

A Gentle Walk

June 2025 — Issue One



A Boat to Golden Island
by Tiffanie Gray

Collation File

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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.

Subscriptions: For the first six 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. (2) Receive all N3F fanzines.

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. 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.

Welcome to A Gentle Stroll

My prior APA was The Wild Hunt, which lasted for well more than a decade, until one Editor died and the other found other interests. What is this APA certainly not at all the same as The Wild Hunt? It is a gentle stroll through park-like gardens. I had originally proposed as a title The Rhodomontadulous Promenade, the parade of boasters and braggarts. A rhodomontade, after all, is a boastful bloviation of a tirade. Then a would-be contributor noted that he could neither spell nor pronounce the zine name, an issue that appeared to me to be problematic.

Our zine's host is The National Fantasy Fan Federation (N3F). Founded in 1941 by the likes of Ray Bradbury, E.E. Smith, Forey Ackerman, and Damon Knight, our zine publishing efforts are now in their 85th year. Our other APA, N'APA, was launched in 1959. Its size has ranged from humongous down to two members exchanging emails, but it has persisted ever since.

For the N3F, A Gentle Stroll is an experiment. The N3F already publishes nine fanzines, with a tenth, Origins, on hiatus. Our policy has always been that all members are sent all of our zines. However, at some point there is a threat that members are buried in emailed PDFs. Indeed, several people have departed because they found our mailings to be too many to read.

About George

I could be very boring. I shall try not to be. I started board wargaming in 1958 with Avalon Hill's Tactics II. In 1964 I founded the MIT Strategic Games Society...they're still there. In 1967 I joined the new International Federation of Wargaming, hearing from zine editor and board wargame designer Gary Gygax. He later published the IFW's Castle and Crusade Society's zine Domesday Book. He and friend Dave Arneson got into miniatures, then fantasy miniatures. About this time the IFW collapsed, but Gary's miniatures rules company persisted. In the early 1970s, MITSGS member Kevin Slimak came back from GenCon with a set of rules variants for Chainmail, the medieval rules set. Yes, those rules variants. Dungeons and Dragons. It was in the pages of The American Wargamer that I announced, to general local disbelief, that D&D was not a set of miniatures rules. It was a new branch of the wargaming hobby, on the level of board wargames, miniatures, and diplomatic games. I seem to have been the first to say that explicitly. (OK, I skipped computer games. While I did play, back in 1963, what would now be called a first-person shooter, the relevant computer would in modern terms cost several million dollars. And it had an incredible 16K of 8-bit memory.) I contributed to the first few issues of The Wild Hunt, which led me into writing fiction (now at ten novels). And now we are here.

Letter to the APAs

Readers:

I like the idea of starting a roleplay APA. If you do, then remember there's more to roleplay than fantasy. Don't let the Dungeons and Dragons people dominate. Please remember the space travel fans, the people who play games like Traveler. Please remember the Time Travel fans, the people who like to play Doctor Who. Please also remember the superhero fans.

...Wesley Kawato.

Ronin Engineer for Unknown Zine #1
by Jim Eckman, 255 S. Rengstorff #171, Mountain View, CA, 94040
alarum@roninengineer.com (650) 996-6728

A Farewell to Alarums

Alarums & Excursions has ended its almost fifty year print run and Wikipedia has a good article about it. Its missing some minor details, one which is that Balboa Game Co., which distributed 40% of all TSR products, also distributed A&E, which meant on the West Coast you would find it in almost every game store. I'm not sure how long that lasted, two or three years? It kicked A&E's popularity to the max and it was widely read and influential, most of the published histories about RPGs seem focused on TSR and not much else.

About Me

My first article for A&E was in issue 6 and the last in the 200s. I stopped subscribing also. I also have an article in the last issue.

I first stumbled onto RPGs at the recently opened game store in the local mall. I was gobsmacked, I'd never had seen anything like it, racks of metal miniatures, shelves of games and books. I had mail ordered boardgames up till that point and played miniatures with the cheap Airfix figures available everywhere.

It was August 1975 and they had an entire collection of TSR publications including **Empire of the Petal Throne** which after looking the white box set and John Carter of Mars? I purchased it, the other two games looked shoddy compared to EPT.

When I got home with it I showed it to a friend and we tried to figure it out without much success, we did use the maps for some homemade wargames, they were awesome. A month later I went back and they had a new bulletin board with contacts for local gamers of all descriptions. One of these was a D&D group run by Chuck Alderson, which kicked off my twenty year gaming binge.

This included working at Balboa Game Co. for a couple years, writing for the inhouse prozine and creating a solo dungeon module, **The Monkey God's Curse** with artwork by Tim Finkas.

In the late 90s I moved to the Bay Area and dropped out of gaming, SF fandom, historical reenacting and pursued some of my other hobbies, Japanese, sumi-e, and as always, reading Speculative Fiction.

Most of my friends did only a little gaming, mostly computer or Cataan, so I didn't follow up on this until the pandemic introduced me to working video conferencing which we still use for weeknights and when infection rates are high. Played in some fun online games, mostly one shots and that resparked my love for RPGs, though I admit after looking at and playing current D&D, its not my favorite by a long shot.

I'm unfamiliar with the modern game systems, a gamer Rumpelstilskin, but I'm surprised how many of the older games have come back in print. Games I've DMed, Bushido, The Fantasy Trip, Traveler, CoC and D&D. Also EPT, but never again.

