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A Brief Message from the Editor

Welcome to the first edition of *Nightflyer* since 2006!

For many of you this will be the first copy of *Nightflyer* you'll have seen, but it's far from the first edition. In fact, this is edition no. 37 of what used to be a termly publication. Hopefully, inspired by the excellent examples within, you're already considering your contribution to the next *Nightflyer*. Without those fresh contributions it might be as long to wait till the next edition.

There are almost a dozen fine articles, stories and comics written and drawn by RPGsoc members inside. The first part contains practical articles. One such features guidance from the mysterious duo of Archibald and Wilhelmina on how to assemble an excellent costume on the cheap. Those thinking of running a society game should be interested in Helen's article on how quickly you can get yourself into exactly that hole, and with only a little alcoholic help at the start. We also have two reviews in the next part. One by Fed on a more than usually interesting fantasy trilogy, and another by Vicky on one White Wolf game but two books.

Our biggest section is made up of fiction, most of it inspired by society games or LARP. From the society game *Albion* we have two stories. The first a wonderful tale by James on the tragic murder of Sir Christophe Swal; full of demons and synagogues and artful misdirection. The second a short but oh so clever piece from Ellie about the highest of crafts. *White City* and *Broken World* each inspire a piece too. The first the epic recounting of an adventure to the wild east, and the second a more disturbing look at how not to woo. The section is rounded out by the final contribution to *White City*, some advice from Tracey on what not to do, and then what looks like being the first in a recurring comic series by Tony – the editor takes no responsibility for those who follow such advice.

Tragically this edition contains no special sealed-section at the back for stories too filthy for reading without warning. *Nightflyer X* will have to wait a little longer to return. Try harder to scar souls and break minds next time!

— Ivan

Part I

Articles

A Timeline of the Creation of a Society Game

by Helen Walter

When I suggested I might write something Albion-related for this year's Nightflyer, some interest was expressed in a timeline of the creation of a society game – from its original inception through to the first session. Here, as best as I can reconstruct from my notes and email archives, is a brief overview of how Albion made it into reality.
—HW

10/11/06 18:00: – Convivial evening discussion at the Hellfire Club turns to the topic of the Society Game. Someone mentions that it's been a while since the game had a setting based on a historical time period.

18:00-20:00: – Various suggestions proposed, including a Roman setting, another spin on Victorian England, and Renaissance Europe. I become briefly and vocally enthusiastic about the latter idea.

23:00: – Household retires to bed.

23:15: – I find myself unable to sleep, grab a laptop and begin typing.

11/11/06 02:00 – First draft of provisionally titled society game, “Renaissance”, completed; 4800 words, with skeleton of character generation system, magic systems, and almost all the Organisations (at least in name) which would later be used. I send an email to several prospective GMs requesting their help, with the blurb “I Have Gone Mad”. The initial teaser text is:

“It is the year 1608. At the court of Good King Harry, the newly-crowned Henry IX, the philosophers, poets, dreamers, courtesans, sorcerers, priests, merchants and ambassadors of Europe gather to celebrate the dawn of a new Golden Age...”

08:15 – First response (from Fed) agreeing to join my pitch team.

09:00 – I email the society Secretary declaring my intention to propose a Renaissance setting game, now called “Arcadia” since I’ve remembered a previous game played at the Oxford Society called “Renaissance”.

12/11/06 14:00: Termly General Meeting. Fed and I pitch “Arcadia”, answer a general Q&A session and take notes on what the players would and wouldn’t like to see.

18:00: Notes suggest that by this time in the day, Ivan and Ann have also joined the GM team.

18:33: The original Arcadia wiki goes online (probably with the help of Chris and/or Gareth).

12/12/06: The original GM-side Arcadia forum goes online at chaosdeathfish.com, implying that Gareth has by this point joined the team. Work continues on setting & system material.

13/12/06: Online meeting in which a great deal of setting basics are hammered out, and factions, countries & magics are assigned to various of the five GMs to write. Most of the Wiki structure exists by now, and the next stage consists of filling in content. Responsibility areas are not “fixed”, but it’s expected that the bulk of the work on each assigned area will be done by one writer, and edits from others will then follow.

14/12/06: Discussion begins on whether we can think of a better name than “Arcadia”. Suggestions include “Dominion”, “Heirs of Elizabeth”, “Jesuits!” and others. Work continues apace, including most of a filled Quirks list and an increasingly exciting Magic system.

27/12/06: The server on which the Arcadia wiki is hosted suffers an irreparable platter crash on the same day that it is discovered the nightly automated backup schedule... hasn’t been backing up. Almost everything since the original brief document is lost. In a remarkable feat of self-control, none of the GMs bite each other to death.

11/01/07 00:20: Gareth begins testing the cunning “IC email” system which copies IC letters to GMs and enables PC correspondence without having to expose real email addresses, in addition to easy emailing of groups like “dragoons” or “sorcerers” or “Ivan’s PCs”.

23:00: The great rename. “Arcadia” becomes “Albion”, which fails to fulfil my original goal of sounding any less like a white supremacist group, but does roll off the tongue a little better.

17/01/07: First few pages of the wiki go public, and are revealed to the RPGSoc lists.

29/01/07: Selected players with a reputation for being “system savvy” or horrible twinks are sent non-publicly-accessible portions of the system documents, and asked to break them. Responses include:

Joe says: So does shagging in the courtroom protect you from catching the Pox?

The Oxford Girl says:

The Oxford Girl says: So, someone mentioned that at the GM meeting, and I said, “We do /not/ need to work that out. It won’t become applicable. No player will think of that.”

The Oxford Girl says: And Gareth said, “Joe will.”

The Oxford Girl says: And I said, “Not even Joe would go that far. Seriously.”

The Oxford Girl says: And Gareth said, “Wait and see.”

Joe says: And that’s just me. Matt probably will come up with a complex plan involving scented candles, 2 pounds of flower, a cardinal and a voodoo doll to ensure that while he’s shagging someone in Bromley he is spiritually within the courtroom.

15/02/07: First draft of “Quirks” page is published. Most Wiki pages now public, in one form or another.

18/02/07: AGM. Albion GMs stage a rebellion against their CAMPO’s orders and fail to vote for the competitor, Wolf Drop (originally proposed by Matt):

“The world is a world very much like our own. The time is the dawn of the twenty-first century. All over the world, wolves are falling from the sky.”

Due to this unforeseen revolution, Wolf Drop fails to gain the required votes to go ahead, and Albion is sadly voted in by a margin of 3 (with 1 abstention).

01/03/07: Final GM meeting before the end of Hilary term.

08/03/07: Character concepts have begun to trickle in steadily. Individual eyes-only PC pages begin going up on the Wiki.

16/03/07: Public sections of the wiki are declared “Compleat”.

22/04/07: Proposed deadline for experienced players to submit their character concepts.

23/04/07: “Turn 0” pre-game briefings sent out for players preparing to play Turn 1 of the game. Albion Wiki user accounts created.

18:25: – “Turn 1 news” (pre-game news) appears.

24/04/07 19:30: Doors open on the first session of Albion.

Ten Top Tips for Good Costume on a Budget

by Wilhelmina Fotheringay & Archibald Seasonal

New gamers and LARPerS are often put off the idea of costume, particularly for games where it's not compulsory, by the idea that all character costume needs to be elaborate or expensive. Quite the opposite is the case – and from the girls who brought you the “£10 Full Maelstrom Kit” and “Mystery Superglue Challenge”, here are some tips for costuming both freeform and LARP games without breaking the bank.

1. Scarves

A good way to create distinctive costumes quickly and cheaply is to buy large scarves in several different colours from the street stalls and shops around Oxford (usually ~£5 for 2) and wear them over plain clothing. Waist-cloths, sashes, bandoliers, bandannas, headbands, arm-wraps and shawls can all result from a decent-sized scarf. Although they wear out quickly, badly torn or damaged ones can also be cut into strips to make fringes, braid or knuckle wraps.

2. Charity Shops

It's not usually a good idea to go into a charity shop looking for something very specific (try e-bay); however, browsing is a very good way of picking up useful bits of kit. Keep an open mind, and remember that you can adapt things. You can always replace plastic buttons; some dresses can be slit down the front and used as robes, some tops can be easily transformed into bodices or waistcoats. Look out for period-style materials and fastenings, natural-looking colours, and things that don't look European in origin. Cheap, plain second hand leather coats can make a great base for leather armour, and offcuts can always be used to decorate or make patchwork items.

3. Comfortable Base Layer

It can be very sensible to invest in a hard-wearing, durable base layer which is appropriate for all weathers and which can look generically “character kit” even without anything worn over it. A pair of second-hand leather trousers from Uncle Sam's vintage shop on Little Clarendon Street can be as cheap as £10, and will go with most costumes; a plain, undyed cotton or black “poet shirt” will usually cost around £20, and a second-hand pair of army boots (generally more visually appropriate than trainers, and much more hard-wearing) will cost from £30-£40 and, if well cared for, last for at least three years. Keeping a base layer in neutral colours (blacks, whites, undyed cloth and dark rather than pale tones) and then elaborating with accessories, scarves etc. can mean that you can wear mostly the same clothes for several different characters.

