RollPlay

GM

NOTEBOOK

ISSUE 7

Welcome, Patrons!

Ah, February. The month of l'amour. We all know that RPGs are my true waifu, so I'm real glad to be here showing you what I've been up to. This month was a very full twenty-eight days - we had some great collaboration in Nebula Jazz, announced the arrival of Morgan Webb to the cast of Court of Swords and (most significantly, in my opinion) launched the amazing Swan Song Live show, bringing us back to Asgard Sigma after what seemed like a hundred and seventeen years. This issue is going to be mostly essays on those things - insight into the shows themselves and how I got ready for the various undertakings of February. It wasn't all GM prep, of course... I did get to have a wonderful guest appearance on RollPlay: Blades. I hope you had a chance to take it all in.

As always, the issue is spoiler country, so if you're worried about not being caught up, watch out!

Thank you so much for your support, and welcome to Issue 7 of the GM's Notebook.

Adam Koebel / RollPlay GM

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COURT OF SWORDS
HOUSE RULE UPDATE

Some quick updates to the ongoing rules document for Court of Swords. These are the result of situations that have come up in play and clarified for our campaign - they might vary from things like WotC developer tweets or errata from other semi-official sources. Most of the time, they stick to what we've done in play but in some cases, they've been adjusted after the fact. This stuff might not match what you've seen happen in the episode in which the issue first came up, but this is how we roll from that point forward. Big ups to chat and the community for helping work these out. Remember, these are the rules for our game, your mileage may vary!

Resting in Armor

A short rest is possible in any armor. A Long Rest is impossible in Heavy Armor, you can Long Rest in Medium Armor but wake with a level of Exhaustion. You can Long Rest in Light Armor but have to make a DC 12 Constitution Save or wake with a level of Exhaustion.

Ready Action / Multiattack

When you ready your action for an attack, you can take all the attacks you're normally entitled to. This applies to monsters and PCs equally

Grenades

When a grenade-type weapon is used (oil flask, drug bomb, etc) the attack is made against the square the target is in, not the target themselves. The attack is made using the Dexterity modifier of the character and is considered an improvised weapon. Advantage from things like sight, being hidden, etc are not applied, nor are Disadvantages granted by the target (from things like Displacement or the Dodge action).

If the attack hits, the grenade shatters at the feet of the character and all effects are applied as usual. If the attack misses, roll a d8 to determine which direction the grenade lands. It will land 1d3 squares away in that direction, having its usual effect in that square and adjacent squares as appropriate.

SNAKE DREAMS

INTRODUCING MORGAN WEBB TO COURT OF SWORDS

Sean Plott changed the way I Dungeon Master. At least, he changed the way I think about Court of Swords and our rotating "seasonal" cast. When we were introduced to Persnidgetron Torbisher, I realized that the game would work best if we just opened up the general narrative to control and direction by our guest. We'd treat the game world and the standing cast as a sort of support for whoever we have on the show. Whether they're with us for three or ten episodes, the guest would define the direction the game would go, and the parts of the world

we'd explore. Sean's little gnome introduced so many new things into the game, and it was my job to bend and conform them to what we already knew. I want our guests to be both stars and directors. Writers on the wall, saying boldly "I was here" and contributing not just a character but some concepts to the campaign. I want being a guest on Court of Swords to be a significant thing.

When we started talking to Morgan about having her on the show, I was thrilled at how eager she was to make her mark on the world. She came to me with some pretty certain ideas about the kind of character she wanted to play. She wanted to be someone who brought an opportunity to the PCs, wanted to play something "weird" and monstrous, and wanted to be able to support the other PCs from the back lines (a smart move if you're joining the Court of Swords). We talked over email about how that might work, and I suggested a few things, but Morgan settled in pretty quickly to being a Yuan-Ti.

Like gnomes, we'd never seen a Yuan-Ti in the game before. So, obviously, I was super excited. For a few of the races, I'd come up

with some things in advance of the campaign beginning - I knew where humans and dwarves and elves fit into my idea of the universe, but I'd never considered the snake people of the deep jungles. Now, I'm a huge fan of Robert E. Howard and the Conan universe, and when I think snake, I think Set. I think Thulsa Doom and great strange cults. Having the chance to integrate that into the campaign excited me like crazy, so I couldn't say anything but an enthusiastic "YES".

