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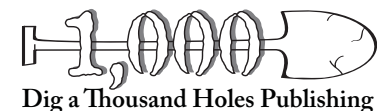
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FROM SALTED EARTH

A tale by Evan Dicken

Illustrated by Delfino Falciani

Kestrel woke to a woman's scream. She'd been dreaming of Xia—not the scorched ruin the Yassa had made of it, but as city had been before the invasion—a forest of high-peaked roofs, festival lanterns seeming to bob in time to the music of the Divine Chorus. She clutched at the phantom song, drawing the tattered scraps around her like a cloak.

It was why she had come to the Black City—to sleep, to dream, to remember.

The scream came again, honed to razor sharpness by Kestrel's burgeoning hangover. She felt for something to throw, but found only flesh—cold and hard as marble. Her hand came away sticky, and she opened her eyes. There were bodies all around her, half-a-dozen rough-looking men, their armor stippled by a patina of dried blood.

Kestrel searched her memory, and found only fragments—smoke-filled rooms, the cold sting of nightwine on her tongue, rough hands, shouts, screams. Snatches of song threaded her recollection, familiar chords trickling through her fingers like precious gems. She couldn't have heard the Divine Chorus, not here, not anywhere. The Yassa had taken special care to hunt down all the Psychopomps. Pyramids of their fire-blackened skulls still dotted the ashes of Xia.

Kestrel sat up, and winced as the ache in her head roared to bonfire brightness. A thin woman in rust-colored robes stood at the alley's entrance, shrieking. A man shouldered past her, naked blade in hand. He was a tall and spare, with a face as pitted and scarred as a common room table. His blue-black robes and single scalp-lock marked him as a necromancer—perhaps even one of those Jamulka



Khan had employed to condemn her people's souls to the scorched earth of their ruined city.

Kestrel rolled onto her knees, retching as the contents of her stomach threatened to spill onto the street. She slapped at her hip, found the sheath empty, and then noticed the cord-wrapped hilt of her sword jutting from one of the dead men. It came loose with a sucking gurgle, and Kestrel tottered to her feet.

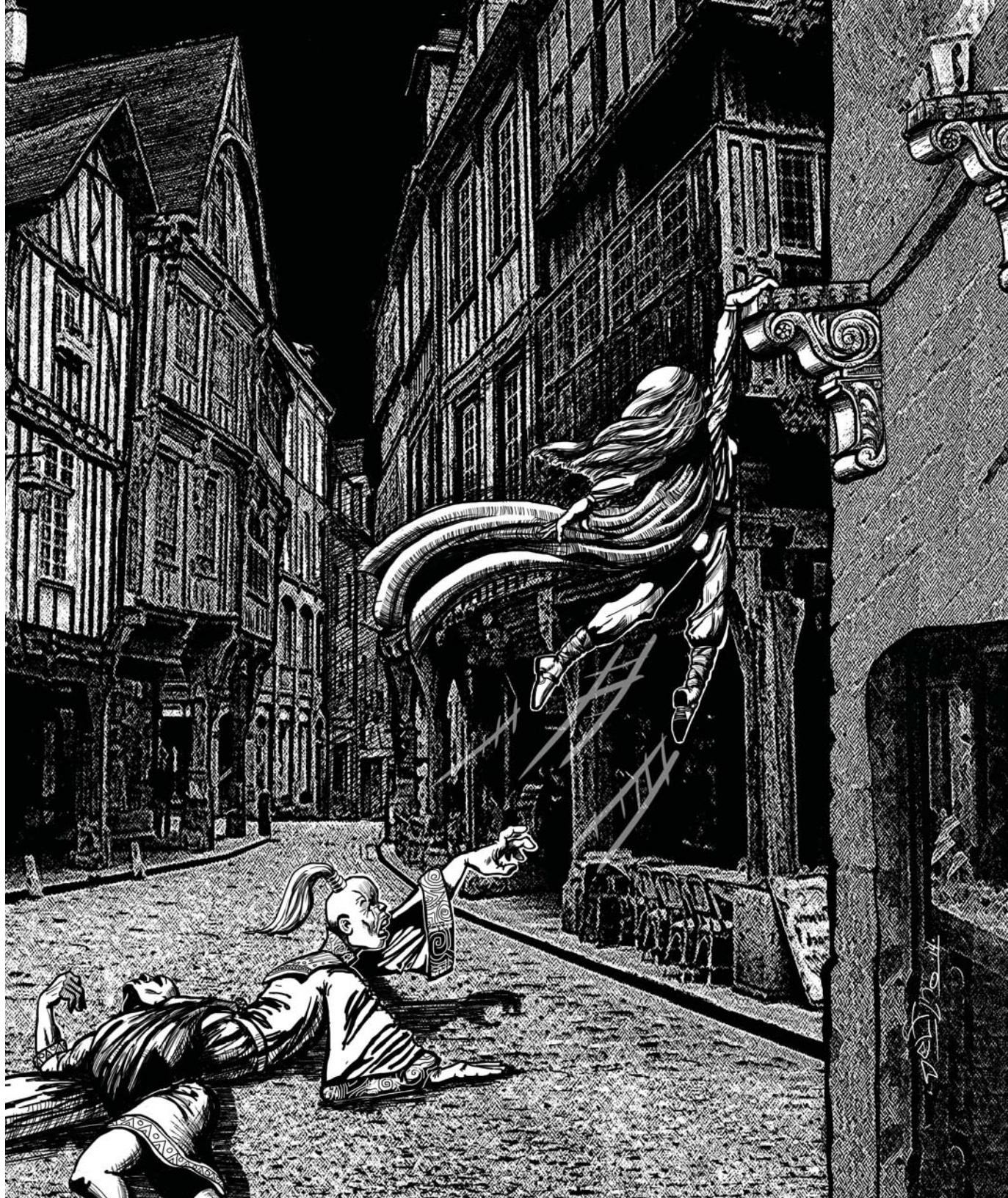
"I know who you are." The scarred necromancer glanced at the corpses, and then moved to block the alley.

Kestrel tensed, ready to cut the fool down, and then grimaced, her throat thick with the sulfur and anise taste of nightwine. She was in no condition to fight. Bounty hunters had dogged her steps since Rakhom. Even if she carved her way through this one, there would only be another, and another. What did it matter? Killing him wouldn't lay the spirits of her people to rest, and wouldn't earn Kestrel redemption for her cowardice.

She sheathed her sword, and bent to grasp one of the dead men. The corpse came up easy, lighter the legs she had thoughtfully removed the night before. She hurled the body and Scarface went down in a tangle of limbs, cursing.

The thin woman's shrieks followed Kestrel as she vaulted over the necromancer, and then leapt to catch a protruding stone on the wall of a nearby tanner's shop. Her fingers scrabbled at the pitted basalt, her strength sapped by days and nights of dreaming.

This was one of the poorest sections of the city, buildings packed so close their eaves almost touched



over the snarl of twisted streets. Kestrel stumbled across the roofs, almost falling several times. When had she become so weak?