4. Accessories

Belts, wrist-cuffs, jewellery and other accessories add the finishing touch to a character; and, in the case of pouches, tankard-straps and holsters, can be vital for carrying all your character needs while keeping your hands free. Primark is a remarkably good source of costume jewellery and ornate belts that are suitable for costumed roleplay. Pouches can be improvised out of a handkerchief, a piece of sturdy curtain cord and some inventive sewing, while straps, holsters and similar are all excellent uses for leather offcuts (the heavier the better).

5. Makeup

If you need to play a non-human race with a makeup requirement, you don't always need the most expensive professional makeups; but if you're using a great deal of a single colour, it can end up more economical to avoid

Snazzaroo and the other cheapest brands – although they cost slightly less per cake, they will need more frequent reapplications than more expensive greasepaint, which can last for up to 24 hours if applied correctly.

For small details (tattoos, sigils, highlighting etc.), don't bother with specific LARP or theatre makeup – Boots and Superdrug both sell perfectly decent eyeliner pencils in several colours. Unscented antiperspirant spray (not deoderant!) works nearly as well as a real barrier spray for makeup preparation; hairspray (the cheaper and nastier the better) is an equally good substitute for expensive fixing spray.

For human makeup, most injury components – from fake blood to oozing boils – can be simulated with things you can find in your kitchen. See Casualty Simulation for a list of tips. For old scars, use Superglue rather than expensive Collodion on less sensitive skin; and for recent wounds, a thicker mixture of your favourite fake blood (try adding PVA glue) will work nearly as well as professional Freshscratch.

6. Emblems, Sashes and Sigils

A group colour scheme is the easiest way of keeping a group looking uniform. Better still is having one item of kit that everyone in the group wears; something very simple like a coloured sash. Simply having everyone in the group wearing a particular logo or emblem will not necessarily make a group look uniform if people are also wearing very eclectic kit – either the single emblem needs to be very large and distinctive, or the group need a unifying element to their costumes; i.e. that group colour scheme.

Sashes are an extremely easy group marker and can be made very cheaply. A very basic tabard is equally cheap and easy to make. If you want something more elaborate, you can embroider your group logo onto sashes or tabards, belt flashes, or any other piece of kit or costume. Simple, distinctive emblems work best, and straight lines are easier to sew. Anything too complicated is hard to reproduce, and will not look uniform. Complicated crests and heraldry can look amazing, but are probably best kept to single show-pieces – anything you want the whole group to be wearing ought to be simple to mass-produce in a variety of different ways – by painting, sewing, drawing, embossing, or any other creative ways that players might come up with.

If you have a small budget and no talent, Velvet Glove can produce belt flashes with emblems for as little as £3.

7. Props

If your character carries props (a walking cane, a box, strange devices), remember that home-making is just as good as buying expensive working kit 90% of the time. The chances that you will ever need to actually use the sextant or telescope that your ship's captain carries are miniscule – get a cheaper non-working replica. One of the most effective props I've ever seen was a simple cardboard box marked "SPECIMEN 266 – FLUFFY". It might as well have been empty, but it exuded the greatest aura of menace I've ever seen from a homemade item.

Bags of mixed, non-working watch and clock parts can be picked up for a song on Ebay, and then superglued to everything you own to create instant steampunk props.

Never throw away good bamboo; it can make everything from a heraldic banner to an IC drinking straw to a mechadendrite robotic arm, and your Society will thank you when it needs the stuff to build the next Fresher's Fair stall. Equally, never junk non-working computer parts which include circuit boards.

Never underestimate the effect which can be achieved by supergluing unlikely things to each other, yourself, and your friends.

8. Character Design

Some character design choices are obviously going to make a difference to costuming – some options in some systems demand which, while they don't have to be expensive, do have to be taken into consideration. Any character choice that leads to the need for full armour is going to be expensive; any necessity for multiple costume changes will also increase costs.

But even outside the realms of system choices, who your character is can have a major impact on how cheaply you can costume them. It is easier to costume an urchin or a thief on the cheap than it is a noble. Ragged clothes are easy to improvise out of modern-looking clothes, and anything you cut down you don't have to worry about hemming, as frayed edges are perfectly IC. Patches can be used to cover modern logos, or simply to create a unique and recognisable look; cheap offcuts of woolen cloth can make do for a cloak.

Playing street-scum is the easiest way of costuming on the cheap, but there are lots of other character-creation choices which will make your character harder or easier to costume. If you want to play a fighter, look out for cultures or options which allow you to wear leather armour rather than plate. If you want to play a noble, then a disowned heir or overthrown lord allows you not to worry about expensive looking clothes; you can concentrate

your budget on a single prop or accessory which will show your noble background. And any character who can use terms like 'eclectic' or 'wild' to describe their personality has the excuse to design their costume to match, using whatever bits and bobs you've managed to pick up cheaply.

9. Weapons

Not all games need weapons; some LRPs, however, require weapon physreps, and they can add a great deal to some non-combat freeform costumes. A good tip is to get a sturdy, low-budget weapon from a manufacturer like LRPStore or Primal Forge which is appropriate for more than one character – a plain single-handed or bastard sword can often cover three or four different characters as a personal weapon.

10. Stance & Voice

Not "Costume" tips, strictly – but just as effective, and free!

If you need to play a new character in a hurry but are very low on distinctive kit, then one of the finest ways to separate two characters is to adopt new body language or a new voice. Foreign or regional accents can sound cheap and campy, but once you throw yourself into them they're surprisingly effective. Speaking entirely in whispers, never using contractions, lisping or addressing everyone as "friend" can throw as distinctive cast on your character as a new hat or tunic.

Similarly, adopting new body language – a hunch, a straighter back, or a different attitude to personal space – can be as defining a character point as any other piece of presentation. Practise different walks (swinging your legs will make you seem arrogant, keeping your feet before your knees will make you seem demure), change the distance at which you usually stand to talk to someone, and consider carefully your character's attitude to being crowded or touched.

How to Run a GM Meeting

by Ivan

It's always good to start with the caveats, if you make them strong enough then you might frighten off any readers before they have time to notice the really stupid things you've said in the body of your article. My important caveat is that I've only GMed in one society game ("Albion") and sat in on the final two or three GMs meetings of another ("Legacy", following the tragic execution of my character for treason). I am not an expert.

If you have an idea for a Society Game, an idea you just know will be brilliant, then you need to assemble a GM team. Sometimes you'll be lucky and you, or one of your co-GMs, will have experience of how to run a Society game already. But if not then it's going to seem a daunting challenge. You'll know what happens in the Tuesday meetings, will have seen the GMs in action and received turnsheet responses, but how about all the behind the scenes activity related to running a game?

Here's an explanation of how we¹ ran things for Albion.

Areas of Responsibility

As a general note, each GM generally has a certain number of players who are their responsibility. You'll know that from playing the current society game! However, behind the scenes certain GMs will generally take the lead with certain aspects of the system, e.g. magic, and with certain of the factions or areas of geography. Thus in Albion 2 I would generally answer questions about alchemy, the Royal Navy and Cathay for example. These don't have to be hard and fast divisions, but it helps get questions answered quickly if the GM team know who's taking the lead on a particular issue.

Preparing for the Meeting

After the meeting on Tuesday you heave a huge sigh of relief; you managed to stay awake all the way through it. Now there are just a few hundred emails between players to keep an eye on, and a couple of dozen answers to their questions to sort out, but basically you and the rest of the team are on holiday till the turnsheeting deadline.

Turnsheets

Every previous Society game has had its GM meeting on Sunday, the majority have set their turnsheeting deadline as the end of Friday. (Albion's deadline was the end of the Thursday.) In games prior to Albion players emailed their turnsheets, or in the earliest games pidgeoned them, to their GM. The modern system is for players to edit a wiki page devoted to that turn. In any case you will have received their plans and should have some idea already about what will happen next week.

The first step in preparing for the GM meeting is simply to read over your players' turnsheets and begin to think about how you'll respond. It's a good idea to read at least a few other turnsheets too, so that you have a good idea of what is going on. Some people write naturally interesting turnsheets, don't be afraid to read them just because every other GM probably will! It's one of the perks of the job.

Most actions in your players' turnsheets can be straightforwardly divided into two types: simple actions or group actions. Simple actions only affect that player, "I shall lock myself in my castle and meditate upon the music of the spheres". Group actions, rather obviously, affect more than one player, "In cooperation with Space Captain Jack I shall explore the debris field, and hope that the rumours are false that Pirate Lord Solomon plans to do the same". (Some actions are often described as "contested", when one player's action is opposed by another. The simplest example is assassinations or duels between players. For the purposes of this article I'll consider

¹The Albion GM Team: Helen as CAMPO, Gareth, Fed, Ann, Adam and I

contested actions as a form of group action.) It may well be worth reading the turnsheets of some of the others involved in group actions with your players.

