

A Gentle Stroll

October 2025 — Issue Five



Black Dragon Steed at the Ocean

By Tiffanie Gray

Collation File

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Editorial Note

We are a bit late. September was an interesting month.

Please email PDFs of your zines to the collator, George Phillies, phillies@4liberty.net, by the first day of the month. Collation and distribution will occur soon thereafter.

Our experiment: After this first issue, A Gentle Stroll subscriptions are opt-in, not opt-out. After this first issue, you must ask to be subscribed to A Gentle Stroll, though the zine will also appear on the N3F web pages, with a rare issue mailed to all members.

General rules: Publication is monthly. Contributors are expected to stay on topic and remain civil to each other. Discussions of contemporary politics and graphic pornography will be rejected. Recall that A Gentle Stroll will appear with our other zines on our web pages, so matters you would not want seen by the public should go elsewhere. You retain all rights to your material, except that the N3F may use your submissions in this magazine, which may be distributed to subscribers and/or N3F members, and will be placed on our web site or other electronic archives.

Subscriptions: For the first some number of issues, A Gentle Stroll is free. After that, unless we end the project, contributors will be charged \$6 per year and be recognized as voting members of N3F (there is no obligation to vote or participate in other N3F activities). Readers are charged nothing. Contributors and readers have to opt-in to receive A Gentle Stroll. Contributors and readers also get to choose: (1) Receive only A Gentle Stroll and a rare issue of our other zines, or (2) Receive all N3F fanzines.

Ronin Engineer for A Gentle Stroll #5
by Jim Eckman,
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Why are you in this book/game?

(Also in E&A #4) What motivates your character, why do they act the way they do? One reason that I like the thought of an SFRPG that plays like an Andre Norton novel is her characters have it rough, they often lack resources, have desperate needs. On the other hand many older SF novels have protagonists that are middle class with an easy lifestyle. Why are they in this book?

Robert Heinlein versus Andre Norton:

1. I was at a political rally that was raided and a sexy woman convinced me to join the revolution.
2. I was starving and my mother was dying a painful death. I sold myself into slavery so that my mother could pass in a painless and happy dream via drugs.
3. After high school graduation, I was socially pressured by a sexy woman to go into Federal Service. I wound up in the Mobile Infantry.
4. I was raised by my very traditional grandfather, at 14 I was drafted into the military because of my special abilities and served as a child soldier in intense combat situations. The war ended when I was 18, my home world was destroyed and I suffered horribly from PTSD. The only thing keeping me apparently sane was my promise to my grandfather to kill a man.
5. When my father died, I was made a ward of my loathsome uncle. He and my creepy cousin though I would make a good servant and mistress. I fled from them on a primitive planet that was mentally controlled by a computer.
6. I was bumming around the south of France when I replied to a strange job ad

in the local paper. A sexy woman convinced me to go on an adventure with her.

Book titles next issue, feel free to guess!

Also another reason I find Traveller's character generator a bit silly. After you retire from a rough life, are you really going out adventuring?

Of course there are characters like Hammett's Thin Man that find themselves in the middle of a mess that requires their talents, so in some cases that's a valid reason for retirees to be in harm's way.

This does make Cthulhu in Space attractive, stressed out characters may have issues that they can't handle, require serious support or treatment to recover. So some method of handling insanity is called for.

Next issue

Read more on current SF RPGs, finish sorting and scanning Wanderer.

Reactions to Issue #4

I Was Walking Lisa Padol - Inventing the Renaissance sounds like a great book, TBR. *Why would anyone worship the Outer Gods or work to destroy humanity?* See The Ballad of Black Tom by Victor LaValle. This a great list of points, more thought required.

Fog Clark B Timmins - A COC monster manual! Sweet.

The Fox's Den: A Zine N. C. Shapero - Good to hear from you, is this the start of one of your books?

1PMG PBEM Jim Vassilakos - This is interesting, given the amount of work, it might be easier to write a book ;)

Random Hopscotch #3 Joshua Kronengold - Mysteries are one of the toughest scenarios to run well. And if you run COC like games, this problem comes up often. I've settled on designing the scenarios to be like solo dungeons, this allows for multiple methods to recover information. Still pretty complex and not bullet

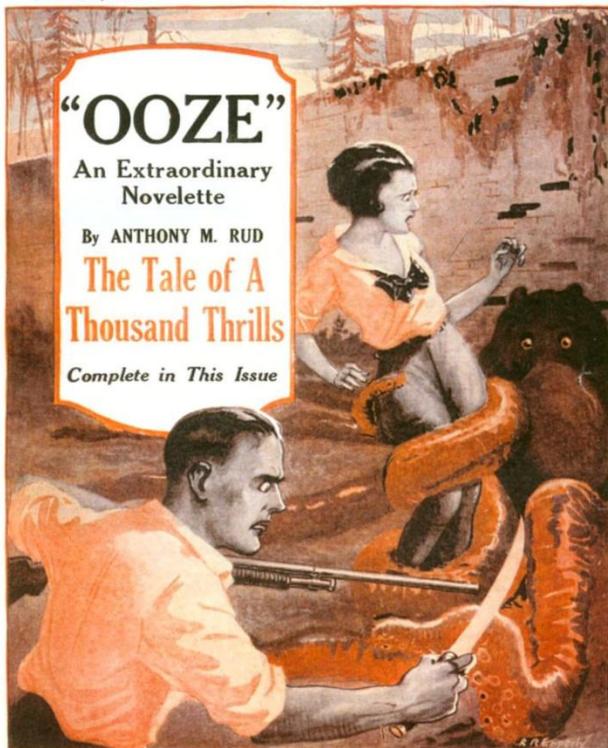
proof, but that's what GMs are for. ...*how much player time are you going to spend on these multi week jaunts?* Not much time was spent on the actual jumps, finding charts, fuel, etc.

A Rhodomontadulous Promenade #4

George Phillies - *The Spartan was originally the magazine of the Spartan International Competition League.* I'm unfamiliar with the history of The Spartan, When I was there it was run in a slipshod fashion and reaching its end of life. It was somehow related to the IGA? which may have been a successor organization.

-WEIRD TALES-

Printed in U. S. A. THE UNIQUE MAGAZINE
MARCH, 1923 25 Cents



Anthony M. Rud published what he called a “novelette” in *Weird Tales, the Unique Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (March 1923). The story subsequently was reprinted in the book *The Moon Terror and Other Stories*, pp. 135-167, by Popular Publishing Co., Indianapolis (1927).

The narrator of the story presents events as he has reconstructed them from an extensive examination of a physical site, an interview with an unreliable witness, and a discovered notebook kept by a putatively insane scientist.

In the ‘scientific’ story, an amœba is subjected to “interatomic energy”, “karyokinesis and embryology”, and “radium emanations”, while being

grown (at first) upon agar-agar. The process is said to remove “limiting factors in protozoic life” so that inhibitions to “growth could be nullified”. Eventually the ooze grows to prodigious size, graduating from vegetable food until it routinely consumes 40 pounds of meat each day. Then it starts eating people whole. When it reaches its final size it is very strong, ripping apart an entire house.

In appearance, the ooze is “a squamous, rubbery something” “containing only nucleolus, nucleus, and contractive vacuole”. It also is described as “something, a slimy, amorphous something, which glistened in the sunlight” and is noted as being translucent. Shotgun blasts have no effect and “even the deep slashes made by his knife closed together and healed” such that the narrator concludes “The monster was invulnerable to ordinary attack!” It also appears to be resistant to fire.

It is most comfortable living in a muddy slime pool but can move around on the ground. It *cannot* climb vertical surfaces. In the story, it is confined by a brick wall and

then apparently starves to death, though the narrator worries “any fragment remaining might be dangerous” because it reproduces by binary fission. The area around the ooze is permeated by a heavy stink like rotting fish and swamp. One person describes the smell as if he’d “sniffed poison air”. When the ooze attacks it extends “ten-foot pseudopods – those flowing tentacles of protoplasm sent forth by the sinister occupant”.

Ooze

Large ooze, unaligned

Armor Class 7

Hit Points 110 (13d10 + 39)

Speed 20 ft., Swim 20 ft.

STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
20 (+5, +5)	5 (-3, -3)	16 (+3, +3)	1 (-5, -5)	6 (-2, -2)	1 (-5, -5)

Resistances Bludgeoning, Fire

Immunities Piercing, Poison, Slashing; Charmed, Deafened, Exhaustion, Frightened, Grappled, Poisoned, Prone, Restrained, Unconscious

Senses Blindsight 60 ft.; Passive Perception 8

Languages None

CR 6 (XP 2,300; PB +3)

TRAITS

Amorphous. The Ooze can move through a space as narrow as 1 inch without expending extra movement to do so.

Oozy Blob. The Ooze fills its entire space. Other creatures can enter that space, but a creature that does so is subjected to the Ooze’s *Engulf*. Creatures inside the Ooze have Total Cover. The Ooze can hold one Large creature or up to four Medium or Small creatures inside itself at a time. As an action, a creature within 5 feet of the Ooze can pull a creature out of the Ooze by succeeding on a DC 15 Strength (Athletics) check, and the puller takes 14 (4d6) Acid damage and the Ooze regains a number of Hit Points equal to the Acid damage dealt. Any creature that dies inside the Ooze is dissolved.

Siege Monster. The Ooze deals double damage to objects and structures.

Stench. *Constitution Saving Throw:* DC 15, any creature that starts its turn in a 30-foot Emanation originating from the Ooze. *Failure:* The target has the Poisoned condition until the start of its next turn. *Success:* The target is immune to the Stench for 1 hour.

Transparent. Even when the Ooze is in plain sight, a creature must succeed on a DC 15 Wisdom (Perception) check to notice the Ooze if the creature hasn't witnessed the Ooze move or otherwise act.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. The Ooze makes two attacks using either *Grappling Pseudopod* or *Engulf* in any combination.

Grappling Pseudopod. *Melee Attack Roll:* +5, reach 10 ft. *Hit:* 19 (4d6 + 5) Bludgeoning damage. The target has the Grappled condition (escape DC 15).

Engulf. A target the Ooze has grappled is dragged inside the Ooze. An engulfed target is suffocating, can't cast spells with a Verbal component, has the Restrained condition, and takes 14 (4d6) Acid damage at the start of each of the Ooze's turns and the Ooze regains a number of Hit Points equal to the Acid damage dealt. When the Ooze moves, the engulfed target moves with it. An engulfed target can try to escape by taking an action to make a DC 15 Strength (Athletics) check. *Success:* The target escapes and enters the nearest unoccupied space within 5 feet of the Ooze and the target gains the Prone condition. If there is no unoccupied space, the target fails the save instead.

– Clark B. Timmins

Ooze #1

October 2025

Back To School...In a Dream?
An Isekai Story

By N. C. Shapero and G. S. Cole

A Second Chance?

Richard Charles Fox rolled out of the pad. There was that faint “buzz” that wasn’t sound but something else. *Telepathic noise generator – either Altha’ani or Shidran-Kas, but which?* He took a deep breath, and did a quick physical examination.

“Computer,” he called out, “what is today’s date and time?”

“15 Summer Ship-year 37,514, San 1 Kir 7 past High Sun,” a voice responded.

Ok, it’s a different date. But who am I? Wait a moment! “Computer, what is my personal account readout? Display!”

“Name: Tal-Tal Po do Ashan, Professional Status: Adjudicator 19th (training completed and final tests passed, 14 Summer, Ship-year 37,514,” the computer voice responded.

Huh! “I” managed to complete training. I wonder who else in “my” study group managed to get through “law school”?

A curtain parted and a tan furred female entered “his” quarters. “Are you *still* up?” Ishrikraiva asked.

“Yes, quite obviously, ship-sister. And ...” he stopped, her scent was mixed with the scent of another – a male scent. “Ah ... have you ...”

Ishrikraiva’s ears flushed with blood. “Claws! I thought I’d washed up enough...”

“Well, if it’s who I *think* it is...”

“No, we aren’t going to be inviting you to witness our knife-bonding ... yet,”

“What happened?”

“Now, you know it isn’t nice to gossip, Tal-Tal Po do Ashan,” Ishrikraiva chided. “I’m exhausted – I just need to hit the pillow.”

“Isn’t that what you were...”

“Stop, if you value your nose,” she interrupted, before heading through a door to sleeping quarters. “We are sharing cubic to save on coin, and I have no desire to change that situation until T’S’Pa and I seek our own cubic.”

Using the affectionate-diminutive. That means that they’ve “pillowed”, as if the mixed scents on her fur weren’t evidence enough, Richard/Tal-Tal Po do Ashan thought. Nice to see some things work out sensibly. He took a deep breath. Time to hit the sack myself – and with “my” training complete, I wonder what sort of cases “I” will be given? What is Tal-Tal Po do Ashan’s future, I wonder? Maybe this little incident will be all there is to this time-dive. He shook his head, remembering what the Historian told him. Or there’s something I can do to “help” things along. One can only hope, he thought, and headed off to his own bed.

15 Summer Kir 21 past Sunset, Ship-year 37,514

Richard/Tal-Tal Po do Ashan pried his eyes open, and checked the time after doing his now routine “body check”. *I’m still on this crazy timedive. With all this time ‘invested’ I dread as much as I wonder what the Universe has in store for me **this** time*, he thought. After brushing his fur into manageable shape and dressing, he wandered out into “their” common area. Ishrikraiva was already awake, clear eyed and bushy tailed.

“Let’s do something together, for a change. We are, after all, going to be related soon,” she said. “Let’s share a meal...and I know just the meal to share,” she said, grinning. She looked him eye-to-eye, grinning and licked her chops.

Richard/Tal-Tal Po do Ashan’s fur stood on end, and he backed away from the Sitekii. “Ah...gentlebeing...I don’t think it would be proper to share a meal...I mean...you just did...ah...” he stopped, confused, as Ishrikraiva burst out laughing.

“I didn’t mean from the same bowls, Tal-Tal Po do Ashan! We’ll eat together, but we won’t share a meal in *that* sense. And here I thought that you didn’t think that much about ‘pillow’ matters,” she said.

“Well,” he paused. He could feel the blood rushing to his ears. *There are still levels of meaning that I can trip on*, he thought. “I just had an image of Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan’s likely reaction.”

“Claws! He’d be crushed!” she exclaimed. “But, no, I’m not talking about anything intimate...just a bit of a celebratory meal. We both passed our exams, although from the standings, I beat you by a fair margin – not that you did *badly* – but I placed third and you only placed eighth.”

“I didn’t notice the total of those passing...” Richard said.

“Total for our class was five eight-squared...eight-cubed students took the exam, and roughly eight-squared students will be allowed to retrain and try it again,” she said. “We’re both guaranteed decent starting positions, though, for now, ‘we are the lowliest of the low’,” she said.

“Who placed first and second?” Richard/Tal-Tal Po do Ashan asked.

“Two students from the *Larn* who were here to get a better background in general Homeship law...I spoke to one of them, and ... well ... they had already been practicing law on the Larn for nearly an octad before they came here to be licensed on the *Tal*.”

“Isn’t that kind of ‘slumming’?” Richard/Tal-Tal Po do Ashan asked.

“Apparently not. I didn’t realize it, but just as the *Tal* has one of the People’s top *d’aka-troven*, heading its Strategic Planning Board, our legal training academy is rated third in the Grand Fleet. And one of the hardest to survive.”

Richard/Tal-Tal Po do Ashan’s jaw dropped. “Yet we ‘survived in style’? Learn something new every night! I thought the *Tal* was just an ordinary Homeship...”

“The *Tal* is actually a powerhouse. She’ll be upgraded to Greatship status in an octad or two, mark my words,” Ishrikraiva said, a note of pride in her voice. The larger female took him by the arm and escorted him out of their quarters and off to the open market.

The market was much as Richard/Tal-Tal Po do Ashan remembered it, and the scents were still every bit as mouth-watering. As Ishrikraiva led him to a little “hole in the wall” café, she called out to one of the waiters, “Joki, my table?”

