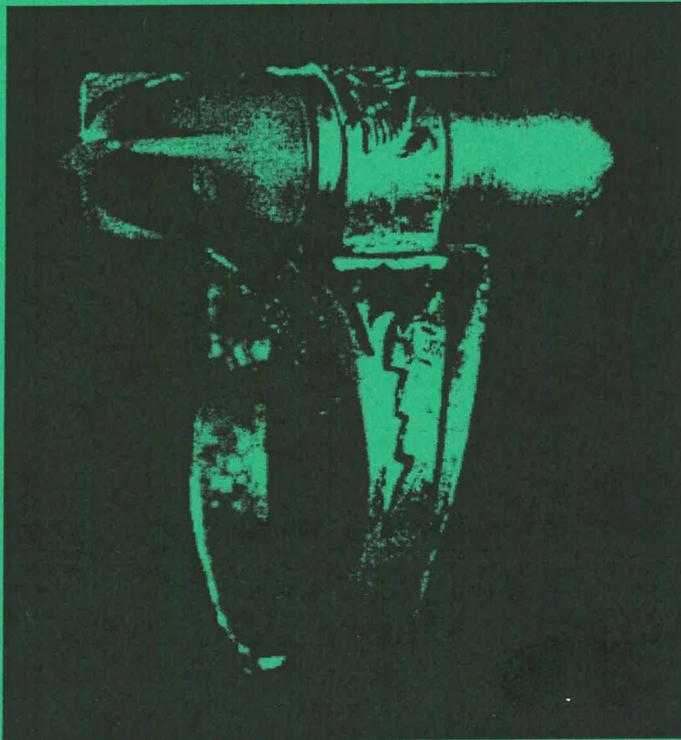


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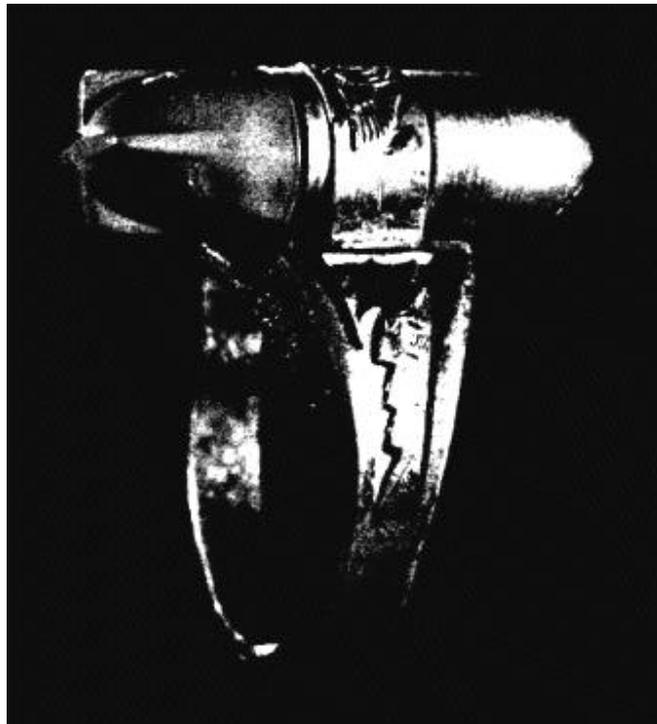
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Cover

From *Who Was That Masked Man? The
Story of the Lone Ranger*, by David Rothel



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Gary Johnson
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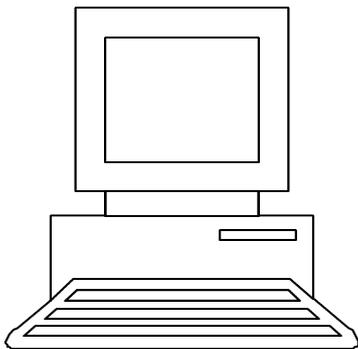
The Threat of Assassins

Submission Guidelines

Format

Text submissions: Please send text submissions to the Editor via email as a Rich Text Format (RTF) attachment (first preference), in any major word processor format, or plain ASCII text if formatting is not necessary. If you do not have e-mail, send text submissions on a 3.5" IBM-compatible floppy disk (disks will be returned at our expense). If you do not have a computer, send typed or legible hand-written manuscripts, preferably double-spaced.

Artwork: Please send a quality scan at a minimum of 300 dpi in GIF, JPEG, PNG, or MS-Windows bitmap format (please send bitmaps as a zip file!) to the Editor via email or disk. We also accept good quality photocopies (please don't send us originals!). Black and white inked works please – no pencils. A4 size is preferred.



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Content

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D&D 102 – Roleplaying for the Slightly More Advanced Fiction

Wolphin

“I’ve got a new campaign,” announced Brian, plonking the familiar cardboard box on the table.

The four regulars looked at him.

“Is it any good?” asked Fiona warily. “Remember the last one.”

“What’s it about?” chimed Rob.

“Ummm,” hesitated Brian. “I don’t actually know ... on both counts.”

“Huh?” managed Tony. “You got a new system and you don’t know what it’s about? What set of rules does it use?”

“I’m not sure,” said Brian, trying his best to back away. “The guy at the shop said he found it out the back when he was cleaning up. He didn’t know anything about it, but he said there was a note on it saying it was really good.”

“Really good?” repeated Fiona. “You bought something based on the basis that it was ‘really good’? I don’t believe it.”

She rolled her eyes, muttering something about men.

Greg finished arranging his dice on the table. “Do I get to kill things?” he asked without looking up.

“I don’t know,” sighed Brian. “I was just told you open it up and start playing. Its all self-explanatory with the exception on the DM doesn’t read on in advance. Even the quest is suppose to be surprise to him ...

err ... her, doh ... Them,” he added in quickly after getting a glare from Fiona.

