RollPlay

GM
NOTEBOOK
ISSUE 15

Welcome, Patrons!

This issue of the GM notebook focuses very particularly on Court of Swords - both because we had a big live show and because I think that the show is undergoing some mid-life changes. The live show and the episodes leading up to it gave me a lot to think about, in terms of D&D and how it works as a show. I've written a short essay about some of those thoughts, as well as included all the prep I have available for the live show, in case you'd like to see behind the curtain. Happy October, everyone!

Thank you so much for your support, and welcome to Issue 15 of the GM's Notebook.

Adam Koebel / RollPlay GM

COURT OF SWORDS
LIVE SHOW PREP NOTES

These are my GM notes for the Live Show, detailing the encounters I expected that I would need, as well as some overarching themes and concepts for the Primordial Arc. Generally, I don't do a lot of prep for D&D outside of encounter building - pairing maps and situations with an appropriately-difficult set of monsters and NPCs. The in-between stuff is mostly improvised, and as you can see if you compare the notes to the live show, there's almost always some thematic drift, even if the encounters stay more or less the same.

That's a big part of DMing D&D successfully, I think - merging the sometimes-sterile prep stuff that we have to do with the fluidity of actual at-the-table play. It's a tricky skill, and everyone leans harder on one side or the other, even just a little.

Here's what prep for an eight-hour session looks like for me;

The theme of the game is "existential horror" - feelings of insignificance - helplessness - smallness - the futility of your own existence against the vast uncaring universe.

Touchstones

+ some Howard, some Lovecraft

+ nihilism and existentialism on the general scale

+ dark souls / bloodborne (you

don't have access to the "truth" of things and just find out as you go)

+ Princess Mononoke (less the civilization vs. nature bit but more the scope and scale)

+ Berserk

The world is a terrifying place because you're so small and there are big things out there that want to eat / destroy / use you and you don't have much else to do to fight back against that - surviving is not a given, every village, every tribe, every culture exists because of pacts and taboos made with local gods and entities

You all lived in a village by a river. The river, over the course of the year, has dried up. There is no more river, only a dry bed. People are dying, the crops are withering, and you will not have food enough for the terrible season of water that is to come. Your village elders have decided that you, brave souls, must venture to the House of the River God, and ask what you have done to offend her, and to beg for her forgiveness and to return the waters of the river to your village.

(this bit, obviously, changed dramatically based on the fact that D&D players never just play humans, everyone is a god damn half dragon catboi or magical robot or some shit)

Mount Parwat has become corrupt and jealous because he thinks Vana and Naadi have been liasing in secret, so he kidnaps Naadi and imprisons her inside him.

Forest - Vana: could be an ally, but is, you know, a terrible and powerful god who is angry and upset and confused. So, dangerous.

VANA'S BLESSING

On 10 in the initiative order, choose one of the following, without repeating any action. - a character can make a single Attack - a character can take the Move action - a character gains Advantage on their next roll

River - Naadi: Is killing Parwat from within - being captured was her goal all along - seducing Vana as a means to trick Parwat to imprison her.

Naadi wants to kill and absorb Parwat's power, so she can become goddess of Mountain and River

ENCOUNTERS

Mountain Dwarves *(Medium)*:

+ ettin

+ 3x duergar

The Plains *(Medium)*:

+ 3x ankheg

In the Mountains *(Hard)*:

+ 4x orcs

+ blade of ilneval

+ orog

In the Forest *(Medium)*:

+ wereboar

+ 5x blink dogs

Just in Case, In the Village *(Medium)*:

