

GODS of DIAZORR

By Jeffrey L. Scifert

Art by Reed Hill



OVERVIEW: SPARKS IN THE DARKNESS

Gods of Diazorr pits heroic characters against the capricious and cruel Chimeric Pantheon and their fanatical mortal minions. Here, evil has triumphed, contaminating everything it touches – especially magic. Every time characters use magic (whether casting, magical item ability, or as deemed so by the judge), they risk falling into Shadow and being changed, perhaps literally transforming into a horrifying monster.

But there is hope. The Gods of Light are defeated, not entirely gone. Their divine essence is scattered throughout the world, hidden in chosen mortal vessels—sparks that will light the cleansing fire. Unfortunately, the only way to ignite this celestial power and reveal a character’s godly heritage is to use magic.

So, to defeat the pantheon and overthrow their evil order, heroes must walk the razor’s edge—at any moment capable of either falling into Shadow and becoming inhuman monsters or blazing forth as brilliant new demigods. Good luck!

Character Creation

Every player character in Gods of Diazorr is potentially a scion of the Gods of Light, but since this mythic heritage is hidden, character creation follows normal rules.

Note: There are no clerics of the Gods of Light. Should a homine PC Ascend to gain their demigod divinity, they may opt to change their class to that of cleric (Gods of Light).

The ecclesiasts of the Chimeric Order declare that only homines (and post-human dominantes) are worthy of the full blessings of the pantheon. Non-humans are inferior, and the order suffers their presence only as long as they serve. Those who resist or speak out are imprisoned, exiled, or hunted down.

Homine: Human; the chosen vessels of the Chimeric Pantheon. Choose cleric (only Chimeric Pantheon), thief, warrior, or wizard, *see DCC RPG rulebook*).

Dominante: Post-human, perfected by thaumaturgy. As homine above, but during character creation: automatically roll 4d6 (drop the lowest) for attribute generation except for Luck (which is still 3d6) and may switch any two attributes (excluding Luck) after attribute generation is complete.

However, they require twice the amount of XP to level up for their class and lose access to one class ability as follows: cleric – divine aid, thief – lose two thief skills (judge’s discretion), warrior – no initiative bonus, wizard – no familiar allowed.

Subterrane: Dwarf (as per *core rulebook*). Permitted by the order to serve humanity through their craft and industry.

Silvestre: Fey (as Elf, per *core rulebook*). Permitted by the order to bring humanity pleasure and delight through music, dance, performance, etc.

Servitore: Summoned worker needing neither food nor sleep.

Belligerante: Brutal fighter born of thaumaturgy.

Aberrante: Bizarre sentient ooze, possibly created in failed alchemical experiments. Somehow, they thrive despite being relentlessly hunted.

Catching Fire and Ascension

Unlike the Chimeric Pantheon, the Gods of Light didn’t play favorites among races, sowing their seed far and wide. Any PC could be a demigod; there’s no way to know until it comes out in play. In addition to all the things that can go horribly wrong with magic, there is also the possibility of something going awesomely right.

Any critical success involving magic or magical items represents an ineffable, transcendent moment where heaven and earth touch and anything is possible. More concretely, the PC gains a point of Rebuke, a quantum of deific

Note: Three classes (the servitore, the belligerante, and the aberrante) are left to the judge to create for their campaign, due to limited space and word count. Nor are there more in-depth deity write-ups. Look for these in the next GFA (I hope).

power they can use to perform feats of demigod might (see Rebuke sidebar next page). Rebuke cannot be used, however, until the PC's divine heritage fully emerges and is recognized. Awakening the demigod potential requires a successful d30 Luck check, either at that moment or during a later moment of reflection. At that point, the PC has Ascended to become a demigod. On a failure, they lose the Rebuke point and may try again after regaining the spark once again!

Rebuke

Rebuke is that spark of demigodhood that those who have the potential to Ascended may gain, and that those who have Ascended may use. Rebuke can be spent to accomplish supremely cool stuff but is limited to actions pertaining to the demigod's domain. Only 1 Rebuke can be spent on any action and no more than 3 Rebuke can be accumulated. Example actions within each divine domain are:

- Divine domain: Impetus
 - Perform a supernatural-level physical feat (e.g., lift a building, sprint across lava, leap tall buildings in a single bound)
 - Enrapture an audience who views and hears you
- Divine domain: Genesis
 - Glow brightly with starlight
 - Enact significant magic (gain an automatic result on spell check)
 - Heal a target

Once that divine nature has been revealed, demigod PCs generate Rebuke in three ways:

1. Some Rebuke regenerates automatically each day (1d3 points recovered each morning)

2. Some Rebuke is bestowed when the PC performs awesome demigod stuff in view of mortals when spending Rebuke (successful Luck check recovers 1d2 Rebuke immediately, as the awestruck emotions of the mortals empower them)
3. Some Rebuke returns when significant happenings occur near them related to their divine domain (see Divine Domains sidebar next page)

Ascension requires the new demigod PC to choose their divine domain (see sidebar). Judges should aid players in this process by reminding them about the incident(s) that led to this glorious revelation and helping them see what this might indicate about their demigod. (Critical success baking cupcakes? Maybe you're the demigod of flaky pastries.)