I'm less interested in game systems than the world of the game. I ran my first SFRP using McEwan's Starguard for the little amount of combat and hand-waving the skills, I was running the Zero Stone as a scenario from the POV of the Zacathan archaeologist. We enjoyed it, this was prior to Traveller. I will probably natter about worldbuilding.

As a player I'm up for most things.



Storm over Warlock: Shann Lantee's Dream

Messages from the Zhalindorian Embassy

Dr. Rich Staats (zhalindor@verizon.net) <https://zhalindor.com>



Greetings!

First, thank you to George for inviting me to participate. George and I have known each other since the days of the Interregnum APA. The authors including: George, Pete, Joe, Kiralee, and a host of others, were friends, and I often did activities with them including dinners, attending conferences and conventions, and, of course, playing games.

Second, this first column, BLOG, article, Zine, or whatever the appropriate name is, will be different than those that follow. This one will just be an introduction and a call for input from the readers. One of the main things that I learned during the years that Interregnum ran was that some of the most interesting and insightful discussions in the Zine were generated by interactions between the authors and the readers.

Bottom-line Up-front (*the older version of TL;DR*).

I have been gaming, writing about gaming, and presenting professional seminars about gaming for more than 47 years. I am a regular seminar presenter at Origins and GENCON, and I have written articles on: World Building, Creating Memorable Non-player Characters, Creating and maintaining Campaigns, Props, Intergenerational Gaming, and many other topics. My work has appeared in a number of venues including Shadis magazines (and tbh others that I cannot remember anymore).

All of this prep is culminating, and I have signed a contract with CRC Books to write a book called “The Principled Gamemaster” that should come out in Spring 2026.

Background: For the rest of this first Zine entry, I will just give a little background, so the readers know where some of my passions and experience lie. George tells me that this APA publication will be about gaming.

My background in games goes all the way back. My large extended family was long on creativity and short on resources. We often created our own games with bits of wood, paper, and other materials that we scrounged. Cards were considered an “adult activity,” and being invited to play cards was a rite of passage in my family growing up. We were a farming family, and we worked hard. The games were a respite from backbreaking labor; they were an escape.

My first experience with role-playing games (RPGs) was with DnD, the original flavor back in 1977. I was going to high school in Wisconsin, not far from either Lake Geneva or the Twin Cities, the two beacons for the fledgling RPGs world. Like almost everyone back then, we really had no idea what we were doing, but it started a creative spark that has lasted these past 47 years and took me to gaming on five continents, more on that later.

I watched my new hobby grow, be reviled by the mainstream, shrink, blossom, grown again, and eventually become widely known and regarded by popular culture. By the time we got to the 1990s, some of my friends made a living from gaming. Joe of Interregnum fame made a decent income as a professional Gamemaster (GM) for a time.

Early Army Time: The US Army has been a big part of my adult life and my gaming world too. I joined the military as soon as I could to escape a potential life of abject poverty. I ended up attending the US Military Academy at West Point. It was not a place known for copious free time, but there was enough that I started up a campaign that lasted until graduation.

My first two postings as a junior officer were in Germany. Germany was different in those days than it is today. Germany was the front for the Cold War, and the US had approximately 500,000 personnel in Europe, and there were groups actively doing bad things, like kidnapping people, blowing up car bombs, and other undesirable activities. It was a seven days a week work environment. Despite that, I found time to run campaigns in both Stuttgart and in Zweibruecken. (One of my players, Bill Reed, is currently playing virtually in my live table-top, on-going campaign.)

Then, it was over to Korea and the Demilitarized Zone. It was another 24-7 assignment, and once again, I ran a campaign in my world, Zhalindor, but this time it was a Play-by-Mail game. Over the time in Korea, I think we only were able to complete 4-5 turns. I had a trusty **Apple IIe** that I used to write up and print out the turns for the participants.

I was at Fort Riley in the 1st Infantry Division for a couple of years, and you guessed it, ran a couple of campaigns there before heading off to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) to work on a Ph.D. in Electrical Engineering/Computer

Science (back when they were close to the same thing).

MIT Days: While at MIT, I was involved in many, many activities, and one of them brought me in close contact with one of the living groups, New House III. After a short time, I started a campaign there too, and we mostly played twice a week for four years.

The time at MIT was substantially different than my time as a junior officer in the field Army. At MIT I was expected to think and develop new ideas. For years, I had a rough set of principles that had guided my gaming. At MIT I turned those into my “Gamemastering Principles” and started doing seminars on their applications at gaming conventions starting with the now long defunct Dovercon (in Dover, New Hampshire, not the ongoing one in Dover, Delaware) and working to Arisia and eventually long-standing stints at Origins and GENCON, where I have been a semi-regular for years.

The Last Thirty Years: I was going to retire from the Army as a Lieutenant Colonel, but then 9/11 came, and I spent another twenty years in uniform, retiring as a major general, division command.

I also spent thirteen years as a single dad and raised three gamer kids, who are gamer adults now. All the kids are out on their own and doing very, very well. We have a medical doctor married to a medical doctor with our two grandsons. We have a former combat marine who raises show bunnies, and his twin sister is a chef in Chicago.

My time from 1994-2016 was spent working for various “think tanks” in the Washington, DC area include the Logistics Management Institute and the MITRE Corporation where I capstoned as the director for the largest program division.