+ 1 berserker

+ 1 druid

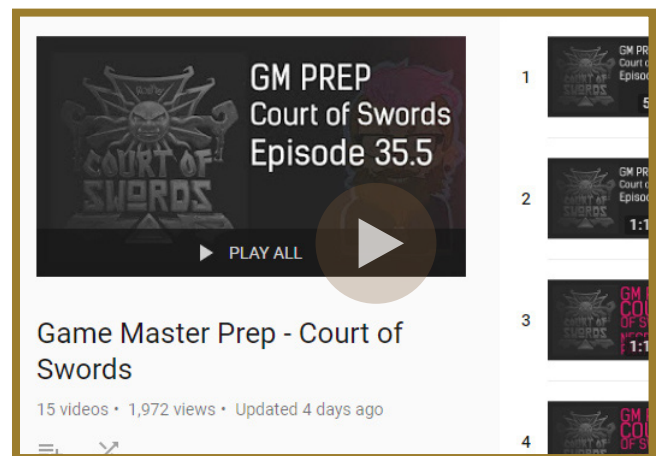+ 2 apprentice wizard

+ 6 tribal warriors

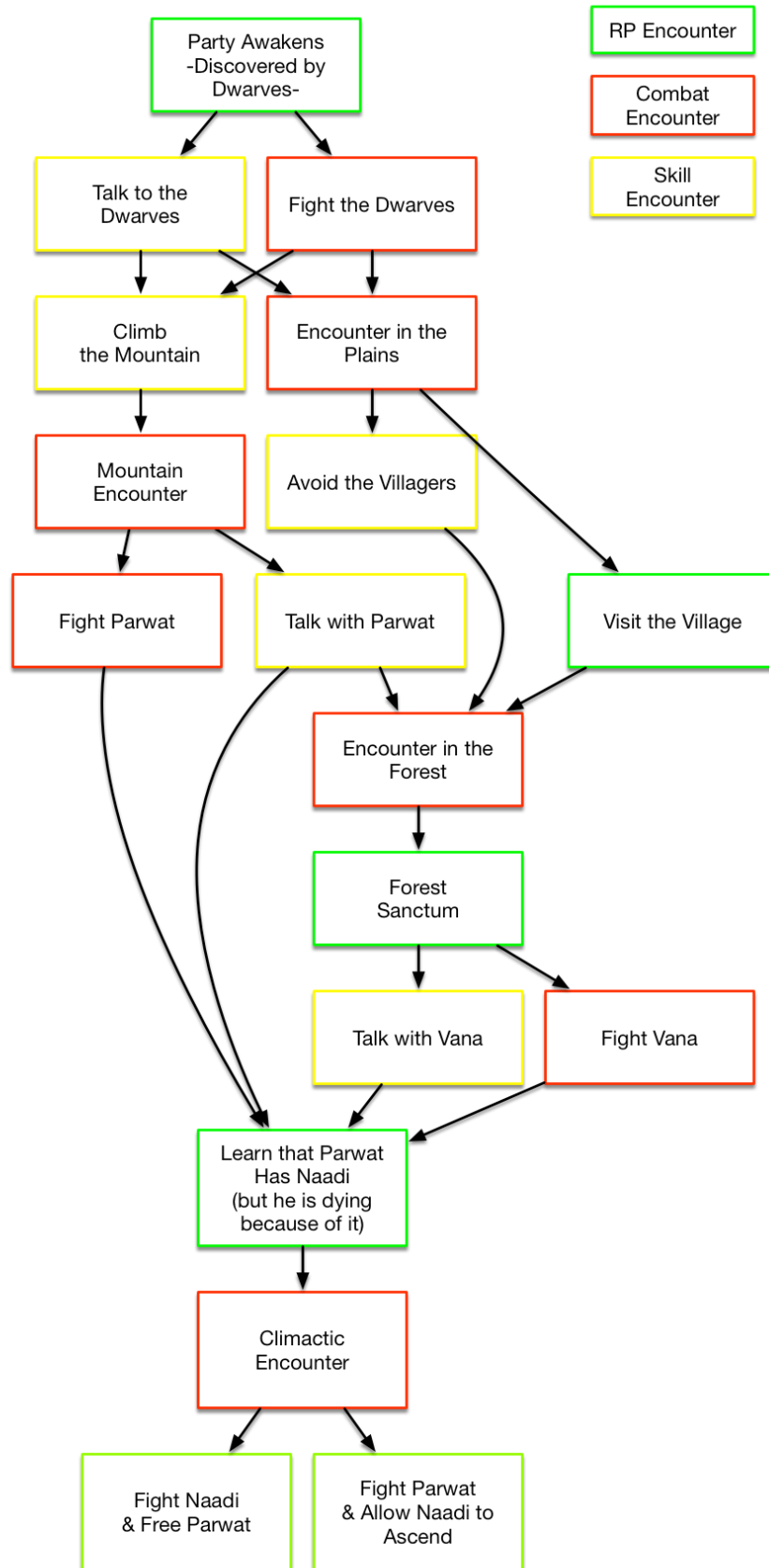**Vana** *(Deadly)*:

+ green dragon

Naadi *(Deadly)*:

+ aboleth

Parwat (Deadly):

+ dao

You can find live GM prep versions of all this action on YouTube.

