of the story.

You may ignore any new threads rolled by reincorporating an existing thread instead. Threads need not be reincorporated by the Rogue Player who wrote them. After reincorporating it, take the thread off the table and keep it as a trophy.

Once a Rogue Player reincorporates a thread, they can no longer receive the dice. Their rogue remains a part of the tale, but can no longer hold sway over it. But this is no loss, for the game is about to end.

Once all but one Rogue Player has reincorporated a thread, the game, and the tale, ends. Do not tarry once the reincorporating begins.

Reincorporating Morals

Morals are reincorporated by demonstrating how your rogue has learned the lesson. Or how your rogue teaches the lesson to someone else. Or how your rogue will never learn this lesson.

At the end of their tale, the rogues are confronted with an alien god destined to consume the world a thousand years before they are born if they do not offer their lives up in sacrifice. When the alien god awakens from its slumber, Sussuan



lures it deep within a watery cave, knowing that this far from the night sky it will have less power at its command, proving that Sussuan has learned, “The stars belong upon the dome of heaven and not beneath the earth.”

Reincorporating Mysteries

Mysteries are reincorporated by solving them or by advancing them with new questions.

After stealing aboard the frictionless ship Thoton discovered, Mareve dispatched its crew and seized the helm, answering the question, “Who commands such a wondrous vessel?” with a resounding, “I do.”

Reincorporating Motifs

Motifs are reincorporated by taking two of the elements on the Motif and combining them, synthesizing a new element for the tale.

Thoton’s player, seizing upon the ceremonial golden mask and the guardian statue in the first Motif, narrates a tragic ending for Thoton that leaves the rogue trapped in the form of a golden statue for a thousand years.

Epilogue

Once all but one Rogue Player has reincorporated a thread, if all the players agree that the story is not quite finished, the final Rogue Player rolls the dice one last time and narrates the briefest of epilogues in that tone, ignoring all threads or stymies.

Go now, gather your companions and seek adventure. Return to these pages when you have a tale or two under your belt.

THE ADVANCED GAME

All that came before is all that you need to play *Swords Without Master*. What follows is for players who have experience with the game and are seeking new paths to adventure. There are new phases, threads, and tricks to be found, as well as new concepts such as rituals, tales, and campaigns. No game should include all of them. Choose from them the ones that call to you on any particular night. They are yours to use as you will.

THE RESPITE PHASE

Dozing in a secluded glen. Drinking in a familiar ale hall. High atop an arid peak. Entering a caravanserai at dusk. In the throes of a weeklong wedding celebration. Grieving at the foot of a fresh tomb. Sharing song and story at the campfire.

Rogues lead lives of little comfort with the Thunder ever pealing in the distance. The Respite Phase is for those fleeting moments when the rogues can let down their guard.

Turn to the Respite Phase when you want to give the rogues room to breathe. Never use a Respite Phase when there are no threads yet on the table.

Overview

The Rogue Players play the roles of their rogues at ease while the Overplayer plays the world and everyone else around them. Dice are rolled only when a Rogue Player pleases. The phase can end with a Rogue Player choosing the next phase.

Starting the Phase

The Overplayer rolls for the Overtone and sets the scene, but never delivers the Thunder. The dice

THE RESPITE PHASE

Summary

The rogues are not in imminent danger.

- ◆ *The phase begins Thunderless.*
- ◆ *The Rogue Players play their rogues in the Overtone.*
- ◆ *The Overplayer plays the world and everyone else in the Overtone.*
- ◆ *If a Rogue Player wants a new tone, they must roll for it.*
- ◆ *Rolling threads can introduce Thunder instead and the Thunder can escalate to a Storm.*
- ◆ *Anyone can end the phase at any time, but Rogue Players do so by shifting into a phase of their choosing.*

Audience Desires

- ◆ *To witness the rogues interacting.*

Rogue Players' Duty

- ◆ *To play their rogues in their tones.*

Rogue Players' Opportunities

- ◆ *To illustrate camaraderie or rivalries.*
- ◆ *To socialize with the denizen of the world.*
- ◆ *To rest and recuperate.*

Overplayer's Duty

- ◆ *To play incidental characters.*
- ◆ *To leave center stage to the rogues.*

remain on the table for now and the Rogue Players should not wait to be handed the dice before starting in.

The Icebreaker

This phase is less about evocative descriptions and more about inhabiting your rogue as an actor would. You will speak as your rogue as much as you will speak for your rogue. And the first rogue to speak must recall the events that surround a thread already on the table.

"I have not yet forgiven you for these burns, but the mead will go a long way towards that."

"What are we to do with the ship Thoton found?"

"I am troubled by that ill moon."

Once the ice is broken, you are free to play your rogues in whatever manner comes naturally, as long as you hit the Overtone.

Rumor & Gossip

Nothing that is said during this phase carries with it the weight of things said during any other phase. Rogues may speculate and plot all they want, but the truth of their words can only be tested in the fires of the Perilous, Discovery, and Rogues' Phases.