Aside from three overseas deployments, I actively ran campaigns in my gaming world, Zhalindor, during that entire time.

I also used role-playing in some non-standard ways to help achieve important objectives. For example, I used role-playing exercises in my brigade when preparing my soldiers for Key Leader Engagements, and my eldest son, Ben, has said on numerous occasions that the lessons her learned about tactics and social dynamics around the gaming table saved his life and his squad members' on multiple occasions.

As Forest Gump might say, "and, that is all that I am going to say about that." Believe me, 47+ years means that there are many, many more stories to tell.

Call for Action: I want to end the Zine by requesting input from the readers and other Zine authors. I would love to hear from you. My email address is in the masthead and just to repeat it is: zhalindor@verizon.net

There are many things to write about, but the introduction and background material should be enough to spark some interest.

Looking forward to hearing from you. In the interim, may all your rolls be critical successes!

Writing Fiction Through Play-by-Email

Jim Vassilakos

For the past few years, I've been running "The Plankwell Campaign" with Timothy Collinson, who has been co-GMing and co-editing, and in the process, we've been producing a campaign report that sort of reads like a novel. You can find the latest version here:

<https://jimvassilakos.com/dos-programs/plank.html>

(this will be updated periodically)

"A novel?" you say. "That sounds like a lot of work."

Yes, but it's fun work, and there are other advantages as well.

For example, you get into a lot more detail when you write than when you're just sitting around a table engaging in prototypical face-to-face roleplaying. Is that good or bad? Well, I guess it depends on how much detail you want to explore.

I'm going to be honest with you here. I thought I understood the Traveller universe to a fair degree — I'd been playing since the *little black books* came out in the late 70s — but as we started writing this thing out, I soon realized I knew a lot less than I thought. So if you want to learn a campaign setting, especially one that has the depth of the official Traveller universe or even one you've created yourself, writing a story in that setting is a good way to figure out how much you've actually figured out.

Another advantage of writing up a PBEM (Play-by-Email) and massaging it into something resembling a novel as you go is that the document then becomes a sort of campaign bible that you can refer to, reminding yourself of any key details that have become a bit hazy over time. And, of course, there's the most obvious payoff, which is that you can share what you've written with other gamers who are, at least, presumably interested in the setting.

There's also a final payoff, which is less obvious, at least initially, but which may come to be of greater value to you as years pass and the memories of your face-to-face role-playing

campaigns become increasingly obscured. If you do this — turn your gaming into written fiction — you will have essentially crystalized your role-playing memories into a form that you'll then be able to revisit and relive well into the future. Maybe it's not much, but my guess is it's not nothing.



At this point, I can only plant the seed, so to speak, so that you can ruminate upon what I'm spelling out and possibly, one day, undertake this sort of campaign. Assuming some small percentage of you will eventually do so, let me give you a few words of advice before you sally forth.

First, having one player or at most two, is, I think, better than having a whole bunch of players. I've tried it both ways, and my sense is that having only one protagonist yields a more unified narrative that is simpler to follow and is simpler to referee as well. Multiple protagonists tend to force multiple perspectives within a single scene, also known as *head hopping*, and this breaks the narrative's flow and is disconcerting for the reader. For this reason, single-player campaigns are inherently more streamlined, and as an additional positive side effect, the player has the freedom to explore the setting without the sort of

concerns and constraints typical in multi-player campaigns. So I personally like it better, but your mileage may vary.

As for first versus third person, I'm running this campaign in the first person because, again, I think it's simpler, and it forces a greater depth of character on the part of the player, but if you prefer third person, I've gone that route as well, and it works, so use whatever you're most comfortable with. I'm not going to advise on this point, but you might want to try it both ways, presumably running different campaigns, to see how each suits you.

My second piece of advice is that you find yourself a co-referee, someone who you can at least bounce ideas off before you commit to them. A good co-GM can save you from making some ridiculous mistakes. Just take my word for it.

Incidentally, I call this single-player, multi-gamemaster approach *IPMG*, and I think it's a really interesting way to roleplay, as it flips the paradigm of the traditional multi-player, single-gamemaster framework, yielding very different sorts of narratives. I think it's really worth exploring, and I'm actually surprised that nobody else seems to be doing it.

My third piece of advice is that you need to be careful when choosing a player and/or co-referee. You need to find participants — co-writers, in effect — who share your vision of the setting, and they also need to fall into your camp when it comes to the question of role-playing vs. roll-playing (characterization vs. combat). If they're on one side of this fence and you're on the other, it might not work out. Finally, and this should be obvious, they need to like to write. If they hate writing, they're not cut out for PBEMing, because PBEMing *is* writing. You play it by writing. So this last one is sort of a requirement, I'm afraid.

Fourth, it's worth bearing in mind that this form of roleplaying straddles the line between PBEMing and authorship, so there's going to be

some natural tension between the two. For example, character flaws are considered so important in fiction that a seemingly perfect character will often be criticized as being a "Mary Sue" or "Gary Stu", and yet players often want to play an idealized, essentially flawless version of themselves. Indeed, they may push back against portraying the character with any meaningful flaws, thus depriving the protagonist of a realistic and sympathetic personality as well as a growth arc. All I can suggest here is that you talk about these issues with the other participants to make sure everyone is on the same page before you begin.

