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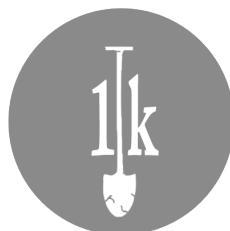
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BECAUSE I CLASP THE CLOUDS AS MINE

A tale by Osmond Arnesto

Illustrated by Wendy Martin

The last road I will walk will be comprised of gemstones floating in a pink perfume haze; the floating dust will polish long jet or auburn strands of hair, if I have hair, and it will coat my pupils, if I have eyes. There will be stoic boulders floating in the void around the pathway, travelers who have lost their way or never had one to begin with. And there will be She. She will be before me, the Lady Hidden in the Dust, the Star Woman, with seven crowns around Her head and the world resting at Her feet above me. I will find Her beautiful because I always have. She will open Her mouth, and within I will watch every life I have been gifted to live. It will look like a broken window, splinters of the taste of charred lamb and the innocent sound of guitar strings plucked in the early after-morning cracking the glass. She will speak, and I will wake.

My eyes adjust to the pink orange of dawn. The stars are as far away as one would expect them to be, but perhaps their slow march is not a thing that can be so easily perceived. I sit up with surprising ease and find myself in a huddle of sleeping figures, snores and coughs accompanied by the constant squeak of a wooden wheel on dry earth. This day's road is solid, packed down by the clouds overhead in rank and file. The dirt caked on their robes and the indecisive rattle of their breaths reveal I am riding with the impoverished. I do not mean to put myself above them. Of warmth,

protection, and decency, my own rags only provide me with the last. I wrap my arms around me to bar the cold as I stand and find my balance on the sleeping cart. My arms are lean, and there are fine brown hairs growing from the wiry musculature. I am a woman again, but younger.

"A flower rises in our garden." The voice, fragile and joyous all at once, comes from an elderly woman with mist hair and a corn cob nose. "Be wary of the greedy hand that may pluck you to decorate their hair."

"It is still spring for me, grandmother," I say.

"A fruit fallen loose from the tree, then."

"A seed looking for home."

"A seed must flourish in the soil before it can turn its leaves toward the sun." She spits over the side of the cart. A few more of its passengers are beginning to shake themselves awake. "Else, the plant will find itself hoary before its time."

"I'm taught that Wind will sometimes disperse the seeds himself." I ignore the chuckles that spring from her little joke. She turns to me then, a petrified tree remembering rain. "Some will bed in fallow fields and some will drop in the crevices between unlit ruins. The rest may never take root, but in doing so, are we not chasing the sun?"



A voice that is neither myself nor the woman says, "She means to chase the sun by hitching a sleeping cart!" Chuckles become laughter, but it lacks the derisive sting of children pecking at each other or enemies biting at heart-strings. It is the shared, defiant shout of inmates challenging the world outside to remember them. The sound rouses the rest of our cart and tinges the heavens with its regular eggshell blue.

"I did not mean disrespect, grandmother," I say. She waves her hand as if to shoo away a hornet or a bad thought, but the bows and curtsies of eye-averting obeisance please her. I was her age yesterday, and I called her older sister then. She tells me to call her aunt now.

"Grandmother' is a term for the dying. Do I look so terrible?" Her grin is gap-toothed and yellowing, and a part of me is warmed when she offers me the scratchy seat next to her.

I ask her where she is going. "I would be more inclined to say that I am on my way back." At this, it is my turn to smile. Every passing day is a surprise, in a fashion. Not only do I receive a face and a body, but several facial habits I must become aware of. Are my brows furrowed in an eternal impatience? Do I make sideways glances when I am hiding a secret? This face, my face today, likes to smile; I can feel deep well-trod lines running away from my nose. She continues with the story she told me yesterday. "The next settlement on this cart's route is Zarhem. The governmental seat and military quarters of this year's tyrant, or an insignificant dot on the map of the next. Who can say?"

I have heard on my travels that the Totarch, the King of Every Thought, the Foodspring, has ruled this sprawling empire longer than most memories.

"I left behind great debates and politics when this country abandoned its banner. I was to be a great senator in my youth, you know. Look at the ruins before you now. No matter. You will find that as the years etch their proclamations in your flesh, you care

less for who keeps the crowds in order just as long as they do it.

"Have you heard of the parade in Zarhem, my flower? Our army-imposed 'king' means to display an object of power he was 'blessed' with by his ancestors. The streets whisper a more telling tale of underpaid scouts bringing back salvage from the Skycrash. I am more apt to believe them. Fear the new war machine! Absolute domination over every dissenter, his messengers cry. All bow before his might, armies render themselves prostrate, so on, so forth, spittle and piss from the mouth of babes.

"I digress. The eyes and ears of the cart are no longer interested in our banter. They have had their fill of these same rumors many times over. They would much rather have food. Now tell me why you travel with the likes of the thirsty and lost."

"Just a mere seed in the wind, aunt." My voice becomes too eager when telling half-truths. "Perhaps I will find soil in this city."

The last road will be flanked by cannons pregnant with loads unfired. Wreaths of dahlias that smell of the breaths between marching orders will hang over their muzzles. It is the sign of wary peace, because even when armies are not champing at their borders, a nation will keep daggers in its boots. Because a life will always face a new adversity before the last can be totally vanquished. Because the heart will never pause to beat until its legislative body disbands forever. The last road will be quiet save for Her breathing, which I will always hear, and the echoing footsteps I will take leading to Her upside-down throne. She does not always have a message for those who have made the journey, but She will grace me with a lover's welcome, as if the words and the kisses have been waiting for a millennia. I will listen, and I will wake.

Zarhem is an ever-burgeoning center of trade, built between a massive rock saluting the early sun and a road that boasts many-colored stones paving the thousand paces leading to and those going away from the city. It is said its crimson blocks were carried to the city on the backs of slaves with skin painted yellow, an approaching fire on the unpaved road; the green blocks were dropped from the mouths of great lilac birds and their fragments were added without further hew or polish; and so on. It is a pity such a far-reaching wonder has to face Zarhem's rotting rind. The remains of its earliest colonial buildings and the destitute who squat in them are found along the foot at the west face of the rock, but the higher up its natural slope you go, the richer the denizen and the more extravagant the architecture. Near the top you will find the most recently erected governmental mansion beside a fortified barracks, two monarchs standing over their repurposed predecessors and, from a certain perspective, waiting to be surpassed.

The parade, though extravagant with masked escorts and mulled apple wines as it was, still saw fit to leave behind several overly-sober night patrols. From a distance, the city must have displayed its own

constellations of shining blades and helmets. It is for this reason that the safest way to approach the Totarch's abode was by climbing the dark side of the rock. It was by no means the easiest. Due to the angle of the jut, the moon's illumination is blocked for most of the night. Today I am thick with muscle, and my hands, one white and one black, are callused to the point of stone. But I lack height, and my figure is fitter to haul cargo laterally from dock to caravan than vertically, as the ascent demanded. It was a matter of chance I was suitable to perform that physical feat tonight, and there was no telling when the Foodspring would depart the city to continue his constant campaign on the globe. No matter, as the aunt said. I am at the peak of the rock a battered man, deprived of the several hours of sleep the rest of the city had already invested in; I had slipped free from my handholds thanks to exertion's sweat several times at the start of the evening and I resorted to wrapping shorn strips of clothing about my hands.

The mansion uses the rock front as its rear wall, so my first touch of it is limping atop its roof. I am not impressed to see peeling paint meant to imitate the appearance of marble, dead poultry, and piles of bovine

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bones. I pluck a few feathers from one of the birds and keep them at the ready. There are no skylights to be found. City tradition calls for solid roofs and the carpenters insist that the scant minutes of sunset that fill the typical home is a poetic privilege. I cling to the edge of the roof to peer into the windows of its topmost floor. The rush of vertigo, combined with the exhaustion seeping into my arms, is almost enough to hurl me into the windless night and down onto the shacks of weather-eaten wood far below. When I can open my eyes again, I brush long, blonde curls away from my line of vision, and begin my search.