COURT OF SWORDS: LIVE SHOW FLOWCHART

```
Party Awakens
-Discovered by
Dwarves-
```

```
RP Encounter
```
```
Combat
Encounter
```
```
Skill
Encounter
```

```
Talk to the
Dwarves
```
```
Fight the Dwarves
```

```
Climb
the Mountain
```
```
Encounter in the
Plains
```

```
Mountain
Encounter
```
```
Avoid the Villagers
```

```
Fight Parwat
```
```
Talk with Parwat
```
```
Visit the Village
```

```
Encounter in the
Forest
```

```
Forest
Sanctum
```

```
Talk with Vana
```
```
Fight Vana
```

```
Learn that Parwat
Has Naadi
(but he is dying
because of it)
```

```
Climactic
Encounter
```

```
Fight Naadi
& Free Parwat
```
```
Fight Parwat
& Allow Naadi to
Ascend
```

ESSAY: DIFFICULTY VS. NARRATIVE IN D&D

Fighting is very important in Dungeons & Dragons. We know this because in the rules of the game, two salient points emerge clear and obvious to even a cursory review. The first is the reward structure of the game, in which players are given rewards (in the form of XP - the primary but not solitary method of behavioural reward in D&D).

is focused on combat. As a result, D&D games tend to focus on combat. The "failure" state in D&D is most often character death - the idea that if you are not performing well while seeking the games' rewards, you can lose that character. Death is a thing that is present in the rules and in the culture of play. Everyone who has played D&D has had experience

> **"Experience points (XP) fuel level advancement for player characters and are most often the reward for completing combat encounters."**
>
> — *Dungeon Master's Guide, Page 260.*

The second is the tools that the player characters have to achieve progress in the game - the vast majority of options given to players and the lion's share of the rules' granularity

losing a character or being witness to (or part of) a TPK. We understand that loss of a character is a signal, mechanically, that we have lost the game, to some degree.

All this is from the point of view of the mechanisms of the game, which exist primarily to facilitate and engineer the narrative of play. "I attack the orc" signals not only "I am going to engage the mechanisms of play and roll a d20 and add modifiers, comparing them to the AC of the orc" but "I am envisioning my character attacking this orc and am impacting our shared narrative understanding in that way - please imagine my character doing so" and the results of that mechanism engagement will impact future narrative. If you hit, we narrate that hit, if the orc loses their remaining hit points, we narrate the orc dying, etc. The mechanisms exist to moderate play and to give us answers when authority is unclear. In combat, their fundamental purpose is to mediate the debate of "I shoot you!" vs. "no you don't I dodged!"

Narrative in the moment is easy to engage - we're really only required to invest attention in what is about to happen in this specific second. We're looking for the binary result of hit or miss, in combat. In the larger sense, narrative is more emergent. I mean here the narrative of a series of hits and misses, successes and failures, creating a longer pattern that shapes and informs our understanding of character, setting and scenario. We develop a history out of the randomness of a series of rolls. For example, in Court of Swords, Berg is not immortal. He is subject to all the same rules as every

other character. However, a pattern of unlikely survival paired with our interpretation of that pattern into the narrative has given us the story of Berg's seeming invincibility. This comes up regularly - characters who seem to be cursed with bad luck, survive impossible situations and appear brave or foolish accordingly. Our brains (as both players-of-games and as humans) crave patterns, and narrative and story are, inherently, just patterns.

What we consider to be the story of a character or campaign in retrospect is a series of occurrences influenced by or created wholesale by the mechanisms of the game and imprinted into a memory record by our observation of play. The longer a character lasts, the more likely we are to convert their mechanism-narrative into a story we tell ourselves and each other about that character. The more fleshed out that story becomes, the more we come to attach ourselves to that character as a part of the story. The more developed their protagonism becomes. We want to attach ourselves to characters because that creates empathy and attachment to the game at large and creates endurance for campaign style play.

