

RollPlay

GM

NOTEBOOK

ISSUE 12

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4

INTRODUCTION

5

RENO STARS

WORLD WIDE WRESTLING ONE SHOT

10

ESSAY: BALANCING EXPERTISE

13

AGAINST THE NECROMANCER KING

HELL IS THE RIVERLANDS

16

AGAINST THE NECROMANCER KING

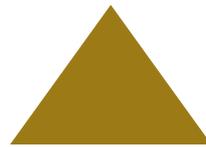
LOVE LETTERS

23

SWAN SONG GM NOTES

25

SWAN SONG GM NOTES COMMENTARY



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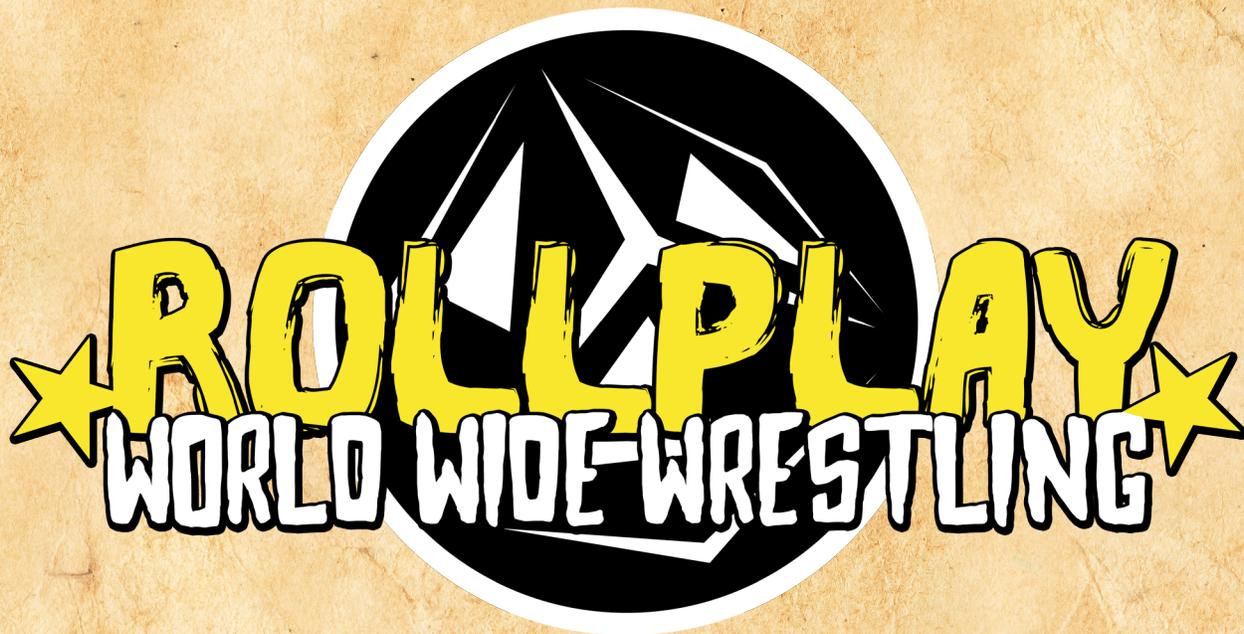
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Welcome, Patrons!

Happy Anniversary, everyone. Or at least, happy twelfth issue. Maybe this means we're done with Volume One of the RollPlay zine and ready to start fresh next month on Volume Two. How exciting! It's been a delight sharing my insights into the campaigns we've played and the kinds of things that go through my mind when I prep for a one-shot or cast a new show. This month I've got some tidbits for you from our guest two-shot of Court of Swords (featuring CinammonToastKen and our own AnneMunition) and a bit of thought about the World Wide Wrestling one shot from this month. As always, it's my pleasure to share. Hope you enjoy it!

Thank you so much for your support, and welcome to Issue 12 of the GM's Notebook.