The first window is merely the stairwell, and in the glass I look upon my face for the first time. Like my hands, a black half and a white half split me in two. My difficulty to keep my eyelids a coin's circumference around and the way my nostrils greedily suck in air belie my desire to reclaim my device. I inch toward the second window and find the end of a banquet hall, where several silver candelabras still hold dying flames. The dining table stretches from this window to the next, and my mouth waters from the sight of half-eaten roasted pigs and their beds of baked potatoes and seared fruits. I can almost smell rosemary and melted butter through the glass. I am lost the reverie, and I do not see the half-asleep guard sitting at the table until he jerks at the sight of me.

I throw my head back, and pull myself away from the edge, cursing myself. I hesitate only a second before I cast the bird feathers away to imitate the hasty flight of some bird. I hear the window open in the same moment, and I scarcely breathe. I wait. I hear a yawn, the click of a latch, and then silence. The relief almost eases me to sleep. The next window is covered with a curtain, and with slow fascination I realize I may be mere paces away from the snoring figure of the King of Every Thought. I saw him in the parade, dressed in copper-threaded robes, holding a blue-glowing cone as long as his forearm, looking down from his litter on the spoils of war. I remember the way he looked at those who had gathered to watch his procession, the

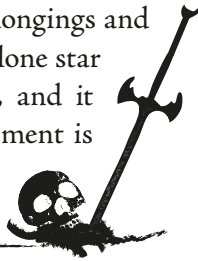
compassion and detachment of a school professor, the silent judgement of a father. I knew I respected the man as the backs of his servants led the parade away, and I will regret what I have come to do. It is in the next room that I find the invention of my people, the product of the genius the Star Woman bestows upon her children, displayed on a black pedestal. There will be guards posted on the other side of the door, and they will be more vigilant than the one I found at the table, but I expected this.

There is a celestial event in the history of this world known as the Skycrash. On the night of a great storm past, lighting sheets filled the sky and thunder blasts filled the ears, and something bright and burning was lobbed to the earth with the sound of screaming heralds and seraphs on fire. Where there was once a hillside, there was now a blue-glowing crater, and rumors of it being a place of mystery and power quickly spread. What the history books do not have any records of is that the sky crashed twice. I lower myself down from the roof, hanging from its edge with the strength left in my fingertips, and I start to swing. Once, twice, and on the third I toss my body through the glass window, feet-first. The symbol-clash of shattering glass breaks the night, and my leg strikes the pedestal, causing my sought-after treasure to fall onto my stomach. I am dumbstruck by the deep hum of a buzzing energy my heart has long-memorized. But only for a second.

The door bursts open, the brass peal that marks the beginning of a symphony, and the guards are met with a two-skinned man, a statue marred by deep cuts and flowing blood. I am aiming the unending bottom of my prize towards them. The original intention of the cone was to transport large amounts of food to areas that needed the aid. Arrange your hands one way on its surface, and it is configured to store. Move them another way, and it releases its entire repository. As the sentries approach me with their now-cautious blades, I press down with my hands. Waves of foreign soldiers in strange raiments appear before me running, as if they had always lived life at a furious gallop. They

carry swords, silver-tipped javelins, and jagged knives. Delayed war cries wake the city, and the blades, missing stars of the constellation outside, are trampled in the wake. I run with them, following the path of their long-paused vengeance.

It is still dark when I wake again. The sounds of warfare, history's oldest form of music, are no longer playing. I pull a potato from my rags with tiny, delicate hands. The hands of a child's. The potato is cold, but its salted earthiness is satisfying, and its texture is almost creamy. I chew in silence, and though I do not feel the aches and bruises of the night before, it is still some time before I gather my belongings and arise to find the next road. There is a lone star over the horizon, the brightest one, and it winks. Just for a moment—for a moment is all that matters—it seems to march ever closer.



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THE HOARD OF YENGRA

A tale by Epidiah Ravachol

Illustrated by Tiffany Turrill

Chapter 1: The Justice of Multheri

Two flightless birds of orange and purple plumage danced around each other atop a rope web strung by the citizens of Multheri over a narrow and deep chasm. Each unsure footfall—graceless under the weight of their riders—vibrated through the taut netting. Both riders clutched their fowl’s reins in their left hands and supported a glass-tipped lance with their right.

The birds were brothers and near identical to those that sat on the cliff edges. The contrast in the riders, however, was visible even to the spectators below. The plaintiff, garbed in rough leathers ill suited for her size, hunched against her bird, making as small a target of herself as possible. The defendant sat rigid in his resplendent armor, an heirloom dragged from his father’s halls for this ignoble event. Even their lances differed in length, the glass tip of hers only two-thirds that of his—both gifts of his father purchased from Master Selu Fyrmyor in the interest of a sure and fair trial.

Among the audience below, the defendant’s father stood beside Master Selu Fyrmyor clasping the merchant’s hand in stony grip. The father watched the trial unfold, each wide swing of a lance, each faltering step of a bird, and each vertiginous sway of a rider.

Master Selu Fyrmyor watched his porters who quietly prepared his caravan for swift departure.

The gathered crowd was a barely staid collision between those thirsty in justice’s long absence and the family and sycophants of the defendant. The birds squawked, the combatants grunted, but the audience held their tongues, fearful of what the merest gasp might ignite.

The birds lurched together and the plaintiff ducked inside the shallow hook of the defendant’s lance. It was a maneuver born of panic that left both combatants surprised. The defendant yanked back on the reigns, but his warfowl only pivoted, driving him into the plaintiff’s lance, shattering the tip and driving slivers of glass deep into his shoulder.

The high angle of the sun obscured the moment of judgment from the audience below. They saw the silhouettes of both riders fall from their warfowl into the webbing as glass shards glittered down into the shadows of the ravine. Instincts broke the father’s grip on Master Selu Fyrmyor as he reached up to catch his son who hung now in the rope a hundred paces above.

Master Selu Fyrmyor slithered into the crowd, never wasting a moment to look up or back, even as the crowd broke its reverent silence.



The caravan rode hard and late that evening. Master Selu Fyrmyor made no guarantees for his instruments, but this did not stop the occasional customer from trying to extract one should justice not favor them as kindly as they had hoped. The stars rose over the night road and Master Selu Fyrmyor busied his mind tallying the risk of a father's vengeance against the cost of hiring caravan guards—a species of laborer that overvalued its skill and worth. He cursed his haste. Had he only remained long enough to see if the son had indeed been found guilty or at the very least plummeted to the hard-packed chasm floor where he would meet a fate no reasonable soul could hold Master Selu Fyrmyor accountable for. Perhaps he could send a scout back to Multheri. Someone swift and deft enough to spy on the father and return with news in time to make preparations. If he sent someone now, he could minimize the delay.

Every day dallied upon the road cost him. It cost him in wages, in the feed and care of his horses, in the intangible costs of lost opportunities, in compounded delays if he did not reach the coast before the monsoons, and in exposure to other vengeful relatives of the guilty. Master Selu Fyrmyor's abacus rattled in time

with the creaking wagons and plodding beasts of his caravan as he tallied the known and estimated against the prizes and sales that lay ahead. Chief among these prizes was the hoard of Yengra, which dwindled with every passing hour.

Chapter 2: The Justice of the Cavefolk

The witch Yengra languished in her prison of stone and darkness, well below the sunbaked sands of the Shrinking Desert. Her people, millennia ago, fled that desert for the cool, damp caves beneath, where generations unwitnessed by the sun were birthed and put to ash. They fed themselves on pale, luminescent fungi; cave shrimp fished from cool, clear streams; and the milk, eggs, and meat of the same dynasty of goats and fowl that fled with them from the heat thousands of years ago.