There were suspicious looks from around the table.

“Do we play then?” asked Brian.

The assembled players either nodded or muttered something that could have been taken as assent.

“All righty then,” announced Brian in his best Jim Carrey impression before pulling out the huge book.

There was a hushed awe from the crowd as he laid it carefully on the table. A full two inches thick, a good fourteen inches high, it was more a tome than a book. The cover looked like aged leather, the corners a little tatty from wear, even the pages were an ivory white adding to the illusion of age.

Brian opened the cover, a little surprised at the musty smell that exuded from the pages. There was no title page, table of contents, just a single blank page which was followed by a page headed with “choose your players” and a list of possible characters.

“Ok,” he took a breath. “Pick one of the following, don’t ask me about stats or anything yet. Right, we have, human, orc ... oh hang on. Everyone is staying the usual dull boring human I assume?”

An chorus of “yes” came from around the table.

“Hmmm,” he continued reading. “And then we have fighter, cleric, wizard, mage, barbarian, thief, knight, bard ... and then a few more. Ok, who wants what?”

“Thief,” shouted Fiona first.

“Fighter,” said Grey sullenly.

“Fight ... Bugger, make me a knight then,” said Tony.

“I think I’ll be a bard,” pondered Rob thoughtfully. “And god damn it, I want to be a woman. You wouldn’t let me be a female last time, so I’m going to make up for it now.”

Brian rolled his eyes. “Sometimes I’m afraid of what you have in your mind ...” he murmured while writing down their choices. “Ok, characters done. And now we roll ...”

They spent an enjoyable five minutes cursing the luck of the dice as they figured out the strengths and weakness of their characters. They decided for survival purposes Rob’s character should also be an expert in some martial art.

“And deadly with a lute” added Rob with a smile.

Once they were sure they had most of the details figured out. Brian turned the page. It was similar to the first, with “It begins” preceding, “The night was cold and damp outside, but

your party has taken refuge in the local town tavern, also known as the Inn of Lost Souls. It is there one of your party, when fetching another round, accidentally overhears about the nearby castle ...”

“Filled with treasure!” exclaimed Fye excitedly, her eyes glistening with anticipation as she unconsciously pocketed the pouch of the unsuspecting drinker she passed on her way back.

“There is always treasure,” dismissed Lady Roberta, her arms cradled around her harp.

Sir Tonus adjusted his chest plate and sat up a little straighter. “This may be true M’lady, but I too have heard of the nearby castle and treasure did feature highly on the list of things within its walls.”

“And what else was on that list?” asked Gorg warily, his eyes shifting across the room, the experienced fighter never letting his guard down for a moment.

“Just the usual things you find in castles,” said Tonus. “There was the treasure, a large stock of magical items, it use to belong to a wizard you know. A pile of curses, spells, I expect at least one ghost and who knows how many tortured souls. You know, the usual.”

“I vote we go!” exclaimed Fye again. Her enthusiasm not dimmed by anything that even vaguely hinted of danger. Then again, this was the thief who stole the prize skull of Marthous from his own temple and even the God did not notice for two days.

Lady Roberta groaned. “I have a feeling we’re all going to the castle right?”

The other two nodded.

“And just when I wanted to sit back, compose some songs and lay in the sun.”

She sighed dramatically. Fye poured the last of her beer over Roberta’s head in retaliation.

“Oi!” snapped Robert, jumping up from his chair. “What was that for?”

Fiona shook the empty coke can and tossed it into the bin. “If you’re going to play a lady, I refuse to let you play some limp heroine in distress. I refuse to play with someone who stereotypes.”

“Oooh, some tension in the group already is there ...” egged on Brian before turning his attention back to the book and figuring out what happened next.

The castle walls loomed high above. Large birds circled ominously overhead while all else was silent. The forest stopped short of the stone foundations leaving a wide strip of no-man’s land around the walls. Along this strip nothing grew, it was almost as if the forest rejected the castle in some way.

The troop’s horses stopped at this invisible barrier and refused to continue. Eventually after much cursing they were hobbled and left in a small clearing on the edge of the path. The party peered out at the formidable walls before approaching cautiously.

“You’re sure its deserted?” asked Fye.

“Quite certain,” replied Sir Tonus. “The mage who use to live here died many years ago, since then no one has come here, or at least, those who have

haven’t come back. Did you noticed no tracks on the path. That means no one has been here for at least several weeks, probably months. I know all the locals avoid it.”

“I can see why ...” agreed Gorg as they approached the massive gate.

They stopped at the huge oak doors.

“Ok, so how do we get in?” asked Gorg.

“I can’t climb them,” volunteered Fye with a sigh. “They’re too smooth, no handholds and the walls are too high to try and throw a grappling iron over.”

“Right,” said Tonus. “Gorg and Roberta can do a circuit of the walls looking for another way in. Fye, you’re with me, we’re scouting the forest for a hidden tunnel or something. Meet back here when you’re done.”

Both parties set off and several hours later they returned.

“Not a thing,” they both murmured exasperated. “Absolutely nothing.”

Lady Roberta looked at the doors. “We haven’t tried knocking,” she pointed out.

Gorg stepped forward and pounded on the door with a gauntlet covered fist. The hollow knocking boomed around the imposing walls.”

“Pizzas here,” yelled Tony jumping up. He returned carrying two steaming boxes which he lay on the table, the gamers eagerly tucking in.

The party sat down to eat their rations.

“So Tonus,” ventured Lady Roberta. “What do you know of this castle and its former inhabitants.”

“Only what I have heard in the stories, M’lady,” came the reply.