Adam Koebel / RollPlay GM



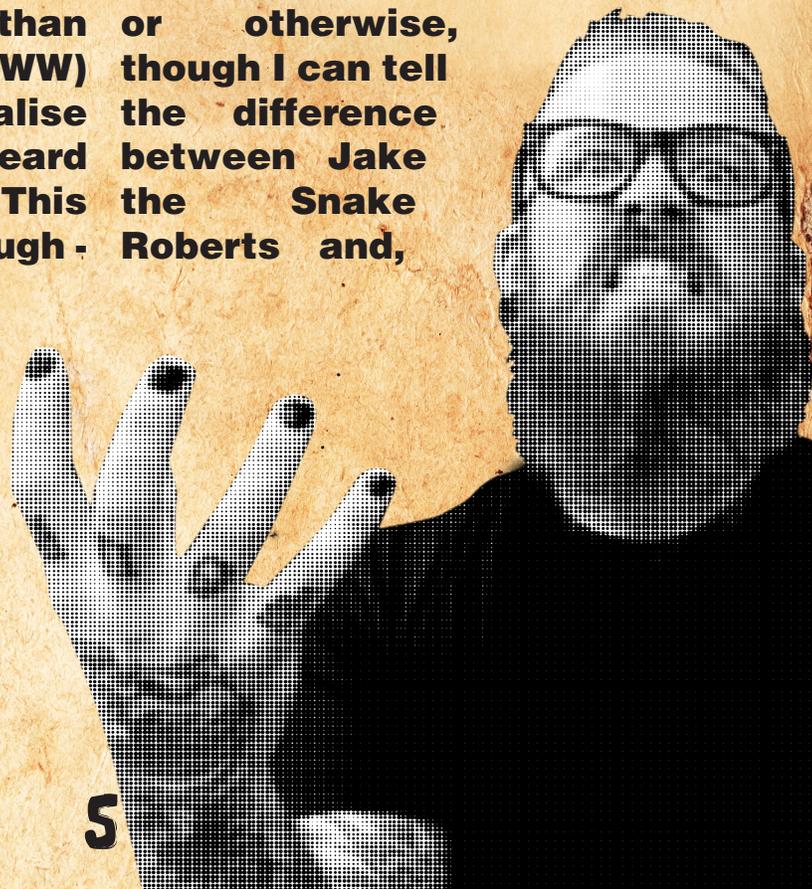
ROLLPLAY

WORLD WIDE WRESTLING

RENO STARS

World Wide Wrestling might be the RPG best-suited for Twitch play that I've ever encountered. Back when it first came across my radar, I was interested mostly because of some of Nathan Paoletta's (the author of WWW) other work - I'd played Annalise once or twice at cons and heard good things about Carry. This was a whole other thing, though - a game about wrestling? I'm sure it had been done before; I'd seen something similar back in the days of the great d20 glut (I believe it was an officially licensed product) and I'd played the White Wolf Street Fighter game which, if you have a chance, is absolutely worth

a go - it's hilarious and terrible in so many ways. I wouldn't consider myself much of a wrestling fan. I can't tell you the storyline of the careers of any wrestlers, popular or otherwise, though I can tell the difference between Jake the Snake Roberts and,



say, Bam Bam Bigelo. I don't know the difference between a power bomb and a body slam, at a glance, even though I'm sure right now you're rolling your eyes. The thing is, I got into Dungeons & Dragons around when I stopped watching wrestling. When I was ten. Had D&D not come along, maybe the great spandex ballet might have stuck with me a little

longer, but it wasn't meant to be. When WWW came around, I find myself extremely interested, but not for the reasons

you might expect.

What intrigued me about WWW was the idea of a studio audience - that the game itself wasn't as much about the punches, kicks and choke-slams in the ring, but their effect on an imaginary audience that the PCs were there to entertain. The meta-level of playing characters who themselves were playing characters clicked so hard and so well with what we were doing on Swan Song, at the time - streamers with their own personae playing characters with theirs, entertaining a chat audience moment to moment. I knew this game would sing on Twitch and I remember bringing it up with JP as soon as I

finished my first read-through. We'd intended to play, and I know JP reached out to some folks about making it happen, but as with all creative projects, we are nothing if not thrall to the realities of schedule and time, and it never quite had the chance to manifest.