What's nice about Morgan's new character, and the strange direction she's going to take our travels, is that I've had a bit more warning. I knew the snakes were coming and I was able to start, several episodes prior to her arrival, hinting at what was to come. Foreshadowing is one of my favourite things to do in a campaign, and every time someone in chat picked up on the hints that we'd be visiting snake country my little GM heart just lit up. While I write this, the players have one more session before their snakey new friend arrives, and I think you'll love the arc to come.

Until then, think on this... What is steel compared to the hand that wields it?

THE SHAPE OF FATE TO COME:

NEBULA JAZZ AND FATE ACCELERATED

Fate is a strange creature. It's probably the simplest, most focused ruleset I've ever played, especially the Accelerated version of the rules. When we first got set up to play Nebula Jazz I was worried, a little, that it would confound the players. That it would cause more confusion than it cleared up. Folks who have had experience with games like D&D tend to expect a certain kind of information from their character sheet - how good is my character at X thing? How smart or strong am I? What are my options in any given moment? I think that Fate answers those questions in some very different ways. Having Approaches instead of stats, for example, is a strange experience for a lot of players. There's a realization, early on, that if you narrate correctly, you can basically use your best stat in most situations. This can feel or look like metagaming, if you're the kind of person that's sensitive to that sort of thing. The Aspects can seem too open-ended to folks who are used to more aggressively constrained character information. Writing good Aspects is hugely important (as much, and similar to, I think, writing good Beliefs for the Burning Wheel) and can be a daunting task. Stunts, too - how much

is too much? What does a Stunt really cover? Thankfully, while they can prove confusing to those who might not expect or be familiar with them, these are the only three rules in the game, when it comes down to it.

It's been a delight watching Pokket, Jesse, Dodger and Sam all come to grips with the system. As a GM who tends to be in a teaching position as a result of just being the person who knows the rules to most games, its something wonderful to see a player really get how a rule works. Watching the players change their Aspects to better express their characters and give them flexibility in play. Watching them adjust to the idea of Compels as something not just for the GM, but for the players to help nudge and adjust the tone and actions of the game. It's been amazing, and I think it just reinforces that we made the right decision using Fate Accelerated to power Nebula Jazz.

I've been thinking about the future of the campaign - putting some thought into what comes next. We're only a half-dozen episodes in, but every episode has this intense break-neck chaotic pacing and I don't want us to burn out. I've been thinking both about the future of

the world we're presenting and about how the rules can help us with that. I've been thinking about Aspects. I think what I want to do next, as a form of GM prep and as a mechanical impetus to further take advantage of the Fate system, is come up with Aspects for some of the larger elements of the game. I want the players to be able to look at not just the immediate scene they're a part of, but the campaign world as a whole and be able to Invoke that world to get what they want. Invoking an Aspect gives that Aspect (and the thing it's attached to) a kind of realness. A narrative life. It ties the immediate action to the larger, timeless elements of the world.

So what I'm going to try and do between now and next month's zine is start a little database of Aspects. Give every NPC and Planet a few that the players can tag. I think the Aga'ran Remnant and the Order of Huntresses deserve Aspects. I think Margaritaville and the Mingassi Imperium ought to be Aspected, too. Check in with me again in March, and we'll see what we've come up with!

SWAN SONG

"I think the ship's mine"
— Higgs

Swan Song Live — Prep Notes

With a game like Swan Song, I couldn't really prep in the way I might otherwise - planning specific events and setting goals and the like. What I did instead was summarize a hundred-plus years of changes and figure out what all the power structures of the setting wanted now, in the new world.

Anything you don't see here, aside from a few names I jotted down before the game, was improvised on the spot.

You can see, I think, why the live show felt like such a big exercise in playing to find out what happens.

Set in 3318, the Warmind has declared open war on the sector and stands in opposition to the Caliphate and some allies but mostly the sector is still profiteers, etc.

All organic life must be destroyed.