Joki, an equally tall Sitekii male, escorted the pair to a small table in the far back of the small café. “The usual, Gentlebeing Ishrikraiva?”

“For the both of us – in separate bowls, if you please. And two bowls of tamse each,” she handed over several coins. “I know you like burnt ends, as do I, but the sauce they use here is ... something else – and it is ‘rather spicy’.” She grinned, and Richard/Tal-Tal Po do Ashan wondered just what he’d gotten himself into.

When their meals arrived, Richard/Tal-Tal Po do Ashan spent the first few moments with his eyes closed, just drinking in the scent. Then, he took a sip of the tamse. “First harvest?” he asked.

“Only the best for a celebratory meal, study-partner. Have you decided where you’ll be seeking employment, yet?” Ishrikraiva asked.

“I’m afraid that I haven’t thought that far ahead,” he answered. *True enough*, he thought, within the innermost wall.

Ishrikraiva laughed. “Considering how often you outthought all of us, looking into consequences of the more complex legal decisions, that’s a bit of surprise.”

“I guess that I’m still getting used to the idea that I’ve actually reached my first big goal ... getting through training ... and I expect that *some* part of the Ship’s government will have use for me. I’m just not sure where I can be of greatest use.”

“And *that* is the Tal-Tal Po do Ashan that I’m more used to. Have you even *thought* about going into a private practice, being your own ‘clan-leader’, in effect? Not of an actual clan, but of a private business?”

“Not that there’s anything *wrong* with that, but shouldn’t one’s first work be for the *Collective*? I mean, it’s the *Collective* that has provided my opportunities, my training, and my support to date,” he paused, realizing his possible error. “If you define the *Collective* to include my clan, of course.”

“Thinking of others before himself. It’s no wonder that you had no problems with the ethical examination,” she said.

“I try to ‘be myself’, and I would assume that ‘I’ am going to be found suitable for the profession – if not, would it not be a disservice to the *Collective* to attempt to fulfill the needs of the group in this work?”

Ishrikraiva laughed. “Indeed, but we are allowing our meat to cool...”

Taking the hint, Richard/Tal-Tal Po do Ashan dug in to one of the meat encrusted bones. The sauce was definitely a ‘sinus clearer’, though in his “true form” (if that had any meaning, now) he had enjoyed hotter sauces...habaneros being a bit hotter than the sauce used here. But the taste! Oh, the taste sent chills down his back, and almost to the tip of his tail.

The rest of the meal was carried out in silence, save for the slurping of tamse, the contented sighs as the delicious meat and sauce combination was devoured by the two *Shidran-Kas*, and the occasional gurgling of the bowls of tamse being refilled by the ever-attentive waiter.

As the last bits of marrow were licked out of the shattered remnants of the *larga* bones, and only a few sips of tamse remained, Richard/Tal-Tal Po do Ashan couldn't resist one last question. "I would have thought that the honorable ship-sister would wish to celebrate more than just her survival of the testing. So, no zhinj? Why?"

Ishrikraiva chuckled. "I should dull my senses with something that I can't stand the taste of to celebrate years of hard work? Simpler to just pound my head against the corridor walls and save myself the coin – same dulling effect, same brain damage. But you didn't ask for zhinj either."

"How would the Guild react to a drunken or caffeine addicted adjudicator? I seem to recall a wise ship-sister who once said something to that effect," Richard/Tal-Tal Po do Ashan said.

At that moment, the café was filled with the sound of a ululating siren, and moving arrows appeared on the floor leading out to the open-air market.

Ishrikraiva was off of her pad in a catlike movement, and halfway to the exit before Richard/Tal-Tal Po do Ashan could do more than catch his breath.

Get to an escape pod – I have to reach T'S'Pa! she 'cast.

Do you even know where he is? Richard/Tal-Tal Po do Ashan responded. The undertone of the female's jealousy made his fur stand on end.

I suspect, and not alone, she responded. And an image came of the path they needed to follow to get to Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan's quarters followed – and Richard/Tal-Tal Po do Ashan could also sense resentment at the presence of a female pilot also residing in those quarters – quarters that Ishrikraiva was starting to regard as "hers" already.

You're not going alone, he 'cast back. *She trusts Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan, but she doesn't exactly trust this Tal-Tiran Chai – the image carries no clan associations ... so Ishrikraiva is more than slightly annoyed with this other female. But is it anything more than a natural response among these beings?* Richard/Tal-Tal Po do Ashan thought, keeping the thought carefully within the three walls that he'd learned to build. He realized he was going to have to stop thinking, and start doing...as Ishrikraiva, with her much longer legs and stride, was fast pulling away from him.

She's not paying attention to her surroundings! He realized, and shouted out, "HOUND!" as they turned a corner, and came face to face with one of the automated killing machines. Ishrikraiva didn't slow down – she grabbed the machine by its head, and swung it, using the full force of her body and motion into the far wall...the machine's "head" separated from its body as the ruined carcass slid down the wall, not even a spark signifying the destructive end of the machine. *These ones break a lot easier ... inferior product, or just a weak point in all the designs?* He couldn't help musing, as he chased after Ishrikraiva.

It was a timeless interval later, punctuated by barging through other small groupings of the Free People and dodging shouts of "get to an escape pod!" from uniformed females, and running through now smokey corridors, they came across Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan fighting with a female who was trying to carry him towards the escape pods.

Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan spotted Ishrikraiva at the same moment that she saw him, and three hounds spotted all of them. Richard/Tal-Tal Po do Ashan found himself next to one of the three, and he lost track of everything else as he dealt with that one robot by turning them into one angled-and-sideways cartwheel to slam both their weights down on its angled 'head'.

Damn! Jujitsu can be adapted to 'bots! Well, physics is physics and 'gravity works'. Only...that leg of 'mine' is going to hurt ... later. he thought. For the neck of the robot had snapped off, but in that process sliced into his inner and upper posterior thigh. At least his self-sealing blood vessels were limiting his blood loss and, while that one muscle was damaged, it probably wasn't severed. Probably.

He'd already glanced around and noted that the two other robots had been smashed into the walls of the corridor and reduced to junk. His breath caught, seeing Ishrikraiva down, her neck at an odd angle. Already Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan had broken free of the female – Tal-Tiran Chai – and was at Ishrikraiva's side.

"Cousin ... please ... help?" Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan begged.

I cannot feel anything below my neck, Ishrikraiva 'cast. **I am not long for this incarnation.**

"No, Ishri, you *can't* die ... we ..." Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan cried.

I am already dead. Tal-Tiran Chai, I charge you with getting Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan to an escape pod – you serve the Collective and his worth is greater than either of ours! she 'cast.

Richard/Tal-Tal Po do Ashan could already sense the darkening of Ishrikraiva's mind, as she began the slide into unconsciousness. The struggle between Tal-Tiran Chai and Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan was one-sided – all he appeared to wish was to remain at Ishrikraiva's side ... he struggled, but it was more squirming, and twisting – there were no strikes, no throws, and the result was inevitable; Tal-Tiran Chai carried him off, still screaming, still crying ... begging to stay with Ishrikraiva, but the firm pinch-hold she put on the back of his neck seemed to reduce his struggles to a useless series of twitches. Richard limped the few steps over and slid, rather than lowered, next to Ishrikraiva.

So, it ends here...at the hands of my own former People's weapons. You should go, Tal-Tal Po do Ashan. You have been a good friend ... and would have been an excellent colleague, Ishrikraiva 'cast to Richard/Tal-Tal Po do Ashan.

Is there anything that I can... Richard's response cut off as he heard a roar and his left arm vanished in a gout of flame from behind him. Richard/Tal-Tal Po do Ashan stared at the stump for a moment, before he collapsed and lost consciousness.

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Richard woke, and it was dark. He was floating on what felt like a waterbed. When he looked around, he was in what was clearly some advanced form of hospital bed, and his left arm – well, someone's left arm – was either restored, or he'd time-dived into a new host. As he was orienting himself to his new surroundings, what looked like a male Siberian husky approached – but the scent was wrong – it was the bitter citron scent of a *Shidran-Kas* male.