In recent generations, as the dunes ebbed away and newly fertile lands brought trade routes across the Shrinking Desert, Yengra's people had been discovered by the flourishing kingdoms of the coast. The bloodshed when these distant cousins were reunited nourished the storytellers and priests who spun grand

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Chapter 3: The Justice of the Rrinni

tales of cannibals and monsters with translucent flesh that await the unwary and misguided in the dark.

Heroes of some renown in three successive generations set forth to cleanse Yengra's people from their subterranean homes. Thrice they were rebuffed by the cavefolk, whose intimacy with the dark left them unmatched in their starless world. Yengra herself drove the third party out into the desert sands where she watched as the survivors froze to death in the silver light of the moon.

But it is said that War and Trade, born of different fathers, are twins weened from the same mother. Even as some strove to rid the land of the cavefolk, others sought to profit from them. The cavefolk were formidable glassworkers who crafted delicately textured vessels that moved as water and the sand trapped within them shifted and percussive instruments that rang in alien tones. Such wares were soon prized all along the coast for their beauty and craftsmanship as well as for the novelty of their monstrous creators.

Divorced from the sun and its seasons, the cavefolk painted time in broad, uneven strokes. They ate when they were hungry, slept when they were tired, and sated their desires when they arose, uncaring of dawn, dusk, winter, or spring. They had no sundial or zodiac to mete out the calendar. They grew old, withered, and were cremated with the years unremarked upon. History was no more than an account of who was alive and who was not, a line set across the present to divide what is from what is no longer.

This was the conundrum for Yengra—war hero, witch, thief—jailed within the timeless cave, the length of her sentence to be served within seven returns of Master Selu Fyrmyor, whose caravan carried the cavefolk's glassworks north into the ranges, southwest over the mountains, into the city of Lep, and eastward along the coast before returning. An imprecise and unreliable measurement to toll away her perdition for having secreted away coin and goods from hundreds of other visiting caravans over the years.

In the valleys of Rrin, true theft—that theft which is perpetrated on physical goods by physical means—is punishable by removing one or more of the guilty party's fingers. The number of fingers removed depended on how many times the accused had to count through their remaining fingers to calculate the value of the goods stolen. False theft—that theft which is perpetrated by means of deception or misrepresentation—is punishable by public lashing so that all may have fair warning of the guilty party's wandering tongue. After such a display, the fault of further transgressions often rested upon the shoulders of the incautious defrauded.

So as to lay no undue burden on the good people of Rrin, the costs of the punishments were paid by the guilty and their kin. Here Master Selu Fyrmyor found a ready market. He brought instruments of justice from every kingdom and hold upon and beneath the world for the citizens of Rrin to peruse on a warm summer day. Knowing their legacies and the predilections of their offspring, many familial heads sought to purchase protections against likely future infractions.

On a wicker mat, Master Selu Fyrmyor presented a procession of whips and lashes. To his left, the most economical options: thick lengths of rope, masses of twine knotted around river stones, and simple leather straps. To his right, the more costly whips designed to catch the eye and haunt the mind of any loved one possessing ill thoughts: whips of patterned leather, lashes barbed with ivory and obsidian, and a gold chain ending in three ruby hooks. Before him, a favorite among his customers: a long lash woven from the amber and violet tail feathers of Multheri fighting fowls. They were delicate instruments that rarely survived a couple years of disuse, but they were beautiful and had become something of a fashion among the wealthier Rrinni. Prominently displayed over a hearth, they assured visitors that the family was

serious about its honor without risking their tender backs should a misunderstanding arise.

A matriarch garbed in thick furs arrived with one of her husbands carrying her purse—for in Rrin it was unseemly for the head of a household to handle the money. Master Selu Fyrmyor, noting that she was clearly a woman of distinction, made a show of not presenting the products on his left to her. They were beneath her. Instead he turned her attention to the products on his right. She, in turn, feigned interest in the artistry and detail of one or another of the more sinister looking whips. There was a joke, made if not by her then by Master Selu Fyrmyor, about disobedient children or né'er-do-well in-laws. The laughter played out into silence as the matriarch pretended to weigh the options before her. Waiting, motionless as a jaguar, Master Selu Fyrmyor's thews tensed for the moment his prey's impatience betrayed her. And then, in the breath before she spoke again, with an effusive apology, he declared all those he had just shown clearly unfit for her station and presented the Multheri feathered whip as if he had just remembered he had one in stock.

And so it progressed, matriarch after matriarch, family after family, sale after sale until the long shadows overtook the Rrinni bazaar and the sputtering torches were lit. Master Selu Fyrmyor amassed such a sum that he began weighing the costs of remaining into tomorrow against the potential sales. More feed for the beasts, yes, another day's wages, and there was the wine and the music of the Valley of Rrin that even now called to his roustabouts. And yet, it had been a fine day, one that Master Selu Fyrmyor would see repeated.

He would have stayed that night, enacted a curfew on his crew in the form of a rotating guard, and saw his stock exhausted had not his road-weary scout arrived with tidings from the west. The Multheri father rides out and he does not ride alone.

Master Selu Fyrmyor broke camp, gathering those porters who had not already succumbed to wine and song. He sent his two most trusted into the valley to gather the rest. They were also pressed with the task of seeking out a handful of Rrinni who bore only seven or eight fingers each—for those, he wagered, would not shrink from the grim toils often required of caravan guards. Any more fingers and they would not

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be desperate enough to leave Rrin for the pittance he could spare. Any fewer fingers and they would be too set in their thieving ways. He would leave tonight and hope that what remained of the hoard of Yengra would offset this tragic loss of another day of sales.

Chapter 4: The Justice of Master Selu Fyrmyor

That light was not permitted in Yengra's cell did not trouble her. The cavefolk do not live without light, but they are as family to the darkness. She had time to learn the full nature of the cool, unhewn stone the held her captive. Stooping, she had room enough to pace. The only entrance was a natural chimney four times her height that she could climb, but the guards posted at the egress would see that she found no profit in it. When she asked for it, food would be lowered and waste removed through the same chimney. Water dripped from a lone stalactite and would disappear through cracks in the floor had she not been left a glass bowl to collect it.

This was how she measured her deal with Master Selu Fyrmyor.

That silvery night as she watched the heroes bleed out and freeze upon the sea of sand, Yengra swam in a thrilling vertigo. The stars and moon cast above her, she had never laid eyes upon anything so far away before. She sat there long enough to witness that, ever so slowly, they moved, arcing high across the sky. She could not discern if they fell toward or away from her, or if she fell with them toward some glass bowl at the bottom of the universe.

Out here there was no rough cave wall lean upon, nothing to cling to. A dreadful frost spread from her stomach and chilled her more deeply than the sandy winds. She felt her mass and strength shrivel. Her limbs were as brittle as newly formed ice as she crawled back to the caves.

There, in the close darkness, with a ceiling above her and a floor beneath her, her guts righted themselves.

She felt, once again, whole and solid, properly fixed within the world.

And yet, from then on, in moments when the peace of sleep enticed her, her restless mind would turn back to the infinity she witnessed and she would dream of casting her unmoored body out among the stars. So she plotted to leave the caves.

There were two types of strangers in the world beyond: those that brought wealth with them and those that brought swords. It was clear which of the two Yengra wished to walk among. So she employed her witchery to inveigle the merchants who traded with the cavefolk.

At her bidding, the darkness would confound visiting caravans, leading some among them deeper into the caves. There, in the timeless black, she would offer to guide them back to the warmth and light. Grateful caravan masters would present her with trinkets for her aid.

A pattern arose that first instilled Yengra with a sense of the unceasing pressures of time. The caravan masters would grow agitated and offer her more the longer she kept them below. Experimenting with the correlation, unsure of the cause, Yengra found that the strangers of the world beyond were plagued by urgency, a condition which befuddled them.