Setting Up

For the second game of Albion, the two term game, the GM team set-up a collaborative Google doc before each GM meeting as part of the preparations. In advance of the meeting each GM would go through their turnsheets and pick out each players involvement in any group actions. We used a table with roughly the following the format to keep track of such things:

GM	Title	Characters Receiving Brief	Characters Involved and their Plans	Results / briefs / write-up
Ivan	Egypt: Recovering the Hellgate	Dalembertus, Haroun, Tsung	Haroun (1AP): Retrieve Hellgate for Tsung; get Ashen Vale demons back home to Albion. Tsung (part of 4-8): Accompany Haroun, take Hellgate to Cathay	Goes according to plan. Haroun and Tsung get the Hellgate with Dalembertus' cooperation. And flee to Cathay. Walking through heart of Demon army UNHARMED woo woo. (Roll into Assault on Heaven)

I've also included an example from Albion's Turn 11 of an uncontested group action by two players, their characters being Haroun and Tsung. Note that although Dalembertus is an NPC his name has been included as a reminder to us of others who will have taken an interest. The notes indicate how many AP each player is spending on the action and a single sentence explanation of what they're planning to do to act as a reminder during the GM meeting.

We also set up another table which we called the "PC Market Place" to record items and information that was being transferred between players. An example from the same turn is:

From	To	Item / Service
Lang	Lovecraft	A doughnut and a note stating, <i>"Dearest Loneycraft, I, Ambassador Lang of the Royal Kingdom of Tungning, formerly Prince Lang, the Fifth Prince of an Exotic and Far-Away Kingdom, send you this wonderful, delectable pastry with the hope that you will enjoy it immensely. I hope your life is well and that your hobby of a masochistic lifestyle is going well for you. Yours, Ambassador Lang of the Royal Kingdom of Tungning, formerly Prince Lang, the Fifth Prince of an Exotic and Far-Away Kingdom."</i>

This may seem quite a bit effort but I used to do it in about an hour before heading off to the meeting on a Sunday morning.

During the Meeting

For Albion meetings began at 11 on Sunday morning and ran till they ended. By the end of the second game, when we had it all down smooth, a meeting would generally last around 6 hours. In the first half of the meeting we would discuss the individual turnsheets and in the second work through the group briefings. The meetings would end by dividing up the news and briefings and deciding which NPCs would be required at the upcoming Tuesday session.

Individual Turnsheets

We would spend at least 5 minutes on each players turnsheet. The responsible GM would give a brief summary of the players actions and mention any simple actions they already had an idea how to handle. It's important to do this because every GM needs to have a rough idea of what's happening in the game and what each player is up to. It doesn't have to be perfect, but remember that during the Tuesday session you may face sudden player questions at any moment! The other two reasons are that it may well catch things that have been missed - actions that aren't simple but are really group, or items to be transferred - and it gives GMs a chance to brainstorm.

The last needs to be emphasised. Part of the job as a GM is to keep an eye on players and make sure they have enough to do and seem to be having fun. Your impression of their turnsheets is one of the key ways you have to decide that. Turnsheets that start getting “boring” are a bad sign. Brainstorming with the other GMs will allow you to work out what plot threads you can try and give them, you’ll need the other GMs to help you work them in sensibly.

The Legacy GM Team didn’t use the Google Doc method of pre-preparation, instead they had a whiteboard and worked up the requirements for group briefings during the meeting.

Group Actions

Once all the individual turnsheets have been looked at, it’s time to move on to the group briefings. There’s no solid advice to offer here as to how to handle group actions. They have to be taken on their own merits and how they work is going to be affected in many ways by the game’s system and by the GMs’ philosophy.

In terms purely of running the meeting however it’s a bit easier to describe how they work. The resolution of the action takes a combination of brainstorming and debate amongst the GMS, but eventually some kind of resolution will be reached and the problem changes to writing up the resulting group briefing. Sometimes we would write the briefing up there and then, filling in the space in the Google doc. It should be noted that this is aided if you have someone like Helen who can type faster than ought to be possible. Most of the time we would wait till the end of the meeting and assign the group briefings to GMs as their workload, expertise and players’ involvements in the briefing warranted. That’s what the first column of the chart was for recording.

Note that some briefs were substantial enough, or separable into sub-actions after all, that two or more GMs would be assigned to write them up in the end. Over the course of the game, we tended to leave more and more of the group briefings writing to the individual GMs.

It was my experience that, if no group briefings were written in the meeting, that it took about as long to go through the group actions as to do the individual turnsheets.

Everything Else

Over the course of the meeting we would put items that we would make note of items that were particularly newsworthy or important to appear in faction briefings, but the truth is that at the end of the meeting these would be pretty bare. So, at the end this was the final thing to decide. What of all the events that had happened in the game world were going to be important enough to make it into the news?

And then as the very last item on the meeting agenda we would decide which NPCs we would play and take note of anything - such as armour, scarves or cosmetic wounds - required to play them.

Snacks

GMs need food to fuel their brains. Chocolate bribes have on occasion been traditional. GM Fudge being particularly apt.

On the Importance of Chemistry

Each GM team has its own chemistry and once you’ve been working together for a while you’ll know that some briefings or aspects of the system are left to one GM in particular. You’ll also find a method of working that suits your team best.

Part II

Reviews

A Review of Scion: Hero and Scion: Demigod

by Victoria Harris

Scion, one of White Wolf's most recent games (released in 2007), centres on the story of the children of the gods and their battles against the titanspawn. The feel of the game, in contrast to the World of Darkness, is that of a world where the players are epic heroes and some of the most powerful beings in existence, but still grittier than the epic high fantasy setting of Exalted. I have heard it fairly accurately described as modern-day Exalted-lite, for those who are familiar with White Wolf's other games. It draws heavily in its influences from Neil Gaiman's American Gods, although there is also as might be expected a great deal of inspiration taken from mythology, particularly classical literature. The game is divided into three tiers of power level: Hero, Demigod and God. Over the course of about eight months of game play (in the region of 20+ sessions) my players have progressed from low-level heroes to powerful demigods.

The format of the books is quite neat. The game is divided across three volumes, which is pretty much all you need to own to play or run the game. This makes rather a refreshing change from White Wolf's usual marketing stance of publishing numerous splat books, many of which are pretty much essential to run a successful campaign. The Hero book contains a selection of Pantheons from which your players may choose their divine parent, with a nice paragraph of flavour text on each describing the mythological background and modern day roles of each god. Otherwise the setting in the Hero book is a little sparse, although this might be considered something of a mixed blessing as it allows the storyteller a degree of creative freedom. Demigod is a little more expansive on its setting information, providing interesting bits of background for various mythological locations.

Character generation, although greatly simplified from its closest cousin Exalted, can still be quite a complex process. This can be ideal if your group is one that enjoys number crunching but could be a bit of off-putting for less experienced gamers. For those not familiar with White Wolf's system, the characters are generally given a 1 to 5 dot rating in various abilities and attributes. Attributes are innate characteristics, whilst abilities are learned skills. The roll for most actions is an appropriate attribute + ability (ie. Dexterity + Melee for a combat roll) number of D10 dice. The GM will assign a difficulty to a roll based on the number of successes that must be achieved. Generally rolls of 7 or above is a success, with tens counting twice. In Scion the PCs are assign epic attributes, which are supernatural abilities brought on by their divine ichor, and boons, which are unique powers. Epic attributes are almost always superior in that they add successes to a dice roll and grant the player access to knacks, which are expressions of their heightened innate characteristics. Players also receive XP throughout the course of the game, with which to upgrade any of their attributes, abilities, epics or boons. Scion: Demigod provides a template for upgrading your characters from low-level heroes to more powerful demigods (and presumably God has the same for upgrading from demigods to gods). In my game I choose to apply a reduced version of this to my players, as they had already received substantial progression through experience points.

The selection of boons and knacks are not always well balanced. The player's choice of divine parent can be influential, as any abilities or boons and epics favoured by their patron can be bought at a reduced XP cost. Furthermore not all divine parents are equal, some providing access to more powerful purviews than others. In particular here Odin seems rather unbalanced as a choice of divine parent as he allows access to more purviews than any other god. Moreover, given the somewhat exponential nature of progression in the game it pays quite heavily for a player to specialise.

The manuals also provide a prewritten campaign, along with some pre-genned characters. Although I chose to base my campaign loosely on the given one in the book, I felt my group of experienced roleplayers would benefit more from creating their own characters. Nevertheless the pre-generated characters could be a useful resource for anyone relatively new to roleplaying or wishing to learn the system before creating a character of their own. The campaign as written provides an interesting over-arching story arc and a number of good features. However, I chose quite heavily to rewrite sections of it in an attempt to remove some of the more railroaded aspects or to change those sections, which relied on the players playing the pre-generated characters. Although conceptually good, I felt that the campaign as written was at times a little heavy handed in guiding the players in a particular direction. In addition I introduced a relatively short side-arc in order to better bridge the gap between the end

of the Hero story arc and my characters attaining demigodhood, as the Hero campaign if played as written can be relatively short. The setting is ideal for running long-term campaigns or campaigns with multiple story arcs, although it may well work with shorter mini-series.