“And what stories would they be?” she pressed.

“The usual stories about wizards, hidden treasure and the like. The sorts of things I usually take with a grain of salt. But I do know a few things about this place.”

“Oh?” enquired Fye. “Like?”

“It was actually inhabited by a wizard,” said Sir Tonus launching himself into his tale. “Not a bad wizard, or a good one either, mainly neutral. He withdrew himself from the mage’s council voluntarily to concentrate on his research. He was convinced he could create a connection between this plane and any other and move between them. Most of the other council members saw it as pure heresy, only Gods had that power, but the wizard was causing no trouble and kept to himself. He used to crop up occasionally at meetings, sporting new theories and spells, but besides being a nuisance, rarely caused any damage. Then, one day he just disappeared.”

“Like most mages do,” muttered Gorg under his breath.

“Do you know what his theories were?” asked Fye. “I know about the different planes, but I am wondering why his differed so much from modern thinking.”

“I am not sure of the details,” replied Sir Tonus. “I am not an expert in such things, but he proposed a different set of planes to the existing ones. For example, consider this world to

be the centre plane. Above it you have the planes of good and below the planes of evil. Now consider a second set of planes, running perpendicular to the existing planes, so one of them would cut all the others. We exist at the crossing point of two of these planes. At another point an almost identical set of us exist, but slightly different in some respects. Maybe I am but a squire, Gorg a blacksmith and so on.”

Fye looked a little confused.

“I find it terrible complicated,” she said.

“A load of nonsense,” mumbled Gorg. “Forget about planes, mages and someone figure out how we can get past the doors.”

The group turned their attention to the pair of oaken monoliths before them.

“There is no lock,” pointed out Fye. “Has anyone tried just opening them?”

“You wouldn’t leave them just open?” protested Lady Roberta.

“Why not?” returned Gorg. “After all, everyone knows you’re the all powerful sorcerer who could smite them with an unkind look, why bother locking the place up?”

He stood, then walked to the wooden surface. Experimentally he pressed at the centre, pausing for a moment before breathing deeply and laying into them with his shoulder. The ancient hinges groaned in protest, Gorg grunted, muttering under his breath. There was an ominous creaking and the fighter leapt back alarmed.

In slow motion the doors seemed to cave inwards, separating from the walls and

gracefully falling to the cobblestones with a resounding BOOM which shook the ground and echoed around the clearing.

“Well,” said Lady Roberta as the dust settled. “That was effective, subtle, too ... very subtle.”

“Must have had dry rot,” muttered Gorg stepping over the remains of the timber. “That or just badly made hinges.”

“Very badly made,” murmured Tonus stepping into line behind Gorg, drawing his sword in the process.

Warily the group made their way through the gate house and into the castle courtyard. There was an air of abandonment to the castle, nothing seemed recently used, but there was nothing obvious out of place either (with the exception of the flattened gates).

There was a well in the centre of the courtyard, two horse drawn carts over to one side, neatly stored out of the way. A large mound of firewood had been placed under a covering on the other side.

Silently Gorg studied the grey stones looking for anything that would hint of an ambush. As he made his way stealthily towards the well Fye ran a practised eye over the layout. There were plenty of opportunities for well laid traps, but she could not make out anything that even hinted at one.

Gorg’s head peered over the edge of the well, sword at the ready, then he relaxed.

“Nothing,” he said standing up.

“Are you sure?” questioned Roberta. “Water monsters live in water you know.”

"Its dry," replied Gorg. "Only about two foot deep. Looks like it was never a well, just a strange circular thing in the middle of the courtyard. Or maybe the wizard started it and disappeared before it could be finished. I don't know."

By this stage the entire party had assembled around the small wall of stones. Tonus poked the ground with his sword. It was solid. they shrugged in unison and looked at each other.

"Righto," said Fye eagerly. "Who wants to go where for the treasure? With wizards its almost always in the tallest tower, but since there doesn't seem to be any towers I guess it will be in the upper room somewhere. Either there or in the dungeon. Dungeons are always popular in castles. Amazing what you can squeeze into a good dungeon."

"We don't split up," said Lady Roberta. "We don't know what is lurking inside. There could be anything. I vote we go in slow ... we use stealth ... Gorg, get back here!"

But it was too late, Gorg had charged off on his own, giving a battle cry before disappearing through the main doors of the castle. The remaining trio shrugged, rolled their eyes and hurried after him.

"What do you think ...?" yelled Roberta at the fighter.

"Shhhhh!" he spun around to face her. "Shut up!"

"Shut up!" she exclaimed. "Why would I want to ..."

"Holy ..." murmured Sir Tonus in an awed tone.

The group peered into the darkness, their eyes adjusting slowly to the gloom.

There was a dragon.

A big dragon. A very big dragon. It took up most of the room, in fact, it took up all of the room.

Their eyes adjusted more. Fye peered at it curiously. It had not moved since their arrival. Cautiously she sneaked closer. There was something wrong about it. It just did not look right.

"Its dead!" she announced when she had finished her inspection and reached her conclusion.

"What do you mean its dead?" queried Sir Tonus.

"Just look at it," she said. "It hardly has any scales, and look at its arm, I can see the bones. I can see the wall on the other side of its chest."

Slowly the group approached. Lady Robert poked it with a flute she had convenient. The wood sounded strange against the exposed bone.

"Ok," puzzled Gorg. "Why would someone stick a dead dragon into an abandoned castle?"

"Maybe they wanted the skeleton for a museum?" guessed Roberta.

"Maybe its not dead after all" said a strange deep voice which resonated around the room.

"Errr ... who said that ...?" asked Roberta hesitantly. "Errr ... guys?"