So now you have it, the bare-bones basics of what you can do to take your gaming to a whole new level, and like I said at the beginning, it's fun. If it wasn't fun, I wouldn't beckon you to give it a go. As for how much time it takes, that's up to you. The Plankwell Campaign consumes a few hours per week, less time than would be consumed running or even playing in a typical weekly face-to-face campaign, and due to the asynchronous nature of PBEMing, you can choose the specific hours. You don't need to be anywhere at any specific time. Each of the participants gets to fit it into their own schedule however they like, so that makes the organization aspect a *lot* easier.

If nothing else, this could be an avenue for you to scratch that gaming itch whenever it's hard to find local players. I'm in California. Timothy is in England. Our player is somewhere else, I'm not even sure where. You can do this sort of gaming with anyone anywhere, even an old gaming buddy who's moved away, and all you both need is email.

So it's something I hope you will consider. If you have questions or need any help, feel free to contact me. Otherwise, good gaming to you, and good luck.

Rhodomontadulous Promenade

A Parade of Boasters and Braggarts
June 2025 -- Issue 1

From George Phillies
48 Hancock Hill Drive
Worcester MA 01609
phillies@4liberty.net

For this issue, I have three segments. One is a partial discussion of D&D rules, as they appear the Three Holy Books and the One Sacred Plywood Box. Those rules are much less focused on combat, and much more open to different interpretations and applications, than are many modern rules.

Following my rules discussion is a piece of a roleplaying environment. You are seeing the background hidden from the players. At the end, there is a long tradition of publishing fiction in rolegaming APAs. I have summoned a piece of fiction that appeared at a very early date, something that I wrote.

The 1974 rules give a modest description of combat, lists of spells, and cursory references to the three character classes, but leave the world and the adventures to the creativity of the gamesmaster. Prepackaged world environments for less imaginative gamesmasters were in the future, and for gamesmasters with no idea of what to do there eventually appeared scenario packs in which the players were bound to march along a single path, deviations from the trail of events being forbidden.

We return to the games and rules of decades past, in particular to the first edition of Dungeons & Dragons. In my experience, most gamesmasters and players viewed the rules as something over which a game could be spread, with the understanding that rules were optional or to be interpreted as seemed most appropriate to give a good game. Thus, when an early gamesmaster I interacted with thought that it would be interesting to have combat that was basically men at arms and men on horses, with a very few low-level magicians to change things slightly. If you entered his campaign as a first level, you started with your platoon of followers, as though you were a junior son of some noble going out on an adventure. Some of the rules, for example the requirement that clerics had to be men, were viewed as a characteristic of a specific campaign.

The price list came in for early criticism. The price of a bud of garlic, five gold pieces, matched the price of

standard rations for one week for one person, which possibly would include, for example, five or 8 pounds of garlic kielbasa. The re-interpretation I recall was that the price of bread for a week, this being ten or more loaves, would be perhaps a copper penny or two, the price of the cheese to go with it and the price of the small beer or poor wine to go with it would be three or five copper pieces, and so forth. There would be an exchange rate between copper pieces and silver pieces and gold pieces, with several people having knowledge of medieval times noting that in period Central European gold and silver coins had the interesting feature that they did not contain any gold or silver. Those metals were very rare. A more familiar exchange rate might have been twenty to one or 30 to 1.

So, to launch the game, you started rolling three D6 for the six character attributes and then once again for how much money you started with. There was a presumption that a fighting man would start with a sword and at least leather armor, and would plausibly also start with a spear or standard bow. The price of arrows was extremely high in some campaigns. The redistribution rules between the three primary attributes, military ability, magical ability, and piety, however named, were perhaps incomplete. The simplification with which I was familiar was that you could move points from one attribute to an adjoining attribute with a 2 to 1 ratio, and could move points between military ability and piety at a 3 to 1 ratio. Thus, for example, the implausible person who managed to roll natural eighteens on all three attributes could rearrange points into magical ability from the two sides. A common understanding was that you could not reduce an attribute to lower than 9, so that eighteen points being rearranged became nine additional points added to the magical ability, so you ended up with the magician with the magical ability of twenty-seven. There were a variety of other interpretations of the same rule.

At some point you collected together some number of players, and had a gamesmaster who suggested things that you could do. The simple original version was that you went down into a dungeon. The economic rationale for dungeons was not always clear, though I do recall the dungeon Hellsgate run by a friend of mine. It was said of Hellsgate that you could readily emerge from Hellsgate as a fourth level character with a dozen magic items and six thousand gold pieces, assuming you went into Hellsgate as a sixth level character with two dozen magical items, twenty thousand gold pieces, and an army of five dozen men. The dungeons were a profit operation for the monsters.

At some point along the way, and credit should be given to Greg Stafford and Runequest, it occurred to people that randomly going into unlit dungeons was not very

interesting and that there should be some universe in which random dungeon delving turned into campaigns with objectives. There were people who created their own worlds. There were people who were aware of the world, borrowed a chunk of it and ran campaigns in some piece of it. Then there were the bottom feeders, the lowest of the low when the opinion of serious gamesmasters, who had absolutely no idea how to set up a campaign or even an event, so they had to read from a pamphlet that gave the players more or less no choice in what they did. The more or less no choice feature has persisted into modern times, where I have been lectured by a computer game design expert that each level was absolutely required to have precisely three serious opponents and at the and one very serious opponent. These rules took a significant part of the thought out of the game design effort.