Enter GLOW - Netflix's series fictionalizing the events surrounding

the founding of the women's wrestling league of the same name. JP and I are both avid and intense followers of just about any sort of pop media



- we consume movies and TV at a sometimes-alarming rate. We both fell completely in love with GLOW. For me, it was the story behind the story - the melodrama of the stage and the ring but also the interactions and relationships (themselves basically soap operatic) between the women playing them. The clash of archetypes, the fervor with which they were booed and cheered - all the stuff that makes actual wrestling so much fun, plus the sweet sweet layer of meta underneath. Obviously, doing what I do best, as soon as the first episode was over, I knew I had to play this show as an RPG.

I'm always really happy that JP gives me as much space to propose and, ultimately, launch shows that might be a bit of a gamble or kind of strange. When I suggested we have four guests who have never been on the show before doing a wrestling one-shot, he was all over it. I think it went great - character creation (which you can watch as a Patron, if you haven't seen it already) was a howl and I knew going in that we would have a fantastic time, but what stuck with me was something I hadn't quite expected. The game's collaborative nature really hit hard for me - the way the game encourages the players to narrate over, under and through

each others' actions and builds on those descriptions to a crescendo without the game ever feeling like there's no adversaria is really quite magical. As a GM on Twitch I often struggle with structuring sessions in a way that gives everyone fair time and allows everyone's voice to be heard. It was a pleasant surprise to have to work less at that than usual - to let the game's pacing be dictated by the whole



group, rather than myself. [Side note: you want to give yourself a heart attack, try pacing out a four hour D&D one-shot at an level over 3rd with folks of varying experience levels.] I was really impressed and happy with our chat audience for the show as well - I really felt like I could hear the jeers and cheers, with chat emoting throwing popcorn and pretending to be in the audience of the actual wrestling event. It felt like a deeper connection to

chat than we usually get. I'd love to see WWW make a comeback, with a second episode of the Reno Nevada Semi-Amateur Wrestling League, with Death Metal and Starla, Trash Mama and Bratty B, or even other characters, and other guests. I think we might not have seen the last of The John T. Knox Memorial Community center...



★ ROLLPLAY ONE-SHOT PRESENTS: ★
WORLD WIDE WRESTLING RPG

Live ON TWITCH-VIEW-PER-VIEW

**SATURDAY,
JUL. 16TH**

**8E
5P**



Roleplay

ESSAY: BALANCING EXPERTISE

In geek and nerd culture, being a part of a fandom is something we all feel great about. I can say that I'm a fan of D&D or Star Wars, I can tell you that I'm a fan of Tolkien or Game of Thrones. We can share that passion as something that binds us together - talking about which House is the best or which Prequel sucks the most. Sometimes, we use our secret knowledge like a handshake, gauging who is in and who is out - if you're a true fan you'll know everything there is to know about a certain fandom and if you don't

know every little detail, some folks might treat you like you don't belong at all. This behaviour is sometimes called gatekeeping and it's a pretty nasty thing to do, unless you never want your fandom to ever get bigger. This sort of thing can crop up a bit in roleplaying games, and if you're playing a game set in a specific world (like Star Wars or the Imperium of 40k or even a built-in RPG setting like Faerun) you might find yourself in a group with a people who have a mixed understanding of that world, which can cause friction.

I got to thinking about this, and my experiences with playing with experts, because of some of the feedback we go when we decided to run World Wide Wrestling as a one shot. There are a lot of fans of wrestling out there, and lots of fans of roleplaying games, too - there are places where those things overlap. Coming to the table with a built-in understanding of the world you're going to explore can, if you're doing it right, be a really fun and exciting addition to your group. We chose, for World Wide Wrestling, to follow the advice of the author of the game and fill our group with folks who had really never engaged with the wrestling fandom before. Including me - my expertise was right near the bottom; pre-teen faded memories of the NES Wrestlemania game and a very pleasant viewing of GLOW. I knew that if we had even one person in the cast who was a huge wrestling fan, that person would have had to be very good at accepting everyone else's constant misdescriptions of moves - someone who would support and ignore and just have a fun time despite the game being about that thing they love so much. This would be like me playing a Star Wars game where anyone can use a lightsaber or where the Empire's home planet is Tatooine.