"I did," said the voice and the skeleton before them began to move.

The four jumped back, weapons drawn as a large head flexed on ivory coloured bones, blank eye sockets looking at them. Suddenly twin balls of pale blue fire burst to life in

each socket, casting a ghostly light across the room.

"I don't like this," muttered Fye, edging towards the door.

"Yes," said Gorg ecstatically. "I get to kill something at last."

"I'm already dead," pointed out the dragon. "I just wanted to see my chosen four."

"Your what?" questioned Sir Tonus. He stepped forward, hiding his fear well.

"My chosen ones," repeated the dragon. "You have been chosen."

"Chosen my ass," muttered Gorg, gripping his broadsword and running towards the animated skeleton. The glowing balls of fire flared suddenly and the fighter let out a squeal of pain, stopping dead in his tracks, dropping his sword with a clutter.

"As I was saying," said the dragon, ignoring the fighter writhing on the ground in pain. "You have been chosen."

"Chosen for what exactly?" enquired Roberta.

"To complete a quest for me," rumbled the answer. "I shall provide you with what you need and you shall complete the task. I assure you the rewards will be worth it and once the quest is completed you shall be free from my services, if you so choose."

"If we choose?" repeated Fye suspiciously.

"Let me say, I have found some that enjoy working for me," said the dragon.

"Then get them to do it," glower Gorg.

"Alas," mhrred the dragon, its rich voice seeming philosophical

for a moment. “That was a long time ago, I was younger then.”

“What do you want us to do?” Fye snapped the dragon’s attention back to the adventurers.

“Its quite simple really,” said the dragon. “Break into a heavily guarded fortress and steal something for me. The usual snatch and grab.”

“Into a heavily guarded fortress, yeah right,” scoffed Gorg. “For that we’d need the right tools, months of planning, maybe an army or two ...”

The dragon lifted a talon and a variety of equipment materialised on the ground before them.

“Take it,” said the dragon. “I shall be watching and try to help when I can, but your success depends on you.”

The skull folded itself back onto a forepaw, the fire in the eyes dimming.

The group pressed around the small bundle of equipment. There was a thick fur coat, lined with supple leather allowing easy movement, but also a good degree of protection.

“Mine,” snapped Gorg, grabbing it before trying to figure out how to put it on.

Fye rummage around for a while before choosing a thin, nondescript grey cloak. She noticed the colour seemed to change, blending in with whatever was behind it. She swung it over her shoulders, pleased with her find.

Sir Tonus was busy admiring a shield. It had a picture of a rearing centaur holding a spear, ready to charge. He complimented it with a helmet which had a long lock of hair flowing over the back of it.

Lady Roberta had more trouble. She eventually decided on a simple hairclip in the shape of a bird and a sharpened dagger which she thrust into her belt.

“You have chosen well,” murmured the dragon as the remainder of the pile vanished. “Each of you have taken something that reflects your spirit. I shall now return you to somewhere a little closer to your destination, and remember, I shall be watching.”

Time seemed to bubble for a minute and the party were left blinking a few times. The inn was crowded, but the beer flowed freely, the noise of the people friendly and welcoming.

“Oh man, this sucks,” announced Greg dropping his pencil on the table. He pushed his chair back and disappeared into the kitchen, returning with another coke and a cold slice of pizza. “Its almost midnight and we haven’t done a thing.”

“Yeah,” agreed Rob. “What is suppose to happen?”

“I don’t know,” protested Brian. “Like I said, I’m learning as I go. I think I’ve got the DMing thing figured out, but I have no idea what the plot is.”

He dropped the large book on the table, flipping back over the pages they had worked their way through. Admittedly it had be a bit of a dull run, they had missed the two raiding parties on the road, avoided the fight in the bar and had not disturbed the gatekeeper, which was a pity. Brian liked the idea of a spectral minotaur, but to get him they needed to roll a two or above and they rolled a one. Sometimes relying too much on the dice was a pain in the neck.

Brian looked at the players. Fiona was staring off into space somewhere, she usually zoned out when the arguments broke out. Tony and Rob had begun debating if it was possible to kill an already dead creature and Greg was sitting there in one of his silent moods, clenching and unclenching his fist.

“Ok,” he said, reaching a decision. “We’ll call it a night here and I’ll see what I can dig up for next week. Unless someone else wants to be the DM?”

“No,” sighed Fiona. “You can stay the DM, you’re the only one who is anything close to vaguely good at it.”

“Oh thanks,” Brian replied sarcastically. He began packing stuff up. “Greg, can you pass me that chart you’ve got there?”

Greg ignored him for a moment.

“My hand feels funny,” he announced, completely off topic.

“That’s because you were probably writing with it,” said Brian gesturing for the piece of paper. “Its probably unfamiliar with being used. The chart please.”

Greg shrugged then reached out for the printed table. He stopped, looked strangely at his hand, then gave a soft groan.

“What now?” exasperated Brian, suddenly feeling the urge for his bed.

“My hand,” gasped Greg. “It feels ... well, wrong ... Like it has worms in it or something.”

Fiona leaned forward and looked at the outstretched arm.

“Oh gross,” she announced. “Stop it.”

“I’m not doing anything,” protested Greg.

That got the attention of the table and everyone peered forward, looking at the spread fingers which Greg dropped to the table. The fingers seemed to bubble, then swell, growing darker, the nails lengthening. A few seconds later his hand was noticeably darker, deepening to an almost black, the change began to creep up his arm and under his sleeve.

“What’s happening to me ...” wailed Greg, bringing up his other hand which now matched his first.

“Umm ... errr ...” stuttered the crowd. “I ...”