"Don't be worried, you're on a medevac ship. I'm a med-tech on the *Istiru's Gift*. And yes, I'm a *Hiruun*, but that doesn't mean I'm your enemy," the other spoke accent-less *Harashan*. "You've been in cryogenic suspension for three eight-days until your arm could be regrown, reattached, and you could be medically stabilized."

“A ... *Hiruun*?” Richard/Tal-Tal Po do Ashan remembered that group being mentioned...but this was something else. ‘*Appears like one of you?*’ *Not by a long-shot ... but the scent is the same. Is that what Ishrikranaiva meant?*

“Yes. My name is Akar-Sura Kan do Harkal, in case you’re interested. And your name is?”

“The Free People call me Tal-Tal Po do Ashan,” Richard/Tal-Tal Po do Ashan said. “At least, that’s what the Free People who were on the *Tal* did.” *It’s true enough ... but ... what about Ishrikranaiva?* “There was another near me – a *Sitekii* – she was a good person, her name was ...”

“Ishrikranaiva, yes. She’s in the next cabin. She’s been up and about for the better part of an eight-day, now. She has been seeing one of the *Healers-of-the-Mind* on a regular basis during that time.” The other’s voice carried a strong undertone of a whine.

“Was this one’s cousin – Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan able to ...”

“Perhaps it would be better if you heard the rest of the news from your colleague, Ishrikranaiva,” Akal-Sura Kan do Harkal said. “And perhaps you should go back to sleep.” He pressed a button on the side of the bed, and Richard/Tal-Tal Po do Ashan found his eyes closing as he slipped off into slumber.

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Another timeless period, and when he awoke this time, Ishrikranaiva was by the side of his bed. She was holding a blood-stained scrap of fabric. “It’s from your cousin’s tail wrap,” she said.

“Was he...”

“The genetic registry confirmed that the blood was his, as were certain ... secretions. Mixed with mine. They found Tal-Tiran Chai as well ... only she had already gone on to her next incarnation.” Her voice was dead, as if she were reading from a script that she must play out, but could not muster the effort to breathe life into. “If I had let him stay, he might still be alive.” The words came out choked. “Istiru can be cruel, even when He helps one evade his Mother. It seems there’s a price for everything. If I’d let T’S’Pa stay with me, he’d likely be alive now, here with us. But I had to send him away ... to the end of his current incarnation. Istiru has a vicious sense of humor.”

“You did what you thought was best ... you put Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan’s well-being over your own temporary comfort. Isn’t that what caring about another is about? Trying to give them a better chance against the Claws?”

“I just find myself wishing that the medevac team hadn’t found us – or that I had reached the Forge before our rescuers reached us. If I had gone on to my next incarnation ... T’S’Pa and I would have both been reborn about the same time; and perhaps I might have one day met T’S’Pa again ... in our next incarnations.”

“Isn’t there something in the sacred scrolls somewhere, about ‘giving the Huntress a good hunt’? I thought you were a believer; was I in error?”

“No, but belief can be hard, when the Claws fall on someone else, leaving you to mourn their passing. I know, males don’t last. But would it have spoiled some vast eternal plan, if we could have been together for an octad or four? I know that I would likely have outlived him by an octad or more ... but ... now ... all the endless years ahead. It seems like a sick joke.”

“You’ll find someone else. I’m sure Tal-Sora Pa do Ashan wouldn’t want you to suffer.”

“You’re right about that. He believed, in his own way. I wish him the best in his next incarnation. If he meant what he implied...”

“What was that?”

“That he had learned his new ‘one life lesson’. He was a romantic, in the core of his soul-self, I think.”

“He didn’t tell you what it was, did he?”

“No, he wasn’t that ill-mannered. But I think he was trying to set himself up for us to meet again, after we both reincarnated. At least, that’s the sort of silly male thing I would have expected of him. But ... he kept his lesson within the innermost wall, and his Talent was far stronger than mine.”

“Perhaps he just decided that ‘trust no female, ever!’ wasn’t what he wanted to carry into his next life,” Richard/Tal-Tal Po do Ashan said.

“He told you what his ‘one life lesson’ was?” Ishrikraiva said, her eyebrow whiskers wiggling in shock.

“Well, not exactly. But he used that phrase several times in my presence. I suspect it meant something deep and significant to him. Certainly, he was ... well ... he had ‘problems’ with females of the species. So, perhaps I am assuming facts not in evidence – he never specifically said that it was his ‘one life lesson’, but one can infer...”

“And in some instances, inferences have considerable weight. Well, if he was changing away from *that* as his life lesson, perhaps what I gave to him was worth all the pain.”

“I’d rather think that it was a boon that you could grant. But don’t mourn too long for him; we need more People like you...”

“‘Hogomous, hígomous, females are polygamous’,” she quoted. “I know my duty to the *Collective*. I just wish that it could have been a bit lighter a burden to carry.”

Richard/Tal-Tal Po do Ashan found his eyelids growing heavy. “I’m tiring ... seems what we’ve been through ‘took a bit out of me’,” he said, and barely managed a chuckle. Ishrikraiva nodded, bowed, and left.

#

Richard woke, and he was back in his own bed, then scents of his two mates strong in his nostrils (and on the sheets). “Home again, home again, klippity, klop!” *Now, which timeline was that jump to? Is it one of the futures of this present, or is it a parallel? Five new dollars if you can guess the number of beans in the jar,* he thought, before rolling over and going back to sleep.

POSTSCRIPTS FROM THE PHOENIX THRONE #3

WHERE ROLEPLAYING GAMES ARE THE CENTER OF ATTENTION

FOR A GENTLE STROLL #5

GABRIEL ROARK
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SEPTEMBER 26, 2025

FROM THE HERALD'S SCROLL (AKA, NATTER)

Greetings, flâneurs! I do not have much natter thish. Celeste & I have been ice skating more than a dozen times now & will start beginner lessons on October 1. Ice skating is part of the reason that I missed contributing lastish. A few weeks ago, I was standing on the ice, looking for my wife through the windows into the snack bar. I must have leaned back ever so slightly, cos I didn't realize that I had moved enough to throw off my center of gravity. The dull-bladed rental skates that I was wearing went right out in front of me & down I went on rear & elbow. The ice gifted me a nice case of olecranon bursitis, so I avoided typing for anything beyond work purposes for a while. The elbow is healing well & I bought a pair of skates that grip the ice well indeed. I also added elbow & knee pads to my protective gear.



COMMENTS ON A GENTLE STROLL #3-4

Random Hopscotch #2-3 (Joshua)

Hello! Yes, it will be interesting to see how both new RPG APAs take shape (my absence from the last issue of both notwithstanding, I am interested!).

Harsh lesson concerning activity during a dungeon run.

Yeah, D&D economics are all kinds of messed up from a real-Earth medieval technological perspective.

Ronin Engineer (Jim Eckman)

I first read about *The Spartan* about 10 years ago. I don't think I've seen an issue in the wild or on the interwebs. Also, I see what you mean by Barker's legacy.

About that game, *Legacy*, would this be it:

<https://rpggeek.com/rpg/8967/legacy>? I look forward to seeing Wanderer.

The Fox's Den (Shapero/Shapero & Cole)

"Back To School...In a Dream: An Isekai Story" is terrific. You developed the culture well. It reminds me of a plot-centered version of anthropologist Clifford Geertz's "thick description." Others (George, I think, in AGS #4) remarked that the counting system could tire the reader. I agree, to the extent that the reader tries to verify or work out the convention used. I did my best to filter it out, for the most part, enjoying the odd math as verisimilitude. I confess that some of the implications of the legal problems (also very cool) might have been lost on me as a result. And

yes, those moments in which the players are gelling & roleplaying without referee intervention are golden (and a time of respite!).

1PMG PBEM: How to Get Started, Part 2 (Jim Vassilakos)

On handling problem players by assigning them the role of adversarial player is a strategy that Steve Jackson advocated in early editions of the *Generic Universal Role Playing System* & possibly *Man to Man* before that.

A Rhodomontadulous Promenade #3-4 (George)

RYCT on the notion of elves lacking souls in early D&D: I thought it was hobbits that hadn't souls in OD&D, since the *raise dead* spell only worked on men, elves, & dwarves (*Men & Magic*, p. 33). Thanks for the answer on magic-users with high Intelligence.