To best understand their state, Yengra placed a small glass bowl beneath a stalactite. As she led the caravan masters through the labyrinthine caverns, she repeatedly returned to the bowl and tallied the number of times it filled up. By this measure she could best estimate when the caravan masters had reached the peak of their generosity and lead them to the sun.

Afore long, the sum of the caravan masters' generosity had become more substantial than even Yengra knew. Had she not herself caught the outsiders' urgency and become careless in her choice of victims, she may would have be able to count herself one of the wealthiest women in the fledgling kingdoms. But in her newfound

haste, she coaxed the darkness into befuddling Master Selu Fyrmyor's caravan on two consecutive visits.

The cavefolk, embarrassed by Yengra's actions before Master Selu Fyrmyor's rage, granted him justice by sentencing her to a period of imprisonment meted out over the course of seven returns of his own caravan. Unabated by the gesture, Master Selu Fyrmyor sought Yengra out to demand a justice more tangible, one paid in coin.

In the throes of urgency, Yengra made a deal with the caravan master's greed. Secreted away, guarded by spell and stone, her hoard awaited his return. She would, in her generosity, split it with him. Many times more wealth than he had stolen from him. Indeed, many times more than he had ever carried across the Shrinking Desert.

But she would not have her urgency toyed with as she had toyed with so many others. He would find no greater reward by dallying. Instead, she counted the passing in her water bowl. Each time it filled, she would deny him one more share in seven thousand.

Six returns and six thousand shares have since passed, but a handsome sum yet remained.

Chapter 5: The Justice of the Father

Since Master Selu Fyrmyor turned from the road three days ago, the caravan lost two horses on the rocky ground and their burdens now fell to the porters, who were already displeased about the decision to bypass the fabled ports of the Opal Coast and the pleasures that awaited them there.

It was not a choice Master Selu Fyrmyor wished to make. The wealth of the ports offered ample opportunity. But he sought to outpace the Multheri father that dogged him even now. And perhaps more pressing, he knew his Rrinni guards had already begun to thief from him. He suspected they plotted to strip

him of all his worth as well as his very life by the end of their first evening on the Opal Coast.

So Master Selu Fyrmyor led his caravan over an untried route to the Dominion of Hatarne. He comforted himself with assurances that this new path would return him to the hoard of Yengra all the sooner.

The massive iron gates of the Dominion, said to have been erected by cyclopean slaves, stood so tall over the plain that the caravan spotted them half a day before reaching them. Within these walls lived a vigilante and fearful people who held no compassion for the criminal or corrupt. Here Master Selu Fyrmyor intended to sell the remainder of his instruments of justice before rushing to the Shrinking Desert and his reward.

Here, also, he intended to surrender his unwitting Rrinni guards, who would surely pay for their thievery with every finger they had left as well as more vital protrusions. Few sentences in the Dominion did not result in death and fewer accusations were found wanting.

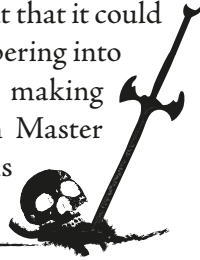
It was a pleasant day for Master Selu Fyrmyor. Rarely had he such time to cast his mind from his figures and encroaching enemies towards the more immediate pleasures availed to one who makes a living under the open sky. But that half-day's approach to the gates of Hatarne was accompanied by a sweet wind and shadows of clouds that darkened only enough to ease the eye against the brightness of the day. He was, upon his horse, unaware of the aches bought by decades spent in the saddle, pondering ways to spend the hoard of Yengra that profited him only leisure and opulence.

In this balmy haze, he paid little heed to the six swordfolk that rode out from the gates to meet him, escorting a father born of Multheri who carried grave accusations on his lips.

Chapter 6: The Justice of Yengra

Still as stone, Yengra lay upon the cool floor. Through the dark, her eye studied the faint edge of the glass bowl and the meniscus it bound. A gravid drop gathered upon the tip of the stalactite above her, preparing to plunge to the end of a journey that began thousands of years ago atop a lush mountain ridge far to the north. From there it condensed, fell, flowed, and seeped over and under the landscape in a circuitous course to meet with Yengra before Master Selu Fyrmyor could make his appointment.

There was no patience left in the witch who was no longer innocent of the ceaseless pressure of time. The caravan master's greed was not so great that it could draw him back a seventh time. Whispering into the still darkness, Yengra set about making deals with devils more reliable than Master Selu Fyrmyor's greed to assure his obedient and impossible return.



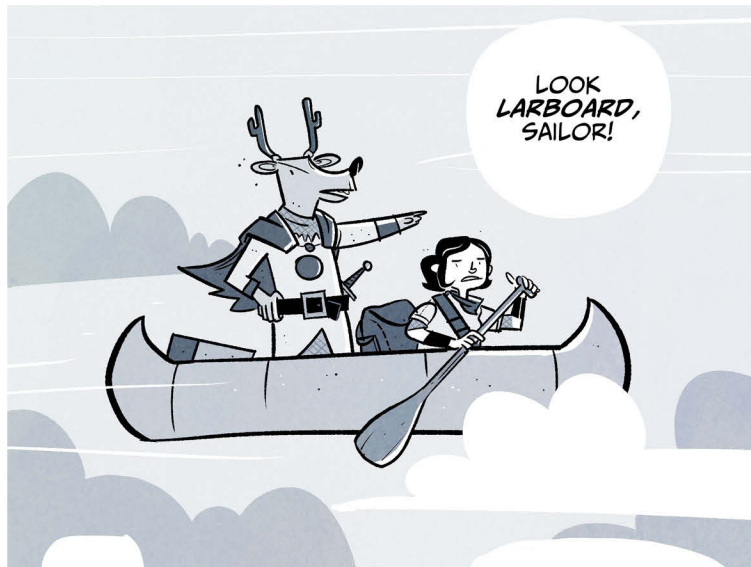
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THE DREAD GEAS OF DUKE VULKU

A game of fantastic horror by Epidiah Ravachol

Illustrated by Vlada Monakhova

Join us now for a game of horror and wonder for three to seven players to enjoy over the course of a few evening hours. One among you shall be the Host, taking on the role of Duke Vulku and the greater world. The rest shall take on the roles of Duke Vulku's most trusted and enthralled companions.

Most of this text is addressed to the Host. That which is for the eyes of the companions will be apparent. If it pleases you, read the following aloud to all players.

"Surrounded by frost-locked mountains and on the shores of a preternaturally warm and salty bay stagnates the immortal city of Telluun. Hoary alchemies from civilizations long dust sustain the seventeen sages whose insatiable appetites for knowledge and categorization must be fed just as the winter and the sea in turn must take their toll. For two score years their hand and shield has been the dour Duke Vulku and his army of skalds and half-scholars. The sages ask and Vulku seeks the answer through fire and blood.

"You have long since freely given yourselves over to the Duke's sorcerous sway. His needs are your needs. His safety is your every thought. His command is as your own desire. You are precious to him and he is more so to you."

Have the other players choose among themselves who will play which companion based on their epithets alone: the Faithless, the Indebted, the Loathed, the Meticulous, the Subtle, and the Vainglorious. Discard the unclaimed companions.

You will also need a Spire to place upon your table. Any tumbling block game will work, but for the sake of brevity these rules assume you are using the Jenga brand. The Spire must tower 18 stories high with three blocks to a story.

THE SEEKERS OF ANSWERS

This, too, may be read aloud to all.

"The Seventeen Sages have consulted the sky and entrails: the tome-tomb of antiquity hypothesized by the late Countess of Ond exists. Its origins predate those of humankind. Unearthing its secrets has become their sole preoccupations. Duke Vulku and his loyal companions have been sent forth into the demon-haunted lands to find this trove of primordial knowledge."