The same holds true of anything said by a character played by the Overplayer. All is rumor and gossip until proven otherwise in other phases.

Tones & Bones

In this phase, you must hit the tone with your rogue's mood, dialogue, or actions, rather than in your narration in general. Your rogues themselves must be some shade of Jovial or Glum, not just your descriptions of them.

You begin the phase, like all phases, in the Overtone. If you wish to change your tone, seize the dice and roll. The result is your new tone, even if it is the same as the Overtone. Another Rogue Player must roll for their tone before you can roll for yours again.

As usual, ties will flip the Overtone and make it everyone's new tone. There is no need to thwart the rogue with a tie in this phase, but the change in Overtone should represent some manner of escalation—a quickening of tempers or a cooling of passions.

Threads & Thunder

Should you roll a Moral or a Mystery (neither die greater than three), do not create a thread. Instead, you must introduce a Thunder, just as an Overplayer would. If your roll would have been a Mystery (a tie with neither die greater than three), the Thunder must be unnatural.

After a Thunder is introduced, the next thread that is rolled ends the phase instead and the next phase is a Perilous Phase with the Thunder now become the Storm.

Ending the Phase

There are three ways to end a Respite Phase. The first is to have the Overplayer end it as if it were a Discovery Phase. The Overplayer simply takes the

THE TITLE THREAD

A Title is a thread like any other. On a scrap of paper write down what would be the title of this tale were it published as a short story. One player creates the title, but all players should agree to it. You may create it and have it on the table before the first Overtone is rolled. Or you may create it when inspirations strikes during the game. Or it may not reveal itself until after the tale is done.

Echoes—*When it comes to the second and third Motifs, you may echo the Title instead of echoing an element from a previous Motif.*

Reincorporation—*As with any thread, the Title can be reincorporated during the End Game. Do so by demonstrating why the story is thus entitled.*

dice, rolls for a new Overtone and starts the next phase whenever they feel it is time to move on.

The second way is for a thread to be rolled when a Thunder has already been introduced. When this happens, the phase immediately ends, the Overplayer rolls for a new Overtone, and starts a Perilous Phase with Thunder from the Respite Phase raging into a Storm.

The third way is for a Rogue Player to slip the Respite into another phase. When the course of the phase naturally leads to a moment better served by another phase, any Rogue Player may pick up the dice and shift into the new phase.

When you shift to a new phase, the Overtone remains the same; the scene is set exactly how and where it is the moment the dice are picked up, and no new Thunder is introduced.

Shifting Into a Perilous Phase

A Respite Phase can handle a drunken brawl or a bit of friendly wrestling, but when deadly intentions are present, it is best to shift into a Perilous Phase.

Pick up the dice and tell the Overplayer to bring the Storm. The rest of the phase plays out as if a Perilous Phase had just begun and the Overplayer handed you the dice first.

Shifting Into a Discovery Phase

A lot can be learned by carousing with the locals or sharing a meal with nobility. But you cannot trust a word of it until you pick up the dice and declare that you are shifting into a Discovery Phase.

Roll and play out the rest of the phase as if a Discovery Phase had just begun and the Overplayer handed you the dice first.

Shifting Into a Rogues' Phase

You may grow weary of the boasting, the elaborate planning, or the gentle wooing of the locals. When your blood boils for action, seize the dice and hand them to another player while making a demand.

The rest of the phase plays out as a Rogues' Phase in which you, instead of the Overplayer, got to make the first demand.

THE LORE PHASE & THREAD

The call to adventure is not always heard when you are prepared, when you have marshalled enough forces to heed it. For these moments, there is the Lore Phase.

Unlike any other phase, the Lore Phase is never used during a game, there is no Overplayer, and there are no Rogue Players. You will only need two players, but it may be played with more. One player is the Seeker and the rest are the Lore Players.

Overview

The Seeker presents a burning question to the Lore Players who then take turns rolling for their tone and offering hints to the question's answer.

Starting the Phase

The Seeker writes a question that they yearn to answer. It should be something their rogue would seek out during a game, or something that their rogue will be unable to avoid. It cannot be a question that can be answered with a simple yes or no.

Who killed my father on that dark day?

Why did the dragons disappear from this earth generations ago?

What is the true nature of the stars?

Once the question is written, the Seeker reads it aloud and hands the dice to one of the Lore Players.

Hints

The Lore Player immediately rolls—ignoring any Morals and Mysteries rolled—and provides a hint in the resulting tone. A hint is some detail related to

THE LORE PHASE

Summary

- ◆ *A question burns within the Seeker.*
- ◆ *The Seeker starts a Lore thread by writing down a question and then hands the dice to a Lore Player.*
- ◆ *The Lore Player immediately rolls and provides a hint in the resulting tone.*
- ◆ *The hint must be related to the Lore, but not directly answer the question.*
- ◆ *After hearing the answer, the Seeker writes it on the Lore thread and decides whether or not to end the phase.*
- ◆ *A tie means that the hint should be in the tone opposite of the current one and that the phase will end after the hint is given.*

■ ■ ■ **Glum Tones** ■ ■ ■

Still, moody, muted, cool, introspective, entangled, ensorcelled, sorrowful, lonely, melancholic, eerie, foreboding, strange.