Thank you for the kind words about the first Dispatch. The serial was my first (and only, so far) published foray into steampunk fiction.

Good write-up on the adventurer's planning. Grandoon has quite a puzzle on his hands, I see.

I Was Walking (Lisa)

Welcome to AGS, Lisa! I appreciate you sharing the prompts; they were a diverting & thought-provoking read. Agreement on the importance of motivation for RPG characters.

Also, your musings about failing to find clues has me thinking about potential alternatives to the 1D6 roll for finding secret & concealed doors in AD&D (specifically, your remark about failing to find a clue when looking in the right place for it, just failing a roll). Perhaps, if the PCs or their players say something like, “Oh, look, this wall abuts the passage that we earlier thought was a dead end; there should be a secret door here,” & declare a search, I can have the player cast the die. If they make the roll, they identify the door & (in most cases) the opening mechanism in one round (one minute). Failure indicates extra rounds to find the door proportional to the scale of the miss. This way, PCs don’t walk away from something that their players figured out, & failure in such situations cost that most precious of resources to the dungeon-delver: time. I think that the normal process for searching for secret doors is fine when players search with only gamist motivations (we are playing AD&D and secret doors are a thing) in mind. Thoughts on this, one and all?

The Fox’s Den (Shapero)

Hi, Niall. I remember your zines & The Lords of Chaos from my deep dive into 1970s & ‘80s zines looking for more information about The Arduin Grimoire. Cool to see you here.

Can you tell us anything about the Mutations APA? I do not see it listed in RPG Geek’s Periodicals list (<https://rpggeek.com/browse/rpgperiodical>).

Dig the Reynard reference in “Unstuck in Time”.

DISPATCHES FROM THE FIELD: FINNEGAN TARREGA’S UNAUTHORIZED INVESTIGATIONS INTO MATTERS ANCIENT AND ARCAINE

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Dispatch 2: Agarrar a un Ladrón

In which your humble reporter further relates the events of the Bureau of American Ethnology’s Archeological Expedition to Arizona Territory, 1895, the truth of which is presented only in part by the Bureau’s official reports, and that concerning only matters mundane or conducive to scientific explanation. In my previous dispatch (Dispatch 1: Something’s Rotten in Sikyatki), I wrote of my rendezvous with the expedition leader in Holbrook, Arizona Territory. Our quitting town for First Mesa was heralded by a madman’s ill portents, and the like greeted us in the village of Walpi, First Mesa, though not announced by an unsound agent. An informant of Dr. Fewkes revealed that one white stranger named Andres, to whom I bear no particular good will, has been purloining sacred artifacts from the denizens of First Mesa. These pages now bring the tale to our excavation at the long-abandoned village of Sikyatki.

Yours very truly,

Finnegan Tarrega

July 29, 1895

We woke early to a view of dawn such as renders a man inarticulate before incalculable majesty. From Walpi's perch on the tip of First Mesa, Hopi and white American alike watched the eastern sky stir from its cerulean slumber into less somnambulistic pinks, oranges, and reds. Our shadows grew behind us with the sun, creating the appearance of two solar audiences, one of flesh, the other of interrupted light on the pueblo walls.

Breakfast passed amiably, all and sundry being in fine spirits. It seems that Fewkes's 1891 visit was preceded in the late 1860s by Victor Mindeleff's survey of Pueblo architecture; the repeat scientific interest in the cultures of the Hopi and their antecedents clearly inculcated an excitement over Fewkes's overtures that Walpi send workers to assist in our endeavour. This is not to say that a suspicious element was lacking among the natives. Nevertheless, the majority of Walpians—including many priests and leaders—saw our scientific method as potentially complementary to their personal knowledge and traditions concerning their ancestors and predecessors on the mesa. I cannot stress enough the trust and hospitality that Walpi bestowed upon our little crew of ardent scholars. That the unscrupulous self-aggrandizer Andres could misappropriate a sacred katchina from Walpi and our expedition still be

welcomed is a testimony to the natives' generosity and Fewkes's graciousness as guest.

Our objective lay three miles north of Walpi, beyond Hano pueblo and near Keam's Canyon. Rather than travel daily between Walpi and Sikyatki, Fewkes wished to bivouac at the mouth of the canyon so as to make the best use of his resources. Our column of archaeological workers marked their passage with the clink of mule hooves against stones, gay chatter, and steady, translucent clouds of red-brown dust. We arrived at Keam's by midmorning. Fewkes's outriders awaited us and had a short colloquy with him while the remainder of our expedition took rest. Within moments, Fewkes relayed orders to our company concerning the disposition of the mess tent, field laboratory, supply cache, latrines, and sleeping areas.

"Have the scouts located a well site yet?" The query came from a burly pack handler, eager to divest his mules of their loads.

"There is no need for drilling at present," I replied. "Kopeli informed Doctor Fewkes that the springs at Sikyatki are flowing. We can use their waters."

"What the hell did we lug all this along for, then?"

I raised a hand slightly to stress the reasonableness of the situation. "Fewkes didn't know whether the springs were still good until he talked with the villagers at Walpi. Ease up, now, man; we might yet have recourse to drilling—who knows what ceremonial

or natural anomaly might close up one or the other spring?”

The muleskinner shrugged and led his charges to the supply cache, where he proceeded to remove thousands of feet of brass pipe joints, hoses, auger bits, sleeves, and pumps from beast and wagon. At this point, Fewkes caught up with me.

“Tarrega, it looks to me that the crew knows what they need to do.” Indeed, Fewkes’s workforce took to assembling the camp with alacrity. “Let’s find old Kopeli and Hodge and reconnoitre the ruin.”

We located these men, the first mentioned being Fewkes’s aged friend and informant from Walpi, the second the chief assistant to Fewkes. Mounting horses, the four of us began the ascent to Sikyatki.

Sikyatki sat some couple hundred feet above the mouth of Keam’s Canyon. The way rose at a constant incline, abrupt narrow arroyos dissecting the slope at intervals like so many indecisive serpents. Our horses snorted and stepped high through each sandy blow-out, where a monsoonal deluge eroded and carried sheets of coarse sediment, boulders, and the occasional juniper tree downslope. Detailed topographic maps cannot prepare the visitor for the contrasting scales observed on the mesa lands—our quartet traversed a two hundred-foot rise from canyon confluence to the ruin, itself situated no more than five hundred feet from an escarpment that tops 6200 feet above mean sea level. In the face of such stark, massive landforms, one does not have to wonder

at the Hopi predilection for community focus and complex ceremonials to invoke the mercies of so many divinities. The everyday survival of men in the tablelands depends on divine favour and social cooperation.

We were not long in making the southeastern margin of Sikyatki. By horse, the constant upward climb was not of especial difficulty. Our company, many afoot, others leading packhorses or mules, would have a harder time of it. Surmounting the mesita’s edge, we looked northwest across the compacted, deflated sands and gravels at melon patches nestled between a dozen or so narrow rock walls.

“Lelo’s been busy, eh, Jesse?” The old man’s horse stamped impatiently and lowered its head, hoping for browse, finding none.

“Yes, he has, friend. Lelo has a nice spread here,” Fewkes replied.

“He can use two different springs. Lelo grows many plants.”

Fewkes nodded. I cleared my throat, “This must have been the old plaza, before Lelo converted it to gardens.”

“Exactly,” Fewkes said, then pointed to our left, “You can still see stubs of dwelling walls there to the south, right on the mesa’s edge.”

Hodge broke in, sweeping his arm across the mesita’s western margin, “J. W. calls the two topographic eminences there the ‘Acropolis.’”

“We will do some digging up there for certain; it is doubtlessly where the most intensive occupation occurred,” added Fewkes.

We meandered a while, guiding our horses around Lelo's melon patch. Kopeli indicated to us where the known cemeteries at Sikyatki could be found, whereupon Fewkes removed a map that he had made of a portion of the ruins and sketched in the cemetery locations. Kopeli's countenance darkened at this. We soon turned and descended the mesita.

We found the camp in order upon our arrival, and dinner preparations were underway. After a cheery repast and music, our entire company retired early; tomorrow's work would begin at dawn.