Combat in Scion can often feel quite clunky. The system is based on high defence, which whilst some might argue is a design feature rather than a flaw, I think can lead to fights being frustrating and overly slow. The attacker will roll their attack roll and will successfully hit if they overcome the players defence value (based on their dexterity and weapon's defence). Damage is calculated from excess success above and beyond those needed to successfully hit, plus the player's strength, plus weapon's damage. The defender has a soak value, which is based on their stamina attribute. Unlike Exalted where soak is subtracted directly from damage dice (and if the dice pool is reduced to zero or below they still get the chance to "ping" their opponent for their essence rating in dice), soak is subtracted from damage successes. This can become frustrating for the attacker, as even if they hit they are not guaranteed to do damage. Furthermore it is very easy to build an adversary with low accuracy and high soak, meaning that your players spend rounds unable to damage your foe but at no risk from being hurt themselves. Indeed many of the pre-written antagonists, whilst being well conceived, have this flaw. I have found the page on Threat Generation in Scion on the White Wolf wiki to have been a tremendously useful resource.

Another potential problem is that often the greatest challenge to your players is going to be other scions. As a character increases in power level so do the automatic successes granted by their epic attributes. As such at high levels the only real threats are antagonists with similar levels of success adders.

Overall I would say that the setting of Scion is both engaging and has a great potential for a number of great campaigns. Over the three books a reasonable amount of background is given but there is just enough room for a GM to invent their own pieces of setting. Where the game falls down is in the combat system. Exalted, whilst still having its flaws, is a greatly superior system. I would be eager to see a second edition print of Scion that fixes some of the issues with the gameplay. Useful but less essential would be a few splats containing some expanded information on the gameworld.

The Last Argument of Joe Abercrombie by Fed Kassatkin

Over the last decade or so, there have been a number of interesting entries into the fascinating genre. We have had the epic greatness of Steven Erikson's *Malazan Book of the Fallen* series, the cerebral and philosophical *Prince of Nothing* trilogy from R. Scott Bakker and the bastardly *Gentlemen Bastards* sequence from Scott Lynch. We have also had a most intriguing entry from Joe Abercrombie with the *First Law* trilogy, first wooing readers with *The Blade Itself's* sensual (to the touch) cover in 2006. The two sequels, *Best Served Cold* and *Last Argument of Kings*, quickly followed, completing the unusual and, in the end, very surprising story. Or maybe I should say 'character study'. For Joe Abercrombie, it is the characters the form the most developed, and for us the most enjoyable, aspect of the books.

Before we get onto Mr. Abercrombie, it is worth taking a look at the competition. By which I mean the competition that I have read, mentioned above. Scott Lynch has so far offered us just two novels (the third in the sequence forthcoming in February, look out for it), both thoroughly enjoyable and offering fabulous (and unlikely) plot-twists, double-crosses and the best in con-artists. The characters, barring perhaps Jean and Locke (the protagonists), lack much depth, and the focus is very clearly on the twisty-turny, page-turny plot. This detracts a little from our attachment to the key characters, but the story is excellent enough to carry us through and be dying for more, and I am willing to forgive Mr. Lynch for the shortcomings of the supporting cast. R. Scott Bakker tries very hard to offer a complex, Byzantine (in practically all senses of the word) world, threaded with philosophical ideas and a most unforgiving set of rules. While the story and characters offered were strong, readable and thoroughly thought-through, the heavy philosophical lean put the whole feel of the trilogy (and is likely to continue in the following books of the series) into the uncomfortable spectrum. It is almost as if Mr. Bakker is wrestling with his own concerns, ideas and concepts, quite forgetting that there are another million people in the room, listening to him telling the story. Finally, we come to Steven Erikson's extremely epic affair, which has so far stretched to eight books, averaging out to something like 800 pages per novel and awaiting the grand two-book conclusion to the cycle. I can see the prospect of reading quite so much to catch up to be quite daunting, but barring a small number of concerns and the problem of the first novel, Mr. Erikson never stops providing the most excellent, non-stop reading in the fantasy genre. Combining a gargantuan cast of characters, with at least a horde of them as a fully-fledged main cast, with a universe full of history layered upon ancient history, layered upon mythology, layered upon ancient mythology and a plot told from a multitude of perspectives, the series has given us almost everything there is to give. Mr. Erikson has pulled few punches and has so far told an amazing story, a review of which is beyond the scope of this article.

Facing such competition, and a host of older series, both finished and long-established, Mr. Abercrombie has produced an offering both familiar and yet new and refreshing. When I first picked up *The Blade Itself* to read, it was not immediately apparent what was on offer. Indeed, the first chapter did not offer many clues as to the novel's true nature – the most telling one, perhaps, was that it started at the End. The characters, as first presented, appear typical fantasy fare – the barbarian, the wizard and his apprentice, the foppish noble dandy (chasing after girls and no doubt soon to become noble in deed as well as title) and the war hero, once tortured, now become a torturer himself. Mr. Abercrombie very kindly starts breaking down our assumptions one by one, neither leaving the characters in the end obvious, nor obviously developing their personalities. The unexpected happens more and more often and the expected unexpected is more often than not deftly side-stepped. The characters Mr. Abercrombie has created, all of them, are extremely well fleshed out and thought through, their experiences affect them and they feel, through it all, quite human, quite real.

That is not to say that Mr. Abercrombie is without failure – the novels lack somewhat in female leads and one of the characters, though interesting, does not deliver the quality that the others do. It is understandable, and it is hardly an easy thing to achieve – both Bakker and Lynch struggle to do so (the latter by helpfully avoiding actually introducing the main female character so far). Nor does he entirely abandon the character stereotypes, co-opting the less interesting aspects together with some of the better ones.

The Barbarian, in *The First Law* series, mostly portrayed by Logen Ninefingers, is comparable to similar at-

tempts to treat the barbarian archetype in Bakker's *Prince of Nothing* (with the mad and unstable Cnaiur) and Erikson's *Malazan Book of the Fallen* (unstoppable and direct Karsa Orlong) but arguably succeeds better than those. What Mr. Abercrombie offers is a complexity of character that gives both contrast to the archetype, and yet takes on many elements of it wholesale. What he has done, is realised the archetype more fully, fleshed out the idea, treated it to become more plausible. Quite an achievement. Through the course of the trilogy he gives a similar treatment to the others, not least in doing the Magus Bayaz in a way which undeniably sets a benchmark in what Wizards are about.

Does Mr. Abercrombie offer us anything else but a host of excellent characters though? After all, we already have Erikson's enormous cast, many of whom perform most excellently. Mr. Abercrombie delivers on many other aspects – the setting is very familiar, and does everything to enable the story to progress smoothly along. It is not dissimilar in function to George R. R. Martin's Westeros, but goes a little further in keeping its mysteries under wraps, though it never achieves the complexity and layering of Erikson's world, but it does offer us a somewhat unexplained, but understandable one. Mr. Abercrombie reveals just enough of the world to let the story be told properly, and lets us have a tantalising taste of what it may be beyond that without making it a meaningless exercise in world-building.

As for the writing, well, Mr. Abercrombie does not disappoint. He does not provide anything ground breaking, beyond a style that eases us in and keeps us reading, keeps us listening to the characters and feeling them through their travails. There is nothing showy, but neither is it simple – we get enough to make it all work.

* * *

So where does this leave us? With a cracking entry thanks to Mr. Abercrombie's willingness and determination to bring his literary labours and imagination to the shelves. Since I know that Mr. Abercrombie regularly trawls through all possible reviews and comments on his published work (he loves nurturing his ego), I will close with something a bit quotable. Mr. Abercrombie has given us something extraordinarily similar and at the same time new and clever enough to break our preconceptions, having damn good ride to boot. Go. Buy it, borrow it, beg for it. Read it. You'll definitely not regret it.

Part III

Fiction

Murder Most Diabolic

by James Grover

The diamonds in the saucer gave off a stinging white mist, and then vanished away to nothing. Reginald Grover carefully removed a pinch of the resulting fluid from the bowl and sprinkled it over the needle. At first, nothing happened. Then, gradually, the deadly weapon began to fade away, until nothing seemed to remain except the desk it had been sitting on. Reginald knew better however, and gingerly reached forward, hands clad in the toughest gloves he had been able to find, and gently closed his fingers around where the needle still lay. Working quickly, he secreted it in the special pocket he had sewn in the lining of the jacket he would wear the next day. This accomplished, he slumped back, panting, in his chair, finally letting some of the tension out of his tired arms, trying to forget the fell task he was to undertake the next morning.

"Use your discretion Reginald" Choronozon's seemingly innocuous words echoed in his head. "Just make our problem... go away". A bitter chuckle escaped from his mouth as he thought of that. Of course. What could be easier than killing the host of a murderous demon, a man who seemed to be vexingly absent from the social circles of the court? Choronozon had provided an apparently lethal dose of poison, and it should have been a trivial matter to slip it into Sir Swal's glass at one of the many parties held around Oxford that season. But again and again the man had been absent, and Reginald had grown more and more anxious. And now, desperation saw him sitting here, face lined with exhaustion and eyes wild with fear for the coming challenge.