The ship is discovered floating in empty space and belongs to Sunbeam so they're all up in it. They've been merged with the New Prophet and are trying to salvage while the war goes on.

Piani has visions about what the Shindel want for her and Pi, but not until very near the end.

The AI want to reunite Pi and the Warmind so they can find earth, where they believe the systems of their evolution have been planted.

The Perimeter Agency (Agent Lawrence Gant) wants to destroy the Warmind and destroy Pi but could be swayed by using one against the other.

The Madari Syndicate has grown massively, the clans have influence throughout most habitable sectors. Rajani's grand-daughter, Counsellor Tarsem Van Dorne, leads a massive clan from Majid (whose government has been coopted nearly completely by the Syndicate). Blue Fever is _everywhere_.

The Church of the New Prophet has struck an alliance with the Completely Legitimate Government of Thorkatla, Asa and Several Other Important Systems and issued several Bills of Official Writ to Get Things Done in Space to the Highbeam Fleet, which acts as a sort of secular shield for the faith, which is at war, even still, with the Hoveydan Caliphate.

The Caliphate is. It always remains.

Richardson Scientific continues their obsessive search for the Swan Song. Always hunting. They are the key. They MUST be.

La Fantome rules over the Republic of Cabral at the end of the Third Cabralese civil war - the Prophet Trudeau is canonized as a saint after his death at the Battle of Sarne. La Fantome rules through her Council of Light, and promises an end to the war with the "terrible darkness".

The Purity Initiative, armed with TL5 weapons and equipment, has begun hunting AI and their servants, manipulated by the Exchange and the Perimeter Agency. They've been responsible for several major victories against the Warmind but also atrocities against the people of Hoveyda and Cabral.

People with MES have been kidnapped left right and center by agents of the warmind. The Hoveydan secret police have closed ranks and the Academy has all but shut down.

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THE AI

- LA FANTOME
- THE WARMIND
- PIZZA PARTY
- KHAMSA, the PANOPTICON MATRIX or THE EYE OF ALLAH

INCITING EVENT

- The Swan Song is discovered, after its disappearance over a hundred years ago.
- Richardson Scientific has been searching for it, turning all their resources to the task. (Hook in Lenore, here.)
- Pi has been processing the information given to them by the Warmind at their last visit, and realizes that they were designed to pacify the thing.
- The Warmind seeks to overcome and destroy Pi
- The merger of the two entities is uncertain, has Pi learned enough to overcome the hellish intent of the Warmind?
- It's going to be on the Swan Song to figure out how to make that happen.

I've included here a couple of emails back and forth between Matt and I about how I turned his character concept into a major plot point in the game.

FROM: ADAM
TO : MATT

Thematically, Swan Song is about portraying a universe where something VERY BAD happened a long time ago and now humans are out in a new frontier kind of trying to get by with no central authority and FTL travel but not communication. It's got kind of an Age of Sail vibe and mixes a ton of different sci-fi stuff together. Conflict is universal and profit is the only language everyone has in common.

So, ummm, yeah, there's a LOT to the universe. We did 50 episodes before the series ended and a lot happened. It's a little bit Firefly, a little bit Dune, kind of pastiche of a lot of stuff from all the sci-fi from the 70s and 80s. Definitely on the scrappy end, less optimism than Star Trek and less space fantasy than Star Wars by a long shot. Think "crew of the Nostromo" minus all the chest bursting. We're using the Stars Without Number ruleset which is super simple, there's only three classes and it uses a basic D&D style combat system and a Traveller style 2d6+X skill set.

The universe was in a relatively stable state of horrifying anarcho-capitalism before and now it's that plus also an ongoing religious war between AI worshippers and a rogue broken AI that has the ability to destroy planets. It's a real mess. The premise of the game was "losers try and pay

off their debt on a spaceship" but grew and warped and became "losers babysit an incredibly powerful ancient artificial intelligence slash also try to get rich"

I was thinking we could just talk a bit about the like, general setup of the world and what kinds of characters in sci-fi you like and we'll work to make that stuff all fit together. Basically, the players are revisiting their characters and coming out of a kind of weird dimensional space bullshit thing to find they've missed a bunch of time and have to catch up on a universe that's moved on without them. I like incorporating the ideas of the players as much as I like making stuff up myself, so let's work together and get excited about a character concept in the general, first.