The game begins with questions. Each player should take some time answering the questions addressed to them in private. Once all have done so, the companion players should share their answers—but the Host's



answers should remain a secret for the time being. New questions may arise; ask and answer them as you see fit. Then take turns asking the other companions to answer the final questions.

THE HOST

Duke Vulku wears a heavy cape and an ornate bronze helmet, the back of which is shaped like a grotesque face with bejeweled eyes, a design meant to trick the spirits that hunt him into thinking he is traveling the other way.

- ♦ Who among the companions does Duke Vulku consider expendable and why?
- ♦ What does Duke Vulku know about that tomb that he has yet to let on about?
- ♦ Who among the companions will the Duke Vulku preserve at all costs and why?
- ♦ *Ask the others:* Which among you plots even now to usurp Duke Vulku and why are you uncertain of your secrecy?
- ♦ What have the sages promised Duke Vulku that compels him to seek out the answers they long for?

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THE FAITHLESS

- ♦ Though Duke Vulku disapproves of your heresy, why has he never commanded that you worship the gods?
- ♦ What is the one thing that you trust in this world of shifting wonders and horrors?
- ♦ Whenever you return to Telluun, with whom do you find comfort?
- ♦ What do you wear in public when you wish to hide the brand of your faithlessness?
- ♦ *Ask the others:* Which among you prays to moldy gods for my soul and why?

The Faithless Cache

Whenever you are offered a pull to ask a question, you may place a block from your cache atop the Spire instead of pulling.

If you wish to place someone else in harm's way, you may do so with but a pull. The Host may tempt you with a pull to do so unsuspected. You may add all pulls made for this cause to your cache.

THE INDEBTED

- ♦ Despite the rumors, you have never actually died, but when did you come the closest?
- ♦ You have two separate families who have moved on after one or another of your funerals. Why have you never tried to contact them?
- ♦ What grave goods have you dug up from each of your false graves to keep with you?
- ♦ How has your appearance changed over the years?
- ♦ *Ask the others:* Which among you slept with my spouse when last I was thought dead?

The Indebted Cache

When the consequences of abandoning a pull would leave you injured or ensnared, you may place a block from your cache atop the Spire to be left for dead instead.

You may add any block you pull to remain untouched, unharmed, or unscathed to your cache.

THE LOATHED

- ◆ Which of the seventeen sages is secretly sponsoring you and to what end?
- ◆ Who are the three entities who lay claim to your eternal soul?
- ◆ What oath have you sworn that now puts you at odds with Duke Vulku's geas?
- ◆ How are your unwholesome studies made obvious through your appearance?
- ◆ *Ask the others:* Which among you has been studying my books while I slumber?

The Loathed Cache

When you pull to remain undisturbed by the horrific or preternatural, you may place blocks from your cache atop the Spire in lieu of pulling.

When you call upon an imp, a devil, or the dead to aid you, pull a block and ask the Host what price must be paid. You will pay the price, but if you wish, you may add this block you pulled to initiate the deal to your cache.

THE METICULOUS

- ◆ Who awaits your safe return to Telluun?
- ◆ What did Duke Vulku promise you years ago when you first submitted yourself to his geas?
- ◆ What happened the last time your sword betrayed your command?
- ◆ How do you maintain your appearance?
- ◆ *Ask the others:* Which among you do I see as a wastrel and unworthy?

The Meticulous Cache

When the Host tempts you with a pull to avoid wasteful action, you may place a block from your cache atop the Spire in lieu of pulling.

When a wound festers or an injury threatens a life, you may pull to properly see to it. The Host may tempt you with additional pulls to save limbs or reduce fevers. You may add any blocks you pull in this manner to your cache.

THE SUBTLE

- ♦ How is it that you are still able to engage in thievery after having both your hands forcibly amputated years ago?
- ♦ What is the loophole in Duke Vulku's geas over you that you are aware of but afraid to use?
- ♦ Whose arms do you reluctantly return to after every quest?
- ♦ How do you blend in?
- ♦ *Ask the others:* Which among you has been secretly tallying my thefts?

The Subtle Cache

When the Host tempts you with a pull to go unnoticed or unremarked, you may place a block from your cache atop the Spire in lieu of pulling.

When you see something that you covet, you may pull to make it yours even as someone is about to use it. You may add any blocks pulled for this cause to your cache.

THE VAINGLORIOUS

- ♦ What is the one thing you love more than yourself and what vile act have you committed to preserve it?
- ♦ Who is the only person to never fall sway to the beauty of your voice?
- ♦ What ward has protected you six times before and why do you fear it may not work a seventh?
- ♦ How do you make an entrance?
- ♦ *Ask the others:* Which among you do I fear is equal to my beauty or grace?

The Vainglorious Cache

When the Host tempts you with a pull to add grace or beauty to your actions, you may place a block from your cache atop the Spire in lieu of pulling.

When you wish to slight or humiliate someone in the eyes of Duke Vulku, you have only to make a pull. You may add any blocks pulled for this cause to your cache.

THE CRUMBLING SPIRES OF SAGACITY

Assemble your Spire according to the rules that came with your specific brand. Once assembled, the companions should each pull a set number of blocks based on the number of companions in the game. Have each companion tuck the blocks they pulled into their own personal cache for use later.

- ♦ If there is a single companion, they must pull 6 blocks.
- ♦ If there are two companions, they must pull 3 blocks each.
- ♦ If there are more than two companions, they must pull 2 blocks each.

For this initial pull, the Spire is not live and the only consequence to be suffered should it tumble is the time it takes to build it back up and start anew. After these pulls, the Spire becomes live evermore.

The Spire of Life & Death

Throughout the game the companions will be asked to pull from the Spire many times. The Host never pulls from the Spire. Each pull must follow these rules.

- ♦ To make a pull, choose a block from any layer beneath the topmost complete layer, remove that block and then place it atop the Spire.
- ♦ As you place blocks in the topmost layer, they must be placed perpendicular to the layer directly beneath and you must complete the topmost layer before starting a new one.
- ♦ You may never touch a block with more than one hand at a time.
- ♦ You may feel about and explore the Spire before pulling a block.
- ♦ You may change which block you intend to pull at any time.
- ♦ You may abandon a pull at any time.

When a pull is abandoned, the Host will tell the companions the consequences they suffer. But know

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"I WOULD HUNT
THE WOLF,
SEE THE TERROR
IN HIS EYES..."

"...AND DRIVE HIS
PACK INTO
THE EARTH."

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this: whatever the consequences of abandoning a pull, they cannot remove a companion from the game. Cowardice is its own reward.

Should the Spire fall, for whatever reason, the player responsible is removed from the game and their companion suffers their ultimate doom. In most cases, it is the Host's duty to relate how and why this ill-fate befell them. Rebuild the Spire as before, but all players, even those of companions who have died, retain their caches. Then the players of the surviving companions pull the number of blocks dictated by how many of them remain, adding these new blocks to their existing cache. All are imperiled by this. The Spire is live and should it fall again during the rebuilding process, another player and companion will suffer their doom according to the whim of the Host.

Players of companions who have died should consult the After All section.

Sacrifice

Foolhardy companions may turn to face their fate head-on and deliberately knock over the Spire. If they do so in an obvious way so that there is no confusion about their intent, it is their privilege, not the Host's, to relate to us how they gloriously gave their own lives. Then the sacrificial player may ask the Host one or more of the following questions.

- ♦ How will this preserve my companions?
- ♦ How will this spite Duke Vulku?
- ♦ How will this be remembered?

And then ask of their fellow companions, "Which among you will sing of this?"

Approaching the Spire

When it comes time to face the Spire, players should tally all the pulls before them. There may be pulls they volunteer for, pulls requested by the Host, and pulls the Host has tempted them with.