□ □ □ **Jovial Tones** □ □ □

Vibrant, passionate, cacophonous, hot, spellbound, crowded, mirthful, terrifying, painful, clear, welcoming, familiar.

Lore Player Opportunities

- ◆ *To point the Seeker towards adventure.*
- ◆ *To change the nature of the question.*
- ◆ *To enshroud the answer in more mystery.*

the question. It must not answer the Lore directly nor lead the Seeker to a foregone conclusion. The best hints orbit the Lore obliquely.

■ ■ ■ *Many who did not belong there took to the battlefield that day.*

□ ■ ■ *There is a well of dragon fire that yet burns somewhere in the southern deserts.*

■ ■ □ *The concord between the stars and the night sky was written in rime.*

Upon hearing the hint, the Seeker records it next to the Lore question. If the phase continues, the Lore Player should pass the dice to any other player who immediately rolls and creates another hint. This continues until the phase ends.

Ending the Phase

Should a Lore Player roll a tie, their tone is the opposite of the previous tone (or a tone of the Seeker's choice if their roll was the first roll) and the phase ends immediately following their hint.

Otherwise, the Seeker decides after each hint whether to continue the phase or end it. Do not wait too long. Three hints are plenty for most Lore.

The Seeker may then keep the Lore thread for future games.

Bringing Lore to the Table

You may use a Lore thread for the Echoes of the Past trick. It reincorporates as a Mystery does.

THE BOOK OF PERILS

The perils that follow have many paths into your game, not all of which are through the Overplayer. Tricks and the Discovery and Rogues' Phases offer opportunities for Rogue Players to invite them in.

Most dangers in the world do not need their own rules to govern them in the game, but some merit special treatment. In additions to brief descriptions and a word on the peril's nature, each entry below tells you how the peril may change the way you play the game. Perils with unique tones affect the Overtone when they are present, as well as the tones of any rogue who does not have the Unparalleled trick. Perils with Marks may inflict the rogues with another type of thread, as described in the sidebar to the right.

Each entry also ends with example Glum and Jovial Thunders, should the Overplayer need them.

Abbuacin

An enormous serpent covered in iridescent orange and purple scales that form a tiger-stripe pattern, with fangs as long and as deadly as a spear.

During the blistering heat of the day, Abbuacin lurks beneath the City of Fire and Coin. By night he hunts in the shadows and alleyways, as he has done for almost a century. Certain guilds have negotiated a peace with the snake, allowing their members to skulk about after sunset free from harm. But few else are safe.

Thunders: The sound of shifting sand on cobblestone. Echoes from beneath the streets of the strained cries of constricted victims.

MARK THREADS

The first Moral or Mystery rolled when a peril with a Mark is present results in that Mark instead of the usual thread. Resolve the situation as you normally would, but the unintended consequence or the unknown force thwarting the rogue must be related to the peril and its Mark. Write a lesson or question about the Mark, whichever is appropriate to the roll, and note which Mark the thread belongs to.

If a Mark is associated with a tone, then the peril need not be present. From the moment the peril is even hinted at—such as through a Thunder or a Discovery Phase or even in the Title—the first Moral in that tone or Mystery that flips the Overtone to that tone is a Mark instead.

Marks are only created the first time they are rolled in a game, but they may be echoed in the second and third Motifs as if they were an element on the first Motif. If a Mark results in a lesson, reincorporate it as you would a Moral. If a Mark results in a question, reincorporate it as you would a Mystery.

Gaunt Revenants

Hollow-eyed and haggard bodies draped in ancient arms and armor that glide about, dragging their toes across the ground. Always accompanied by wisps of gray light.

Owed for sacrifices made in a battle long past over principles now forgotten, the gaunt revenants stand watch on moonless nights over the descendants of those they have died for, holding them to morals no longer relevant or understood.

Jovial becomes Unsettling when a gaunt is present.

Thunders: A field of fireflies on a moonless night. A persistent sensation of being watched.

The Host of Yitidarle

Fighting men and women twisted by sorcery, each cleaved to some manner of flying bird, beast, or insect and no two of the same.

The host inhabit the floating fortress Yitidarle that soars above the wasteland. There they await the return of the sorceress whose experimentations created them. Not all of the host are accomplished flyers, but those that are occasionally raid caravans and any easy prey sighted from their high parapets.

Thunders: Fleeting and incongruent shadows. The human-like cacophony of a flock of birds.

The Lasting Storm

A great and ceaseless thunderstorm marked by odd colors and unnatural precipitations.