The delicate balance between the stakes of the combat-oriented mechanisms of D&D against our inherent desire to become attached to characters and form

their narratives into story is where D&D-as-show tends to struggle. When a character dies in home play (vs. D&D-as-show) it is an acknowledged loss-state for the player, and can be frustrating, sad, annoying or liberating depending on the circumstances. A new character is rolled, or the player leaves the game, and play moves or (or doesn't). In the case of home play, the people affected by this are the players at the table. The area of effect of this emotional impact is relatively minimal. In D&D-as-show, a character death impacts a much larger group of players. When a character in a show dies, especially one who has had time to develop their mechanism-narrative patterns, the number of people impacted can number in the thousands. This makes death a much higher-stakes affair.

In Court of Swords, we have spent 50 episodes pushing the razor's edge of difficulty. In a game that suggests a mix of Easy, Medium, Hard and Deadly encounters, our biggest mechanical "hack" of the system is to go Hard or Deadly every time. This has changed the narrative of the game dramatically, resulting in both characters who come and go at the drop of a hat (or the drop of an entire haberdashery, from time to time) but also in characters whose ability to survive and endure becomes all the more legendary for the known difficulty jump. However, it's also affected our ability to become engaged with the world, and done so in an asynchronous way.

I imagine (guess, hypothesize, etc.) that the folks who have enjoyed Court of Swords most are the folks who want to see the world, more than attach themselves to characters. In each arc, between TPK or guest appearance, there have been memorable characters and interesting personalities, but the only truly enduring element has been the world itself. Of course, for me, character death is fundamentally meaningless - the rules do not have the ability to rob me of the things I'm invested in (or rather, they force me to invest in the bigger picture, because as Randy knows, sometimes NPCs don't get a fair shot). I've had a pretty "get good" attitude towards the rules and the difficulty of Court of Swords so far because I've had the least to lose. I've been wondering lately if maybe there's another approach.

D&D rewards combat, gives the players tools for combat, and makes

combat deadly (sometimes). It's also a game designed for small groups of at-the-table players, and wasn't engineered to be good at being fun to watch. I think that if we were to de-emphasize the difficulty in the game (to reduce death and thereby increase the chances of developing character narratives) we would have to adjust the way the game rewards XP. Otherwise, the only change would be a slower, less challenging game made up of more, less difficult encounters. I think there's more to encouraging the development of character than just making a game easier. It's a deeper thing than just adjusting the difficulty.

I've been looking a lot at how other games reward their players, and thinking about ways to allow D&D to be what it is (combat exploration simulator 1974) but also encourage character development. I think we've had success with this in the past - the way we altered Shadowrun to make it more character-driven is a big part of why we ended up with Mirrorshades. I'm not saying I would like Court of Swords to become Fantasy Murderhobo Dating Sim, but I would love to encourage the players to pursue their own agenda and goals in the game. Something more like the reward model in Swan Song.

I like reward structures that inform play and give the players the ability to push for more. I like when an XP system says "this is what you'll advance for" and encourages specific behaviour but I also like when a player can customize that structure, allowing the group to better understand their desires as a player through the rewards they're seeking in the game.

I've long said that base D&D isn't a character-focused game, but I also believe it to be relatively modifiable without breaking. I've been thinking a lot lately about these things, and I'd love to hear what you think, as our audience. Feel free to tweet me or start a thread on the community board. I'm always interested in hearing your opinions!

COURT OF SWORDS: NAADI'S HOUSE MAP

NAADI'S HOUSE COMMENTARY

I did not expect this to be as much content as it was. There's a pretty good rule that if it takes an hour to prep, it'll take two hours to play, but that's never hard and fast - I've had three hours of prep get consumed in an hour and, like this particular dungeon, I've had a short amount of prep work get blown up into a multi-session encounter. I think maybe because I expected the roleplaying solution to be a first attempt, and because I didn't expect the encounter to be quite so full of summoned monsters, I thought this would be the intro session and then we'd be able to get into the larger quest for this arc. Just goes to show that sometimes, you're not just surprised by the players' behaviour, but by the way the game's mechanisms interact.

I will say this, there are small elements of play that, as we get more and more into Dungeons & Dragons, I realize have a bigger impact on the challenge of a combat encounter than I expected. I think the biggest thing in this particular location was the semi-flooded nature of it. The prevalence of difficult terrain completely changed the way the encounters were structured - in some cases crippling the monsters (making the myconids - who are already very slow - even slower) in other cases the PCs (the surface-gliding oozes). D&D is a system whose complexity increases dramatically as the characters level up - more options become available and you can throw larger more diverse sets of monsters at them. However, the little, more subtle things like positioning, location and environment can create complexity at even the lower levels.