“I don’t feel so good ...” announced Fiona quietly, leaning back in her chair. “My head feels like its going to explode ...”

“What the hell is going on here?” demanded Tony, shifting awkwardly in his seat. “I theel thange ...” he started to say, followed by, “My thips are thoo big ...”

Rob and Brian looked at the other three in silent horror. Fiona’s head seemed to be warping strangely to the sides. Tony’s face looked as if it was melting, his features flowing towards the floor while his eyes were slowly pushed to the sides. Greg’s jacket was obviously tight around his arms and there was a ripping of fabric as the stitching broke, black bulges of muscle appearing at his shoulders as his body seemed to solidify.

Rob turned to Brian, a look of horror on his face and Brian gave a gasp of surprise. Rob’s eyes were not human any more, instead they were the iridescent blue of a bird. Even as he watched, the change flowed over Rob’s body, his nose and lips drawing out into a beak.

“Our gifts,” gasped Fiona, pulling at her T-shirt, ripping it off and exposing her naked chest which was rapidly covering in light grey fur. “What were our gifts.”

Brian looked confused for a moment, then Fiona pointed with a finger at the book on the table. Brian watched the hand as a sharpened talon expended from each digit. It was only the bellow from Greg that roused him from his trance. He flicked back to his scrawling he had made earlier that night.

“Ummm,” he managed to say as his eyes flicked between the paper and the writhing people. “Fiona, you had the cloak of darkness, it lets you sneak into places undetected, but only at night.”

Greg’s hands shot out, gripping the table and ripping holes in the pine. His ears had moved towards the top of his head and now his face was extending into what looked like a muzzle.

“Greg,” continued Brian. “You had the armour of the ice ones. It would protect you from all cold weapons and gives some sort of strength bonus.”

Brian snuck a look at Rob. His neck had somehow disappeared into his shoulders and his ears had been absorbed by his head. He had stood up and was leaning forward, as if his balance was changing.

“Rob, had an amulet of the bird people, providing the gift of flight and Tony,” Brian looked at the human with the distorted face who was growing in statue. “Your helmet had belonged to Prince Trackus of the Equine race as had your shield, but it doesn’t list anything other than the standard protection bonus.”

Rob nodded, standing up. But this stage all four of them had removed their clothing from the waist up. Rob seemed to squirm, looking decidedly uncomfortable. He fumbled at his belt with enlarged awkward hands, the buckle releasing itself eventually. He gave a sigh of relief before his jeans almost immediately swelled, for a moment he panicked, then the material ripped and he kicked free of the rags.

Greg was in a similar situation, the dark fur that had covered his body seeming to grow lighter. Black, through grey, until a blazing white coat began to emerge. His legs seemed to shrink, but his body expanded, the effect of his hips descending almost comical.

Fiona and Rob were undergoing similar changes opposite each other. Rob had let out a decidedly inhuman shriek as his feet lengthened, his arms bending under mysterious forces, while small bubbles under his skin burst, tendrils that looked like thick hairs emerging all over his body.

Fiona squirmed, her body was already covered in fine grey hairs, but then the skin below her arms seemed to stretch, melting and sticking to the sides of her body. Her face poking out into a smallish snout while her ears expanded, seeming to match the large brown orbs that her eyes had become.

Greg growled, moving slowly. Brian watched him. He now looked almost like a polar bear, but more human like. He seemed comfortable on two legs and had longer fingers, even if they had claws and black paw pads on the underside. Tony moved nervously, his pink skin fading to brown as short hair covered his body. With the

addition of hair, the definite equine head was easy to recognise and Brian was not surprised to hear the muffled click of hooves on the carpet.

Rob's strange hairs seemed to flatten, then spread and in a matter of moments, the human was covered in feathers. A sort of nondescript grey green on the front, but a deep green across the back and a vivid yellow under the modified arms. Fiona folded her arms around her, they easily circled around her body, covering her in the thin skin and suddenly Brian realised he was looking at a bat head, peeking curiously out of the living bundle.

He studied the former human members of his gaming team warily, not sure what to do.

"Ummm, guys?" he hesitated.

Greg's head spun around to face him, a snarl escaping the bears lips.

"Wow," murmured Tony, peering at his hands. "I mean, serious wow." He looked down over his body, his eyes widening as they noticed the large sheath just above his legs, "Wow!" he said in the best disbelieving tone.

Fiona unfurled her wings, stretching them. "Well, this is unexpected," she said.

"Unexpected!" exclaimed Rob in a strangely high pitched and melodious voice, his wings unconsciously folding back against his body. "Unexpected is an understatement. I'm a bird. And that's not all of it. I'm not a man any more."

"That is obvious," growled Greg, licking his teeth with a pink tongue. This had the unfortunately side effect of allowing his saliva to drip from the sharpened teeth.

"No," protested Rob. "I mean I'm not male. I can't feel anything ... you know, down there."

"Oh," said Tony, then extended to "Ohhhh" as the full impact of his words set in.

"We've become our characters," announced Fiona, clawing at the carpet. "I mean look at us. I'm a bat, perfect for launching unsuspecting thieving raids on castles. Tony there has become some sort of horse thing, you can tell just by looking at him that he is the ever noble knight. Greg is definitely the barbarian fighter, even if he does have the fur coat on and Rob, well, Rob looks and sounds as if he has become the delightful, attractive and talented bard he wanted to be, even if she is female."

"But we're human," protested Tony. "I mean, people don't just turn into animals. I mean, look at us. Can you see me rocking up to work like this on Monday? Brian is the only one here who can ever go out in public again."

"Ahhh yes, Brian," said Fiona, turning her attention to the DM. "Why would you be the only one not to change?"