She took shelter in the shadow of a canted minaret, blinking against sunlight that seemed to pulse in time with the throb of her head. The nightwine made her memory slippery, and when she reached back all she came away with was the song, each note more painful than the pressure behind her eyes.

She should flee the city. If one hunter had found her, more would follow. And yet, the Divine Chorus called to her, more real than the phantoms of her nightwine binges. It wasn't just a forlorn hope. Kestrel had heard the song.

She needed to find out where, but first, she needed to rid herself of this damned hangover.

The bowl of worms writhed in front of Kestrel's face, glistening bodies moving in time with the Wormsinger's drone.

"Eyes open, *mouth* open... Or they'll find another way in." Bordai's eyes glittered like broken glass in the light of the dirt-floored shop's single smoky lantern.

Normally, Kestrel would have chosen a hangover over the worms, but time grew short. She lowered her face into the slippery mass, and fought the urge to gag as their soft, slick bodies filled her mouth and nose. Dark shapes coiled across her vision, but she didn't flinch, even when the worms slipped beneath her eyelids, tickling around to the backs of her eyes.

There was no pain, only a numb wetness that spread across her forehead like a cool compress. A few moments of sweaty trembling, and the first of the worms dropped from her nose, trailing a thin streamer of blood.

"Better?" Bordai sang the rest free, then emptied the bowl onto the floor with a flourish.

"Much." Kestrel groped for a nearby jug of wine, thought better of it, and selected water instead. Her belt pouch was lighter than she remembered, so she just held it out to him.

The Wormsinger waved a gnarled hand as if dispelling a bad odor.

"I'm not coming back," she said.

"I know." Bordai grimaced. It was the first time Kestrel had seen him wear anything but a smile since he'd dragged her from a gutter south of the Distilling Pits. "I asked around about that song."

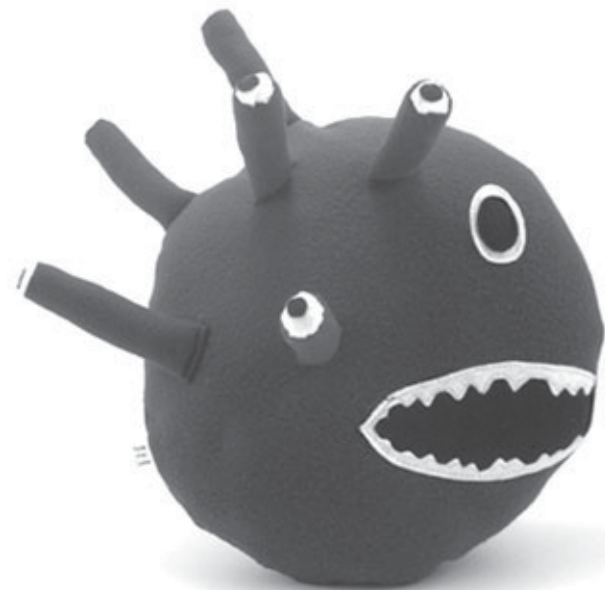
"You know of the Chorus?" Kestrel caught Bordai's shoulders in a tight grip.

"Last night." Pain edged the Wormsinger's voice. "You were mad with the black drink, raving."

Kestrel flushed, suddenly conscious of the way her fingers dug into the old man's flesh. She stepped back, hands raised in apology. "What did I say?"

Bordai turned and began to rummage through one of the boxes that lined the shop wall. "Even with our wealth The Black City couldn't have withstood the Yassa. At best, we would have been subjects, at worst—" He ran a hand through his patchy beard. "After Xia, all know the price of resistance."

"Why do you tell me this?" Kestrel rested a hand on her sword hilt. What if Bordai's kindness had been a ruse to delay her until hunters arrived? Although Jamulka Khan's death had set the Yassa fighting among themselves, they were yet united in their desire for vengeance. The amount they had offered



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for Kestrel's head made the Black City's riches look like a pile of clipped coppers.

"Liao."

"What?" Kestrel tensed.

"The name of the man for whom you search. Word is he's half-mad, spirit-ridden."

"Where is he?"

"The Necropolis, where else?"

Kestrel cursed herself for a fool. What better place for a Psychopomp to hide than among the unquiet dead? She'd been drinking near the Pits last night, and must have heard a snatch of the song wafting over the Necropolis walls.

The Wormsinger turned, a heavy, leather cloak in his hands. Instead of a hood it had a full-mask with circles of silvered glass set over the eyes.

"Why are you helping me?" Kestrel asked.

Bordai held out the cloak. "They say Jamulka was assassinated by a woman, a Sword-Saint out of lost Xia."

"Is that what they say?"

"Only rumors, of course." A smile creased the weathered planes of the Wormsinger's face. "But whoever killed the Great Khan saved this city, and many others."

Kestrel drew the cloak over her shoulders, turning away to hide an unaccustomed flush. She'd hadn't slain Jamulka to save anyone or anything, but in the hopes it would expiate her shame.

"Thank you," she said.

"It has been an honor." Bordai sketched a deep bow. "Spirits watch over you."

Kestrel frowned. "That's what I'm afraid of."

The setting sun trailed fingers of shadow across the Necropolis wall. Built of the basalt from which the Black City took its name, the wall's face was etched with thousands of interlocking trigrams. The wards were not for the living, though. Only fools and madmen braved the Necropolis after dark. Most of the guards were clustered around the Pits where the shadowstuff pooled, dreams of the dead leaking from crypts to be collected, distilled, and bottled. Avoiding the patrols had been nothing compared to slipping into Rakhom to kill the Great Khan. And yet, it felt nice to have a goal again.

The need for vengeance had consumed Kestrel for so long it left no thought of what to do afterwards. She'd wandered, aimless, homeless, intent only on avoiding the Yassa, and the memory of those who could never rest. Many times she contemplated returning to Xia and ending her life in the ruins so she could join her people—tormented, but not alone. Always she turned the idea aside. What if Xia didn't *want* her back? Nightwine had been her only solace, until now.

From her perch on the eastern parapet, Kestrel watched a man stalk up to the black iron gate, his scars a livid red in the sunset.

"Persistent." She murmured, drawing the mask over her face and slipping over the wall. The Necromancer's appearance was no surprise. If she'd been searching for Liao last night, any one of a hundred drunks might know her goal.

Tendrils of mist tickled across her flesh, searching for a way in. The mask kept the dead from her ears and nose, the mirrored lenses defeating their attempts at her eyes. She kept the cloak close around her, careful lest the spirits find other, less savory, entrances. Kestrel had no wish to become a specter's plaything. Unlike Xia, the Black City had no Psychopomps to sing the dead to their final rest. Unburnt, the spirits remained until their bones became dust, their dreams fueling the trade that had made the Black City rich.