I think having an "expert" on the cast of a show can be really helpful, especially if that person is the GM - because the traditional flow of knowledge in a game just works that way - in almost every RPG the GM knows things that the players don't, and they can pass that info along. Having just one player as an expert adds a level of tension and frustration for that player that might not be a fun experience for them. I think there's something to be said for assembling a whole group of experts and really just reveling in the world you're exploring together - that kind of high level nerding out can be so satisfying - and I'm sure that there will be a WWW game full of wrestlexperts who can quote the winner of every single WWE championship since 1994 but that game wasn't this game.

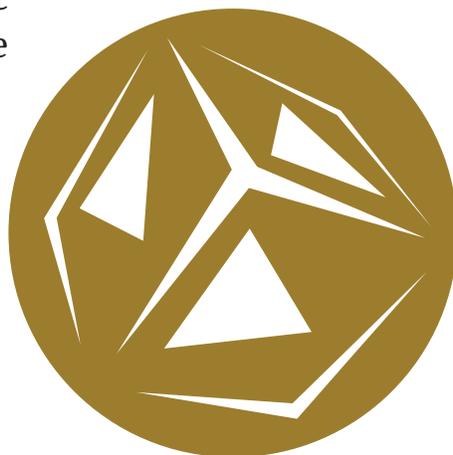
I've talked a lot before, in various venues, about how important casting is to building a good show - how Nebula Jazz would never be what it is without the people that play its whacky characters. That Mirrorshades is as much the result of Kaitlyn's chaos and Dodger and Wheat's shipping their own characters as it is the game itself. So for me, having that casting be just-right is how we make a show out

of a game. We make entertainment out of roleplaying. Part of making the decision, for me, about who to cast, is how well they know the material. This doesn't mean that we always cast "the expert" but we cast folks who will understand the type of thing we're going for, if not the specific details. For example, with Swan Song, everyone in the cast was a sci-fi fan, and since the game was meant to be inspired by all sorts of 70s sci-fi I could be sure that Geoff, Wheat, JP and Steven had all been exposed to a pretty good cross-section of references. Their cultural exposure in that space was what made it work. With Balance of Power, we'd all at least seen Star Wars, with some of the cast being more expert than others.

Which brings me to Jesse Cox, of whom I am remarkably proud. Jesse knows more about Star Wars than just about anyone that I know. He has an encyclopedic knowledge of the core

and extended canon, all the way down to the bullshit dregs of the universe. I knew this, going into Balance of Power, and wondered if this might cause friction. Would Jesse be the sort of player to shove his glasses up his nose and decry "ACTUALLY" if I made an adjustment to the canon? I was so utterly pleased that not only was Jesse a fantastic player in the game, but he was graceful and accepting of any changes that I made, supporting them as the new way we saw our version of the Star Wars universe.

This is the kind of conversation I'd have with any group before we decide to play together, I think. Getting on the same page and squaring away everyone's feelings about canon and non-canon, knowledge of the universe and how we want to deal with those intense feelings that can come up when the GM tells you that Coruscant is on the Outer Rim.



AGAINST THE NECROMANCER KING

HELL IS THE RIVERLANDS



Welcome back to the Riverlands, everyone. The site of our great magisterial slaughterhouse back in Season One. I'm so glad to have gotten a chance, in our "Against the Necromancer King" two-shot, to visit the bloody swamps of this part of the world, and see first hand what

happens when a Front is given ten years or so to mature. It isn't good, as we saw in the one shot. I want to talk here a little about the world building stuff here, some inspirations for the two-shot and what I was hoping to accomplish.

Inspirations

From the get go, when I think of a war torn, miserable environment where everything is deadly, even the landscape itself, I think of the Vietnam War. I think that, as far as conflict environments go, it's among the worst I can come up with. Pairing that and the already-existing Southeast Asian connection to the world of the Court of Swords, I figured this would be the perfect place to go looking for inspiration for our horrific two-shot. For me, there's two perfect films to draw on, here. After that, some inspirations both traditional and unusual.