Brian swallowed, not liking the look he was getting from Greg.

"Ummm ..." he stuttered.

"Let's just think back to the campaign for a moment shall we," said Fiona, getting that knowing look in her eye. "Basically in the game there was the four of us and the dragon. The dragon said that he would watch over us and help when he can. That sounds a lot like a dungeon master to me."

As the words flowed out of her lips, Brian swallowed, he did not feel right. He looked down

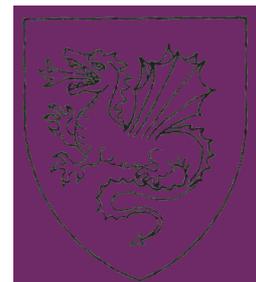
at his arm which seemed to be fading, the skin began to turn grey. He watched in mute horror as the layers of his body were peeled off. First the skin, then the muscle. It was almost like watching some documentary. His clothes disintegrated, turning to dust as he fell to the floor. His bones clicking together strangely. He was vaguely aware he should be dead. No one should be able to look through their own rib cage.

The cartilage from his nose fell through what had been his throat as his mouth began to lengthen out into a snout. He sensed, more than felt, the cold connections of a tail forming behind him as his pelvic bone reshaped itself. The room seemed to dim, then it burst back into brilliance as the twin blue suns flared in his eye sockets. Skeletal wings materialised behind him as ebony talons easily ripped through the flooring.

The room began to grow cramped as the dragon grew and with a mental command from Brian the walls faded. The faint outline of grey stone taking their place in the distance. A timber roof high above where the emblems of long dead kings hung in the stillness.

The dragon lord looked down at the pawns in his game; the thief, fighter, knight and bard seemed in awe of his presence.

"I have a quest for you." the dragon declared to the party ...



Mech Deconstruction

For Battletech

Daniel Blackbourne

Light Mechs

Light mechs typically fit into one of two roles, scout or spotter, providing information on enemy forces, or a target lock for indirect fire. Two other, less used, roles should be considered though, those of scout hunter, and front line mech.²⁰

Scout mechs are, as a rule, lightly armed and armoured, relying on speed to find the enemy, then leave. These mechs can rarely, if ever, stand toe to toe with **anything** at all, with the possible exception of other scouts and light infantry.

Spotter mechs are slightly different, they're more heavily armoured, and often carry C3 slaves and/or TAG systems, allowing long range bombardment to soften, or destroy, an opposing force from afar, Arrow IV and LRM systems being the two most common weapons used in this manner. A good example of this kind of mech is the InnerSphere's 'Raven'.

Scout hunters normally have little armour, even for their class, and as much speed as most scouts. The main difference lies in armament, which is often quite heavy for its size. These are generally used to kill enemy scouts or spotters, saving your heavier mech's weapons for heavier targets. In addition, these can often be used to scare an opponent into a mistake, being a threat to a heavier mech's often weak rear armour.

Most say that a light mech does not belong in front line combat, this field belonging to their heavier

cousins. A few light mechs break this rule, the InnerSphere's 'Thorn' for example, by boasting an impressive amount of armour and weaponry for their weight. In larger numbers these mechs graduate from 'nuisance' to 'threat' quite quickly, their combined firepower being difficult to destroy with a single lucky shot or salvo.

Medium and Heavy Mechs

The workhorse of the battlefield, most mechs fall within these categories and thus, they is the most common class of mechs to be found on the battlefield. Generally speaking these mechs should form your line of battle, using the combination of weight and numbers to destroy their opposition. These mechs generally fall into category by the range they perform best in.

Long range mechs most commonly boast LRM systems, Gauss rifles, autocannon twos and fives, and PPCs, these weapons all having impressive range, and good damage. They are best used in one of two fashions, either targeting the opposing longer ranged mechs, which often leaves them with few threats, allowing them free rein to sit back and remove any target they choose, or targeting the enemy's close range mechs, stopping them before they become a serious threat. Classic examples of these are the InnerSphere's 'Catapult' and 'Archer'.

Mid range mechs are the most versatile, generally using medium and large lasers, autocannon tens, and the new MRM systems. These mechs are most comfortable in a

mid-range firefight, where their versatility is most useful, and their firepower most effective. When the range closes they can still generally hold their own, as they can when the range increases. Many mechs fall into this category, too numerous to name, too useful to ignore.

Close range mechs are often the most devastating mechs to be found, but also among the more difficult to use. These mechs generally carry SRM systems, Medium and small lasers, flamers, and the occasional close combat weapon. At their most dangerous within close range, these mechs often have a difficult time of getting there. Using scenery and covering fire from their longer ranged cousins becomes a necessity in most cases.

Close range combat is generally a very brutal affair, the range meaning more attacks will hit, that often leaves a few barely operable mechs limping back for repairs. Close combat is hazardous and not always worth the risk, which is where weapons come into play, be it a hatchet, mace, or uprooted tree, all of these can do horrendous damage to an enemy mech.

Assault Mechs

These behemoths are truly the kings of ground based warfare, their lack of speed made up by impressive armour and devastating armament. Most assault mechs fit in the three categories described above, with a few additional things to consider.



The autocannon twenty is, quite simply, one of the most terrifying weapons to be found on the battlefield. While it does not have the range of a Gauss rifle and takes up more space than a PPC or LRM twenty, it has two advantages which ensure I rarely go to battle without at least one of these. The first is its impressive damage, often enough to cripple a light mech in one shot, and seriously threaten a medium mech. The second is fear: most will go out of their way to avoid an AC-20 if possible, or go out of the way to destroy the mech carrying it.