The players may decide what a pull is for after the pull is made. However, if the abandoning of one pull would render another pull impossible, that pull must be made first. You must, for example, pull to overcome your revulsion before pulling to impress the Fleshless Queen with your manners. But if you attempt to secret away a knife from her banquet table, you may choose to attribute that to a pull you made before or after either of the other two.

Players make the pulls they wish to make and abandon the ones they do not. The Host will note the abandoned pulls and tailor their consequences appropriately as described in the Being a Gracious and Graceful Host section.

Being a True & Loyal Companion

Duke Vulku is loved by all the companions and his geas is rooted deep within their consciousness. It is sinister and disgraceful to go against his will. When a companion seeks to do so, their player must make all disobedient pulls with their off-hand, should they have one. Additionally, for each transgression, they must also first pull or become overwhelmed by shame and befuddlement.

If Duke Vulku calls upon a companion and they disobey through inaction, they must make a pull with their off-hand or plummet into a torpor of remorse. Each time Duke Vulku calls upon them in this manner, they must pull again. After the third call, all that they do will be considered disloyal until Duke Vulku forgives them.

Should Duke Vulku perish, the companions' consciousness will escort his soul to the realm beyond for seven nights as their mindless bodies wander the mortal world. Upon their return, they will be lost and weak from hunger and thirst.

Experience Belongs to the Bold & Fortunate

When the Spire collapses, a companion is lost, but one will learn from the experience. Note which of

the surviving companions pulled from the Spire most recently before the fall. They will receive a boon from this tragedy should they survive the rebuilding of the Spire. They may now choose one of the lost or unchosen companions and add those abilities to feed and use a cache to their own.

EXPLORATIONS & INVESTIGATIONS

Under a live Spire, you explore the world. The Host describes the world and the people in it. The companion players ask questions about what their companions experience and describe what their companions do. As this conversation unfolds, you will find yourself at certain crossroads. You may attempt to do something the Host does not think you can do without endangering yourself. The Host may present you with a chance to do something more skillfully or with more aplomb. You may fight amongst yourselves. Or you may be presented with something beyond the ken of even Duke Vulku's companions. When this happens, any player at the table may demand that one of the following companion moves may be used.

Rote Work

When you wish to do something you are well-versed in, you need not pull to do so, but the Host may tempt you with pulls to do it with grace, unharmed, without waste, or unnoticed.

Taking from the World

When you are denied something, tell the Host how you plan to seize it. The Host may request a pull to do so and may tempt you with additional pulls to do so with grace, unharmed, without waste, or unnoticed.

Imposing Your Will

When the Host describes unintended consequences that result from your actions, speak out. Tell the Host of the outcome you desire. If the Host denies you that outcome, make a pull and ask again before adding the

block to the top of the Spire. If the Host denies you again, make a second pull and once more ask before adding either of the blocks to the top of the Spire. If the Host denies you a third time, you may not control the consequences of your actions, but you may add these blocks to your cache. If you abandon before finishing the second pull or if the Host acquiesces to your desires, place these blocks atop the Spire before continuing.

Keeping Your Wits

Whenever you wish to know more about something that has you in peril or presented you with opportunity, the Host must answer one of the following truthfully for every pull you make.

- ♦ What is most dangerous about this?
- ♦ Where am I most safe?
- ♦ What is most valuable about this?
- ♦ Who can I make vulnerable?
- ♦ What would be hidden from me were I not so attentive?

If you do not pull, the Host may demonstrate the answer to one of these questions for you.

Leading to Safety

When you wish to remove your companions from danger, make a pull for each of the following you wish to occur.

- ♦ None of the other companions are harmed.
- ♦ Duke Vulku is unharmed.
- ♦ You are unharmed.
- ♦ Your way is not impeded.

The Host may tempt you with additional pulls to escape with grace, unnoticed, or without waste.

Feats Unheard Of

When you wish to do something no one has ever done, pull. For every pull you make, you may choose one of the following outcomes.

- ♦ It is possible.
- ♦ You are unharmed by the attempt.
- ♦ You do not imperil others in the attempt.

The Host may tempt you with any of the following.

- ♦ Pull a block to be lucky enough to accomplish this once and only once.
- ♦ Pull a block to learn what is needed to accomplish the task. Add this block to your cache.

Witnessing the Unknown

When you stare into the uncanny depths of the unknown and find within it awe and horror, pull once to choose from the following reactions, or pull a second time to ignore the list and react as you wish. Elsewise, the Host will choose for you.

- ♦ Blindly flee for safety should it be found.
- ♦ Unhinge your consciousness from your senses and fall backwards into the comforts of darkness.
- ♦ Bury your fear in a blood-pounding rage and lash out at ally and peril alike.
- ♦ Whisper regretful prayers to any unwholesome entity with a desire to hear them.

Overcoming Afflictions

When you must endure the pain of recent wounds or labor through illness, the Host may require a pull to deal with your suffering before you can see to the task ahead of you. If you wish, you may place a block from your cache atop the Spire in lieu of making this pull.

Working in Accord

When companions set their wills towards the same goal, ask the Host which pulls before you may be divvied up freely among the cooperating companions. Then ask the Host if Duke Vulku approves of this cooperation.

Delivering Death Upon the Wanting

When you apply your skills to toils of gore and mortality, commit yourself to violence and then ask the Host if what you do is just. If it is just, make a single pull to do one of the following actions.

- ♦ You slay many.
- ♦ You need only slay a few.
- ♦ You wound or injure a beast of preternatural might or sorcerous protections.
- ♦ You slay a beast of preternatural might or sorcerous protections that has been made vulnerable, as determined by the Host.

The Host may tempt you with additional pulls do so with grace, unharmed, without waste, or unnoticed.

If your violence is unjust, you may perform one of the above actions, but you may not pull blocks nor may you use blocks from your cache. Instead, you may only push blocks from the Spire and let them fall as they may. Leave them where they land. Do not place them atop the Spire and do not add them to your cache. They must lay there, screaming on the edge of consciousness, eagerly awaiting the death of one of the companions before they can be returned to the Spire.

Struggling Among the Companions

When you physically struggle with one or more of the companions, all companions involved should declare their intentions. These intentions may be anything physically obtainable were it not for the other companions' efforts, but they may not be anything that harms another companion in such a way that it would

effectively remove them from the game. Allow that companion's player to be the judge of that.

Starting with the initiator, each companion player involved takes turns pulling a single block from the Spire. Any player may place a block from their cache atop the Spire in lieu of pulling during a struggle.

When you abandon a pull, you may no longer attempt to pull during this struggle. After all but one of the companion players has abandon pulls, the remaining player's companion achieves their intent.

As is his privilege, Duke Vulku may disapprove of one or more of the companions' involvement, even if Duke Vulku is not present during the actual struggle. Any companions suffering from such disapproval must make all their pulls with their off-hand and may not use blocks from their cache.

AFTER ALL

When companions die, their players hold what is left of their cache and temporarily remove themselves from the game table to answer any two or three of the following questions in secret.

- ♦ With the geas lifted from your will, what sin have you committed in the service of Duke Vulku that now troubles your soul?
- ♦ As the veil is pulled from the unnatural world, what blasphemous secret is divulged to you?
- ♦ Now that the vitality has been stolen from your corporeal husk, what vanities do you still cling to, unseen and unheard in the shadow realms?
- ♦ As the comfort and warmth is cast from your home and hearth, what calls you back to Telluun even now that your task is finished?
- ♦ With the pain and weariness finally eased from your numb thews, what new tortures do you see before you in your eternal destiny?

When the player has answered the questions, they may return to the table. Unless called upon by necromancy, their companion may no longer communicate or interfere with the living, except in the fashion outlined below.