She passed by rows of grave obelisks, scaling the wind-scoured faces of tombs that had been ancient before the Yellow Emperor taught the five tribes how to measure time. Her exhausted muscles trembled from the effort, but faint snatches of the song kept her shambling on.

She found Liao in a ring of toppled dolmens, a shadow amidst shadows, crouched low, his face in his hands as he sang. She crossed the distance between them, stooped to lay a hand on his shoulder. Her fingers found flesh, and she gave a little cry, unable to believe he was real.

"Honored singer, you do not know me, but I am of Xia. I've come to—"

The words curdled in her throat as he lowered his hands. Layers of grime had darkened his skin, and long scabs marked his cheeks where he had clawed his face in the throes of possession. Despite all this, Kestrel recognized the thin, arching brows and wide jaw of a Yassa.

A man stepped from the darkness on the far side of the circle. He'd donned a black-lacquered full mask

with eyes of obsidian, but Kestrel knew him by his robes.

“How?” The question slipped from her lips.

“Why hunt when I could bring the prey to me? The Necropolis holds many dead, from many lands. This one was difficult to find, even for one of my talents.” The necromancer nodded at Liao, who had stopped singing to regard Kestrel through eyes bright with tears. “I thought it only fitting to bind his soul to a Yassa. After that, it was only a matter of having my men spread the word. It would’ve worked perfectly if the fools hadn’t thought to claim the reward for themselves. I do want to thank you for saving me the trouble of killing them.”

Kestrel shivered. Rage she’d thought doused with the death of Jamulka banked high again, filling her with hate so bright she felt as if it would burst from her chest in an arc of flame.

In truth, she’d missed the feeling.

Scarface barely parried her first few strikes, backpedaling to avoid a looping cut that would’ve removed his head. But anger alone was not enough, and he regained his poise even as her strikes slowed. Two more exchanges left Kestrel gasping. Her muscles burned, enervated by long nights spent in the throes of the black drink.

Scarface gave ground, forcing Kestrel to stumble after him. Her hood was hot as a brazier, sweat stinging her eyes. She saw the cut coming, but her arm moved as if submerged in sand. The Necromancer’s blade bit into her side, grating across bone.

Kestrel’s sword tumbled from nerveless fingers. It was all she could do to press both hands to the wound to prevent any spirits from slipping in.

“You’re worth far less dead.” Scarface’s laugh rang hollow within his helmet as he stepped forward, blade transcribing a slow arc to point at Kestrel’s throat. “But I can’t risk having you break free on the journey to Rakh—”

His body twisted in a confused pirouette, and Kestrel saw a hand reach up from the mist to clutch at his leg.

“Xia!” Liao screamed, dragging Scarface off balance. “Xia! Xia!”

The Necromancer chopped down, but before he could raise his blade again Kestrel was on him. She felt his ribs crack as they landed, all her weight on his sternum. He worked a hand into her cloak, then shuddered as she slammed her forehead into his mask, shattering the lacquered faceplate. Kestrel caught a flash of sweat-slick skin, and an eye, wide with terror, before the mist flowed in, obscuring his features. She stumbled away, hands clamped to her wounds, to kneel next to Liao.

Blood bubbled from the cleft in his shoulder, but he made no move to staunch the flow.

“I failed you, just like I failed Xia.” The confession stung more than her wound. “The city. I ran—”

Liao raised a hand to her cheek. “Be at peace, sister.”

Then he sang.

The mist drew back, and through her tears Kestrel could see the roiling fog begin to dissipate. She hadn’t believed it possible—that even centuries dead, alone amidst strangers, Liao remembered the song.

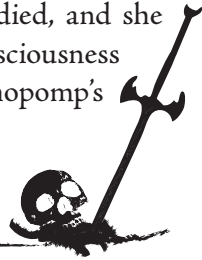
All he’d needed was a voice.



Kestrel knew what she must do. It was why she had come to the Black City—to sleep, to dream, to die.

The night air was cold on her skin as she slipped the mask off, and lowered her face to the singing man's. The Song embraced her, each note so pure it filled her heart to bursting. Through Liao she would find redemption, and through her he would lay their people to rest. Her lips moved in time with his, and for a moment the air was filled with their aching harmony. Then his body died, and she sang alone. Kestrel smiled as consciousness slipped back and away as the Psychopomp's soul took root.

She was going home.



THE PEBBLE BALLAD

A tale by Epidiah Ravachol

Illustrated by Eric Quigley

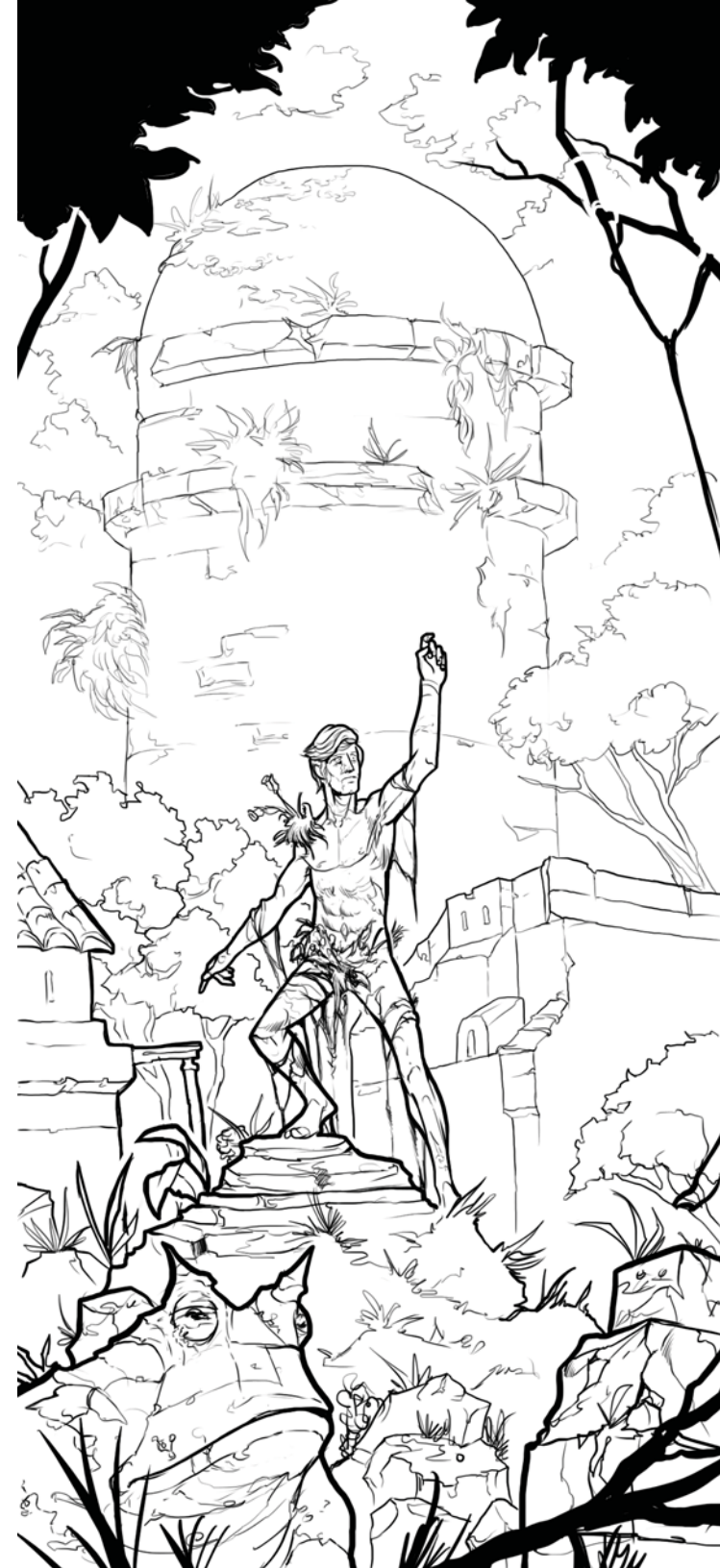
I was half-drowned in the brine when they dragged me from icy waters and into that rotting wharf-tavern. Nothing could completely dry in that mist-choked hole, but the fire was warm and the wine was free to those recently pulled from the sea, of which there were too few. There, in that glum air—where we would rejoice in our fortune were it not for our sea-siblings who went down with The Little Skua—survivors and salvagers alike joined in melancholy song so as to busy the mind and chase out our thoughts. And as often happens when such songs are sung, “The Pebble Ballad” was first among them.