Borne across the world on violent winds, the Lasting Storm ebbs and swells, but never dissipates entirely. Its eldritch origins are immediately evident in the mesmerizing, swirling hues of its clouds. It has been known to rain many things from hot cinders to toads to blood. And it has been rumored to have at least once rained sapphires and emeralds.

Stormgaze (Mark)—People have seen things in the storm that have left them vacant and distant.

Thunders: A cloud of purple or dark green on the horizon. A clash of thunder that triggers in you the sharp memory of a past injury.

Pale Worms

Finger-sized grub with translucent flesh and a ring of tiny yellow teeth.

Those ridden by the Pale Worm are seized by extreme emotion. Some are thrown into brutal rages. Others entertain less obvious excesses while possessed by the worm.

Thrall of the Pale Worm (Jovial Mark)—The spore of the Pale Worm can be passed through a kiss or the hot spray of the host's blood.

Thunders: Tears streaming down an otherwise placid face. Piercing hiccups that go unnoticed by those afflicted.

Strange Hounds

Great glass sculptures resembling mastiffs in shape, filled with a murky green ebullient fluid.

Strange hounds are relentless and utterly devoted to their master. They are coursing hunters who run their prey to exhaustion as they tear pieces from it with their jagged jaws.

Jovial becomes Caustic with these hounds present.

Thunders: A low, growl-like gurgling. A strong, acrid odor on the wind.

RITUALS

Rituals linger behind the vanguard often unnoticed in the chaos of the battlefield, muscles taut and ready to spring forward when their sword-arm is most needed. They are always available, but only impact the game when called upon. Many are little more than agreements between players to use the existing rules in specific ways. Some are as sorcery bending the very nature of the rules to the players' wills. All lay bare intentions and carry with them powerful consequences.

The Ritual of the Companion

If need be, rogues stand back-to-back so that they can face the entire world. A lone rogue is a dead rogue. This ritual illustrates what two rogues can do together.

When you are handed the dice, hand one of your dice to another Rogue Player and tell them, "We do this together and..."

- ◆ "...we use sorcery."
- ◆ "...we use no magic."
- ◆ "...we use our cunning."
- ◆ "...we use our brawn."
- ◆ "...we slay many."
- ◆ "...we struggle with a few."
- ◆ "...we are defeated."

You both then roll the dice together. Your tone is the tone of the die you kept and their tone is the tone of the die you handed them, unless your dice

are tied, in which case, as with all ties, the Overtone flips and your tones are that of the Overtone.

Together now you work out how both your rogues accomplish the task at hand. You may do so as battle-bonded companions who have long stood by one another's side. Or you may do so bickering over the differences in your tone. However the two of you wish. But you are bound by the initial compact. If you said you would use no magic, then none may be employed. If you said you would be defeated, then it must come to be.

If a Moral or a Mystery is rolled, you suffer it together and a tie stymies you both.

Once you are done, if you are the Rogue Player who started the ritual, collect both the dice. If it is a Perilous Phase, you decide who to hand the dice to next and when. If it is a Discovery Phase, you ask the loaded question of the Overplayer. If it is a Rogues' Phase, you make the next demand.

Since no Rogue Player may roll the dice twice in a row, you may not perform the Ritual of the Companion with the Rogue Player who initially passed the dice to you and when it is over, you may not hand the dice to the Rogue Player who performed the ritual with you.

The Ritual of the Telling Blow

You are wagering your entire fortune upon a single roll. For good or for ill, whatever the outcome, this ends with you.

During a Perilous Phase, stand up before rolling the dice. Then, when you are done with your narration, you must end the phase, even if you end it on a Moral, Mystery, or stymie.

The Ritual of the Long Spell

A single thrust of the sword can determine the course of a battle, but there are times when more intricate plans must be put into motion.

As with the Ritual of the Telling Blow, this ritual governs when a Perilous Phase ends. When another player attempts to hand the dice to you in a Perilous Phase, turn your back to them or otherwise refuse the dice.

From this point on during the phase, as you describe your rogue slipping and struggling, you must show your rogue busy putting some larger plan into action. A plan designed to vanquish the Storm.

Tossing tables aside, I clear a space in the hall and carefully pour salt out in the lines and glyphs I will need to invoke the spell.

Leaping upon the giant's back, I begin hacking at his stony neck, attempting to fell it like a woodcutter fells a tree.

Wending my way unnoticed through the fray, I intend to murder their general and force a rout.

While this is happening, the Overplayer is encouraged to target your rogue. For their part, the other Rogue Players will defend you as best they can. When they have had enough of this, they hand you the dice.

All rests on this single roll. Whatever the outcome—even if it is a Moral, Mystery, or stymie—you will end the phase immediately following your narration. Feel free to stand before rolling, as you would with the Ritual of the Telling Blow.