But what choice did he have? He reached down under his desk, and pressed a concealed button. A thin draw containing a single piece of faded parchment covered in red scrawl slid out. Reginald grabbed the contract, and read through it for what seemed like the thousandth time. He thought he had been so careful in its wording, mindful of the countless examples of those thwarted by a demonic contract, but there it was again, the wretched ambiguity about what could be considered "reasonable effort" to defend Choronozon's mortal interests. He should have realised that the damned demon would sometimes be "interested" in people, and so he had become Choronozon's instrument of vengeance against the one who had harmed Lady Mai.

Reginald poured himself a double measure of brandy, and tried to chase away the lingering doubts in his mind. He had found out as much as he could about the Synagogue that Swal would be attending the next day. He had built a small identity for the Jewish man as whom he would appear on the morrow, and the spell to achieve his transformation thrashed around in his mind like a caged animal. Reginald glanced down at the ancient book lying on his desk. It had taken him weeks, and a small primer on the illogical, seemingly incoherent language in which it was written from Lady Mai, in order to extract any useful information from it, but it had been worth it. Consultation with the notes he had painstakingly taken had amplified his spells to levels even greater than he had anticipated. He was quite confident that the needle now concealed in his jacket was the most advanced application of the stasis spell since the mysterious authors of the tome had themselves been practicing the magical arts, a fact that gave him some academic satisfaction to cling to at the very least. The hours he had spent studying the proceedings of a Synagogue meet also gave him some reassurance that perhaps, just perhaps, he would escape the next day with his freedom. But these facts were a small comfort among the crowds of doubt that threatened to overwhelm his sanity. Sighing, Reginald stood up, changed into his nightgown, and lay awake in bed knowing that if even if everything went as planned, by this time the next day he would be a murderer.

* * *

An unremarkable Jewish man walked through the morning cold along the Headington way, towards the central Synagogue. Reginald Grover struggled to maintain a steady gait in his unfamiliar form. The shape of his body felt unnatural, somehow aberrant, and his newly acquired facial hair felt uncomfortable against his tanned skin. Reaching the threshold of the building, he was electrified to see Swal standing only a few metres away from him and just barely managed to maintain enough composure to mutter the correct responses to the Hebrew greetings coming his way. He was forced to turn away from his target to introduce himself to the crowd of inquisitive men that had formed around him. Thankfully, before he had run out of background to tell them, the group started to proceed inwards. Reginald found himself sitting three rows behind Swal.

Reginald's racing mind managed to carry him through the blessings that initiated the service, bringing the

slim window of opportunity provided by the traditional readings ever closer. Maintaining the façade of a man who had been reciting these words all of his life took all of his concentration, and he knew that the recitations from the Torah were the only gap in the proceedings long enough to undertake his dire task. As the end of the last community blessing drew nearer, he felt his fearful anticipation rising higher. Finally, the time came for the congregation to sit, and he began.

Focusing all of the new, innate power he had extracted from the tome into an extension of his will, he forced the deadly needle from its hiding place in his coat sleeve, and forced it through the air towards where Swal sat. The words of the Rabbi faded in favour of the sound of his pulsing heart, and he struggled to sit still, keeping the visage of a man in religious contemplation. He managed to levitate the needle to a position behind Swal. A single bead of sweat formed on his forehead as he reached to the very limits of his power and managed to dislodge a small shower of dust from the ceiling above Swal onto the man's trousers. As he leaned forward to brush it off, Reginald sped the needle into place behind him, against the back of his seat. With an internal flicker of triumph, he saw Swal start as if stung by an insect, and flail at his back for a moment. The triumph turned to fear as he saw Swal glance around the room; perhaps it was his fevered imagination, but he was sure that the man's gaze had lingered on him for half a second too long.

Still, if Choronozon had not played him false, then Swal was sure to perish before he could do anything about the presence of one unfamiliar face at prayers. His relief was so great that he almost missed the cue to stand up to sing psalms that felt horribly unfamiliar to his tongue, and stumble through the group prayers, until at last the ordeal of the service was over. He filed out with all the other worshippers being careful not to show undue haste to leave the place. He glanced around to see Swal twisting to show one of his companions his back, obviously complaining about the "splinter" he had leaned on during the service. One of the man's companion's brushed his hands over the slight tear in Swal's coat, but Reginald knew he would find nothing. The needle had been magically formed out of poison itself, timed to dissolve shortly after entering the body. The perfect crime, a death from a sudden sickness with nothing amiss save the suddenness of the passage; Choronozon had assured him that the poison was of a type unknown to the country's scientists. There was no rational reason why he should fear, yet he still felt unbalanced and unsure of himself, though thankfully the guilt for what he had done was still strangely absent. He made his excuses and stumbled off through the bitter morning. There were still two weeks before the next court session, and he intended to spend them in his country estate, clearing his head and trying to forget what circumstance had forced him to do.

* * *

Reginald Grover arrived at the palace of Oxford on the day of the winter court visibly pale, and with grey bags under his eyes from lack of sleep, but looking otherwise confident and composed. He waved his way past lesser courtiers as he progressed towards the privy chambers, stopping only for the mandatory search of his person, jovially explaining away his complexion to the footman, whom he vaguely recognised from a past visit, as due to some urgent research into new illusions for the next royal performance at the New Rose. He was feeling a perverse elation that he would be able to report his success to Choronozon. He walked into the inner chamber and glanced around at the familiar faces, and barely kept himself from fainting at the sight he saw in one corner.

Paler than himself by far, with unpleasant blotches covering his face and hacking coughs escaping near constantly from his mouth, sat Christophe Swal. But that was impossible, Choronozon had been adamant that the poison would be quickly lethal in even the smallest dose. He looked, as subtly as he could around the court for the Demon, but couldn't see the garish streak of red that would show his presence. The bloody Demon had obviously decided to use the assassination as a test for some horrible new substance he had developed, and of course failed to tell his ally this. Reginald glanced once more over at Swal, to see him in conversation with a tall, severe looking woman; Ruth Levi, the ambassador from Prague. Alarming, she looked back at him and walked his way. "Baron Marlborough" she said cordially, "Would you mind joining us for a discussion of matters vitally important to the state of Prague". "Of course, your Excellency" he replied helplessly, barely keeping the fear out of his voice, and followed her back to where Swal was slumped.

Up close the man was an even more horrible sight. Pus oozed from several of the blemishes upon his face, and his eyes were bloodshot and flickering around obviously outside his control. The man did not have long to live, a fact for which Reginald inwardly gave thanks; even if his involvement had been discovered, at least the demon would soon have no vessel with which to harm the realm further. "As you can see", said Levi "This man is very sick. Our healers have been able to discern that he has been poisoned, but they cannot identify the substance responsible. Your skill at the arts of conjuration is famed all over Oxford, and we ask for your assistance in tracking down the one who has done this". Reginald managed to contain the laugh he desperately wanted to let loose, and instead fixed his visage in an appropriate look of horror. "The city of Prague", continued Levi, "will be most grateful for any assistance you can render". "I would of course be happy to produce a lodestone your Excellency; would you like me to deliver the results to the embassy" Grover replied, hardly daring that he might have gotten away with it after all. Levi's next words quickly extinguished this flickering spark of hope.

"I am afraid that I must ask that you come to the embassy to have the casting witnessed by myself, Swal and

some of our associates. It is vital that we do this as soon as possible so that you can lead us to the murderer at once" With a much more genuine show of sorrow, Grover assented. He hardly conversed with other members of the court for the rest of the evening, meditating as he was on his impending discovery. Everyone knew lodestones were practically infallible, so failing to lead the way to a culprit would surely be suspicious, yet he could hardly refuse to cast one; that would practically be admitting guilt. Towards the end of the meeting, a fellow courtier asked if he had seen Jonathon Clairfoyl recently. Just as he brusquely replied that he had not, a detail of a conversation he had had with Clairfoyl a few years ago leapt into his mind, a flicker, just a small one, of a plan began to form in his head.

* * *

Six months later, Reginald Grover's passage into court went anything but unremarked. Whispers followed him through the corridors as people tried to point without pointing. "Bad business" "Terrible Accident" "Not right them foreigners putting our gentlemen in such danger". Reginald was as dull, by now, to the pain of the whispers as he was to the agony of his finally healing hands. Wrapped in bloodstained bandages, with a few tiny shards of glass still lodged in them, his hands and forearms were a terrible sight. The plan had seemed so perfect. Clairfoyl had told him of his efforts to find a conjurer who had vanished mysteriously, and how the lodestone he had cast had exploded in his hands. By focussing his mind on the vanished man, Reginald had planned that he would cause the lodestone to fail, removing all suspicion from him but conveniently not finding the poisoner.