Something I'll definitely be thinking more about as I go into building encounters for Court of Swords to come!

THE NEBULA JAZZ:
SEASON 2 CHARACTER SHEETS

OLD REX

Aspects:

Retired Outlaw Sharkanoid

Table for One

Anything for Love

Approaches:

- Careful· +0
- Clever· +1
- Flashy· +1
- Forceful· +3
- Quick· +2
- Sneaky· +2

Stunts:

Because of the Eternal Hunger of the Sharkanoids, once per session I can devour something my size or smaller.

Because I've seen more shit than you can comprehend, once per session I can recall a scene from my past that may help me in the present.

ARTEMIS

Aspects:
Hopeful Minghassi Urchin
I Just Want Somebody to Love
The Golden Shadow

Approaches:
- Careful· +1
- Clever· +2
- Flashy· +1
- Forceful· +0
- Quick· +3
- Sneaky· +2

Stunts:
Because I am Minghassi, once per session I can reveal myself and draw the attention of all around me

[GM Note: I love this Stunt because it's basically a Skinner move from Apocalypse World: "An arresting skinner: when you remove a piece of clothing, your own or someone else's, no one who can see you can do anything but watch. You command their absolute attention. If you choose, you can exempt individual people, by name.]

B.A.S.I.L. — BLAST ASSAULT SYSTEM INCURSION LEAD

Aspects:
Just a Gigolo
If Only I Could Kill You (And Everyone You Know)
Slay the Meaty Ones

Approaches:

- Careful· +1
- Clever· +3
- Flashy· +1
- Forceful· +0
- Quick· +2
- Sneaky· +0

Stunts:

Because I understand the anatomy of organics, I get a +2 when Attacking Cleverly.

LUNA KIARA

Aspects:

Enigmatic master of chemical engineering.
The end justifies the means.
Good News, Everyone!

Approaches:

- Careful· +1
- Clever· +3
- Flashy· +2
- Forceful· +0
- Quick· +2
- Sneaky· +1

Stunts:

Because I know my way around chemicals, I get a +2 when Cleverly Creating an Advantage that involves strange concoctions.

Because I have a thirst for knowledge, I get a +2 when Carefully Creating an Advantage based on examining a cadaver.
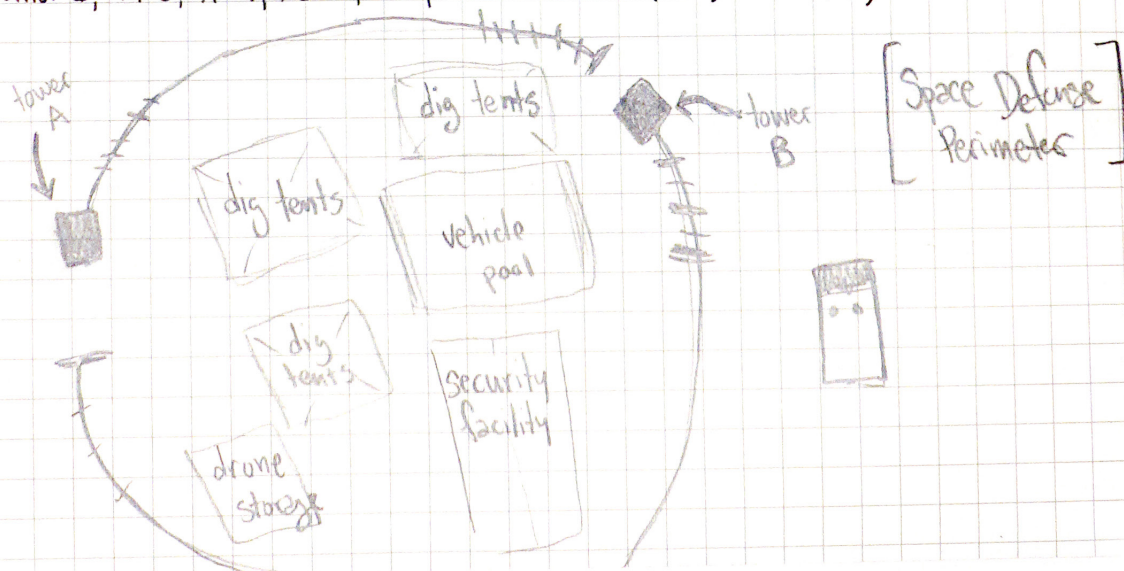
SWAN SONG