Full Metal Jacket

Less the first half, in which the characters are engaged in the horrible prison-like sadistic nightmare of boot camp, but more the second half, when the group is alone, wandering around in Vietnam after a particularly nasty revelation about the Tet ceasefire. I think the back half of Full Metal Jacket is sort of a perfect framework for an overland adventure because in it, the characters are isolated from civilization and have only each other, to begin with (a more player character style group of people you'll be hard pressed to find outside

the Fellowship of the Ring) and they spend much of the back end of the film encountering outright horrors, foes on all sides and the occasional strange ally as they pursue their quest. It's a great film, and has lots of interesting things to say about the nihilistic nature of those whose job it is to "to meet interesting and stimulating people of an ancient culture... and kill them".

Apocalypse Now

The other Vietnam War movie, in my mind. Based on the eerie work of Joseph Conrad, there's a similarly D&D-esque structure to Apocalypse Now - violent armed men taking on a task in a near-hellish environment. It has a more shadowy, mystical nihilism in contrast to the sharp edges and manic chuckling of Full Metal Jacket, and the bit in the extended version where the "party" encounters some French colonists is a beautifully surreal island in the stream of blue smoke and napalm that makes up the rest of the film. Haunting, and I wanted my Court of Swords to feel haunted.

The Black Company

For dark, amoralistic military fantasy, you can't go wrong with this classic series by Glen Cook. It's about

the eponymous military company during a particularly tumultuous period in their epic history. It features entities known as the Ten Who Were Taken, who inspired Exalted (a White Wolf RPG) to create the Abyssals, who in turn are an inspiration for necromancers of all sorts in this game. Black Company feels like a semi-anachronistic look at the evils men do in the name of war and glory, with just the right amount of weird magic to fit into a D&D world.

The Warriors

Another big inspiration for this two-shot, though our world is a very rural one to the urban jungle presented in this 1979 film (itself a reimagining of Anabasis, by Xenophon). This film is amazing, and a must-watch - if you've ever seen (or been) someone put beer bottles on their fingers, clatter

them together and taunt someone to "come out and play" you need to put this movie on and see what it's all about. Basically, a group of gangsters (read: D&D party) are framed for something they didn't do and for one night, all of New York is on the hunt for them - they just need to get home safe to Coney Island. It's an ageless premise, and one I happily stole to make our Necromancer King story fit into a structured narrative.