It was the verse about the strange and welcoming cottage that did not fit comfortably in the countryside—as if, as the lyrics put it, it was “built by mind and hand, born of distant time and land.” I had seen such a place while sailing

in the south no more than six days prior. A singular building shaped almost like a pyramid that stood just to the treetops. It was visible for only a moment, when your line of sight passed through the trees and far side of an algae-infested lagoon. It was secluded and nothing like the thatched hovels that typically populated the coast.

I returned to the coast that winter and sailed south until I found the cottage again. It had been covered from tip to foundation in a thick, dry clay that sealed it against moisture and vermin. It took a morning with a sledge to get the door open, but the treasures I found preserved inside!

The shining jewel of this hoard is this collection of letters found throughout the home.



Scratched into five of seven small wooden tablets once used by the people of those distant coastal villages in rites of confession and prayer.

I know your secret, as my grandmother before me knew it. Her grandmother, the last priestess of the toad-worshippers, practiced her faith in the dark and quiet hours, away from suspicious eyes. She shared your secret with my grandmother when she was my age. And though my grandmother has forgotten more than she can tell me, as I will forget more when I have reached her age, neither of us shall forget your secret.

She brought me here to show me where you stood, locked in stone, an effigy amid the ruins of the toad-worshiper's temple. She taught me the songs to float a dagger on fresh water and to compel that blade to point to the pebble you once held between your sinister thumb and nameless finger. The same pebble I now hold between mine.

We would sit at your feet and wonder upon you. How long have you stood there? Would you recognize the world around? Have you watched the centuries pass before you? Or do you sleep? Do you dream? Why did you take on the pebble in the first place? Were you tricked into doing so? Or were you always so? There are more questions than stars in the sky. I am bursting with them, and perhaps you possess even more.

After the gap caused by the two missing tablets.

But unlike her, fear has not turned me away. So in the dark and quiet hours, I have snuck into your ruins, to study your graven face by firelight. I find sadness there, but I know not if it is etched in your features or a trick of the dancing shadows. Your secret is a stone in my own heart, a burden I refuse to bear until I am grandmother's age. I have long pondered the right of it and I have decided to trust you, man from the past.

This is my gift to you. Awaken from your long slumber and stretch your legs. Behold what has become of the world. You are no longer alone in this curse. I will stand in your stead, a statue holding the pebble and awaiting your return. When you have sated your curiosity, find me, for I must hide or my grandmother will surely intervene. Take the pebble from me and pinch it as you have all these centuries. Then we shall swap and, if you wish, we will pass the pebble and its burden back and forth so that you may live a life of flesh once more.

Scrawled on papyrus by an unsure hand and wrapped in tanned and oiled goatskin.

You are so very young. A child. I had not known. It took so long to learn your tongue. Longer still to learn your signs. Longer still to learn your trust.

I awoke from the restless, dreamless night of stone. I had just closed my tired eyes and in the span of a single nod the entire world rotted away. Brown-green sea and earth swallowed the shimmering ziggurats of my people. Or they were carried away, brick by brick, by the meticulous greed of tomb robbers and time. Or a giant amused himself by flinging me over the horizon into this muted land. Even the toad-worshippers' temple that lay in hoary ruins at my feet was strange and new to me.

You awake with the world around you still familiar. You do not miss the purple-and-scarlet fruited vines that crept across the lush plains, because you have never seen beyond the gloomy trees that stretch up to dull your sight in all directions. You do not miss the chimes on the wind that warned of coming storms or the succulent and melancholic Feasts of the Survivors that followed them. The air



does not taste so cold and stale to you. The people seem natural, not too short nor too ruddy. None among them assail you with spears and thrown rocks.

You may not flee as I did when I awoke. You may not understand why so many years have passed between when I awoke and when I deciphered your tablets. I am shamed by my ignorance in those years, but I am shamed more by my fear in the years that followed.

I fled and your grandmother found you as a stone statue in that quiet glen you had tucked yourself in. She took the pebble and hid it away. She feared what would happen should it be lost. I found her after I learned your words and with her the pebble.

She greeted me with a knife and held me accountable for your actions. The memory of her vicious welcome is etched into my face and back. I did not return to her thatched home for several seasons. We made our peace much later. She entrusted me with the pebble. She was not able to use it herself, but hoped I would.

I am sorry for how long it took me to hold the pebble, embrace the transformation into stone, and free you from your stasis.

Written across three amphorae—one filled with strongly scented oil, one with sour wine and the third with pungent seed.

Upon the first amphora:

Oh how I have hated you. I awoke in the rain and feared a season had passed when I had only expected days. Seeking a dry place to read your message, I



ran home but found an unrecognizable village, with no known kin to shelter me. So I hid in the ruins of the toad-worshiper's temple, read of your sins by firelight, and wept.

That night, I could not reckon how long I have been trapped in the stone. I suspected grandmother had changed my garments, for they were not the same as I remembered. But even those new ones had moldered and tattered over years of neglect. This was the first hint that she had passed while I slept in stone. That morning, I found you, retrieved the pebble from your grasp and threw it into the lagoon.

Upon the second amphora:

The people of the village tell a horrid tale of a demon disguised as a statue in the ruins of the toad-worshiper's temple that one day sprung to life and carried off the last child of direct lineage to the secret priestess of that cursed place. They are kind to neither of us in their telling. So I have not confessed my true origins to any of them.