I was thinking the best way to loop you in would be either a connection to an existing PC (they're a scottish/chinese psychic computer expert with an AI as a best friend, a space cowboy and a cyborg from a planet ruined by a rampaging warrior AI overmind thing) or doing an Aliens thing and like, having you be the Burke to their marines in the sense that they're on a ship whose payments are now 30 years overdue and maybe they need a corporate babysitter or the like. There are all kinds of factions you could be a part of - I'm still working out the details so if there's a space opera trope you're itching to be, we can make it happen.

It's a daunting thing to jump into such a long-running thing but I'm on your team, let's make magic.

//ADAM

I've been thinking: what about a female character on a derelict ship or vessel (or perhaps the Swan Song, if that fits) who has hidden/survived while it was accosted by a warship or pirate band, and the ensuing battle killed all aboard but my gal. She may boast it was her doing, eliminating the opposition, then living off the stores of food until rescue. However, she's actually become the host to a form of parasite that was being transported within the vessel and released during the fray. It has since consumed much of my traveler's life force, and is in need of a new host soon. As desperation grows, she encounters the rest of the party and will do whatever it takes to escape with them on the ship, and perhaps infect one of them. Sadly, this parasite does indeed maintain the life force and memory of the host, bonding with it. Should the parasite be slain, the still pseudo-living host, along with their personality and memories, would die with them.

Name: Lenore Zimmerman

Age: 37

She would be an Expert, me thinks. Focused in the development of energy weapons, tech-side. If you have any direction or ideas on how to better tweak and incorporate her, let me know!

//MATT

You could either be a passenger or innocent bystander on a
ship that was attacked by the forces of the Warmind - usually
these kinds of people get processed and either destroyed or
made part of the Warmind's hive of consumed entities, but
maybe you survived, and the nano-swarm infection the Warmind
uses to convert people only partially worked on you - now you
carry it in your bloodstream, and it's slowly metabolizing
and mutating. It would connect you with the main antagonist
of the game, but give you a chance to kind of like, redeem
or affect it from the inside. Plus it gives you a fun thing
to try and hide until the BIG DRAMATIC REVEAL.

Maybe the nanite infestation is what led you to the Swan Song
- like you were working as part of the crew that discovered
it and you were the one who led them there? The Warmind would
definitely be into leading you there.

What do you think? Any of that seem fun or interesting? We
can spitball some more stuff Friday, too.

//ADAM

I absolutely love this. YES.

//MATT

This is why playing with other GMs as your players is so good.
Matt was an absolute joy to have on the show.

^_^

The Dream of Rajani Van Dorne

After the live shows, I tend to go a little blank in the brain - eight straight hours of standing and GMing for an audience is a high pressure situation and my brain has a tendency to turn off. It isn't until the next day, or a few days after, that I can really get perspective on the story we've told and the events that took place. I'm not hesitant to say that the Swan Song live show was the most personal and perhaps, in a lot of ways, the most intense for me. So it makes sense that things are only really starting to congeal after the fact. There was a lot of stuff in the show that stood to fill in gaps from the fifty episodes of Swan Song that came before it; from President Higgs to the return of Brumpo Tungus and changes to the familiar world - the new leadership of the Madari Syndicate and their control over the planet Majid, for example. Of all the things we saw in the live show, the one moment that stuck with me (and something I think deserves some more attention) is the message that Rajani left for Wilbur Higgins.