July 30, 1895

The rising sun brought the camp to life the next day. Some men and the few Hopi women present started up the kitchen fire at the mess tent. A handful of children laughed, playing a stick-and-stone game that had the youths careening from one end of camp to the other. Workers stamped the stiffness out of their limbs, dressed, assembled packs and gear, visited the latrines. The mess soon held all hands, who breakfasted on salted pork sausage, maize grits, and toasted bread. Under the tent the air was all tobacco smoke cut with the homey scent of full-bodied coffee.

After breakfast, Fewkes had his workforce packed and marching westward, up the little mesa. The expedition's leader made the climb first, enabling him to direct traffic as workers arrived. Dr. Fewkes directed one group to the southern cemetery, another to

the western cemetery. To the younger boys and girls Fewkes assigned buckets for water duty. He also detailed a crew chief to each group. Fewkes retained Hodge, Kopeli, a few other Hopis, and me to work with him personally.

Sizable rocks and boulders covered much of the ruin's surface. Fewkes's crew chiefs exhorted their teams to remove them to ease the opening of large earthen exposures. This task was directed toward the cemeteries and Acropolis. In the latter area, our efforts revealed sections of broken walls cropping from the earth at intervals. The number and distribution of wall sections suggested that at least two series of rooms occupied the Acropolis. A quick tour of the premises after the rock clearing convinced Fewkes that wind-borne sands and loess had buried much of Sikyatki—so much so that we would need to remove considerable quantities of dirt to open up entire rooms and graves.

By one in the afternoon, the heat was oppressive, even with tents shielding us from personal insolation. Fewkes gave the order to retire for the day. We left our digging equipment under canvases to protect it from the elements, and headed to camp. Evening passed peaceably.

July 31, 1895

Today, Fewkes set the various crews to removing the overburden from select areas of Sikyatki. We targeted those areas where we expected a rich yield of artifacts, architecture, and interments. The Walpians proved able workers,

moving an impressive volume of dirt. The grating and “Shiick! Shuck!” of shovels piercing gravels and sands reflected off of the canyon walls to either side of Sikyatki, creating a cacophonous din. Fewkes had instructed the work crew to stop work and notify him, Hodge, or myself should they chance upon a potsherd, bone, or other implement. Since our excavation was spread out over a considerable area, the three of us walked the digs, observing the progress of our group’s endeavor. Periodically, our able co-workers uncovered sufficient quantities of artifacts, or a section of wall, that Fewkes, Hodge, Garrett, or I would indicate that the men were to dig no deeper, but instead direct their efforts laterally from the find. As the mercury rose to an intolerable point, Fewkes had the company stretch tarps over the hard-earned exposures to prevent wind-blown dirt obfuscating them overnight. In the southwest corner of each exposure, we hammered a 12-inch stake into the ground in the event that sand covered the tarps.

We retired to camp and variously spent the afternoon compiling field notes, making plans for the next day, or taking siestas. The evening meal was fine, consisting of pork tamales, corn salsa, and squash. At sundown, we had music, whiskey, and talk around the campfire.

Around ten o’clock—about the time we all reluctantly put down cask and flask, flute and fiddle, and stumbled back to our bedrolls and tents to collapse into that slumber that follows hard labor

and an evening of pleasant dissipation—the canyon channelled the baying of multitudinous wolves. I imagine that Garrett might well have rusted his button-fly that night, on account of the apparent size of tonight’s carnivorous host. Although the equine members of our groups stamped and whinnied, the rest of the camp went quiet. Here and there, I could pick out the sound of revolver hammers being pulled back, cylinders rotated and slapped back into place. I readied my Winchester and slipped quietly from my tent, stalking parallel to the long side of it. Once at the tent’s rear, I had my back to the central campfire and my eyes adjusted to the low light. Out in the black, beyond the range of firelight, the desert seemed lit by yellow-green eyeshine. I attempted to track individual animals by their shine, but had only a brief glimpse, as at fast-moving creatures. I watched, pulling down from the inside brim of my hat a pair of clear, crystalline-lensed spectacles. Ambient light refracted through the myriad rods that comprise the lenses, bestowing a limited form of night vision. Dozens of canids, wolf and coyote alike, loped eastward, up Keam’s Canyon. A greater number of deer bounded amidst their usual predators, hunter and quarry headless of one another. Long after wolf, coyote, and deer passed our camp, minute pink pinpricks of light dotted the slope up Keam’s Canyon. Spiders en masse? The wind carried isolated barks and growls for the next several minutes, then nothing. Looking west toward Sikyatki, I saw only the mesa rim overshadowing the ruin. I shouldered my gun, raised

my spectacles, and returned to bed. Camp rustled softly as my compatriots readied for sleep, convinced that their fears were needless and that any foe would be overmatched by the night watch. I do not share their confidence; the tide of fauna that I witnessed was fleeing directly opposite from Sikyatki.

August 1, 1895

The camp assumed business as usual this morning and we were at Sikyatki early. We still had overburden to remove, which Fewkes had Hodge, Garrett, and me supervise while he wandered the finished exposures and made plans for unveiling the materials encased below. By the end of the day, we had all the overburden removed from the areas to be scientifically excavated.

August 2, 1895

Today we assembled at Sikyatki, where Fewkes assigned various tasks to groups of workers. Fewkes directed the youngsters to continue bringing water from the springs, as they had done the last few days of work at the site. He formed additional crews to work the cemeteries that had been exposed. This plan vexed Kopeli and some other traditionalists. These men began walking among their fellows, exhorting them strenuously in Hopi not to dig in the cemeteries.

“Let the white men dig graves if they must! You should let the bodies rest. Walpi came against Sikyatki before your fathers’ fathers’ fathers were born.

Walpi put Sikyatki in the ground! The earth roundabout here was red with the blood of two villages. But there was more Sikyatki blood; they are no more. Walpi put Sikyatki in the ground—can Walpi fight the dead if they rise up again? Can you win if Masanwūh is angry, and raises these bodies? No!”

In this way, Kopeli and his coterie dissuaded many men from working the burial grounds, although several were yet willing to work there. Fewkes and Hodge did not attempt to prejudice Kopeli’s neighbors against the old man’s position. Once finished with their harangue, all the old men but Kopeli left Sikyatki for Walpi. Fewkes had a few private words with the priest, which I did not chance to overhear. Kopeli’s lined face creased with delight as he and Fewkes conversed, then Kopeli ambled toward the acropolis.

I approached Fewkes and stood to his left. We watched Kopeli walk upslope while the rest of the company dispersed to their assigned digging. “He looks mighty pleased, Dr. Fewkes. How on God’s green earth did you turn the man around?” I inquired.

Fewkes smiled, “I put him in charge of excavating the most important part of Sikyatki—and there are no cemeteries up there. Come on; let’s catch up with the old man.”

The summit of the Acropolis had lost up to two feet of height along its narrow eminence. The overburden had been shovelled to either side of this pinnacle such that the work crew had created two shallow swales along the cleared strip, each flanked by a row of back dirt. With the overburden removed, it

was possible to make out a large number of rectangular, stone-walled chambers laid out in two rows, the orientation of which followed the long axis of the summit.

Littered as the surface of the Acropolis was with fragmented pottery and other evidence of former habitation, Fewkes detailed several men to shovel-broadcast the overburden for the recovery of ceramics and other artifacts, preferably whole vessels. In the midst of this bustle, Kopeli was already assembling various implements: flat-headed shovel, brick-layer's trowel, stiff-haired brush and pan, ice pick, and soft-bristled whisk broom. Fewkes and I spent much of the day excavating with Kopeli and obtained several fine specimens through our labor. The entire host was in high spirits when we left for camp.

August 5, 1895

Excavation of Sikyatki continues at a good pace and I expect that we have already gathered much information of scientific consequence: artifacts, drawings and plans of room features, and detailed notes concerning the mortuary habits at this ancient settlement. Yesterday, having left off excavation of the acropolis to tour the western cemetery investigation, I observed men placing various items in their trenches at the end of the work day: thin wafers of baked corn meal, mountain tobacco, raw rabbit, and uncooked cornmeal. I stopped a man called Teino, "Why do you leave food and tobacco in the trenches?"