Tactics were sometimes quite limited. I recall the friend of mine describing watching a group of players attack a reasonably well defended stronghold, and losing their entire party without managing to get through the first room beyond the gate. The friend proposed to rerun the event. He would suggest to the players what they should do at each point. The players thought this was a great idea. After somewhat less long than you would expect, the players entirely cleaned out the entire stronghold and captured the treasure. In the process of doing so they suffered approximately no wounds, took almost no damage to their equipment, and had the gamesmaster saying "Not fair! Not fair!".

Once upon a time we did set up a historical miniatures game, using cardboard rectangles not toy soldiers, and fought out a battle using the standard English medieval miniatures rules. However, each side had three first-level magicians and three fifth-level magicians. There was no indication in the rules book as to how often the magician could throw a spell, so we assumed that once per combat round was adequate. It very soon became clear that the game most closely resembled a recreation of the battle of the Somme, except that both sides were out in the open. At the end, I had the one surviving third-level magician and the one surviving first-level magician, the other side had a superb pike formation unit of the quality that was trained to advance while in square, except they couldn't possibly get away with from my magicians, so they surrendered. I am happy to admit that my victory was dumb luck. I could perfectly well have lost instead of won.

For my slightly later fiction, I emphasized that infantry advanced with a shovel for each man, entrenchment and missile weapons were the order of the day, and a good medieval castle would've been recognized by Vauban except that the embankments were a bit thicker. Vauban

was the French Marshall who was recognized as the supreme expert on the art of siege warfare. Recall, however, in fairness to Vauban, that his cannon might get off a cannonball within fifteen or 20 degrees of the aim direction, so that to pound a hole in a fortress wall you had to close to within fifty or 75 yards with the cannon, but a lightning bolt would create a 1 inch diameter (game inch, that's ten feet real world) hole with an additional depth of 10 feet, real world. Boring holes in castle walls became much easier.

A good campaign would present the players with a series of layers of mystery and challenge, with the players at first not necessarily knowing what the problem is, let alone what they are to do to solve it.

Setting the Tone

A gamesmaster setting the tone for a new campaign may well want to populate enough background that he can respond to unexpected player decisions. The tone also populates the sort of challenges that the players may encounter. Oft-times, the challenge is kept a secret from the players, something for them to find as the campaign advances.

So here we have a bit of background, opening to an unfinished novel *Small Giant Class Liberation Army*. After all, many rolegaming societies are positively medieval, in many of the less fortunate senses of that word.

"Comrade Captain," the quiet voice came out of the early twilight, "another li ahead. I found the cave. The villager from Three Peach Trees pointed at it, then fled in terror."

Captain Chingfei Chang paused to catch her breath. "Don't stop," she said to the men behind her. "Follow Wang to the cave. I will bring up the rear." She tried not to grind her teeth. This was her first independent command, her first chance to strike a blow against the Japanese invaders in this, the Great War of the Resistance, and so far matters were doing poorly. It appeared that the local commander of the Chiang Kai-Shek clique had betrayed her, either for profit or because he was looking beyond the current war to the final struggle for control of all China. In this year 1939, both of those times seemed infinitely far off, not that she expected to live to see either of them.

"But, Comrade Captain," Sergeant Enlai Liu began his expected protest.

"Enough! We are leaving no one behind. I will stand at the rear. The men will know they cannot straggle, or they will endanger me. But, you four, wait here. Switch off with the stretcher bearers when they bring Comrade Zhou."

“You will wait? Then I will lead the way,” Sergeant Liu answered. “Be sure you are not captured by the Japanese running dogs. Save your last round for yourself.”

“And spare the life of some Japanese officer?” she answered, not quite angrily. “Absolutely not. Besides, I can hear their horns, far in the distance. If it becomes dark, they may lose us. It will rain soon. That will clean our trail before dawn. Now, revolutionary discipline! Go!”

A quarter hour later, Chingfei reached the mouth of the cavern. Her men were indeed all ahead of her. The cave was tall enough she could walk in, which must, she thought, have been a relief for the four men carrying the stretcher. The sun had now set; it was almost full darkness. Out from the mouth of the cave came an eerie glow, a deep violet almost impossible to see.

She stepped inside. The light was much brighter, enough that she could see her men, sitting in a circle talking quietly.

“Hush,” she said. “The Japanese could hear you. How deep is the cave?”

“Comrade Captain, I just came back from checking. It goes back a hundred yards. There is one sharp turn. The cave floor is covered with sand, good walking. Comrade Zhou is already being carried back there. But the cave end is very strange. There is a wall of glass.”

“The rest of you follow Comrade Zhou,” Chingfei ordered. “Do we still have the sweeps?”

“Yes, Comrade Captain!” Sergeant Liu answered.

“Carefully and very thoroughly hide our tracks in the sand. The Japanese may yet decide we are not here,” Chang said. “The rest of you, be on your way.”

Chang sniffed the air. There was an odd scent, like unfamiliar out-of-season flowers, on this cold late-fall night. Behind her, screams could be heard. The Japanese must have captured the villager. It would be unfortunate if he led the Japanese to the cave, but there really had been no obvious alternative hiding place. The terrain was much too open to hide. The Japanese were fresh, while her men were exhausted; if they kept running, they would soon enough be run to ground. Besides, her orders had been to find a secure base camp location, invisible from the air. A cave surely qualified.

The cave actually twisted and turned. After the second bend her men had come to an exhausted halt. Most of them were already asleep. A few of the most alert were posted as sentries, peering between rocks at the cave entrance.