I have now figured that I have been stone for close to 30 years. Almost twice as many years as I remember living. You were right. Though I recognize no one in it, this world is still familiar to me. People still fish and I can still repair their nets for food and shelter. The trees are comforting and the buildings do not shimmer. It is not the home I remember, but it is not so alien that I could not make it home again.

Upon the third amphora:

After a fortnight of regret, I began diving the cold waters of the lagoon and sifting the sands beneath for the pebble. I have judged you unfairly. What was counted in mere years for me could be counted in generations for you. Perhaps even more. Though

I am unable to truly understand your experience, I know just a hint of what it must mean.

I have decided to trust you once again. I now hold the pebble between my thumb and third finger. These amphorae will sell for a modest sum. Enough to last until the moon wanes. Do not leave me until the clothes rot from my frame. Return to me, take my place, and I will return to take yours.

Carved into the inside wall just above the hearth of the cottage of unusual construction and height.

I am humbled by all your gifts, child. Here is a home for us to share in our burden. You have been stone for only eleven nights. You are welcome to whatever you find in our stores. Welcome.

Each of the following, and many more, were written on papyrus and tucked into the amphora of seed which rested, unsold, on a squat table near the entrance of the strange cottage.

Such treasures you have collected here! The crystal bowls, the iridescent stones, the bright and patterned feathers, the perfumed scents! And I, in my pride, thought that I spoiled you with oil, wine and seed. You marvel me even more, man from the past.

Tell me that I may have one of my curiosities sated: Are these treasures from the past?

I have traveled far during your decades of stone. I have spent more years in your world than I have in mine. This is all the beauty I could find in it. I stole dark blue-and-red eggs from a viper's nest because they reminded me of the mottled aprons worn by

the priest-lords that sheltered my family during the war. I wrested the bright, sharp fruits that now dry on the mantel from a bejeweled seafarer because I had never before seen their color or beheld their scents. I sought out the six volumes of Saregith's Histories Real, Imagined and Mistaken because I cannot understand why your people tell the tales they tell. You will find in the pot resting by the fire a stew of root and grain that reminds me of the one I ate most my adult days. I do not care for it. You might.

There was a storm two nights ago that blew a tree into the southern wall. It took me an entire day to remove the tree, but I do not know how to repair your house. I attempted to use part of the tree, dried leaves and mud, to no avail. It does not hold the wind at bay and the roof above has begun to bow ominously. So you will find me in a graceless pose, plugging the hole as best I can. I imagine the wind will still seep in, but I think I can hold the ceiling for a while this way.

We are bound by the pebble. You must not put yourself in peril. We do not know the limits of our stone. You might not have been able to support the roof. You might not have been whole when I took the pebble's curse upon myself again. You might not have survived the transformation back to flesh. You might have died and I might have remained stone evermore.

You must also never hide when you take the pebble. I know not the songs you use to find it and there are none left who can teach them to me.

You must not reveal our seclusion to others. Your people are unwelcoming to me and have sought to do me harm.

We must follow these rules.

After a score of unanswered notes that essentially reiterate the same three rules.

That I could teach you at least one song so that you would stop singing this same one. Tell me, what made you take on the pebble all those centuries ago?

I was to be honored for one bright summer. I had proven myself during a spring of glorious games and pious fasting. Someone else was meant to stand in my place when the summer games ended and the night began reclaiming the twilight. It had always been done so.

Written on papyrus laid out upon three crystal bowls of various sizes, accompanied by instructions on how full to fill each bowl with wine as well as on where and how often to strike each bowl.

Here I will teach you a song. It is not as useful as the ones that will help you seek out the pebble, but it is one my grandmother taught me when I was much younger. You must follow these instructions carefully and in exchange you have my oath that I will follow your instructions.

A multitude of exchanges were made after this, each involving instruments and instructions on their uses, building on the previous instructions in attempts to teach each other the songs of their



respective people and eras. It is my contention that somewhere within this exchange lies the key to the song that seeks the pebble.

And then, pinned to the door by dagger point, these final two letters.

Swiftly, you must pack what you will and flee. Strangers hang about in the wood. I have caught sight of them, but they are clearly ashamed of what they plot and flee when confronted, only to skulk back when they believe themselves unobserved.

Go as far as you need to a place where you are not feared. When I awake from the stone, I will use my songs and find you. But go far! I have spent these last two years living in the trophies of your journeys and I itch to see more of the world.

I have been attacked upon the road. A man possessed with the spirits of his ancestors sought

vengeance upon me for carrying you off all those years ago. He swung a stout club of sharp stones. He was clumsy, but determined. I fled into the dark night and hid in the monotony of your trees until the sun rose.

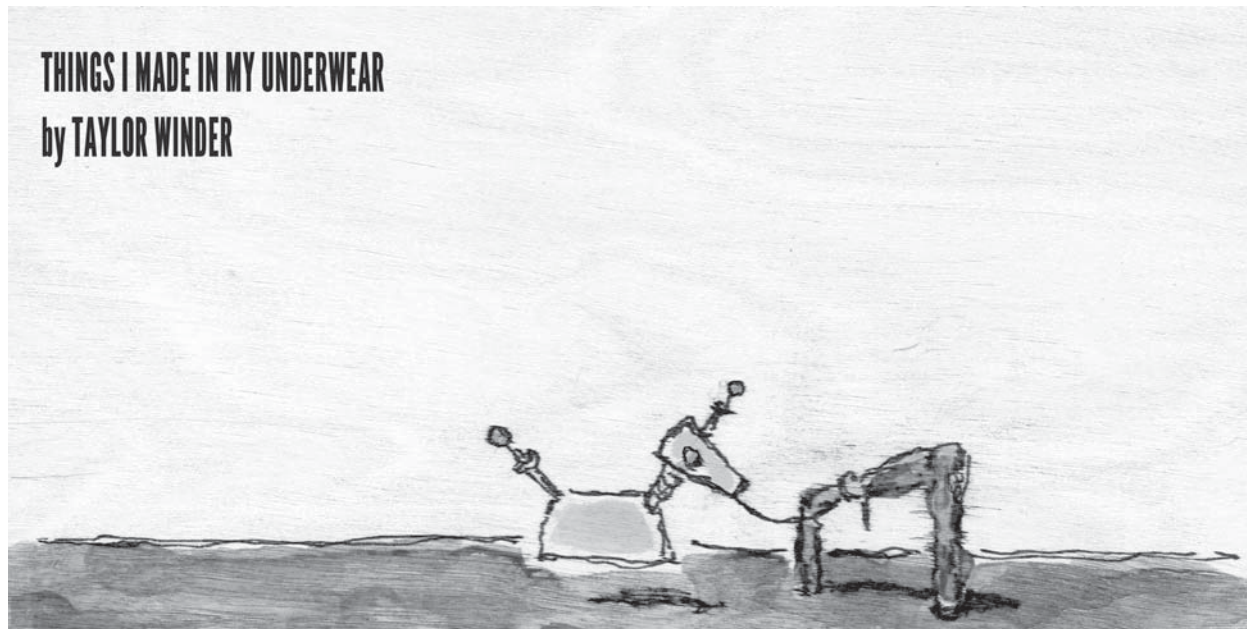
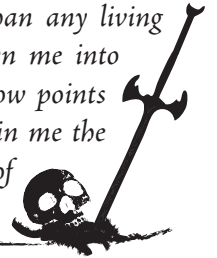
I spent the night in a greater fear than the one that held me that first night you took the pebble from me. I am not willing to die as you stand in stone. I do not know how many centuries will pass before someone such as you will find you and the pebble.