"Those are for Masanwûh," he answered. Perceiving that I did not consider the answer wholly explanatory, Teino elaborated, "We leave offerings when we finish digging. They show him that Walpi respects the great god. These things make Masanwûh happy. He takes them instead of Walpi people to replace the dead that we take." With that, Teino walked on toward camp, secure in his knowledge of the supernatural and the efficacy of the daily offerings.

Tonight, I joined Kopeli by the fire, where many of the workers enjoyed idle talk, boasting, and sometimes discussions of archaeological importance. The venerable priest nodded my way.

"Hello, Finnegan Tarrega."

"Greetings, Kopeli. May I sit here?"

Kopeli gestured his assent, so I sat, stretched out my legs, and flexed my toes in my boots. "I would like to talk with you about Andres, Kopeli."

"Huh! That white buzzard? Why do you want to talk about him?"

I ground the dirt with one boot heel, "I don't appreciate his robbing people of their heritage. The things Andres steals should be left with their caretakers, or else scientifically studied. Andres only honors these ideals when it suits him."

Kopeli wrinkled his brown brow at me, "¿Habla español?"

"¿Cómo? Sí, hablo un poco. ¿Por qué?"

"¡Que bueno! Hopi habla mal, Finnegan," the old man chuckled, "Lo siento, chico; Sólo hablo pequeño inglés."

I shrugged my shoulders and smiled. Kopeli continued the conversation in Spanish, “So, what do you want to know about Andres?”

“Did the Flutes tell you anything about Andres’s plans? Where he was headed, for instance?”

He left, but said that he wanted to visit the villages on Second and Third Mesas. Your ‘friend’ wanted to see their baskets, too.”

I clapped Kopeli’s back, “Much obliged, Kopeli. I know what I need to do now.”

August 6–10, 1895

I took leave of Fewkes’s expedition the morning of the sixth under the pretense of collecting basic information about ruins on Second and Third Mesas. Kopeli had filled in an important gap in my knowledge about Balázs Andres’s activities during the last several months. Truthfully, I had put him out of mind after he was apprehended in Hoptown for attempted murder and theft. I clearly overestimated the harshness of colonial justice, or Andres’s resourcefulness. Kopeli had surprised me a few weeks ago, when he told Fewkes that the Flutes saw the Magyar last year. If there is a connection between Andres’s larceny in Bechuanaland and his appearance here in Arizona Territory, I do not see it. One thing I know, Andres will have returned to Hopi country to complete his kadcina collection, since he was here a year ago. He will not be able to leave it alone—Andres cannot tolerate unfinished business.

The residents of Oraibi and Shipaulovi both report kadcina thefts from their towns, and harbour no illusions about Andres’s responsibility for them. I directed my horse—laden with weaponry, saddlebags with a day or two of water, and a few miscellaneous supplies—back to First Mesa. I rode up to the highest prominence that offered a view toward Holbrook. Scanning the desert with a spyglass, Andres’s duster filled suddenly filled my view until I adjusted the focus. Sure enough, he was headed toward Holbrook and had a significant lead down the mesa. This is a small concern to me; the next train out of town is scheduled to leave late tomorrow. Should Andres intend to quickly provision himself and ride out of Holbrook on horseback, it will pose little trouble for me to follow and overtake him. Otherwise, I expect to find him at or near the train station. I hope that Andres will choose to travel by rail; I feel that it is critical for me to speak with the crazed fellow who accosted our party on its moment of embarkation—immediate pursuit would not be conducive to an interview.

August 11, 1895

I rode through the night, brightened as it was by moonlight. We passed the following daylight hours in a desultory walk till the heat became unbearable. I camped in the shade of an abandoned wagon and watched the wind twist the waste’s old eolian grit into russet serpentine tendrils. They gyrated and shimmied, reaching upward as though to grasp the buzzard circling overhead, then collapsed in a dispersed slough.

One reformed within arm's reach of me and assumed a convincing viper aspect to my thermally stressed senses. The dust devil wavered before me, sunlight glinting off of micaceous particles where eyes and fangs should be. The hot breeze on my shoulder imitated a hiss. I reached to grasp the head of the earthen apparition, which lunged—against the wind—and struck my hand. As I flinched and pulled back my hand, the dust devil dissipated, leaving naught but an obsidian chip on the hardpan, soon joined by a few crimson dots from my bloodied finger. Time to go.

Nota bene: Finnegan Tarrega's Dispatches from the Field are faithfully presented by Gabriel Roark, who works as an archaeologist and cultural resources manager. Finnegan's exploits are fictional, albeit cast in real-world archaeological and social contexts. For those curious about the actual Fewkes expedition in Arizona Territory, the sources that I consulted when writing Dispatch 2 are provided below. Representations of historic persons are attempted with the utmost respect; my fictional contrivances might not fare so well.

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NEXTISH

Next month, *Postscripts* will bring you Tarrega's third dispatch. Comments will sally forth from the zine, & I might explain the zine's title, too.

The Rhodomontadulous Promenade #5

George Phillies
phillies@4liberty.net

Comments

Water's Edge: Beautiful capture of snow on gravel with pine trees in the distance.

I Was Walking: You present a wonderful analysis of scenario design. These are a fine list of factors to consider in designing a rules set or scenario. The closest I come to being a patron, other than subscribing to a few substacks, is to buy books of favorite authors, preferably hardback books. I try to be on time, but it can be challenging. Where else might people meet. You noted the coffee shop. Bookstores come to mind if your area is that advanced. Ah, yes, there are many ways to send messages. In my *The One World*, there was horseback, railroad, signal towers as deployed by Napoleon, and the magicians had spark-gap and coherer radios, whose operation they did not actually understand. Aging? A fine question. The heroine of my *Eclipse* novels, which was originally derived at least somewhat from Champions, was 'she's caring, daring and deadly, not to mention being young enough to disguise herself as a boy, not to mention being one of the most powerful superheros in the world.' Origin? Agree! The opposite was the original Traveler, in which one could spend an hour rolling up a character, to find that the character then died before the adventure started. Mysteries and detectives are a fine scheme, so long as the gamesmaster treats all the same players with equal fairness.

Fog: Ah! A Lovecraft monstrosity! Another terrifying creature. It's certainly something you would not to meet without appropriate preparation. Lovecraft wrote more to create emotional tones than to provide quantitative descriptions, but you provide a playable path to having one of these creatures appear. Where are you finding the old issues of *Weird Tales*?

The Fox's Den: Congratulations on completing novels and having them published. You have certainly been around since the early days of the hobby. Yes, that is an interesting opening for your character. Perhaps he might have been more interested in what clothing he was wearing, but enough detail was apparent.

1PMG PBEM: In some sense you are using the characters to generate a fiction, which as you correctly note puts certain constraints on what sort of character the player can run. There are terrible people in the world, but as you said many people would prefer not to read something from the terrible person's point of view.

With respect to person, you wisely skipped Second Person and Plural. I concede that there was a recent Hugo winner written in Second Person Present Tense, but I was congratulated for having finished it. I would have rejected it for *Eldritch Science*. Second Person in many cases leads to abominable writing.

Past versus present tense? The SF author Modesitt once upon a time noted that genre fiction in most genres is written in past or historic present tense, but modern literary fiction is often written in present tense. “Smith rapidly climbed the ladder” versus “Smith rapidly climbs the ladder”. However, modern literary sales are tiny relative to genre sales, so you are less likely to encounter something written in present tense. The spoken encounters are well done, complete with the points where the players cross the fourth wall.

Random Hopscotch: I confess I have enjoyed reading some mystery novels, but I never made an effort to try to solve the mystery before the hero of the novel did. Zendo sounds to be a strange game. Generating a mystery scenario seems to involve a great deal of careful work; there is always the hazard that your clues do not work as intended.