“Captain, there is an extraordinary wall,” Sergeant Liu said. “And a narrow passage deeper into the hill. I sent Wang and Li, with our lantern and stern orders not to use it, to see where it leads. It seems to lead nowhere. There is an abrupt end. But with this wall

glow, you don’t need a lamp. You can easily see where you are going.” He gestured politely for her to follow.

The wall, she thought, was indeed remarkable. It was absolutely flat, with the feel of a glass window. When she pressed her face against it, there seemed to be a light on the far side. Someone was behind her.

“Comrade Captain?” Liu spoke as quietly as possible. “There are Japanese soldiers at the cave mouth. They are looking in but not entering. One of them seems to have a flashlight. He is looking carefully at the sand.”

“Let us be as quiet and still as a mouse,” she said. Liu led her back to the bend in the cave. She carefully peeked around the edge. A Japanese officer, sword drawn, was leading a dozen of his men forward. Inescapably, her men would be found.

“Comrade Sergeant,” she said, “Wake all the men. Very soon we will be fighting the Japanese.”

“I know you are there!” the Japanese officer called. “Come out and I will give you an honorable and rapid death.”

Chang pressed finger to lips. The Japanese officer shouted something to his men. Shots rang out. Objects clattered against the far cave wall. Rifle grenades! Chang threw herself at the ground. The concussion of several explosions left her dazed and half-deafened. Must stand, and lead, she thought distantly. But what was ‘stand’? Shouts had to be Sergeant Liu leading the men in a desperate counter charge. Someone was firing the machine gun. She passed out.

She awoke to find Liu sponging her face with a damp cloth. “Comrade Captain?” Sergeant Liu asked. “Are you awake?”

“I, Yes.” she answered. “What happened?”

“You were knocked unconscious,” Liu answered. “We killed ten Japanese, and took their weapons. But we are trapped. They have another machine gun outside. We lost three men trying to reach it. It cannot be done. They tried another charge. We slaughtered them like chickens. Now we hear them doing something, but cannot say what. Outside it is dawn. They cannot see in. I have men building entrenchments across the width of the cave. If they attack, we will kill them.”

“However, if they cannot enter, we cannot leave. Is there any water to be found?” she asked.

“Unfortunately, no, Comrade Captain,” Sergeant Liu answered.

“Then they will not be waiting for very long,” she answered. “We shall hold out as long as we can. Perhaps something will happen to change the balance of forces. Until then, make a diligent search for other exits. Dig holes. See how deep the sand lies. Perhaps there is a hidden exit. Perhaps we can find water. The search will at least keep the men busy.”

Shifting shadows from the cave mouth marked the passage of hours. Very clearly, the cave had only one exit, the one blocked by Japanese guns. Captain Chang kept searching for alternatives, but it appeared that the only choice was to charge into a machine gun nest. That could be tried in the deep of the night, as quietly as possible to avoid warning the Japanese, but even with those tactical advantages a charge into machine gun fire remained a path to certain death.

Now the Japanese outside were shouting again. What was it? A roar shook the cavern. Another shock wave knocked Chang from her feet. There came the crash of falling rock and a cloud of dust. A look toward the cave entrance revealed only darkness. The Japanese had planted explosives and closed the cave mouth. Perhaps they could dig their way out, she thought, before they asphyxiated.

"Comrade Captain Chang," Sergeant Liu called. "The explosion. It shattered the glass wall. There is light on the far side." Chang wept with relief. She had been convinced that death was certain, but at the last moment hope had returned.

"Comrade Sergeant." Chang used her command voice. "We need to be out of here quickly. Collect all the men and their equipment, be sure the wounded are all helped to move, and be ready to advance. I will take Ching and Wang, and reconnoiter the exit. If possible we will set up outside the exit to ambush Japanese forces attempting to trap us again." Next time, she thought, I will be a little more careful about thinking of a cave as a safe hiding place. "Ching, Wang, follow me."

The glass had shattered into a million pieces. In the distance Chang could see sunlight. In between? "Ching, Wang, those are stairs, and cut stone. There must be a village ahead of us." What sort of people build paths into caves? she wondered. People who have eased the passage of your stretcher-bearers, it would appear.

The cave's exit was well up on a mountainside. Behind her was a steep stone cliff. They had emerged at one end of a tall steep spine of rock. From her vantage point, she could see three-quarters of the distant horizon. Far below were heavy forests and what appeared in the distance to be farmer's fields. A broad river edged with wide fields made its way entirely around the mountain, approaching from the southwest, looping to the east, and disappearing to the west. At several points, thin columns of smoke suggested small villages. In the far distance a white tower, stone, she thought, and remarkably tall, rose through the trees. Chang jogged her mental map. Surely there was no river that large locally? However, she could see it clearly, not to mention the paved road that ran parallel to it. She gestured for a pause and listened. She heard no sounds from Japanese soldiers, no gunfire, and certainly not an observation airplane circling overhead. "Ching," she whispered,

"Go back and tell Comrade Sergeant Liu that I said to bring everyone and everything out of the cave. Comrade Peng Wang, creep forward to the edge of the hill and see if you see anything between us and the forest."

Ever so slowly, Captain Chang's men crept out of the cave into the bright air. Wang returned to report.