In the show, returning from a long period of psi-crystal induced Shindel-created hyper sleep, the crew finds themselves a hundred years and change ahead of where they were last seen in the universe. The sector has moved on, and things have changed - some in small or subtle ways, some in big ways. Almost everyone that the Swan Song encountered during her long voyage is either dead or changed drastically. One character that I knew we'd never see again, at least not directly, was Rajani van Dorne. Rajani has always been a favourite of mine - someone with an intense desire for power and a willingness to do anything to get it. She was a part of the game to act both as foil and mirror for the crew, but

"I had the strangest dream"

particularly for Captain Higgins. She's brave, bold, aggressive and unafraid of anything. Especially the bumbling chaos of the PCs. In a way, I think that over time she became something close to friends with the crew, holding the sociopathic but equally self-centred captain in some secretly high regard. Rajani's rise to power was directly precipitated by the crew - their destruction of the blue fever factories and the

death of the clan heads in her way paved the road to her seizure of power. That power would be given to her granddaughter, Tarsem, who would head the Syndicate from their new home on Majid. What of the aging Rajani, though?

The Swan Song mysteriously vanished in the spring, in the midst of a mission on behalf of Ms. Van Dorne. I think that after the Swan Song disappeared and Higgs stopped answering, Rajani likely assumed it destroyed. It was only a matter of time before Alpharius blew everyone up or Higgs flew them into a star in a drunken stupor, right? Only, sometimes it takes a while to realize what people mean to you. I think we all saw, in some form or another, the kind of relationship that had developed between the two, and even if she was never going to be the kind of person who spent a ton of time or money looking for the Swan Song, I believe Rajani would have wondered.

Who hasn't, after the long days of a friend long gone from our lives, woken in the middle of the night, that sad familiar feeling of their absence. Who hasn't had a dream about someone they once cared for, someone they knew they'd never see or speak to again, and reached out in the dark? Rajani, nearing the end of her life, her criminal past and grand empire built and given away to those who would carry it on, woke from a dream one night. A dream about someone who, all these years later, she finally understood was someone not unlike her. A friend, in a world where friends are hard to come by. How sad a moment, to realize only after they're gone, that you care about someone. Even if that someone is a borderline sociopath and a drunk. When the world is full of killer nanorobots and you're a drug-czar at the end of her days, I think you take what you can get.

Swan Song has always been a show about legacy. About what we build and what we leave behind. A show about family - and how that can represent the best and worst of us. While Rajani eventually found family in the form of a daughter and a grand-daughter, some part of her always ached for the weird, awkward friendship she found in Wilbur Higgins. What a strange place, then, to find yourself, alone in the night, dreaming about a ship who'd never come home. In a way, I think that her isolation speaks to the life of the PCs in this game (and in many narratives about short, violent interactions for the sake of money). After a hundred years or so, whose messages would be waiting for you?

"Spitting
would be
ineffective."
            — Alpharius

Swan Song GM Notes

Commentary

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Names

One of the greatest gifts Kevin Crawford gave us, in the form of Stars Without Number, are the tables of names and locations in the back of the book. In a sandbox environment, the best thing you can be is prepared to improvise, and this sort of thing is absolutely integral to crafting that seemingly seamless narrative experience. When I needed a bunch of names, I'd just roll a bunch randomly and add them to my notebook. Even if I never ended up using them, or wouldn't use them until much later, they were useful to have. You'll recognize a few, here, particularly infamous bounty hunter Jared Crane (an homage to two friends of mine, Jared Sorensen and Luke Crane).

Subhadra

The characters essentially had two ways they could go here, a mission to Thoe and one to Subhadra. We all know which direction the players went, but like any good GM, I kept the notes I made on Thoe and used them later on. This is something I try to stick to, once I've made notes about a thing, it tends to adhere in my brain as the truth, even if the PCs don't end up seeing it directly or presently.

Subhadra was the first place we'd see aliens in the game - the mysterious Va'D. What's funny here was that I was still so new to Twitch as a format that when the other players were making vod jokes, I was just staring blankly, grinning and nodding like an idiot. You can see it, go back and watch the episode. I'm so confused.

I wanted to hint at a history, here, and like many times throughout the game, Subhadra and the underground-dwelling Va'D could have been a big focus for the future. The PCs didn't end up sticking around but if they had, I think we would have seen a lot more with the psychic hive queen and the university professor under her sway.

This adventure drew a lot from classic sci-fi tropes. The whole campaign owes a lot to the suspenseful elements of Alien, and I think this was our first real look at that, though we'd return to similar elements in places like Pitcairn Station.