Many thanks for your excellent and thoughtful comments on all the other zines. Comments are important but rarely given at length. Yours are to be treasured. Some issues of *The Wild Hunt* had appreciable discussions of economics in a somewhat coherent way, for example, the historical example of the German knight who fed an army of 20,000 with one silver penny that was actually made of silver. Most ‘silver’ pennies were actually iron. At the bottom end, small fractions of copper pieces were notches in sticks of wood; a dozen or two notches paid for as many loaves of bread. There was also some discussion of how spells might change things, e.g., growth of plants as a spell made wheat fields vastly more productive.

Champions combat? When I played in the later 80s and iirc early 90s, one of the players had a laptop which tracked everything. That made a big difference, though we had large combat runs (perhaps 8 players, many running two characters at the same time. In one of his other campaigns, for the player who owned the computer there was this amusing point where during character design the computer and the players could not get agreement as to how many points a specific character design was worth. They finally stepped through things very carefully, and discovered that the computer was right, and that all these years they had been interpreting a specific rule incorrectly. I did have a character who had a large number of power in two different pools, made possible by heavy use of increased endurance and activation rolls – her main attack used (quoting numbers from memory) more like 50 power points than 25. She had a large end battery but not infinitely large.

The Hugo definition of a novel is strange, to put it mildly. The N3F Laureate definition is 100,000 words, splitting all fiction into two categories: shorter works (<100,000 words) and novels (>100,000 words). Yes, back then paperbacks were much thinner.

You will perhaps to some extent see more about the Princess and the Wizard. But thanks for your comments.

Ronin Engineer: Art comments are a rara avis, so are most welcome. The image on the your second page is nicely impressionistic. There are impressions with many different possible interpretations.

Our Adventurers

“Blew up the rapids?” Emmanuel asked.

“I should have said ‘blew up the locks’.” [the GM corrected himself.] “And while there are portages, the load to be portaged is large. Furthermore, the river is in early Fall fullness, meaning that the roads are clear, but the current is swift and pointed away from our destination.”

Brian Northwindson cleared his throat, then stared at Herman Ingolph. “There are seven of us,” he observed, “of whom two are skilled at arms, you more than me, Sandra, as our wrestling and sparring yesterday showed, two magicians who can put weaker opponents to sleep so that their throats may be cut, two clerics who can cure our wounds or, if you have learned to focus light, momentarily blind an opponent. A foe who is a significant threat to a convoy whose men are all armed may be less than impressed by us. And I am still sore from yesterday’s wrestling falls and pins.” [rolled before the session started.]

“Brian, you got in a few of your own,” Sandra answered. “But there is a trick here. If we play the part, no one can tell we are not great armsmen, powerful sorcerers, people of great holy strength, or a respectably wealthy patron, all with a respectable stock of enchanted items.”

“And how do we do this?” Herman asked. “Oh, and see he is here, so I should introduce Godwin Rifstaffel, the merchant whom two of you have already met.”

Courtesies were exchanged.

“I heard the last part of the conversation,” Godwin said. “I will have ten wagons each drawn by two oxen, a drover for each, a farrier, a wheelwright, and a healer with their wagon, and four helpers, all of whom can use a sword or bow. However, none of us claim great skill, and if it were not for Lady Sandra being one of my favorite customers, I would have hesitated to travel into the wilderness. My cargo is rewarding but not priceless. Financial reward is not helpful if your throat is slit before you can collect your fee. So I want to hear Lady Sandra’s suggestion.”

“Brian and I discussed this,” Sandra said. “He had the good ideas. The five of us who are not men at arms will each ride with a drover, wearing quality clothing. That marks them as important people, respectably powerful mages and the like, namely they ride rather than walking. Brian and I in such armor as we have will ride in front a modest distance ahead of the march, to draw ambushes to us. Two of your helpers will ride on the rear of the hindmost wagon looking backwards to warn if danger approaches from that direction. Other eyes face out, not down at the dirt. If any of your people have a horse, they will ride with Brian and I. If danger approaches, they may withdraw or not as they see fit.”

“I bow to your wisdom,” Godwin said.

“I am not very wise,” Sandra said. “Brian knows more about this than I do.”

“She’s being nice to me,” Brian said. “Do your people know how to stand night watches?”

“Enough of them,” Godwin answered. “Though they may complain.”

“Just so they do it properly,” Brian answered. “Stand, do not sit. Stay still, do not walk about. That way you do not draw the eye of your foes. Eyes always away from the fire.”

Elaine

Tower security was provided by shifting flame barriers which drew their heat from a central source. The journeyman mage controlling the flames watched from his distant room, while telltales reported Elaine's march through one barrier after another. A mage who saw her progress and lived -- there were oddly few of these -- said that her aura drank the flames, so that she and her armor were untouched. Of course, reflected Grandoon, there had been few mages within Arburg, since few mages were foolish enough to support Pyrrin's despotism, while most of those native to Arburg had fled. Still, details gathered here and there suggested that Elaine harbored a specific hatred of those mage-born who supported Pyrrin.

Elaine took the guards at the spell-dampers by surprise. The door to the vault was heavily warded; the wards vanished at Elaine's touch. Grandoon suspected that a solid crossbar across the door would have been more effective. Before they could so much as stand, five men fell to Elaine's hand-and-a-half sword. The others found that she wielded the blade one-handed with the grace and speed of a dueling master demonstrating a fencing foil. Despite five-to-one odds in their favor, the remaining guards put home only a few blows before she struck them down.

One guard survived by feigning death. He saw Elaine shatter damper controls with mailed fist, then hold the door against reinforcements sent to restore the dampers. The defenders directed increasingly desperate attacks with pike and sword against her. The Duke's men, backed by wall-shattering spells, fought their way through the tower, down to the vault. There they found a corridor littered with dead. Elaine, gravely wounded, was holding her own against four men in heavy armor.

The surgeons assured Grandoon that one injured so badly as Elaine could not live without the aid of sorcery. Since the aura in which she shrouded herself blocked all curative spells, the surgeons saw no hope for her recovery. Grandoon, curious as to the nature of her protection against magic, waited for her to die. In the instant that she yielded herself to death, her protections would doubtless fail, allowing him to penetrate her secrets. He witnessed instead her miraculously swift recovery. She slept for a day and a half, ate ravenously, stood on the third day, and by the fourth was back on her feet, albeit with a distinct limp.

Grandoon watched her closely. A person whose natural protections against sorcery stopped thunderbolts and Death Runes would be a useful tool in the struggle against the Apostate, assuming her inclinations remained on the side of justice and virtue. Elaine accepted his less romantic attentions, most notably the lure of his library. She was happy to discuss magecraft, geography, history -- excepting only her modest part in it -- indeed, she would discuss almost anything except her own past. She affected the language, though not the manners, of a mercenary sell-sword. While she was lost in thought, her speech became genteel.

Grandoon found her to be an enchanting conversationalist, far more knowledgeable than expected of someone of her age. Of her family and past life, she dropped only oblique hints. Asked about the siege, she said she'd fought a few guards, most of whom she'd taken by surprise. Then the Duke's men rescued her. She denied all talent at spell-casting. If she could command the Presence, even very slightly, she was scrupulously careful to hide the fact. Most men-at-arms could summon firespark well enough to light dry tinder, though they denied that Firespark was sorcery. She carried flint and steel, and was adept at their use.

Grandoon suspected that she, or some unseen patron, actually used much magic, while being excruciatingly careful to avoid notice. Her passage through the tower could be explained by the protection of an amulet of great potency. Grandoon himself, or any other truly first-rate mage, could have destroyed the spell-dampers using her approach. Grandoon would have preferred other, safer methods against the tower, but Elaine's resistance to sorcery was not unique. The Duke of Arburg had reckoned himself safe because the world contained at most dozens of first-rate mages, none of whom would plausibly take arms against him before other mages would come to the Duke's aid.

Elaine's bladesmanship was possible for a master wielding an enchanted sword. Her recovery after the siege was slightly short of miraculous. Her approach to the city was at best improbable. She had met a southern contingent of archers, been invited to share a campfire, and paid for her meals with good coin. The men remembered her as a runaway farmboy, young, with an impressive set of weapons. Then they ignored her. Her cloak had hidden her figure; seemingly, they had not noticed her sex. Female sell-swords were not unknown, but militiamen three days from wives and lovers were usually aware of a woman's presence.