Speed is the weakness of assault mechs, meaning that care must be taken to avoid being outmaneuvered in combat. This can be accomplished by

deploying medium mechs to either side, or by using terrain to careful advantage.

Heat is an essential factor to consider, and heat efficiency is a selling point of many mechs. A mech with enough weaponry to destroy something well over its weight is often hampered by heat problems, leaving it less useful than first thought. Often not firing a weapon is as important as firing one, as the penalties heat brings can leave a mech vulnerable, especially if a salvo meant to destroy a particular threat fails to do so.

Noteworthy mechs

The 'Raptor', an innersphere light omnimech, is a versatile mech. The D variant makes a good spotter, it is more vulnerable than the 'Raven', but

faster. The C variant is the classic scout killer, boasting an armament that will cripple or destroy most scouts in a single salvo. It is also a threat to heavier mechs, its speed and firepower making a deadly combination.

The AS-7D 'Atlas', an innersphere assault mech. This mech is often ignored for its newer, and better, counterparts, but is still worthy of attention. It's still very well armed and armoured, capable of surviving, and dealing, a lot of damage, with the added benefit of being less expensive to field than many newer mechs. Also in the Atlas' favour is the fact that its main weaponry is wholly torso based, meaning that more damage needs to be done to remove them.

World Dipcon 2002

A review of the World Diplomacy Championships

David Astley (pryllin@yahoo.com.au)

As many of you may know, I gave into a rather large masochistic streak and made my way down to Canberra for the World Diplomacy Convention over the Easter weekend.

I tried unsuccessfully to get some other Queensland representatives to join me but upon my arrival I discovered two other Queenslanders who had made the horrendous trip from Brisbane to the dark and seamy depths of New South Wales. None of us knew the others but perhaps next time some form of car pooling can be arranged to fight the sinister southern roads.

The trip itself was a journey into hell, hell being a very dark place with torrential rain, no visibility and lots of breakdowns at the side of the road, one of which eventually became me. My sudden lack of a fan belt cost me a couple of hours and a couple of hundred dollars, and I was on my way once more.

The World Dipcon took place at Rydges Resort, Eagle Hawk Hill, Canberra, which is actually twelve kilometers outside Canberra, and therefore on the New South Wales side of the border with the Australian Capital Territory.

The convention included a boardgame tournament, so many non-Diplomacy games were present and there was plenty to do when you were eliminated from your diplomacy game. I got to play a lot of board games.

Representatives from around the world, including New Zealand, the USA, the UK and France, turned up on our shores ready to do battle for their country. The French in particular made a strong showing with a team of five players all of

whom seemed to do quite well. For my part, I was thoroughly crushed and systematically destroyed and seemed to have made the trip to Canberra solely to provide supply centres for my neighbours. ("Neigh-bours, Everybody needs good neigh-bours ...")

My first game, I thought I was doing okay. I drew Germany, which is probably my least disliked of the central powers, and made a strong alliance with England. We carved up Russia while France went south and grappled with Italy. Turkey propped up Moscow while I supported England and we bounced heads for a few turns while I took Warsaw.

This was the turning point- by sacrificing Warsaw, I could guarantee Moscow to England and we could retake Warsaw next turn. Unfortunately, England misordered and both Moscow and Warsaw were lost to us forever as Turkey and Austria pushed forward. England, with nowhere else to go, apologised and backstabbed me for the supply centres he was losing to the enemy, who had reached the northern coast and could march no further.

The game was declared a time draw after 1910 with me on 1 centre, England on 7 or 8 and Austria and Turkey on about a dozen each.

I had many hopes for my second game, but these were dashed when I randomly drew Austria.

Remembering the successful Austria Turkey from my previous game, I pointed out to Italy the need for us to guard each others backs and for my opening move I went straight for Russia.

Unfortunately, Italy's opening move went straight for me. I immediately fortified and counterattacked but the rest of Europe saw trouble in the middle and moved in. Italy, unable to take me, found himself attacked on all fronts while I was destroyed by the Turks. I held out until Fall 1907 before I was eliminated. Italy realised his mistake and later apologised for his opening- he finished the game with a single supply centre.

And so finished Saturday – 2 games with only 1 supply centre. I was off to a bad start.

Sunday I was comforted with the thought that we couldn't play the same country twice, so if worst came to worst, at least one of my two Sunday games would be an edge power. Sure enough, worst came to worst, but in the morning game, I was assigned England.

With a corner power, and a France player that I knew, I attacked Russia with much gusto and some German help, until France moved into an empty England and Germany started helping the Russians against me. The France and Germany players, apparently quite good friends, knocked me out of the game by Fall 1903 in my worst game yet.

For my fourth and final game I was swept with amazing paranoia that was in no way placated when, against the odds, I randomly drew Italy, the last of the central powers. I negotiated carefully with the surrounding players, paying particular attention to Turkey whom I knew by reputation to be a good player. Turkey, Austria and I discussed a three way alliance and I opened neutrally, thinking of an attack on France.

My heart sank as I watched Turkey and Austria team up efficiently and effectively to move into Russia, leaving their rear supply centres unguarded in an amazing display of trust for each other. Realising what would probably happen to me as soon as they built some more troops, I moved into Austria on the second turn and stabbed him in Trieste. Fortunately in the north, France

and England beat the living daylights out of Germany, giving me time to convince the Turks that I was a much stronger ally than Austria. Turkey made the most of the situation to pick off extra supply centres from a weakened Russia. He also managed many Austrian supply centres because every time I was poised to make significant gains in Austria, France would move in my direction and I would bring troops back for a possible defence, leaving the Austrian centres virtually unguarded against their Turkish 'ally'.