I will take the pebble out to sea. You will awake and I will sink with it to the ocean floor too deep for you to find.

You can take what you wish from our home and sell the rest. You may travel. You may see the parts of your world I have written of. You may find the parts I will never see. You have given me gifts unique in this universe. You are owed a debt greater than I

can repay. I love you as kin and will carry that love into a future unknown.

However, I have come to believe that the final message in this bizarre conversation is “The Pebble Ballad” itself. Written upon the only medium that could persist far enough into the future that it may outlast the eternal ocean that now clutches to its bosom the man from the past as it does The Little Skua and so many of my dear sea-siblings. A song heard by all who drag their livelihoods from the sea or have spent a damp night in any of the wharf-taverns that crowd even the farthest ports and harbors. A song that is, even now, older than any living memory. A song that has drawn me into their very home. A song that now points me to the sea and breathes within me the desire to dive its depths in search of a man holding a pebble.





IS THIS THE *QUEUE* TO SEE *GOLAH*?

WELL, THE *BACK* OF IT.



OH GOOD. I'D HATE TO THINK THAT THE CRAZY OLD CHARCOAL BURNER WHO GAVE ME DIRECTIONS, ISN'T A RELIABLE SOURCE OF INFORMATION.



FIRST TIME SEEING GOLAH?



YEAH.

I'M A BIT *NERVOUS* TOO.

OH?

WHY?



WELL, I GOT *KNOCKED OFF MY HORSE* LAST WEEK. EVER SINCE, I'VE BEEN HAVING *VISIONS*.

BUT, ARE THEY *REAL*, OR JUST, YOU KNOW, A *CONCUSSION*?



I MEAN, WHAT'S THAT *TALKING TREE* SAYING TO YOU? DOES IT SOUND, LIKE, *CRAZY* OR *NORMAL*?



UH. IT'S *NOT SAYING* ANYTHING.

NO... NOT TO ME, EITHER. THAT WOULD BE *WEIRD*.



I AM THE *ALEPH* AND THE *THAW!* AND *EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN ENDS IN FIRE!* IN *FIRE!*



HOW ABOUT YOU?
WHAT ARE YOU HERE FOR?

WELL...



IT'S A BIT EMBARRASSING,
REALLY.

YOU SEE,
MY HUSBAND IS A REAL BASTARD.



I'VE BEEN TRYING TO POISON HIM FOR, LIKE, SEVEN MONTHS NOW.



BUT, IT'S JUST NOT WORKING.

SO I WANNA KNOW WHAT'S, LIKE, UP WITH THAT?



NEXT!

THAT'S ME!
GOOD LUCK WITH THE VISIONS AND EVERYTHING.



HEY.



I WILL LITERALLY GIVE YOU, LIKE, \$100 IF YOU GET RID OF THIS SQUIRREL FOR ME, NO QUESTIONS ASKED.

A SCOUNDREL IN THE DEEP

A collaborative storytelling game for two adults, a matchbox, and an ashtray

By Renato Ramonda & Flavio Mortarino

Illustrated by Ed Heil

PREPARING FOR THE JOURNEY

- ◆ One player will be a scavenging Scoundrel. Their objective is to return to the surface from the ancient Tomb of the Deep, its legendary Ruby in their pouch.
- ◆ The other player will be The Deep. Their objective is to keep the Scoundrel in the tomb and deny them glory.
- ◆ Have at the ready one box or book of regular sized matches and one fireproof container, such as an ashtray. Also, be sure to have one pen and a few index cards.
- ◆ Most importantly, make sure your game space can accommodate some small open flames.

The Scoundrel should now take a moment to picture their character: are they a nimble rogue like the Grey Mouser, a musclebound barbarian like Conan, or a learned scholar of the arcane? Why have they delved in the Tomb of the Deep? There is no need to write down the answers. They will serve as inspiration for rest of the game.

The Deep, meanwhile, should try to picture the Tomb's general layout: is it an ancient and abandoned layered city, a forgotten system of sewers and canals, or an underground temple of a forbidden cult? Are the obstacles in the path of the Scoundrel part of a concerted effort of a malevolent will, or simply the uncaring remains of ancestral traps and creatures? There is no need to write down



the answers. They will color your depiction of the locales and perils in the game

The Match Game

The game was written with a matchbook in mind, but any collection of matches will do just fine. Just set aside 20 matches that will be your game set. Also, matches quality can vary wildly. If you are trying a new box or book and you feel uncertain, strike one or two before the game to check them.

A JOURNEY THROUGH THE DARK BEGINS

The Scoundrel player reads:

“Hours have passed since I conquered the Ruby at the bottom of the Tomb of the Deep. Luckily I still have...”

Then selects two Items from the list below and writes each down.

Tools of the Trade:

- ◆ A length of silk rope
- ◆ An old but sharp dagger
- ◆ Four sturdy iron spikes
- ◆ The Scroll of Anuba
- ◆ A vial of extremely corrosive Fire Beetle acid
- ◆ The blessing of the Dawn Priestess
- ◆ A perfectly balanced throwing knife
- ◆ Yan, a mercenary of the Isthmus war
- ◆ Shirat, the Abbess of the Sun goddess
- ◆ ...or makes up their own. No lights, though.

COLLABORATE

Both players are collaborating in telling the story: when the flame is not on, they can take time to describe details about places and characters, embellishing the narration or adding little color vignettes, such as flashbacks to the Scoundrel’s past, moments of respite or rest, or even ominous events brewing elsewhere in the Tomb.

The Deep player meanwhile invents the first Peril the Scoundrel will face, and some features of the room or section of the Tomb that contains it.

When the Scoundrel is ready, the Deep describes the first location (omitting the peril), then the Scoundrel player reads:

“...My lamp dwindles. Tired and hungry, I must scramble in pitch dark, only a few matches in my pocket separate me from endless inky blackness,” picks up the matchbox and adds *“My Fate is in my own hands.”*

ANNOUNCING THE DARKNESS

The Scoundrel takes a match and offers it to the Deep who takes it and announces:

“...but Peril lurks in the Dark,” adding a very brief description of what sound, smell or feeling the Scoundrel perceives.

The Deep gives the unlit match back to the Scoundrel.



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FACING THE PERIL

The Scoundrel player declares:

“I just need to make it outside.”

Now the player holding the matchbox strikes the match.