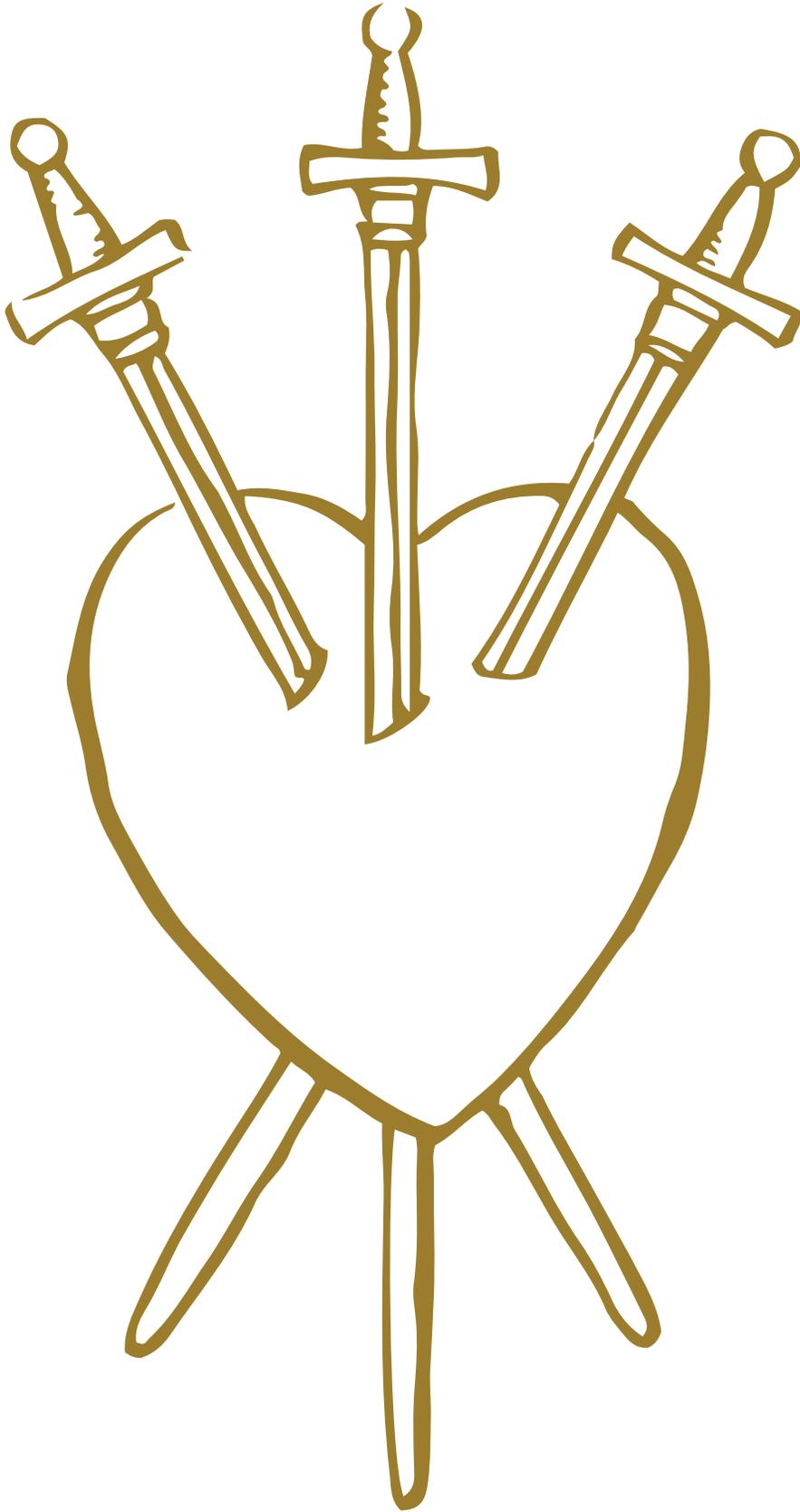
I've said before that everything is always inspired by something else. That my GMing is more like remixing than composing, and I think whenever I create something new for any campaign, recognizing and acknowledging that brazen thievery is really useful. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to listen to Paint it Black for the 100th time this week.



**AGAINST THE
NECROMANCER
KING**

LOVE LETTERS

III



DEAR BARD,
YOUR UNIT HAS BEEN DISMEMBERED
- JUST ANOTHER IN A LONG LIST
OF HORRIBLE LOSSES AGAINST THE
NECROMANCER KING. HOW DID YOU
MANAGE TO SURVIVE? TELL US ABOUT
THAT AND THEN ROLL 2D6+1. ON A 10+
CHOOSE ONE, ON A 7-9 CHOOSE TWO.

X YOU GOT A BAD WOUND THAT JUST
WON'T HEAL

X YOU SAW SOMETHING IN THE BATTLE
THAT YOU CAN'T SHAKE, YOU'RE
HAUNTED BY IT - YOU WERE IN
CHARGE OF THE EQUIPMENT, BUT
YOU LOST IT ALL

X EVERYONE HAS A WEAPON, THEIR
ARMOR, AND ONE OTHER THING,
AND THAT'S THAT

ON A MISS, ALL THREE ARE TRUE. SORRY
FRIEND, THAT'S HOW IT GOES.

DEAR WIZARD,
IN THIS HELLSCAPE, IT FEELS LIKE THE
FOUNTAIN'S RUNNING RED WITH BLOOD.
THE PRESENCE OF THE MARA ARE
EVERYWHERE, FUCKING WITH YOUR
MAGIC. YOUR UNIT ALL DIED AND YOU'RE
IN THE DEEP SHIT, NOW. ROLL 2D6+1 AND
WE'LL SEE JUST HOW SCREWED YOU
ARE. ON A 10+ CHOOSE ONE, ON A 7-9
CHOOSE TWO.