Turkey suddenly started working very effectively with me when the English and French alliance abruptly ended and England threatened to take over half the board and win the game with a solo. We established a stalemate line on the remains of

Russia and around Spain with the help of the last few surviving French units then agreed to call a draw. It was the Fall of 1909 and I still had 6 centres though Turkey had accumulated 11 and England was on 14, only 4 short of victory.

All in all, I finished the tournament on a high. Despite my dismal showing I was congratulated on my play by several people, both enemies and allies. During my plentiful elimination time, I learned some great new German boardgames and I put some faces to some of the many names I'd heard in the Diplomacy circles.

Overall, I had a good weekend. I would even say it had been worthwhile, if only the car hadn't cost me that little bit extra.

Diplomacy ... surprise your friends, amuse your enemies ...



Revised Ability Modifiers and Bonus Spells

For 3rd edition Dungeons and Dragons

Kenneth Murray (kennethmurray@bigpond.com)

This table replaces *Table 1-1: Ability Modifiers and Bonus Spells* on page 8 of the Player's Handbook. It gives a more favourable progression for bonus spells, including bonus 0-level spells. The modifier progression is unchanged.

Score	Modifier	0-level	1-level	2-level	3-level	4-level	5-level	6-level	7-level	8-level	9-level
1	-5										
2-3	-4										
4-5	-3										
6-7	-2										
8-9	-1										
10-11	+0	1									
12-13	+1	2									
14-15	+2	2	1								
16-17	+3	2	2								
18-19	+4	3	2	1							
20-21	+5	3	2	2							
22-23	+6	3	3	2	1						
24-25	+7	4	3	2	2						
26-27	+8	4	3	3	2	1					
28-29	+9	4	4	3	2	2					
30-31	+10	5	4	3	3	2	1				
32-33	+11	5	4	4	3	2	2				
34-35	+12	5	5	4	3	3	2	1			
36-37	+13	6	5	4	4	3	2	2			
38-39	+14	6	5	5	4	3	3	2	1		
40-41	+15	6	6	5	4	4	3	2	2		
42-43	+16	7	6	5	5	4	3	3	2	1	
44-45	+17	7	6	6	5	4	4	3	2	2	
46-47	+18	7	7	6	5	5	4	3	3	2	1
48-49	+19	8	7	6	6	5	4	4	3	2	2
50-51	+20	8	7	7	6	5	5	4	3	3	2

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The Threat of Assassins

For the Republic of Rome boardgame

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Republic of Rome is one of the few boardgames I know of where every player can lose. That additional complexity makes it more interesting to me than a standard boardgame, where your only opponents are the other players. It also helps that the subject material of the game, the political and military upheavals of the middle and late Roman Republic, provides a rich selection of famous names – Hannibal, Pompey, Julius Caesar, Cleopatra – to stir the imagination.

That said, like most games, Republic of Rome has rules that don't seem to work as well as they should. One well-known example is the "matching war" rule that doubles the strength of any war that is matched by another war against the same enemy. Drawing Hannibal and the 2nd Punic War before the 1st Punic War is defeated can end a game before it begins. That's not a lot of fun when it happens three games in a row!

A quick review of Web-Grognards ("the site for wargames on the web") at <http://grognard.com> shows the range of rules suggested to fix this "problem". I agree that the "matching war" rule is a potential problem: personally, I favour a one-turn delay for matching wars to take effect.

Another area where I feel the rules are in need of a fix is assassinating opposing senators. Firstly, I don't find the probable outcomes of an assassination well balanced. You roll 1d6, on 5-6 they die, on 1-2 you get caught, on 3-4 nothing happens. Without card play, you cannot assassinate **and** be caught. I think this should be possible, so I suggest revising section 9.8 "Assassins" as follows:

The assassin announces the Senator making the attempt, plays any Assassin cards, then

rolls a red die and a white die. Each Assassin card adds 1 to the numbers rolled on the dice. A result of 4 or better on the red die kills the target. A result of 3 or less on the white die results in the assassin being caught and implicating his Faction Leader.

The target Senator can play Secret Bodyguard cards to modify the outcome of the assassination attempt. If played before the die rolls, each Secret Bodyguard card subtracts 1 from the numbers rolled on the dice, protecting the Senator from the assassin and making it more likely the assassin will be caught. If played after the die rolls, each card subtracts 1 only from the number rolled on the white die, making it more likely the assassin will be caught.

The end result of this revision is a better chance of success **and** a better chance of discovery, heightening the uncertainty and risk involved in an assassination attempt. This may not be as appealing to you as it is to me, and that's fair enough: it's a preference on my part, rather than a patch for a broken rule. However, another aspect of the assassination rules seems badly broken to me, and in dire need of a fix.

As section 9.84 "Punishment" states, a caught assassin is killed, his Faction Leader loses

Influence, and is immediately prosecuted. If the Faction Leader loses the trial, he is also executed, and other Faction members may be killed by the vengeful mob. All good so far.

Now, what happens if the caught assassin is the Faction Leader? The assassin is killed. That's it: no other impact on the Faction. Presumably the game designers expected most players would make their Faction Leader their strongest Senator with the most Influence and Wealth, and that's usually true – but you could make a minor Senator Faction Leader for the Senate phase where you intend to have a go at your target.

This strategy is legal, and as it minimises the risk to your Faction, it's good play. I find it unhistorical to have a nobody lead your Faction for the single purpose of whacking a political rival – a case of playing the game system, not the game. It just doesn't feel *right* to me. So, I propose a second amendment to section 9.8, named the "my hands must seem clean" clause in honour of ruthless politicians throughout history:

A Faction Leader may not be the assassin if there is any other Senator or Statesman in the Faction.

"Caesar, remember to keep your hands clean ..."