If the Scoundrel is lighting the match and it doesn't catch fire after two tries, or breaks, he tripped in the dark. The Deep describes the Peril using only sound, smell and touch (there is no light!), and how it hurts the Scoundrel, sets them back, and generally blocks their path to the surface. The Deep may take away one of the Scoundrel remaining Items. The Deep describes how the Item (if any) is lost, stolen, or broken and puts its card in the ashtray and sets it on fire. The Deep gets the broken/failed match.

If the Deep is lighting the match and it breaks or fails to fire after two tries, then the Peril is of little consequence, or the noise was misleading. The Scoundrel can catch their breath, describing a moment of rest. The Scoundrel can also narrate how he chances on a new Item in the Tomb. Give a brief description of the Item and write it on a new index card. The Scoundrel gets the broken/failed match.

If the Scoundrel is lighting the match and it catches fire, they pass it to the Deep who must quickly describe the Peril and pass it back, still lit.

If the Deep is lighting the match and it catches fire, they must quickly describe the Peril and pass it back, still lit.

Until the Deep announces Darkness again the players can assume that there is just enough light

SAPIENT ITEMS & COMPANIONS

Sometimes the Scoundrel can find an ally in the Tomb just like they find Items during their journey. It happens, and it is indeed a tragic event. If somebody will leave the Tomb it will be the Scoundrel, and the Scoundrel alone. Grim Fate awaits those who entwine theirs with the Scoundrel's.

Will the Scoundrel use them like the Scoundrel uses any other item they happen to stumble upon in their journey? Or are the Companions going to be victims of the Deep relentless effort to withhold all things, living and not, from the surface?

This is up to you to decide. If the Scoundrel decides to have Companions or Sapient Items instead of regular Items, they should be aware that in the end they will be alone.

for the characters to perceive some details of their surroundings.

The Scoundrel then, while the flame eats the match, must try to describe how he completely overcomes the Peril, then blow out the flame, and proceed in their journey through the murk. The Scoundrel gets the spent match.

Gentleperson's Agreement

This is a collaborative game, its purpose is to evoke the struggle of the Scoundrel. When you play, play fair. If you are the Deep, never take more time than you need to state the Peril just to leave less time to the Scoundrel, and never interfere with the match when in the hands of the Scoundrel. If you are the Scoundrel, try to avoid reusing the same solution do beat the Peril, and be ready to admit if your exploit is weak, and concede your match.

Using an Item

The Scoundrel can decide to use an Item as a shortcut to overcome the Peril. They declare which

Item they're using, then blow out the flame, now they can narrate how the Item helped them beat or otherwise sidestep the Peril without the pressure of time. The Item is spent and goes away: tell how it is lost or broken while putting the card it was written on in the ashtray. The Scoundrel gets the spent match.

If the Deep still has the match when its flame dies (because they took too long describing the Peril, or the flame died), the Scoundrel narrates how he evades the Peril entirely. The Scoundrel can now narrate how he chances on a new Item in the Deep. Give a brief description of the Item and write it on a card. The Scoundrel gets the spent match.

If the Scoundrel still has the match when the flame dies (because the Scoundrel is about to get burned, drops the match, etc.), the Deep describes how the Peril severely hurts the Scoundrel, sets them back or blocks them. The Peril is unconquerable or just too hazardous and the Scoundrel must retreat and

choose an alternate path. The Deep gets the spent match.

The Capricious Fate

The player that received the spent match gets control of the matchbox.

If the matchbox has been in the hands of the same person for three times in a row, hand it to the opposite player saying:

“...but Fate is fickle and the wheel turns.”

If the Scoundrel has the matchbox, they add:

“My Fate is in my own hands.”

If the Deep has the matchbox, they add:

“You let your Fate slip through your fingers.”

A Stolen Glimpse of the Future

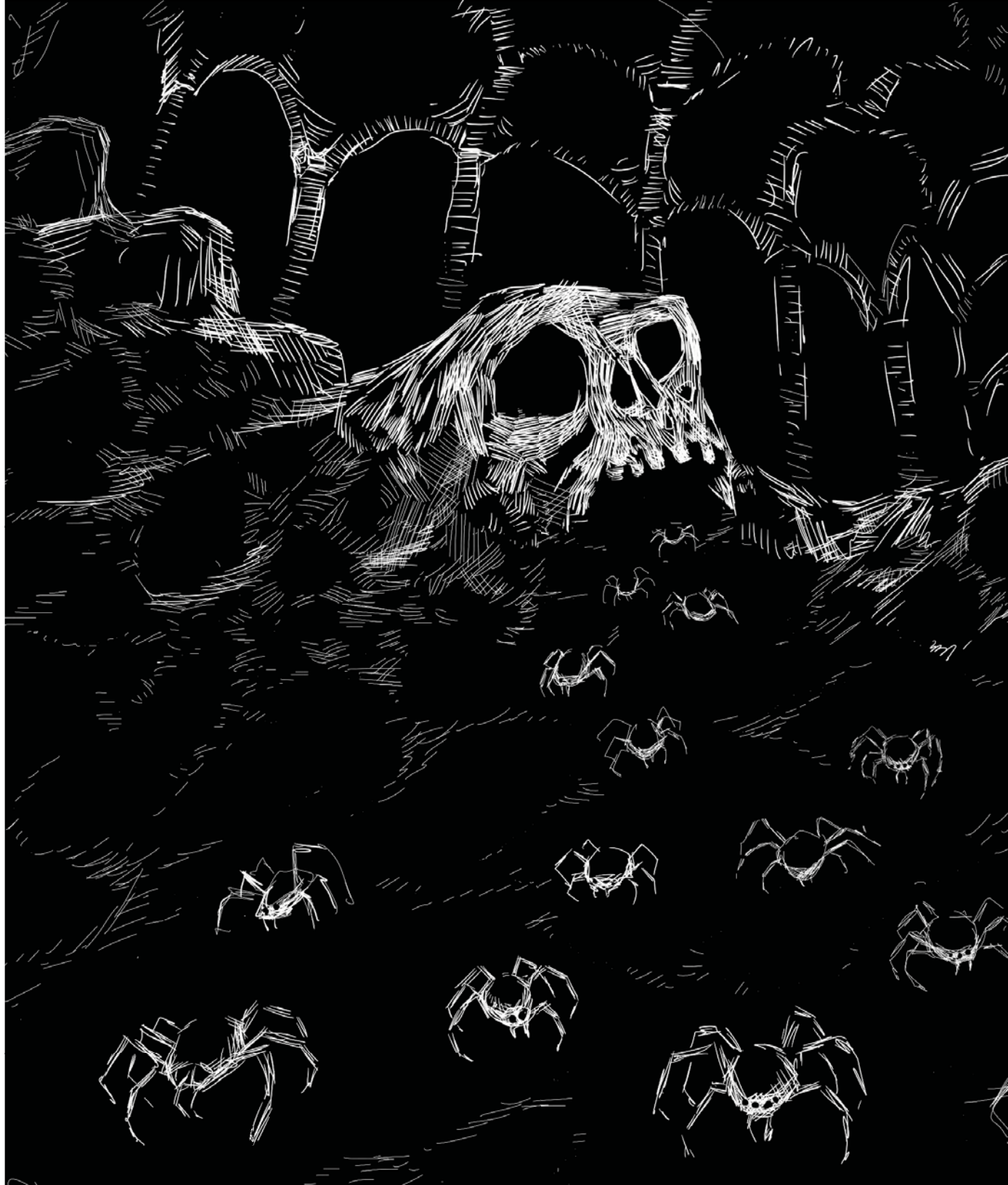
The player that holds the matchbox now gets to describe some features of the next room, corridor, or section of the Tomb. This is where the Scoundrel will go next.