- X** YOUR MAGIC IS UNPREDICTABLE,
WARPED BY THE DEMON TAIN OF
THIS HORRIBLE BATTLEFIELD
- X** YOU'VE MANAGED TO ATTRACT THE
ATTENTION OF SOME PARTICULAR,
SPECIFIC DEMONIC FORCE
- X** AN ENEMY SPELLCASTER LEFT YOU
WITH A DEEP WOUND IN YOUR
SOUL, SO THAT'S GREAT

ON A MISS, IT'S A BAD HAND ACROSS
THE TABLE, THEY'RE ALL TRUE.

DEAR MONK,
THEY PROMISED YOU THAT YOU'D MAKE
A DIFFERENCE, HERE - THAT THE RIVER
LANDS WERE OVERRUN AND THAT THE
PEOPLE WOULD WELCOME YOU AS
SAVIORS. SADLY, IN THE JUNGLE, THIS
PROVED TO BE JUST ANOTHER LIE. ROLL
2D6+1 SO WE CAN FIND OUT WHAT'S
WHAT. ON A 10+ CHOOSE ONE. ON A 7-9
CHOOSE TWO.

X THE BATTLE COST YOU MORE THAN
YOUR UNIT, THEY TOOK A LIMB OR
AN EYE - YOU PICK

X YOU FORGOT TO READ YOUR
FORTUNES BEFORE YOU SET OUT,
THE GODS ARE LOOKING ELSEWHERE

X SOMEONE KNOWS YOU'RE STILL
ALIVE AND WORD IS GETTING
AROUND THAT YOUR COMPANY HAS
SURVIVORS - HUNTERS ARE SURELY
ON THE WAY

ON A MISS, THE GODS HAVE LEFT YOU TO
YOUR OWN DEVICES HERE IN HELL. IT'S
ALL TRUE AND IT'S ALL BAD.

DEAR PALADIN,
SEE THE WORLD, THEY SAID. JOIN THE
ARMY, THEY SAID. SAVE THE WORLD,
THEY SAID. NOW EVERYONE YOU WENT
TO TRAINING WITH, EXCEPT THESE
ASSHOLES, ARE DEAD. YOU'RE OUT
HERE IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE AND
EVERYTHING WANTS TO KILL YOU. ROLL
2D6+1 AND WE'LL SEE WHERE YOU START
ON THE RIVER TO HELL. ON A 10+ ONLY
ONE, ON A 7-9, PICK TWO.

X YOUR DEVOTION TO THE FOUNTAIN
IS A BEACON IN THE DARK, AND
EVERYONE AROUND HERE CAN FEEL
IT

X THE AMBUSH AND MASSACRE ARE
YOUR FAULT - WHY?

X YOU'VE BEEN BITTEN BY SOME
HORRIBLE CREATURE AND YOU CAN
FEEL YOURSELF CHANGING

ON A MISS, ALL THREE AND MAYBE THIS
WON'T BE SUCH A LONG TRIP AFTER ALL.

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SWAN SONG

“Monsieur Higgins, do I make you uncomfortable?”

– Prosper Trudeau

- 1) The PCs are being held by local governmental forces (the EPDF) being coerced by agents of the Exchange (led by one Aaron Maier, formerly of the Perimeter Agency) to cooperate.
- 2) Maier is head of an investigative task force mandated to combat the threat of unbraked AI within the sector.
- 3) Maier's interest in the Swan Song is the capture of its onboard infant-stage AI, to further connect him to his real target - La Fantome / Odette Rainier.
- 4) Pi has sealed the ship and has been attacking anyone who approaches, defending it until Piani comes back.
- 5) Maier wants to EMP the ship but won't do it because he could damage the AI, so he's working on the crew, trying to get them to convince Piani to tell Pi to let them in.
- 6) A local doctor, Elizabeth Abramowicz, is working to erode Piani's self image, in order to coerce her to tell Pi to open the ship.