However, he had gotten greedy. He had decided to also give himself an excuse to leave the embassy as fast as possible by exaggerating the damage done to him by the exploding mirror using one of the illusionary tricks he had learnt from the ancient tome, now regrettably back in the hands of Miss Gamut. Unfortunately, the illusion of a horrifying glassy explosion had interacted with whatever force was vanquishing the lodestone and become all too real, shredding his arms so much that he had genuinely needed to be taken away for urgent healing. He was thankful that one of the embassy Rabbis had been a skilled surgeon. At the very least it had given him a decent excuse for not casting any further lodestones in search of a poisoner. Levi had sorrowfully given him her thanks and allowed him to depart. Of course, his "delirious" ravings about powerful diabolic protections had probably helped too.

Quiet words of sympathy from the footman on the door followed him into the privy chambers. Reginald kept a low profile until after the arrival of the king, and made appropriate murmurings when Swal's death was announced. He tried to find Choronozon in the crowd, but was pulled into a huge discussion about the problems posed by the enhanced magical ritual that had afflicted Oxford, which moved the terrifying events at the boat race, a subject that forced him to make his excuses lest he reveal his hand in that affair. The blasted diabolist De Winter was even worse than Choronozon, having lied about his intentions as well as his methods. Still, at least the events had removed his wretched cousin down to the depths of hell freeing him from that service at long last. If he had known, he mused bitterly, that De Winter had been planning to remove himself so spectacularly, he would never have signed the contract with Choronozon in the first place. His mother had been right, never associate with the wicked, lest your own soul become drawn into their sin.

From his seat in the corner of the chamber, he saw David Brandage approaching him from a conversation he had been having with his sister. "Lord Grover" he said, "May I have a word with you regarding the passage of master Swal?" Fearing the worst, Reginald motioned Brandage to join him. The man hesitated for a second and then sat down. After a few awkward moments of silence, Brandage asked "Did Swal tell you or ambassadorAmbassador Levi where his notes were kept?" Taking Grover's surprised silence for incomprehension, Brandage continued "You may not have known, but Swal was one of the most powerful Theurgists in the land. His mastery of protective magic was almost unmatched. Several years ago he used his strength to drive out a terrible possession that was upon him." Reginald instantly knew that something was wrong with that statement, but it took him a few moments to realise what it was; Choronozon had told him that Swal was possessed. That was why Reginald had killed the man surely? Oblivious to Reginald's internal confusion, Brandage continued "More recently he has been aiding Lady Mai, my sister and I in our struggle against the evil that was the Master of the invisible Ccollege. Without his heroic intercessions, made despite his ill health, Oxford would surely have been destroyed. Are you all right Lord Grover, you seem somewhat distracted."

Reginald managed to murmur that he was fine, along with an excuse for departure and a vague promise to search for Swal's notes with a lodestone. As quickly as he could, struggling to contain the roiling horror within him, he left the court and made his way back to his lodgings, mind swimming with the truths laid bare. Swal hadn't been a killer, he had been a good man, and what is worse one who had defended Lady Mai against those who would wish her harm. And Reginald knew that he had been all too easily taken in by Choronozon's serpent words, with his desire for action, and to be a hero. All he had been was a pawn, a worthless pawn in one of the demon's pointless game, and had himself had become a base murderer. In his chambers he stripped out of his court finery and donned his nightrobe in a daze, and lay down on his bed with his eyes open, waiting in vain for sleep that he knew full well would never come.

* * *

A man, or something that looks very much like one, dressed all in red sits in the penny gallery of the New Rose theatre. And he is laughing. The theatre is dark. The stage is bare. The stalls are empty. Yet still through the silence he laughs.

Love Poetry *by Raijin and Enki Sedlak and Timothy Bygone*

A selection of love poetry written over the course of Broken Worlds 1 by Raijin and Enki Sedlak to Pennington Deepcut.

1. Left anonymously in a knothole in a tree near her home, written by Raijin Sedlak.

Oh for the lite that glows so britely
Within the burning sky sky
To burn as such does
Within thine firey eyes.

With crimson dreems
That make such sweet promises.
Dost thou fear the growing darkness,
Which brings such blood drenched desires.

And whilst you sleep unawares
I shall burn with such bitter agony.
Should you let down your guard
That I mite plunge my blade...

Forged in nite and darkness
Into your hart unawares
Perhaps then should set me free.

Will you sleep calming this nite
Not nowing of my intent
Or will you lie awake
With your mind alert?

2. Written by Enki Sedlak.

Oh that thou wert buried down deep
As unto one in the midst of frowning sleep.
That thou wert like unto sky,
For I would you in knots ty.

That as the ants crawl and crawl and bite bite,
All over you gaze mite mine sight
Be. Dreem sweet fires which all-consuming are,
Like unto small animals in a forist fire from afar.

Oh I deep, deep, deep EXPLODING
You Mine target and within Mine hart,
All the blood (yours) pouring
I'll carry you away unconshuss in my cart.

Built in deep dark
 Away with me you'll be
 And that will set me free.

Sleep, sleep Pennington
 For this I pen in fun,
 Do not awake afeered,
 Do Not Wake At All.

3. Left in her notebook at the trade fair. Written by Raijin Sedlak.

Deep runs the midnite river
 Its icy toch so cold
 That thou mite shiver
 As it thy within its grasp enfold.
 And wot mite keep you warm
 Shud it tak you in its deathly embrace.
 For now I you must inform,
 That you mite know, just in case.
 For thou ist not alone.
 Must thou feer at nite
 Whenst thou ist on ones owne?
 Or dost thou tell thyself it will be alrite?
 Who shalt be ther for thee?
 Who shalt be thine frend?
 And dost thou know of me?
 Willst thou realise in the end?
 Oh if thou shalle wake
 Be it as I penetrate thine heart.
 Oh what a pretty site you must make
 As I must play my part.
 But for nowe in apreehenshon I must waite,
 And I within the shadows must hide.
 Willst thou now before it is too late?
 Whilst burning darkness must in my mind reside.

4. A Poem for Pennington. Written by Timothy Bygone.

The following turns up one day. It appears to have been most neatly and carefully written.

The poetry sent to you recently
 was not written or sent by me,
 But to make up for their curses,
 I have tried to write these verses.

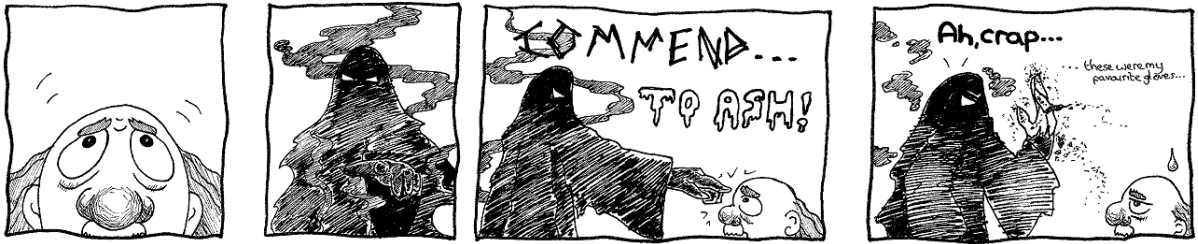
Who am I? Let's say a friend,
 who doesn't want your life to end.
 The other poet wished you dead,
 but I wish you to live instead.

Your looks are sweet, your ways are kind,
 and you have a most wonderful mind,
 so to stop someone from hurting you
 I'll do whatever I can do.

So do not fear or feel sad
 from the taunts and threats of someone bad.
 I hope never will anyone

try to harm you, Pennington.

Rookie Error by Tracey Gent



Ask Korgoth

Announcement

Since 4th Ed D&D doesn't have the Barbarian Class, Korgoth has been posing as different classes to stay alive. Cleric didn't work out. Ranger just wasn't mighty enough. Wizard failed spectacularly and don't ask him about "the bardic song incident". So now he's trying the most fearsome thing he can think of.

So if you are having trouble with the Working or the nice lady wenchies. Or, if you are ill with the diseases or have problems with your friends. Or, if you are adventurer needing advice on what sword is best for fighting dire wolverines, or a Wizard looking for more mighty barbarian spells. Then you should ASK KORGOTH! There is nothing KORGOTH cannot solve with Barbarian Ways!

First Letter

Dear Korgoth,

In my day-to-day life I often find it difficult to find the time to properly produce nutritious meals. I instead have to rely on junk food and between-meal snacks. Is there a way to easily and quickly make something to eat that will give me the vitamins and minerals I need?

Worried of Oxford

To the Oxford Worrier,

Silly civilized man! KORGOTH meet many of you elfy types and you are FOOLS! Tricked by evil nutritiomancers into thinking small chalky rocks and pretty flowers will make you strong. Really it is Evil Ritual by the Cabal of Fruit Wizards. KORGOTH once had quest to slay many of their kind, but then found out it was scheme to help them cross pollinate... KORGOTH still feel dirty...

No, Worryman, there is only one true food group and that is MEAT! Real barbarian meat from animals like Dire Cow. Here is recipe:

Worried Cow Surprise

Ingredients

1 Dire Cow (fresh is best. Catch it while grazing)

Salt to taste

Cooking steps

1) [Optional] Kill Cow. (Korgoth recommend battle axe, though ladle is also good)

2) Eat cow.