TRICKS OF THE ADVANCE GAME

Haven—Write down a setting where the rogues might let their guard down. The mead hall of your fathers. A campfire in a forest clearing. Bored and becalmed at sea. Wrestling for money in the pits. Bedside at your daughter's birth. Before the Overplayer chooses a new phase, you may demand that it is a Respite Phase and it is set here.

Curse—Write down a Mark related to a peril, known or unknown. You may treat it as a Moral or a Mystery. Do not trust men with overly compelling eyes. Where did these bite marks come from? If your Curse is a Moral use it as the Ill Fate trick. If it is a Mystery, use it as the Doom trick.

Compact—Write down a new agreement for the Ritual of the Companion. ...we rely on the grace and savagery of my jaguar. ...we are sorely tested. ...we show no mercy. You may use this agreement for one invocation of the Ritual of the Companion.

Born in Fire—Instead of waiting for a Discovery or Rogues' Phase, you may add one name to your list of named after surviving a Perilous Phase with the named.

Incantation—Write down a plan of action for the Ritual of the Long Spell. Assembling a complex trap. Negotiating with a demonic familiar. Singing a little known saga to recall just what needs to be done. During one Perilous Phase you may invoke this ritual, even if no one has yet attempted to pass the dice to you.

Echoes of the Past—Place a thread that you saved from a previous game or a Lore Phase on the table before the first Overtone is rolled. One of the elements on the first Motif must echo something on this thread before you can move on to the second Motif. This thread may also be reincorporated as normal during the End Game.

The Ritual of Hubris

Not all rogues are worthy of our adoration. To see overconfident rogues laid low. To deliver unscrupulous rogues their just deserts. Or to be entertained by the tragic comedy of pathetic rogues. This ritual allows you to invert the Perilous Phase to raise a rogue up, only to dash them down.

When you do not have the dice during a Perilous Phase, describe your rogue as prevailing instead of

slipping or struggling. This is a cue to your fellow players, letting them know to hand the dice to you when they have hand enough of your rogue.

When you roll the dice after prevailing when you should have been slipping or struggling, you must narrate your rogue succumbing to the Storm. All other options are closed to you, even if you should roll a tie. For this ritual, stymies thwart the rogue's intentions, not the Rogue Player's intentions to thwart the rogue.

The Ritual of the Weird

Genres calcify over time to meet the often rigid expectations of their audiences. Sword and sorcery is, to some extent, resistant to this process by virtue of its loving relationship to the weird and bizarre. Though not common sights in the great worlds of the genre, aliens, robots, time travelers, and their ilk have all made prominent appearances in many of the more famous tales. There is no true limit to what can be brought into the fold.

But there is a limit to what the audience is willing to accept. It can be jarring when Wyatt Earp offers to help you root out a serpent cult that has the king in their thrall. The Ritual of the Weird is meant to help everyone ease into the stranger reaches of the genre.

When a fellow player introduces something so bizarre it trips you out of the fiction, tell them that you are invoking the Ritual of Weird. Set the weirdness aside for the moment and continue without it. If at the next Discovery Phase anyone wishes to introduce it again, they may do so as part of their revelation; or if they are the Overplayer, as part of an answer to a loaded question.

Should a player invoke the Ritual of the Weird on something you introduced, choose one aspect of the weird thing that you want to keep and boldly discard the rest. Create a mundane reason for that aspect to exist or hint at some sorcerous cause. Then continue where you left off, cheerfully awaiting the next Discovery Phase. Give your fellow players time to adjust to the weirdness while you consider abandoning it or saving it for a future game.

During a Perilous Phase the Overplayer describes a band of sea-faring raiders using

what is clearly a ray gun to vaporize their foes. This does not sit well with Sussuan's player who invokes the Ritual of the Weird. The Overplayer likes the image of flashing colors flying from ship to ship and keeps that aspect, describing it as the result of sunlight gleaming off of jeweled javelins.

Later, at the next Discovery Phase, Thoton's player is eager to see a ray gun in the game and has Thoton uncover a raider hiding in the hold of the ship wielding one. The Overplayer is then asked to describe its terrible power.

The Ritual of the Outlier

Rogues, by their very nature, do not conform to society's standards, nor does anyone expect them to. Villagers, pirates, wardens, princes, and thieves—none are likely to make assumptions about a rogue based on any of the usual signifiers society relies upon. And certainly not based on the signifiers relied upon by the players' rather alien culture.

You may have characters suffer under any assumptions about your rogue you wish and you may prove them wrong however you please. This is your prerogative. But other players may occasionally misstep and narrate a character treating your rogue in a way that violates your vision. This is especially likely with characters expressing some manner of bigotry. The Ritual of the Outlier is a gentle way to help keep your fellow players from stepping on your toes.

If a fellow player narrates a character treating your rogue in a way that you feel is based on cultural assumptions or prejudices that would not apply, tell them that you are invoking the Ritual of the Outlier. State what the mistaken assumptions are

and set them aside. If at the next Rogues' Phase you decide that you do wish to explore these assumptions, make a demand of the Overplayer to demonstrate a character behaving that way.