- 7) Odette has sent backup... she wants to retrieve Pi as well. (L'enfante)
 - Start the session w/ a scene of Odette in a big baroque church, sending the cyber-ninjas to Elouhaba.

[Head of security: Daliz Roth] ← Captain in the EPDF

Agent Aaron Maier HP 20; AC 5; AB +1; Laser Pistol (+3 to-hit); PE 14 ME 13 EV 12 Tech 11 Luck 14

Hospital Security HP 10; AC 4; AB +3; Semi-Auto Pistol (1d8); PE 12 ME 15 EV 14 Tech 16 Luck 13

4th the PCs...

- 1) Give Pi to the Exchange, then they're contacted by Odette Rainier, who asks them for a debriefing and assures them that the issue will be taken care of. Depending on how it goes, she might invite them to Cabral to meet her.
- 2) Capture Pi and escape, Maier (or his superiors) put a bounty out for the Swan Song. Odette gets in touch to suss out the situation, speaks to Pi directly.
- 3) Fight their way out, they're not chased (the Exchange is a huge bureaucracy) but as per #2, they put out a hit.

GoTo Taxila Prep (Give everyone 1250xp)

- Science Vessel Nausea, (Odette Rainier) in orbit over Geaxi X
- "M'am, we've got reports of the Swan Song having been captured on Elouhaba?" "It's Maier, then." "Yes m'am" "And L'enfante?" "Unconfirmed." "Send 2 team. Confirm it." "Oui, madame."

Heather = Higgs is Job

Swan Song GM Notes

Commentary

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The Situation on Elouhaba

I've always found, and still find, bulleted lists a useful way to manage my thoughts and to prep what might be considered linear events. A sort of, this and then that situation. In this case, I'm laying out what's going on on Elouhaba so that, at any given point, I can refer to what each element of the scene is doing at any given time.

Agent Aaron Maier

This guy is a classic example of an NPC I had a lot of interest in and backstory for, at least, the threads that I might eventually weave together into a backstory, but who never managed to stick around. The corpses of such NPCs are littered around the universe of Swan Song particularly. With Aaron, formerly Agent Maier, I wanted a kind of semi-former CIA agent vibe - someone who had spent their formative career working the anti-AI squad for the Perimeter Agency, but who gave up the hunt to come home and protect his people directly. He worked for the government, and still had all this AI hatred all tangled up in him, so of course he took over when the AI on the Swan Song was detected.

I try to imagine my NPCs as, for the most part, believing that they're in the right - I don't think even villain types know they're villains. This dude was just trying his best, and of course, when you come up against the crew of the Swan Song, that might not mean much.

L'enfant Terrible

I knew what a treasure Pi was, at this early stage - the highly complex, remarkably difficult-to-engineer core of an AI, more or less wiped clean and ready for ideological imprinting. I imagine that, had I developed the Caliphate earlier on, the whole campaign would have had a different tone [instead of La Fantome and Prosper, we'd have had The Panopticon and members of the Caliphate's secret police - I love moments like that in campaigns - seeing where things could have gone with a different piece moved across the board]. At this point, though, Odette was the first on the scene, and ready to try and snatch up Pi as part of her rescue mission.

If the PCs...

You can never predict what a player character will do with any certainty, so it's good to have a backup plan or two. I wondered, at this point, how attached to Pi they were - what amount of money or cajoling would it take to get Pi out of their hands? It seems ludicrous to even imagine, now, that they would ever have turned the AI over, but early on, it's hard to say.

Science Vessel Nausea

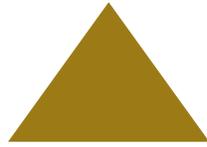
This ship is a reference to the 1938 Sartre novel "La Nausée" in which the main character becomes obsessed with self-identity. It's a crucial work of existentialism as a philosophy, and a fitting herald of the strangeness to come for Pi.

Sometimes I'm not sure if this stuff is clever or just pretentious, and then I remember they're two sides of the same coin.

Heather = Higgs is Jeb

I do believe this right here is the grandmother of the future Supreme President of Asa, if memory serves.

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