KORGOTH is sure even elfy man has time for this healthy dish. You may not have dire cow in Oxfordia, so KORGOTH suggest Cat. You will see plenty of these on way to work, saving you even time going to market!

Good luck. KORGOTH is sure you will be envy of all your elfy friends when they see your new diet.

KORGOTH, Barbarian of the Frozen Wastes

The Adventures of Sir Ulrych von Rauschpfeife the Cursed *by Orlando Cristofori the Bard*

And so it happened, dearest reader, that this most humble bard found himself in the headquarters of the Northern Defence League amongst the company of men of such stature. Our employer, the great Beornwulf Oakfast, was a man of nigh on seven feet. His forearms bulged with tight sinews and his strong legs were akin to two mighty trunks of some ancient oaks that grew in the deepest parts of the Western forest. On his firm set square jaw grew proudly the most bushy beard I have ever seen and his eyes were not those of any mortal man but of some god or spirit of the wild animals that roam the darkest parts of the west, searching ever in their insatiable hunger for the blood of their latest prey. About me stood my cousin, Thier Cristofori, a proud and honourable noble, the rose of the south displayed prominently on the hilt of his blade. Next to him stood Finch Tyrrel, a man of cunning and of some wit, and of course the brethren's most dutiful servant. By the window, the sunlight glowing around his crown like a golden halo, was positioned Falcon Bravo. And well, my dear reader, have you not heard tell of Lord Bravo's daring-do?

Amongst these great men stood one whose stature towered over all. Even General Oakfast seemed dwarfed by the towering form of Sir Ulrych von Rauschpfeife. A man who I have had the pleasure of adventuring with for many seasons now. Well my cousin, Thier, no one would dare say he was not a noble man. Why if there were any amongst the Cristofori I would say has shown great honour, he would most certainly stand out to my mind. Indeed there are few amongst the White City can dare claim to have even a fraction of the nobility of the great Thier Cristofori. But if I had to speak honestly I would say that even he might seem like an amoral bandit when compared to Sir Ulrych. And Finch a man forever unflinching in his duty to the Brethren. Why I would even be so bold to say that I have little doubt he is the sort of man who would stand before the Bound Ones themselves and face single handily their slaving hordes, twisted forms of life, before he would ever turn his back on his duty to the Brethren. But even he would be hard pressed to claim his loyalty to the Brethren was as true as Sir Ulrych's to the Light. And well I am sure you have heard stories of the great Falcon Bravo and glorious epics they are indeed. But they would seem nothing more than childish fancies compared to the true tales I could tell you of Sir Ulrych!

Indeed I am reminded at this point of the fair Adele De Almedia. I do not believe I exaggerate when I say that her beauty was as great as the Lady of Blood and Wine, herself, but her purity would, and here, my dear reader, do I risk great blasphemy, why it would rival that of the Light itself. And this fair maiden had been taken prisoner by perhaps some thirty, nay nearer forty, blaggards and heartless fiends. Now you may call me a liar, for I know this tale may be somewhat fantastic, but I saw with my own eyes and indeed would testify on any god you would care to name that what I saw was true. Now there were only the two of us, and I am not ashamed to admit that I am no great fighter. Sir Ulrych stood before the bandit camp, his eyes blazing with the righteous glory of the Light, and I dare say I saw a little of the Scourge itself burning with just fury deep within Sir Ulrych's eyes. I confess at this stage, even I was a little afraid, but I knew Sir Ulrych's anger was pure and just in its cause. Near half of the most foul fiends fled upon sight and the rest, distracted by their subconscious fear, were swiftly beaten down with the skill of Sir Ulrych's blade. Now Sir Ulrych is not only a righteous man, but a merciful one, and each bandit he struck, he struck with the flat of his blade, so as to allow them a chance to repent their sins and thus to go on and live honest lives. He moved swiftly to where the gentle Adele lay captive, knowing he must rescue such a paragon of virtue and such a fair rose of White City nobility from being violated by such heartless fiends. As he held her in his arms, knowing she was safe at last, I think I saw in her eyes admiration, gratitude and perhaps a little love – for what true woman could look upon Sir Ulrych and not fall in love. But Sir Ulrych, being far too virtuous a man to take advantage of such an innocent, returned her to the protection of her family. But look now my friend, how I digress!

Now then, dearest reader, where was I? Ah shall we say we had set out from the White City. General Oakfast had recounted to us in considerable detail news of a great threat imminently looming in the North. Legend recounts tales of armies of thousands upon thousands of twisted creatures, life forms crafted from darkness, those who fell upon Dream Bridge many hundreds of years ago. And one might hear stories of seething cyclopean horror that would devour the very soul of any mortal who were unfortunate enough to look upon it. Of those

things in the deepest corners of the north, that grow strong upon your fears and steal your emotions away until you become nothing but a vague husk of humanity wandering around in a vague imitation of life. The General spoke of how word from the north had brought eyewitness accounts of the return of all these horrors, and no doubt more. As he talked of their dark masters, I thought I might have spotted a vague unsettling tinge in his face, carefully concealed of course, but he was concerned no doubt. And let me tell you my friend, we would be wise men indeed to fear something that had caused mighty General Oakfast to even so much as shudder. Whilst I am no coward, nor have I ever claimed to be a particularly brave man. Still I swallowed hard and buried my fear deep down, for it would not have done to have shown any weakness in front of such legendary companions. And so we were sent to seek out the strange barbarians of the eastern desert and to persuade them of this threat, that we might recruit their aid to the Northern Defence League.

I could tell you of the many exciting endeavours we went through to reach the tribal lands but I fear it would take longer than my years to recount everything in perfect detail. Now then, I shall continue our journey when we reached the desert.

We had travelled maybe one or two days in to the desert. The blistering heat and uneven ground would have already caused lesser men to turn back. But we knew that the existence of the **World As We Know It** might rely on the success of our mission and that turning back was not an option. Thus we pressed deeper in to the desert, bravely enduring the harsh conditions. And what did we come across but some rag-tag group of blaggards and thieves. They viewed our weapons with avarice. Now there must have been some two score of those men and by the look of them they were a hardy bunch, driven by being forced to survive in the unforgiving embrace of the harsh burning desert. From the malice in their eyes I could venture that any sense of morality or humanity had long since been driven from them by the extremes of climate.

Thirst and starvation can drive a man to madness. There are many tales. Why I once heard a man cut the legs off his own brother and ate them raw when they were shipwrecked in some remote part of the Breathing Isles. Why such things do not bear thinking about! What extremes man may be driven to!

Now we were not ones to stand aside for such unscrupulous scoundrels, though they did bear their yellowed and pointed teeth and were indeed wily and turned bestial by the desert's ravages on their bodies. Falcon Bravo, displaying an incredible level of skill with a style of duelling I had not had the privilege of observing before, moved with an almost unnatural speed to engage a deceitful trickster who had sought to conceal himself amongst the sand dunes. The sneak thought himself clever, mayhaps, but he was no match for the hawk like perception of Falcon Bravo! His somewhat unique style, I uncovered later, had been passed down through the Bravo family for centuries and was taught to him by his uncle, a renowned adventurer of some repute, and required the practitioner to display a nigh-on godlike degree of dexterity and agility.

Finch moved in from the side, closing in with his staff on a number of the savages, who leapt at him teeth bared and I think so driven by hunger that they sought to tear him apart. One seemed to grab on to his neck and endeavoured to sink its teeth into him but unfortunately for the fiend he had not counted on Finch having something up his sleeve. His skilled use of Chain Magic was something the tribesman had never seen before and I must say I was chilled to the core by his unearthly screams as he wailed and thrashed trying to force the steel links that now bound his limbs. With that Finch was trivially easily able to fend off the remainder.

Thier, now spotting his chance to engage their leader in single combat, drawn by his religious duty to the Rose Princes, moved in to meet the barbarian. The leader was a colossus of a man, although I use the word man liberally here, for he was more like unto some sort of beast. Snarling, his bloodshot eyes met with those of our honourable hero. But Thier was able to match him blow for blow. Whilst the savage had the advantage of strength and sheer bulk, it was clear that speed and skill were on my cousin's side. It was clear that, though they at first glance the pair seemed evenly matched, that eventually the larger man would tire and fatigue would set in and then Thier would have him.

But treachery was assuredly afoot.

For though those of the White City were bound by the honourable tradition of a fair and just duel, to these barbarians such things meant naught. An opportunistic individual, unseen to most of us had positioned himself carefully behind Thier, seeking his moment to strike. As he dove for him, daggers unsheathed, I truly believed that that might be the end of my cousin. But while the rest of us were unawares of what treachery had occurred Sir Ulrych was not fooled. From a swarm of maybe fifteen hardened warriors who he was single-handedly holding at bay Sir Ulrych leapt, felling several of the enemy as he did so, jumping with a speed and agility I have rarely seen from any man he cut down the vile coward who had attempted to take Thier from the back.