Should a player invoke the Ritual of the Outlier for something you narrated, hear them out and trust their judgment. They know their rogue best. Agree with them and then remove the assumptions they named.

After the Rogue Players ended a Perilous Phase in utter defeat, the Overplayer has decided the rogues have been captured by a merchant king and sets the scene for a Rogues' Phase with the rogues being brought as slaves to his harem. Mareve's player invokes the Ritual of the Outlier, stating that it would be foolish for anyone to think Mareve would be confined to any harem. The Overplayer agrees and has the merchant king consider the rogues' worth as gladiators instead.

The Ritual of Interlocution

This ritual is a different way to handle Discovery Phases that may be more appropriate for times when the rogues are conferring among themselves rather than making individual discoveries.

The Overplayer invokes this ritual at the beginning of a Discovery Phase by holding the dice out in the palm of their hand instead of handing them to a specific Rogue Player. Whoever seizes the dice first rolls and makes a revelation as normal. Unlike the standard Discovery Phase, their revelation must be something spoken aloud to the other rogues.

Then, instead of asking the Overplayer a loaded question, that Rogue Player hands the dice to

TRAVEL TO OTHER WORLDS

another Rogue Player and asks them the loaded question. Just as one rogue is asking another. The new Rogue Player rolls the dice and makes a revelation relevant to the loaded question. Then they in turn ask another loaded question of another rogue.

This continues until either a thread or a stymie is rolled or the Overplayer calls for an end to the phase. In both of these cases, finish the last revelation and ask the final loaded question of the Overplayer, just as you would a normal Discovery Phase.

The Ritual of the Swift & Recurrent Blade

This ritual turns the Rogues' Phase into a montage wherein several Rogue Players briefly answer variations on the same demand. It is particularly well suited for uncomplicated demands or demands that cover quite a bit of time, such as showing:

- ◆ The rogues on a long journey,
- ◆ The rogues languishing in captivity,
- ◆ The rogues whiling away the winter season,
- ◆ Or the rogues frittering away hard-fought spoils.

The Overplayer invokes this ritual at the beginning of a Rogues' Phase by making such a demand and holding the dice out in the palm of their hand instead of handing the dice to a specific Rogue Player. The first to seize the dice rolls and briefly answers the demand.

The dice are then passed around as usual, but only to the Rogue Players, with everyone answering and making the same, similar or related demands of each other. Answers are kept brief, involving only one or two details.

Wanders, wayfarers, rovers, and roamers. The further one travels, the smaller the world becomes. Eventually, you cannot help but leave. When the rogues finally fling themselves beyond the known world, new tones will replace the now familiar Glum and Jovial. Upon their entry to a new world, decide together which die will now represent which new tone. As long as you remain upon this plane, these tones apply to the Overtone and the rogues' tones alike. The rogues may keep their native tones for their Feats Heroic, or if they replace a feat in this strange land, they may adopt one of the new tones—it matters not which, as long as no two feats are of the same tone.

As usual, anyone may end the phase between when someone answers the demand and when they make one of their own. Should someone roll a thread or a stymie, the phase ends after they finish answering the demand and before they make one.

☞☞☞ The Overplayer rolls a Jovial Overtone and sets the scene, "In the court of the Scarlet Queen all are celebrating the day before her son is to be burned to ensure another 100 years of prosperity. Fire is forbidden before tomorrow's burning. There are jugglers, brightly colored dancers, raucous musicians, and a parade of rare animals." The dice are then picked up, making the rare animals the Thunder. Holding the dice out, the Overplayer demands, "Show us how you celebrate."

Astral Plane—Eerie & Resounding

Earth's End—Petty & Miraculous

Ember Fields—Smoldering & Fiery

Eternal Hunt—Predator & Prey

Fae—Haughty & Whimsical

Gravesbreath—Hoary & Visceral

Limbo—Becalmed & Unquieting

Mars—Barren & Blood

MonkeyDome—Grim & Zany

Nexus—Orderly & Chaotic

Venus of Old—Foreboding & Vibrant

☞☞☞ Thoton's player grabs the dice and rolls a Glum tone. "Thoton wanders the crowd in contemplative silence." Then, handing the dice to Mareve's player, Thoton's player demands, "Show us how Mareve celebrates."

☞☞☞ Mareve's player rolls Jovial. "Mareve gets drunk enough to join the jugglers, who are terrified of the improvisations this forces upon them." Handing the dice to Sussuan's player, Mareve's player demands, "Show us how Sussuan is also swept up."

☞☞☞ Sussuan's player rolls a stymie, and the Overtone escalates to Glum. "Sussuan attempts to entertain some children by lighting a flame and making it dance. All go silent as it sparks to life." Thus ends the phase.