If the Deep described the place, they take a match and offer it to the Scoundrel, who takes it and adds a detail of the room, handing the match back to the Deep.

If the Scoundrel described the place, they take a match and offer it to the Deep, who takes it and adds a detail of the room, handing the match back to the Scoundrel.

Plan Ahead

When you picture the new room in your mind, try to think ahead: if you are playing the Deep,



imagine which Perils will spring up there and build the room around them. If you are playing the Scoundrel, create a colorful place, but be sure to avoid painting yourself in a corner imagining possible escape routes.

If you are in need of inspiration, turn to the Vistas of the Deep, below.

DARKNESS FALLS AGAIN

The Deep then announces again:

“...but a new Peril lurks in the Dark,” adding a very brief description of what sound, smell or feeling the Scoundrel perceives (if any).

Play proceeds from Facing the Peril.

GOODBYE MY FRIEND

If at any time the Deep has 5 spent matches, the Scoundrel is now one of the Lost of the Deep and quickly forgotten by the world. The Deep describes the ultimate, solitary fate of the Scoundrel. They never came out of the Deep.

If at any time the Scoundrel has 10 spent matches, they made to the Surface and describe their triumphant return to the Surface. Glory and song will remember them forever.

Fiery Heroes of Song and Legend

At any time, if the Scoundrel has control of Fate, they can choose, to set fire to the remaining matches, letting the current match burn in the pyre, thus negating the Deep's victory. They get to describe their heroic last stand against the Perils of the Deep, before dying a glorious Death. They never came out of the Deep, but their legend lives

on, inspiring new adventurers to test their skills and ingenuity in the Tomb.

SPARKS OF INSPIRATION

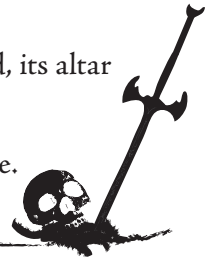
Some Perils in the Dark

- ◆ A tripwire at knee level, triggering hallucinogenic poisoned darts.
- ◆ A blind, tentacled creature emerging from black water, groping for a prey to feed upon.
- ◆ The unquiet dead, reaching from their tombs to grab the living.
- ◆ Lots of brightly colored fungi growing on the floor, ready to release spores if stepped on.
- ◆ A gaping crack in the corridor's floor, its bottom unseen.
- ◆ A teetering rope bridge, brittle with age, crossing an underground river.
- ◆ A blade swinging across the path on a titanic pendulum, still razor sharp after the aeons.
- ◆ Swarming peridot beetles, carnivorous and fast.
- ◆ A vengeful spectre, insubstantial yet baneful.
- ◆ A sudden incline in the smooth obsidian floor.
- ◆ ...or make up a looming Peril.

Some Vistas of the Deep

- ◆ A cramped corridor, its walls made of polished and perfectly aligned stones.
- ◆ The throne room of a forgotten Queen, both her and her guards frozen as ice statues.

- ◆ A room so vast no wall or roof can be seen, only echoing darkness.
- ◆ An impossibly long staircase, climbing the face of a sheer underground cliff.
- ◆ A crypt, the sarcophagi neatly lined, their golden surface glinting through the dust.
- ◆ A natural cave, its walls covered in huge quartz crystals.
- ◆ A spiral staircase with no rail, disappearing up in the murk.
- ◆ Cell after cell of a forgotten dungeon, the iron bars corroded and bent.
- ◆ A small temple to a bygone god, its altar in the shape of a scorpion.
- ◆ ...or make up a mysterious place.



THREE DOZEN EXPERIENCES UNSEEN

A miscellany by Epidiah Ravachol

- A screech that raises gooseflesh.
- An alarmingly close rich, earthy smell.
- The warm, dry flagstones that hide the flow of magma beneath.
- The shocking taste of one's own blood.
- The wind on your face as you and your mount race forward into the unknown.
- The warm, welcoming aroma of a meal cooked over the hearth fires of your youth.
- Razor webs sliding unhindered into flesh and bone.
- A burning quaff that dulls fears and enrages cerebral passions.
- The bright scent of citrus hiding recent sins.
- Poetry— forbidden to be recorded by decree of the Silent Emperor—shouted into the night so that none may forget.
- The leap felt in your guts when the floor unexpectedly falls away and you drift down after it.

- The slavering cackles and moans of a scavenger keeping a careful distance.
- The tittering and scratching of capricious imps and their cohort of vermin.
- The muffled beat of your prey's heart at your ear.
- A swimming sense that your hands and feet grow further away from you with every breath.
- A bitter wind that warns of a lasting storm.
- The peal of intoxicated laughter from a single voice on either side of you.
- The bulbous pustules that painfully strain against your flesh, eager to release their spore.
- The distant sound of dripping that echoes in your mind for years to come.
- The taste of flesh on the tongue of the hungry.

- The softest of the three songs of surrender used to appease the lost and mournful gods of now extinct peoples.
- Your own shrieks echoing back to you when you have not yet cried out.
- The coarse fur of a cave python brushing against your arm.
- The cold, sharp chime of coin sliding away from you and deeper into a stony maw.
- The stale belch of a hoary crypt disturbed after centuries of stillness.
- The minute footfalls of a millipede across the nape of the neck.
- Moist and slick surfaces with a cloying scent.
- An acrid air that claws at the throat and eyes.
- The dirge of an ancient people who mourn at every birth and rejoice when they find themselves alone in the dark.
- The compelling and repugnant odor of a leviathan's ambergris.
- A gossamer caress indistinguishable from that of a lover's.
- A chill draft that sits in the air undisturbed by wind and those who pass through it.
- An assault of scents at turns appetizing and revolting pouring over you in hot, humid waves.
- The sound of your own breathing and nothing else.
- The conspiratorial clink of goblets to signify a concord made in secret.
- The vertiginous slip of unsure gravity.



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: WorldsWithoutMaster.com/realms.

"Three Dozen Experiences Unseen" belongs to the Free & Chaotic Realms.

"The Pebble Ballad" belongs to the realms curated by Epidiah Ravachol. Its edicts may be found at: WorldsWithoutMaster.com/edicts.

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