With that Thier made swift work of the leader, whilst Sir Ulrych was able to take down the remainder of the warriors. In a moment of contemplation Falcon and Sir Ulrych ministered to the fallen, that though they may have lived lives of hardship and without honour, they might find something better in the Burned Realm.

We had travelled but a few paces when we were accosted by further horrors. Had we had any complacency in our defeat of the bandits, then this would have been shattered by that which we encountered next. But brave and hardy adventurers, such as my companions, know full well never to show complacency. I shall say now,

skilled though I am with words, that there are no words I can use that would convey to you, my dear reader, the horrors that we saw before us. I say truthfully that I had started this venture with some reservations. Surely the General must be mistaken. For without a doubt the danger could not have been as imminent as he believed. But I take no shame in admitting that in that I was dreadfully wrong. Whatever reservations I had dissipated when I encountered the Sleepers' servants travelled this far south. Now lesser men would have fled at the sight, and in truth, and as I have told you before I am no coward, I may have considered it myself had I not been accompanied by such worthy companions. Still to see such unnatural horrors, such twisted, eldritch and malformed imitations of life I cannot say it did not strike terror into my very soul. Thus I said a silent prayer to my Lord, the Prince of Sighs, and to the Burned Gods (for I feared for my very immortal soul!). And even surrounded by such companions, the kind of men stories and songs are written about even thousands of years after they have passed beyond they veil, a small moment of doubt entered my mind. Could we truly prevail?

My doubt was short-lived though, as my companions sprung instantaneously to action. Though the creatures moved at an unearthly speed and in a manner that would almost be incomprehensible to me had I not seen it with my own eyes, Falcon Bravo met each blow with his style of fencing. I tell you now, had I been a maiden, I think I would have fallen in love with him there and then. For he moved with such grace and elegance. Sir Ulrych, favouring a show of strength against the creatures, struck pre-emptively against a group that was moving in to engage. He demonstrated with much skill the trademark style of the Shining Order, which they say is easy to learn but much trickier to master (oh and master it Sir Ulrych did, you mark my words!). My cousin Thier being more of a noble duellist fought with speed rather than strength and Master Finch's skill with a staff reminded me somewhat of those Chain Sorcerers who had held the line when the White City fought the armies of the Red Griffin. The foe was bested, although we took some moments to catch our breath.

Now I shall not bore you with matters of politics. First tribe to visit was the Glittering Eye. A rather enigmatic bunch of mystics, still uncertain in their loyalties. The smooth tongue of my cousin and Falcon Bravo was enough to sway them though.

On the road to our second tribe, the Hung Boar, we encountered a servant of the most vile and accursed Rattle Prince, who sought to part us from our lives with trickery and lies. But he was not so clever that he could turn the noble hearts of my companions.

The Hung Boar themselves were a tribe of proud warriors and so a test of strength was required to prove our worthiness. Forgive me if I dwell on this more than the other tribes but you see it is a rare privilege to see Sir Ulrych fight in single combat! The tribal leader was strong indeed and with ferocity to match. A proud man, he seemed to stand nigh on nine feet tall. His hands were dry and calloused, showing that he was one who was no stranger to hard labour and his muscles bulged prominently from his arms and legs. But Sir Ulrych showed no fear, even as the eyes of the man before him blazed with the fires of the desert, itself. For a time they matched each other but in the end he could not keep up with Sir Ulrych. For both strength and speed were on the Shining Order Knight's side. Even thus the champion was most gracious in defeat and I can say that I saw even in these barbarians some semblance of the nobility of the White City, reminding me that the desert may not be such a barren place after all.

Tribe Grey Dragon, a group of serpent men, seemed more xenophobic than the previous tribes. They served one know as the great dragon, although whether this is akin to the western dragons, I could not say. Perhaps you may recall the burning visage of great Torameas silhouetted across the sky, as he fought alongside us in the battle against the Red Griffin? Even despite their cautiousness they showed great faith. And the faith of my companions was enough to buy at least a little of their aid. Further along we encountered the Cold Water tribe, who were a small tribe and somewhat quiet and contemplative sorts.

Little did we know however, that further treachery was afoot!

Tribe Dry Sands, tricky bastards by all accounts (in fact I would not be surprised if they were not under the sway of that most malevolent of beings the Rattle Prince!), had already been corrupted by the Third Sleeper. The Bard of Rainbows, as they call him. Now I know what you are thinking... a Bard?... of Rainbows? Might that really be so terrible? Well I say that the name is a deceit. For the Bard may be the most dangerous of them all! They say that he wishes to engulf the entire world in a strange sleep and bring them all under his power! The Priestess of the Bard had the ear of the tribal leader; in fact I fear she may have had his mind somehow under her sway. Although we tried to persuade them, we knew that such treacherous sorts might never be brought round. And our fears were confirmed when their minions tried to ambush us on the way to the next tribe. But such trickery was no match for Sir Ulrych von Rauschpfeiffe and his brave companions!

At last we found tribe Raven, the final group on our list. As we spoke I could see the frown, carefully concealed from all but his companions, across Master Finch's face. As he talked to us in confidence he explained, "those most surely must be worshippers of the Namers," and then sighed in resignation. With some reluctance he told us how he knew his duty to the Brethren would not let this lie. We were all in agreement to stand by our companion, for the memory of the battle against the Red Griffin was still burned to freshly in our memories. Sir Ulrych stood forward with confidence.

"Will you not renounce your allegiance to the foul Namers?" he declared.

They laughed and told him, "Never! We shall not bow to you westerners and your heathen ways! Show me one amongst you who will challenge us!"

"I shall challenge your leader then!" declared Sir Ulrych.

"Nay," said Finch, placing a hand gently on Sir Ulrych's shoulder, "I thank you for your bravery, friend, but this is a fight I must take on."

Sir Ulrych nodded, despite knowing no fear, he also understood the honour of the other man and that to interfere would show disrespect.

The two fought, staff on staff. Perhaps before I had underestimated Finch's skill with a staff but now seeing him fighting in single combat, I could not doubt that he was probably the best staff fighter in the White City. He did not have Falcon's agility, nor Their's swiftness with a blade, nor even Sir Ulrych's strength, but his blows were laid with a carefully calculated accuracy that could not be matched by his opponent. A clever and skilled tactician, he knew when to spot his rival's weaknesses and to take best advantage of any opening. One might even say he looked rather dashing and he fought with skill and style. The battle was won without the Cloistered Brother even breaking a sweat. The tribesman, skilled and wily though he was, could not match Finch's sheer cunning and careful craftsmanship. Though the tribe were not gracious in their defeat, turning instead on us with resentment and anger. We decided to make haste away from the tribe, for we did not wish to be involved in any more slaughter that day.

And so my good friend, we returned to the White City. Making our long and arduous journey through the desert. We had succeeded in securing the aid of the majority of the tribes we visited, although others had proved treacherous. But now I must leave you once more, my dear reader, for I grow weary and must rest my pen for this evening. And thus I must give you my closing words. Perhaps you question the veracity of what I have told you, but you should know I am but a poor and honest bard, who wishes nothing more than to relay to you the truth as I encountered it. And thus, you may well ask, should we fear these Sleepers? And I shall answer most certainly yes. But remember still that so long as there are men such as Falcon Bravo, Their Cristofori, Finch Tyrell and Sir Ulrych von Rauschpfeiffe the Cursed then the White City shall surely prevail!

Calligraphy

by Eleanor Williams

The students hushed as they watched the diminutive Cathayan woman walk up to the front of the lecture theatre. The room was unnaturally full – an usual state, for students at this hour in the day are usually still enjoying the hospitality of the Lord Morpheus. Rumours were flying about what this small woman, decried by their arch rivals in the Invisibles as a heretic, was about to unleash upon the university.

“I heard she summoned a demon that leaped snarling from the circle...”

“...attacked one of the Invisibles.”

“Serves them right.”

“Grabbed his, well... yes and swept him right off his feet.”

“Naked and six foot tall with a giant...”

“Bones! Made entirely of bones!”

“...all the tea in Cathay to see that!”

The woman picked up a small stick and a bottle.

“What d’you spose those are for?”

“It’s a wand, obvious.”

“Nah, it’s a stick to beat the demons into line with.”

“Can’t you see it’s a pointer.”

“Maybe she’s got one of them foreign djinn in that bottle.”

“It’d have to be a very small djinn.”

“Don’t you know nothing? 1000 angels dancing on the head of a pin and all that...”

“But she’s not a Theurgist.”

“Oh hush up...ohhh look, she’s about to start”

“Today I would like to teach you about the highest form of art known to man.”

“I wonder what it’ll look like, slathering beast or bewitching beauty...”

“It can take years to perfect yet is vital for anyone hoping to achieve the pinnacle of magical talent.”

“My bet’s on a succubus...”

“Once you can control the brush...”

“...I dunno some horrible fanged creature would certainly scare the first years... wait... did she say brush?”

“You will truly be a master of calligraphy.”

“WHAT!?!”