"What is dancing?"
— Pi

Swan Song: S02E02

- the PCs are halfway to Andoni to drop off some mining supplies (stolen equipment bound for a rogue mining operation) and to deliver Captain Rejani Van Dorne to the Madari agents waiting there (for which they will be paid 50,000, though their drop off will try to haggle them down)

- Rejani will ask questions of the crew while they're "in the air" with the intent to feel out if they can help her when they land - the Madari are going to steal something from the Andonian Cultural Protectorate, something they've dug up

- the situation on Andoni is tense: traffic in and out is monitored heavily to prevent smuggling and on the surface armed forces monitor and patrol constantly

- the job: work with Madari Syndicate forces to infiltrate the facility at the Damascus Gate dig site and make off with a crate marked KX001-M. The Madari don't know what's in the crate but they have an offworld contact coming to pick it up.

- complications: • the ACP has an eye out for the Swan Song and for Higgs for the crime of murder (Randy)
    • the dig site is in an isolated location (outside the Pacified Zone)

- the deal: the Swan Song will act as courier ship to connect the cargo w/ the buyer.
   the crew will join the mission to steal KX001-M
   PAY is 10% of the sale: 100,000 on reciept of payment

- NPCs: Captain Rejani Van Dorne, Maha Al-Masari, Gregory Idalia, Victoria Pando,
     Professor
   + ~~Inspector~~ Emilio Han, ACP-PD   the Madari team
   + Yasmin Ojo, the buyer

- the truth: the cargo in question is a pre-scream element of a larger computer system. it's the personality core of an Ancient-Ass AI (who the Cabralese will get interested in later - called the Heirophant)

ACP Security: Warrior 1, HP 8; AC 4; AB +3; weapon: combat rifle (1d12) knife (1d4); PE 12 ME 15 EV 14 T 16 L 13

- the facility

Swan Song GM Notes

Commentary

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0011

Captain Rajani van Dorne

She's a terrible person - a murderer, a manipulator, a bastard through and through but I think she's my favourite NPC in Swan Song, when it all comes down to it. Every chance I had to portray her was such a delight.

The Job

I wanted this job to be a call-back to the first episode, to the smuggling operation that was going on moving illicit stuff off of Andoni. We'd find out why all that was happening later on, but I thought since it was the first real mission of the second "arc" that it would be fitting to shout out our original mission for the crew. I don't know I ever got to call it the Damascus Gate on the show, live, but I feel like this was just one of a billion little winks to my sci-fi faves throughout Swan Song.

The ACP Has an Eye Out…

I believe this is the job that resulted in the crew not getting a grav tank. I still feel great about that. The fact that they never got a grav tank. Christ, this show would have been different. "Wilbur Higgins III, Tank Commander"

Yikes.

As a GM, I relish any opportunity to bring back past bad behaviour to bite the players in the butt, and murdering someone on a planet known for their intense and surveillance-heavy state control policies means your face and your crime are in a database, somewhere.

One thing you can do if your players are the murder hoboin' type is let them do their dirty deeds but make sure there are NPCs or factions who remember. Just when they start to think they've gotten away with it, that's when you nail 'em. Players love feeling like they've impacted the world - that their actions matter. Show them that they matter however makes sense, and make it sting just a little. It'll reinforce that there are consequences without you having to be all punitive about it.
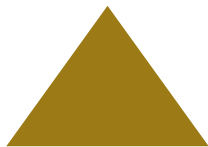
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The Truth

We never really got to see any of the other unbraked or powerful AI directly, aside from the Warmind and La Fantome, though there were guest appearances or indirect movement from some of the rest of the family. I had intended for each of them to take the role of a trump card in the Tarot, though I'd get a chance to reuse this, obviously, on Court of Swords.

The Facility

More excellent map-craft from yours truly. Really a work of cartographical art. That said, I think what works, works. In a game like SWN all a map really needs to do is tell you where things are in relation to each other. I can tell that these are tents surrounded by a fence but what the heck is that thing off to the right? A giant bed? The aforementioned grav tank?

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