TALES

When you sit down to play, whole worlds open before you. It can be thrilling to explore these worlds unshackled by concerns beyond the desire to see all that there is to see. But there are times for wandering and there are times for questing.

Tales lend direction to your wanderings. They are a collection of agreements on the nature of the story about to be told, and tools designed to help bring such a story about. Unlike rituals, tales only apply to a single story and must be agreed upon before the roll of the first Overtone. While playing with a tale at the table, all players should strive to adhere to it. This is not an overly difficult task, but a tale is not something that just happens. It requires the cooperation of the players.

Anyone, Overplayer or Rogue Player, may craft a tale and bring it to the table. Just as a rogue starts with an eidolon or a simulacrum, the first step in creating a tale is finding something of our world that calls your tale to mind. Anything appropriate for a rogue's eidolon or simulacrum is also appropriate for a tale's. An illustration befitting the cover of the tale is an excellent choice, as is a song on the tale's imagined soundtrack. Or a map detailing the wondrous places the rogues may explore. Or a passage from the very story that inspired the tale.

An eidolon or simulacrum is all that a tale needs to be a tale. But should you desire it, you may also give the tale a Title thread, an overtrick, and up to three styles.

The Overtrick

An overtrick is one of the tricks available to the Rogue Players chosen and crafted by the talewright.

A tale may have only one overtrick. It cannot be the same as a trick employed by one of the Rogue Players.

During the game, the overtrick sits in the middle of the table and may be used by any Rogue Player. In the case of tricks that can only be used once, the first Rogue Player to use it is the only Rogue Player to use it.

Be cautious when using the Unparalleled trick. As an overtrick, it allows any Rogue Player who rolls the original tone to choose the new tone instead. But they are not obliged to do so and it has no effect on the Overtone unless a tie is rolled. There are other, more comprehensive ways to change the base tones of a tale that may better suit your needs—such as traveling to strange new worlds, encountering certain perils, or using a particular style.

Destiny and Echoes of the Past are particularly evocative overtricks. The former allows the Overplayer to create three images, sites or events that must be experienced before your tale is over. The latter ties the story you are about to play to a previous tale and can help you find the answers to the questions that have plagued players and rogues alike.

The Styles

In your mind's eye picture the cover of your tale, the title sprawled upon it along with a striking list of just the sort of adventure awaiting the reader.

“The Haunted Crown”—a tale of war, tragedy, and dark magicks!

“On the Ridge of Forever”—a tale of wonder, mystery, and high adventure!

“The Scrolls in Amber”—a tale of seduction and intrigue!

Found within this striking list are your styles. Each of them an agreement between the players to work towards a certain type of story and a single rule to aid them in their endeavor.

The list of styles below is not exhaustive. You may make up quite a few new ones for your fellow players. A style should be as a sword blow—swift and simple. It only needs two things: a statement of the sort of tale you will tell and one rule about how and when the subject of the tale will be reflected in the rest of the rules.

Players are welcome to interpret these however they wish. What is beautiful to one group may not be to another. And one rogue's fabulous treasure may be another rogue's fabulous trash. As long as all the players agree with an interpretation, you may consider the style satisfied.

Let us tell a tale...

...of Beauty

- ◆ A tale in which the exquisite pleasures in life are celebrated.
- ◆ At least one element on each motif thread must be an image of striking or haunting beauty.

...of Betrayal

- ◆ A tale in which loyalties are not what they seem.
- ◆ After the second Motif is finished, but before the last thread is reincorporated, there must be at least one Rogues' Phase in which a demand is made to see how a rogue betrays or is betrayed by someone or thing on that rogue's list of named.

...of Dark Magicks

- ◆ A tale in which sorcery only comes at a cost.
- ◆ Rogues may only ever resort to magic when a Moral is rolled.

...of Fabulous Treasure

- ◆ A tale in which the rogues make their fortune.
- ◆ Before the last thread is reincorporated, there must be at least one Discovery Phase in which the rogues unearth an astounding treasure.

...of High Adventure

- ◆ A tale in which the rogues travel far, seeking their fortune or fate.
- ◆ Before the last element can be written on the second Motif card, the Ritual of the Swift & Recurrent Blade must be invoked with a demand to see the rogues on a journey.

...of Horror

- ◆ A tale in which the rogues or the players experience dread or fear.
- ◆ At least one element on each Motif thread must inspire dread, fear, or revulsion.

...of Intrigue

- ◆ A tale in which lies are told and characters are manipulated to serve hidden agendas.
- ◆ At every Discovery Phase, a new character with ulterior motives must be introduced or the ulterior motives of an existing character must be revealed.

...of Mystery

- ◆ A tale in which a heinous crime is committed in secrecy and may eventually be solved.
- ◆ The last phase of the game must be a Discovery Phase in which answers are revealed.

...of New Beginnings

- ◆ A tale in which rogues meet for the first time.
- ◆ Begin the game with a Rogues' Phase in which demands are made to see how the rogues first meet.