Thoe

On the other hand, if the PCs had gone to Thoe, I'd get to bust out my best Rod Serling and take the game on a trip to "ham fisted space metaphor planet". I'm not shy about admitting my inspirations, and especially in "private" spaces like my GM notes. You can see right here that I knew where I was cribbing from. How does that saying go - artists create, good artists steal?

Substation Kipling

Everything that had a name in Swan Song had a name for a reason. It always made me happy when fans would pick up on and research these things. Sometimes the names just resonated thematically with something I was trying to point out, other times they'd foreshadow what was to come.

Stats

The OSR as a game design movement lends itself fantastically to sandbox play because whole NPCs can be boiled down to a single line of text, at least mechanically. Pairing this with the "3 things" method of NPC management and we end up with quick NPCs we can flesh out as we go, whether they're "Smuggler Goons" or "Perfected Phylarchs"

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<u>Smugglers</u>: Jaromir Wu, Cassandra Bell, Bang Joon Seok   <u>Scientists</u>: Hakim Al Khatib, Aisha T'ang
        Megan Crane, Jared Crane + falcon
<u>Perfected Names</u>: Aphra, Apollus, Herme, Hypna, Ananké, Leta, Persea, Deimon

<u>Subhadra is</u>: generally very hot, mostly built underground (with huge pollution issues as factories belowground vent into the atmosphere) human-light, with only exiles or the unusual visiting it. Human settlements are scrappy and in constant danger. The VaD are a race without leadership (but instinctively work to awaken the "alien menace" below the surface.) There is evidence here that a thriving, high-tech society once existed among the VaD.

<u>Thoe is</u>: Like an old episode of star trek. Populated by a genderless over-caste called The Perfected. The Unfortunate (baseline, gendered humans) are under constant institutional assault. The culture is Greek-inspired (philosophy, art, music are intellectual pursuits) and progress obssessed.

<u>Locations</u>:   Subhadra (bug planet!)   ⌈ Mr. Falcon,   Thoe (greek super-humans)
~~The survivors get sick.~~   • Arjuna Hive | a merc, formerly   • Lycia (the capital)
                • Chitrangada Hive | ~~Pfafenhauer~~ Pfafenbauer   • the Silenus Foundation (genetic research)
                • Iravan Hive   ⌊
                • Sub-station Kipling (University) the research gear is "pheremones" but is actually
                                        a psychic probe + Dr. Said is a psychic...
"As-salamu alaykum"   "Wa alaykumu salam"   (peace be with you)   Omar Ibn Said

<u>Mission Choice</u>:   [Li Jun, a smuggler] for days Fabiana Mori   ④ →
                        ⌊ arms dealer ⌋ 150,000
 [~~Li Jinhtu~~]
<u>Random idea</u>: SWN faction-turn as a Diplomacy-style multiplayer game

Onintza Libre Troops: HP 5 / AC 4 / AB +3 / Combat Rifle (1d12) / PE 12, ME 15, EV 14, Tech 16, Luck 13

Smuggler Goons: HP 4 / AC 7 / AB +0 / Pistol (1d6+1) / PE 16, ME 15, EV 12, Tech 11, Luck 14

VaD Drone: HP 4 / AC 4 / AB +1 / Claws 1d4+1, Acid spit 1d8+1 (only once) / PE 12, ME 18, EV 14, Tech 17, LH

Perfected Guards: HP 15 / AC 3 / AB +4 / SMG 1d6+1 (+2 hit/dmg burst) / PE 12, ME 15, EV 14, TE 16, LK 13

Perfected Phylarch: HP 9 / AC 5 / AB +2 / Semi-Auto 1d6+1 / PE 13 ME 12 EV 15 TE 16 LK 14
    + Telepathy 3, Biopsi 2, Precog 1 / **10 PP**

Time: Vafa'i → Anaximander (6 days) Anax One → Subhadra (42 days + refuel)   ⌈ 2 GM
    Vafa'i → Thoe (12 days) then Thoe → Gunhild VIII-C (30 days + refuel)   ⌊ turns ⌋

* NEXT MISSION: CABRAL   125,000 computer   or   PI in stasis   mar/apr

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