"Comrade Captain," Wang said, "there is a gentle slope with more stairs. I looked carefully with the big binoculars. Near the river, a distance inland from the road, there are three small villages. They are very strange. They each have stockade and fields with people working in them. The clothing is odd, all different colors. To the southwest along the road, approaching, it looks like a troop of cavalry, all wearing garish colors, not at all like Japanese or Kuomintang army uniforms."

"No one move!" Sergeant Liu shouted. "Airplane!"

Captain Chang froze, then slowly turned her head to where Liu was pointing. She had seen airplanes before, several times, but this one was completely different. There was absolutely no sound. "Binoculars," she whispered to Wang. Seen through the binoculars, the airplane was a colorful rectangle, with no signs of wings or tail. Gradually it descended. Something seemed to be moving on top of it, but it was just too far away to make out clearly. To her eyes, it appeared to be flying to the white tower. After a few minutes it faded into the distance.

"Was it a Japanese bomber?" Liu asked. "I did not recognize it."

"Nor did I," Chang said. "It didn't even look like an airplane." She described what she had seen.

"Comrade Captain?" Corporal Chuntao Wu had waited politely for her Captain. "Over the side of the hill to the left, a hundred yards down. There is a stream coming off the mountain, and what looks to be dry wood for a fire."

"Very good! Cooks! Go with Chuntao, and if there is enough dry wood for a smokeless fire, let us boil enough rice for a solid meal." Captain Chang pointed, and two men joined Wu in heading down the slope. "The rest of you take the stairs down to the bottom of the hill. Comrade Sergeant Liu, Apothecary Tseng, Comrade Wang, Comrade Ching, stay here." She waited while her men headed down slope. She was pleased to see that they remembered to put someone on point, fifty yards ahead of the rest of the group. "Comrade Tseng, how is Comrade Zhou doing?"

Tseng's shoulders sank. "I have done everything I know how to do," he answered. "I do not have any magic western medicines. He might do better if he were allowed to rest, not be moved, but I think it will not be more than a day or two before we must bury him."

Chang frowned. Zhou had been a brave soldier, perhaps too brave, and had attended lectures by the great

leaders of the People's Army. He had met Comrade Mao himself. More than anyone else, he understood how to carry out their mission. "Do what you can," she said. "There are no magicians or miracle cures. Go with your patient." She pointed down the hill.

"Comrade Wang," she continued, "take the small binoculars. Go to the slope overlooking the stream. Keep an eye for approaching soldiers." He headed off. "Comrade Ching, back inside the cave. If the Japanese reopen the entrance, shoot at them to warn us.

"Comrade Sergeant?" Chang faced her second-in-command.

"Yes, Comrade Captain?" Liu snapped to attention.

"I did not say anything that would confuse our men," Chang said. "But there is something strange here. Surely the cliff and mountains behind us are much larger than the hills we were approaching yesterday."

"I noticed this, and said nothing. For the same reason. And over there, in the distance, surely that is snow on the top of the mountain?" He pointed.

"Yes. And that river below us is very big," she said.

"I agree, Comrade Captain."

"So where on earth are we? That cave was deep, but not that deep." Her question was not rhetorical.

"Also," Liu said, "when you let me look through the telescope at that very distant troop of cavalry. There are no such uniforms. Those men look like peacocks."

"I considered this." She shrugged. "Then I remembered. They look like Japanese, in samurai medieval armor. I had not realized that the Japanese are that reactionary. It is amazing."

"Perhaps you should join our men," Liu suggested. "They may have noticed the mountain, and are too afraid of you to speak. With the telescope, I will keep watch on the Japanese. If anything changes, I will send Wang down to tell you."

"I agree. It is very fortunate that the people entrusted us with two binoculars, a telescope, and a Type 11 machine gun. It is even more fortunate that I have you as my first sergeant." Chang nodded emphatically.

Liu snapped a sharp salute. "The Comrade Captain is most kind. I will do my best to serve the people and live up to your words." Chang headed down the stairs.

Fiction

Fiction has long been a steadfast component of rolegaming APAs. I could search more vigorously, but the following is the opening section of **No Tears for a Princess**, which was at least one of the first pieces of fiction to appear in a rolegaming APA. If I recall

correctly, it was sent both to *The Wild Hunt* and to *Alarums and Excursions*.

It was written sometime in the period 1974-1978, when the surprise reveal at the end was far more radical than it would be seen to be in the current epoch.

No Tears for a Princess

Strive not, good sir, 'gainst stormy wave,
Nor cry my name 'neath star-topped nave,
For Death stalks me with wand and stave
To seal my soul in stoneclogged cave.

So shed no tears for princess brave
Who knows she goes to unmarked grave
But still will ride, her land to save.

...The Ballad of Three Princes

Opening...

The river Tressin, half-a-mile broad, flowed majestically into the setting sun. Its northern bank was dotted with trees, red and yellow in the frost-touched fall air. Arburg-am-Tressin, largest city in thirty leagues, brooded on its southern shore. The city's gray walls jutted out into the water, oblivious to the rumble and groan of the currents at their base.

Two guards, looking cautiously across the river, waited on a stone parapet. They chatted nervously about nothing in particular, scarcely aware of their own words. From time to time they peered furtively over their shoulders. Behind them, to their right, rose a series of small watchtowers. To their left, the parapet ended in a granite-tiled plaza, the city's farthest projection into the river. A pair of blue-robed mages waited on the further wall, continually pausing in their conversation to look down the parapet beyond the guards.