...of Romance

- ◆ A tale in which at least one rogue falls in love with someone.
- ◆ At least one rogue must add a name to their list of named before the last element can be written on the second Motif card.

...of Savagery

- ◆ A tale in which violence and brutality are brought to the forefront.
- ◆ At least one element on each Motif thread must be about a moment of graphic violence or cold brutality.

...of Seduction

- ◆ A tale in which at least one rogue seduces or is seduced by someone.
- ◆ Before the last thread is reincorporated, there must be at least one Rogues' Phase in which demands are made to see how a rogue seduces or is seduced by someone.

...of Tragedy

- ◆ A tale in which the unthinkable occurs.
- ◆ Before the last thread is reincorporated, a rogue or something or someone with its name recorded next to a rogue's name must be lost forever.

...of War

- ◆ A tale in which battles are fought.
- ◆ For any phase in which armies are clashing, replace Jovial with Glory and Glum with Hell.

...of Wonder

- ◆ A tale in which the rogues and the players experience awe.
- ◆ At least one element on each Motif thread must be about an image or detail that produces a sense of wonder.

...of...

...Corsairs, ...Fire Apes, ...Elder Gods, ...Marauders, ...Strange Hounds, ...Sorcery, etc.

- ◆ A tale in which the person, creature, or thing the style is named for features prominently.
- ◆ Before the last element can be written on the second Motif card, the person, creature, or thing this style is named for must have appeared as at least one of the following: the Storm in a Perilous Phase, part of a loaded question in a Discovery Phase, or part of a demand in a Rogues' Phase.

CAMPAIGNS

Not all stories are told with a single tale. Some are long slogs through the mires and highlands with ever more familiar companions to watch your back as you help shoulder their burdens.

Campaigns are ways to link two or more games, through plot, theme, or a shared cast. They take a great many different forms and require nothing more formal than an agreement between players. Below are some examples, but forge your own paths.

The Common Origin

Rogue creation begins by choosing an eidolon or simulacrum from a common pool. Such as:

- ◆ Each player brings a model or replica of a weapon they associate with their rogue.
- ◆ Each player brings to the table a drink commonly drunk in their rogue's homeland.
- ◆ All idolons and simulacra are chosen from the same line of action figures from the 70s or 80s.
- ◆ Each rogue is based on a miniature painted by their player.
- ◆ All idolons and simulacra are chosen from a single band or musician's oeuvre.

Campaign Styles

Many of the styles used for tales can readily be applied to entire campaigns. Should you wish to play sellswords always engaged in one military campaign or another, make all of your tales of War. If sorcery in your stories is only possible through lopsided deals with malevolent entities, all of your tales are of Dark Magicks. If your rogues travel

from village to village solving murders and other furtive crimes, all your tales are of Mystery.

Be cautious about campaign styles. Choose only one and choose it only if you are certain you only wish to tell tales of this nature.

The Novella

At the end of a given adventure, after all the reincorporating is done, there are usually several threads left on the table, unechoed in this tale. Should you look upon these and lament the story left untold by them, collect them. You have just played out the first chapter of your novella.

Play each successive chapter with Echoes of the Past as the overtrick featuring one of these loose threads from the first game. You may order these threads among the chapters however you want, but save the one you find most pressing for last.

As you play out each new chapter, you will invariably create even more loose threads, many of which will call to you just as those from the first chapter did. If you wish to feature one of these with an Echoes of the Past overtrick, you must first choose a loose thread from the first chapter to abandon.

The Trilogy

A trilogy is a novella with a tighter structure. Like a novella, you do not decide to play a trilogy until after you have finished the first chapter. And even then, only if you have two or more loose threads.

The next two chapters will feature your two most pressing loose threads as Echoes of the Past overtricks. Before starting these chapters, choose a style for each of them as follows.

The second chapter must be either a tale of Betrayal or of Tragedy. Or of a style of your own design with a sufficiently low note.

The third chapter must be a tale of Fabulous Treasure or of Romance. Or of a style of your own design with a sufficiently high note.

Not of This World

The astronaut stranded on a bewitching alien world. The stage magician summoned across gulfs of space and time to a land fraught with real sorceries. The squadron of WWII fighter pilots blown off course by a bizarre storm who find themselves dogfighting with a flying serpent.

Decide which among the rogues is not of this world. Create tones for the world they are from. These rogues begin their first game with Feats Heroic in these tones.

For that first game, play a tale of Wonder and of New Beginnings.



THE CONTRIBUTORS

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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

"In Taruve: the Merchant Train" belongs to the Free and Chaotic Realms. Its edicts may be found at: <http://lumpley.com/index.php/anyway/thread/774>

"A Slaying in Smoke" and *Swords Without Master* belong to the realms curated by Epidiah Ravachol. Their edicts may be found at: www.Dig1000holes.com/words/edicts