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The Inscrutable Goals of the Dead

When the spirit of a departed companion disapproves of a living companion's actions, attitude, or existence, they may imperil them with ill fortune. As you tally up the pulls a player must make, each dead companion's player may hand one of their cached blocks to the player making the pull and declare which of the pulls before them is imperiled. It must be a pull they have already offered to make or one the Host has already tempted them with. Instead of pulling a block from the Spire or placing a block from their own cache, the player making the pull must instead place the dead companion's block back in the Spire. They may put it anywhere in the Spire beneath the topmost complete level and must otherwise follow all the other instructions the pull would normally have. In the special case of unjust violence, the dead companion's block must be used to push out and replace the block that is to lay where it lands. To abandon the pull, hand the block back to the dead.

The spirits of the departed companions may only do this for as long as they have cached blocks.

BEING A GRACIOUS & GRACEFUL HOST

To prepare for the expedition, you must consult the disciple of the cartographer and plot your course to the tome-tomb. Before the game, as the Host, you should commit to paper an account of the areas of interest and the surrounding environs. You may create your own map, or use one already made. It should travel overland and feature at least three different environments.

Place upon opposite sides of the map the immortal city of Telluun and the tome-tomb. Draw a lie as the raven flies from Telluun to the tomb. This path is not possible without sorcery. But the entourage may return to it many times to keep their course true. Scatter along this path spectacles of awe and horror, drawn from your own imagination, or from the Miscellanies found in this or other issues of *Worlds Without Master*. As

Duke Vulku and his companions wend their course, they will encounter many of these spectacles, but not all.

As the entourage first sets out, begin by describing the gates of Telluun and the city itself, with specific regard for its decaying opulence. Tell the players their heading and the most prominent landmarks that lie in that direction.

During the journey, rely upon the following Host moves. They will keep you true.

Be Generous

When a pull is abandoned and the text offers no specific options, consider what the pull was for and then craft your own consequences for the companion's failure, which may include harming them, ensnaring them, imperilling them or others, separating the entourage, wasting precious resources, or disappointing Duke Vulku. You may not kill the companion, for this is solely the at the whim of the Spire.

Be Mindful

When it is a companion's turn to pull, remember the following protocols.

- ♦ Remind the companion of their injuries, illnesses, and suffering.
- ♦ Do *not* tempt a companion with grace, safety, thriftiness, or stealth unless you are prepared to exploit their negligence.

Be Courteous

When a companion is in peril of being harmed or killed, ask the player to pull to remain whole. You may tempt them with additional pulls to remain untouched, to flee to safety, and to protect their allies.

If they make no pulls, you may tear the companion asunder, incapacitate them, capture them, and imperil the others; as long as none of these fates removes the companion from the game.

Be Revelatory

When things get slow, ask the players to pull to drink in the world in through their senses and mark what is wrong or dangerous. Give the first to make a pull a single, sensual clue to the danger that awaits them. For each additional pull the companions make, you choose one of the following pieces of information.

- ♦ Tell them how they are vulnerable.
- ♦ Tell them what they should be wary of.
- ♦ Tell them where they may be safest or if there is no safe refuge.

If none of them pull, you may take them by surprise.

Be Judicious

When a companion appears proud or confident, have Duke Vulku praise an unworthy companion and remain indifferent to all others.

Be Sympathetic & Forgiving

When companions openly plot against Duke Vulku, have him steer them into danger.

When the whim seizes you, have Duke Vulku forgive a companion.

Be Forthcoming

When the world and the companions are quiet, you may reveal one of the answers to your Host questions, either through the actions or voice of Duke Vulku, or through other means. After your revelation, offer any present companions the chance to pull. If they refuse, the revelation hangs in the air unremarked upon. For every pull a companion makes, you choose one piece of information from the following list.

- ♦ Tell them how it endangers them.
- ♦ Tell them how they may profit from it.
- ♦ Tell them who they can safely tell about this.

Be Gregarious

When companions speak to anyone besides themselves or Duke Vulku, decide which of the following applies to the one to whom they are speaking.

- ♦ They will tell the companions whatever they wish to hear.
- ♦ They will hide their true desires from the companions.
- ♦ They will respond to inquiry with hostility and silence.

For every pull the companions make, choose one of the above that they obviate.

Be Helpful

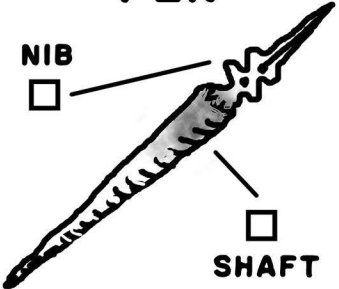
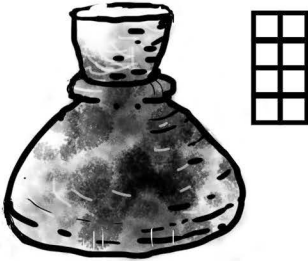
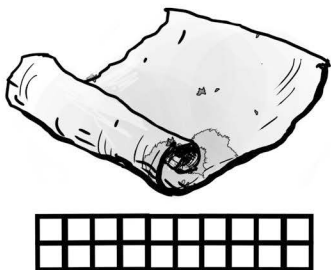
When the task before the companions is too great for a single companion to can handle alone, allow two of them to work together by pulling together. Both players must be touching the block being pulled at the same time while it is being removed from the Spire, retrieved from a cache, or placed atop the Spire. Their companions share all glories and dooms that accompany the pull.

THE GEAS END

You may end the game under any of the following circumstances.

- ♦ All of the companions have perished.
- ♦ Duke Vulku has perished and none care to complete the task at hand.
- ♦ The Host has revealed all the answers to Duke Vulku's questions.
- ♦ The tomb-tome is unearthed.
- ♦ The story has reached a note unsettling, discordant, or satisfying enough upon which to end.



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THREE DOZEN DELAYS AND DISTRACTIONS UPON YOUR PATH

A miscellany by Epidiah Ravachol

- .■.—Packs of coursing beasts that nip and harry their prey to exhaustion. Tucked into the fur of each animal is a full and recognizably human face. Where can it be found and what falls from its human lips?
- .■.—A tower, tall and dark, that bends toward the moon. What can be seen by candlelight in its windows?
- .■.—The mill works whose denizen welcome you and offer a humble, but nourishing repast. They have sewn their eyes shut long ago to shut out what abhorrent sight?
- .■.—A fissure in the ground that belches a cold, yellow-green miasma. What do the echoes from within pronounce? What is the only way across?
- .■.—A woodcutter crying silently and hemorrhaging corpulent beetles from a wounded leg. Where do the beetles scurry off to and what is unsettling about the woodcutter's ax?
- .■.—An endless and despairing road that wends in ever-tightening loops. What other travelers can be seen upon it in the far distance? What keeps travelers from merely stepping from the path?

■.□.—The ruins of a silvery castle torn asunder ages ago by cyclopean hands. What comfort does it offer weary travelers? What malevolence hunts in its shadow?

■.⋮.—A nimbus of purple-orange fire over the head of a tree adorn with the hanged corpses of three highwayfolk. What grows in the fertilized ground beneath the bodies?

■.□.—A parade of demonic lovers who are unconcerned with travelers, but block the path with their debaucheries. What leads this infernal orgy? How long have they continued unabated?

■.□.—Warm blood and snot gurgling up from the loam like a hot spring. What creatures water themselves here? What benefits do such pools imbue on the bather?

■.□.—A monk wandering and lost from another time. What secrets might they divulge? What might they do once the fragility of their mind is tested?

■.□.—Tiny, flitting birds of rusty plumage with a desire for eyes that they recklessly try to sate. What waits in their roost, hungering for these orbs?

■.⋮.—A clear pool littered with venomous, jewel-like amphibians who foam in the open air and offer transcendent ecstasies. Where do the frog-fevers take those who succumb to them?

■.□.—Six lithe and alluring men that chase you playfully among the pillars of a forgotten temple. What happens to the others when one of them is touched? What is their true desire?