A single figure came briskly up a distant stair. A deep hood and plain green cloak concealed body and face, but failed to hide the long stride and broad shoulders. The two guards glanced knowingly at its approach, then moved in front of their tower, out of the figure's line of sight. The magicians pretended to maintain a conversation, each struggling not to look elsewhere than the other's face.

The figure strolled along the parapet, slowly nearing the plaza. A slant of cloak suggested a stare across the river, as if the newcomer were admiring the wilderness. Finally, moving quietly, the figure passed the guard tower and stepped onto the terrace. The magicians turned away, to begin a stroll along the further parapet.

One gestured with a wand; the other mouthed an incantation as though testing his memory.

As on previous evenings, the figure stopped to watch the sun set. One guard reached backwards, ever so slightly, to release the tower door. Three figures in dull black -- black slippers, black trousers, black tunics, black capes and masks -- slipped silently from the guardhouse. One held a massive cudgel; the others waved tawdry short-swords. Three figures in black stalked one in green, closing on padded, spell-silenced feet.

Cudgel-bearer swung his weapon down at the green hood. His target lurched forward at the blow. A clatter of wood on metal revealed a helm hidden under the cloth. Cudgel-bearer cursed. Reversing his weapon's swing, he smashed green across ribs and back. Green skidded over the smooth-polished stone, finally rolling to peer skywards. Black ran in pursuit. One swordsman went to each side of their prey. Black dropped his cudgel, producing in the same fluid motion a dagger. His cloak swirled raven-dark as he pounced on his victim. The knife stabbed down.

The swordsmen saw Green's long fingers snap up, taking Black's knife hand at the wrist. The cloak draped over both of them, shrouding prey and predator alike. A convulsive motion of the cloak was the knife stabbing down again and again. The movement stopped. The swordsmen relaxed, grinning at each other. It had been a delicate job, in which their part was now accomplished.

The guardsmen stood at attention. The junior wished that he were elsewhere, no matter that he would gain a promotion for his deeds this day. He had heard the thud of a club, the ring of metal on metal, and finally a solid splash from the river below. He counted the seconds and turned, knowing he would find a vacant stone plaza.

Three black figures lay in ever-widening scarlet lakes. The mages, returned to the plaza, gestured at the senior of the guards. "Tell the Master!" one of them snapped. The junior guard peered over the wall. He thought he saw a disturbance in the water, nearly lost in the sparkle from the setting sun. He tried not to hear what happened behind him.

The senior guard scurried down the stairs, dodging temporary barricades held by his own men, to enter the city's heart. His run took him through winding streets, past tradesmen on their business, past taverns and homes. His boots pounded on the cobbled pavement, their rhythm punctuated by the wheeze of his breathing. He ignored jugglers, quarreling hobgoblins, a sorcerer's gracious arrival on flying carpet. A collision with the pushcart of a trollish

street hawker sent fruit rolling in all directions; he ran on, ignoring the curses directed at his back.

Castle gates loomed before him. Barely breaking stride, the guard drew an amulet from one pocket; sentries gave way at its sight. A final sprint down carpeted hallways brought him to a double door. Four halberdiers stood at the ready, blocking all entrance. They peered momentarily at the guardsman, then stood aside. The guard knocked thrice and swung one door open.

Within waited a solitary man in black and ermine. Gold lace on his coat accented a blond van Dyke and trimly cut hair. His rigid demeanor matched the dark, deeply carved furniture and tapestried walls. Lips curled upwards when he recognized the guardsman. "Is it done, Grand-Captain?" he whispered as the door swung shut.

The runner gasped a single phrase: "Alive, M'Lord Duke."

The blond face contorted in fury. "Damnation!" he shouted. A black and gold arm threw a wine goblet in an arc. It spun through the air, crystal sides gleaming, to shatter against the farther wall. "A thousand gold crowns! Gone! Wasted!" The Duke's fist smote the table, once and again, harder and harder. "May the Curse of Al-Benzir be on that one!" He sank dejectedly into his chair. "Summon my advisors again. There must be a way. This affront to my dignity can not be permitted to endure."

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North of the Tressin, a green-cloaked figure stood in the shallows, still gasping for breath. A plain unpatterned cape hung soddily around broad shoulders and narrower waist. The figure clambered up the bank, mud squishing under bare feet. Sandals lay discarded in the depths of the river.

On shore the figure stopped. Lean fingers undid a throat clasp. One arm gathered the cloak, while the other reached to the waist. The hood fell back, revealing a dented steel-lined helm with short nose guard. A single touch confirmed that the short-sword was still secure in its scabbard.

The figure looked back over the water. Arburg-am-Tressin sat placidly in the distance. The sun's rays reflected brilliantly from tower windows, leaving the river an inky blue. Birds soared and dipped above the current, their feathers tinged pink by the setting sun. A tilt of the head released the helm, which joined the still-dripping cloak over a well-muscled arm.

Her hair fell back to hang golden-brown across her neck. One hand cleared stray locks from sea-green eyes. A gleaming line of chain mail rose above her collar. Seen without the cloak, her dark green tunic clung to her armour, revealing the slight curves of her body. She looked perhaps sixteen. Her mouth pursed, reflecting not so much fear as a touch of sadness. She pushed hair clear of the nape of her neck and probed gingerly where the club had struck her helm. A further poke at her ribs evinced a grimace of pain. As the sun set, she turned from the river and disappeared into the woods.

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