■.⋮.—A bridge made of the tanned hides of beasts and folk stretched across a windy gulf. What awaits on the other side and how does it greet visitors?

■.⋮.—A melancholy song that hangs in the air, unsung by corporeal throats, swelling and fading with your wanderings. Where does it lead? What memories does it stir?

■●—A feast of living, half-cooked beasts that, in human voice, beg passers-by to partake. Who presides over this meal and what gift do they offer their guests?

■●—A bloom of amber and azure mushrooms that form a tridecagram upon the ground. What passions do the fungus induce in those who unwittingly inhale their spores? What watches over them?

■●—Cannibals, richly dressed and recently sated, that wish only to hear the tales of travelers. How do they display their opulence? How do they show their disappointment?

■●—A crude stone ax caught in mid-air as if embedded in an invisible, intangible tree. What purpose does the vegetation that it harvests from a parallel world serve in this one?

■●—A circus menagerie of fantastic beasts escaped into wild. How do they differ from the usual fauna? Which among them is the most dangerous?

■●—A squalid village, fearful of strangers, with a single stone building at its center. What alien entity resides within that they make obeisance to? Why?

■●—A body draped by their own intestines over a tree, their mouth agape in a silent scream. What is the only sound that can be heard?

■●—Three lathered and wild-eyed horses arriving from a long and terrifying run. Where have they come from and what evidence do they still carry with them?

■●—A senseless but captivating poem etched in stone, wood and earth, unfinished and terminating in the poet's moldering corpse. How far does the poem stretch across the landscape? What secret might a contemplative soul puzzle from it given time enough to ponder?

■●—A deep and vast cave that shines as day in the dark of night. What inhabits this bizarre and transposed world? How may one escape it?

☛☛☛— Three siblings arguing over a box with a head in it. Why do each of them wish another owned it? What would they do to strangers who interfere with their quarrel?

☛☛☛— A merchant leading a caravan bereft of beasts. What does she offer those who agree to relieve her porters of the trunks and parcels currently chained to them?

☛☛☛— A wind that stirs no tree, grass, or dust, but howls and whips its icy fingers across bare flesh. What stranger weather does it foretell?

☛☛☛— Two frail and starving armies camped on either side of a foetid field of corpses awaiting new orders from long dead commanders. What originally set these legions against each other? How long have they been forgotten?

☛☛☛— An unkempt garden with fruit-bearing vines clinging to skeletons propped upon crucifixes. What hungers do these fruit sate? What has become of those who once tended the garden?

☛☛☛— Predator and prey fleeing together. What shelter do they seek and from what?

☛☛☛— A grove of evergreen trees that grows denser as the tree's needles grow sharp enough to draw blood. What runs freely within the bristling heart of the grove?

☛☛☛— A lone traveler on horseback that follows from a distance. Why does the traveler avoid approaching? How does the traveler respond to hails and shouts?

☛☛☛— Six men and women bathing in a hot spring with a single corpse floating among them. What do they chat about? How do they invite strangers to their bath?

☛☛☛— A cascade of fresh, cold waters that hide pale, grasping hands. Where do they seek to drag those who drink from the falls?



THE CONTRIBUTORS

Osmond Arnesto, as of this writing has just come back from a week in China, and has two days left as an English teacher in a little mountain town called Taebaek in South Korea. You can see his most recent short fiction in Issue #21 of *Protodimension Magazine*, *Phantasmacore*, and the now-defunct *Fiction365*. He is originally from San Diego, California but has re-locating to Denver, Colorado, post-Korea. <http://thestoriesbeyond.com/>

Bryant Paul Johnson is a cartoonist, illustrator and essayist who hails from Northampton, Massachusetts. His works include *Teaching Baby Paranoia*, *Dropped Frames* and *Equip Shield: The Role of Semipermeable Cultural Isolation in the History of Games and Comics*. <http://bryantpauljohnson.com>

Wendy Martin has been working as an illustrator for 25+ years. Her career began in advertising and graphic design in New York, where she was often called upon to create spot art for a variety of clients, which included Fortune 500 companies such as Kraft, General Electric and Sears. After her move to Missouri in 2000, she turned her focus to her true love, children's books. *An Ordinary Girl*, *A Magical Child*, a children's book she both wrote and illustrated was released in 2005 and re-released in 2008, then went on to become a finalist in the 2009 international COVR awards. Four

additional picture books and a coloring book quickly followed. <http://www.wendymartinillustration.com/>

Vlada Monakhova is a versatile artist with a passion for creating stories, characters, and worlds. Stranded in the frozen Alberta prairies, she works as a freelance illustrator and chips away at a variety of personal projects when the local wildlife allows for a break. She fancies video games, comics, movies, and all things spooky. <http://www.vladamonakhova.com/>

Tiffany Turrill is a fantasy illustrator, concept artist, and creature designer. She's illustrated two children's books, and worked with a whole bunch of game companies, including Electronic Arts and Fantasy Flight Games. She will talk your ear off about dinosaurs and drink an obscene amount of tea. She lives in Oakland, CA, and you can catch her on Twitter @TiffanyTurrill. Her art lives here: <http://tiffanyturrill.daportfolio.com/>

Jabari Weathers is an illustrator based in Baltimore, Maryland. He uses his work to foster and explore worlds of strange, fantastic and sometimes horrible realization. Armed with some paints, inks and a computer, he's managed to stay alive yet! You can see the fruits of his exploits at jmwillustration.com, or follow him during his travels at fortuneandfey.tumblr.com and twitter.com/JabariWeathers.

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 Delays and Distractions Upon Your Path" belongs to the Free & Chaotic Realms.

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





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THIS RICH?

FAVORITE
UNCLE?

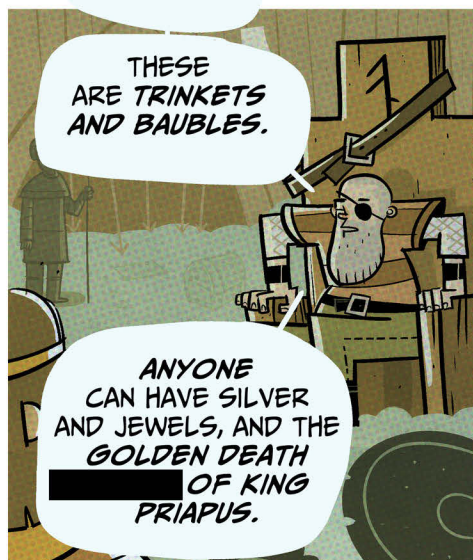
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REAL WEALTH?
THIS IS REAL
WEALTH.



HOW DID
YOU GET
TO BE SO
RICH?

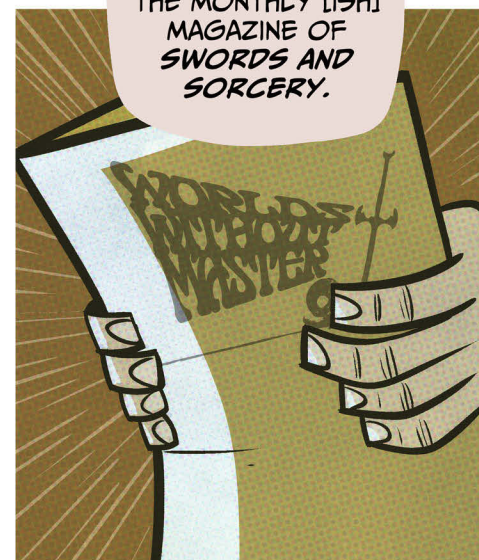
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SELLING
GRIT?

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SWORDS AND
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ARE TRINKETS
AND BAUBLES.

ANYONE
CAN HAVE SILVER
AND JEWELS, AND THE
GOLDEN DEATH
OF KING
PRIAPUS.



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