Having Rebuke should change the game for your players, giving them both their first real dose of power and their first breath of hope in the campaign. Let them enjoy it for a while, reveling in their newfound capabilities. Then turn up the heat.

Thaumaturgy and Shadow

Magic was a gift from the Gods of Light. When they fell, magic did not entirely disappear, but it diminished, and what remained was tainted by the dark power of the Chimeric Pantheon.

This contaminated, adulterated form of magic is called thaumaturgy.

Whenever thaumaturgy is called upon, spell check results of a natural 1 for most characters cause the character to fall into Shadow and gain a Shadow Transformation (this replaces typical corruption effects). Homine or dominante spellcasting characters or scroll-casting non-spellcasters (e.g., thief) instead suffer a Shadow Transformation on a natural 1-2 on their spell

check. Characters with even one Shadow Transformation are more vulnerable to the influence of the Chimeric Pantheon and their agents (see thaumaturge, hereafter).

Divine Domains

There are four divine domains which may be selected by one who has Ascended.

- Divine domain: Impetus
 - Focus is on emboldening others to succeed and those things which inspire others to become more than they think they can be.
 - *Regain Rebuke*: Whenever something occurs near the demigod which requires monumental impetus.
- Divine domain: Genesis
 - Focus is on acts that have their derivation in the creative desires of others to cultivate, construct, or effectuate something new.
 - *Regain Rebuke*: Whenever something of illustrious creation occurs near the demigod.
- Divine domain: Ruination
 - Focus is on the ending of things, destruction, death, and despair.
 - *Regain Rebuke*: Whenever something of import ceases permanently near the demigod, either through death, destruction, or some other means.
- Divine domain: Warfare
 - Focus is on battle and strategy, wherever it may be found, be it a battlefield, a trade negotiation, a battle of wits, or even political debates.
 - *Regain Rebuke*: Whenever an action involving tactical genius, *extreme* violence, or cunning occurs near the demigod.

Characters can also fall into Shadow by performing evil deeds, or even by coming into contact with cursed objects or locations. The judge may require a particular saving throw (judge's discretion) upon first contact, for every day of exposure, etc.

In addition to the Shadow Transformations table hereafter, you may wish to use any or all of the minor, major, or greater corruption tables as additional options for Shadow Transformations (p. 116-119, *DCC RPG rulebook*).

The more Shadow Transformations a character accumulates, obviously the more difficult it will be to live a normal life. In addition, PCs who accumulate more Shadow Transformations than their Willpower ability score are lost to the Shadow, becoming NPCs for the judge to make their own!

Shadow Transformations

3d6 Shadow Transformation

- | | |
|----|---|
| 3 | Roll twice on this table and take both transformations. |
| 4 | Develop: (1) a lion's body or hindquarters; (2) cloven hooves and/or goat legs; (3) ostrich legs; (4) slimy tentacles in place of existing appendages; (5) snake body from the waist down; (6) scorpion body from the waist down. |
| 5 | Fingers: (1) grow to twice normal length; (2) fuse into three digits; (3) become beast-like paws, losing opposable thumbs; (4) become tentacle-like; (5) are replaced with crab-like pincers; (6) gain an extra joint and claws. |
| 6 | Skin becomes: (1) albino; (2) feathered; (3) furry; (4) rough like a shark; (5) scaled like a fish or lizard; (6) transparent. |
| 7 | Ears become: (1) cat-like; (2) bat-like; (3) donkey-like; (4) elephant-like; (5) replaced with feathered tufts like an owl; (6) vestigial, inside the head and attached to the jaw bones (can sense vibrations and hear low-frequency airborne sounds). |
| 8 | Develop/Lose: A body part becomes necrotic or drops off (50% chance of each): (1) arm; (2) leg; (3) hand; (4) foot; (5) fingers and toes; (6) eye(s), ear(s), nose, or tongue. |
| 9 | Develop: (1) oozing ear wax; (2) itching pox; (3) weeping mouth sores; (4) pustulant armpit boils; (5) bark-like skin warts; (6) an endless trickle of purulent, bloody tears. |
| 10 | Eyes become: (1) cat-like; (2) dark crimson, in the iris and/or sclera; (3) fused into one, like a cyclops; (4) divided into eight, |

like a spider; (5) absent, and character develops either echolocation like a bat or reptilian pit holes behind their ears with which they can sense infrared heat signatures; (6) supplemented by a parietal eye which forms in the forehead and is covered by skin, used for detecting light and color via a biochemical pathway.

- 11 Develop: (1) ram's horns; (2) a crow-like beak; (3) a wolf-like muzzle; (4) slitted nostrils, a lipless mouth, forked tongue, hinged jaw, and large posterior fangs for grasping and swallowing food; (5) a platypus-like soft beak with electro-reception capability (detect live vs. inanimate nature of objects or beings); (6) a leech-like sucker mouth OR a butterfly-like proboscis for a tongue.
- 12 Sprout a tail which is: (1) donkey-like; (2) cat-like (Advantage on balance checks); (3) opossum-like (use as extra prehensile limb); (4) like a whip or scourge, with barbs along its length; (5) like an ankylosaurus tail, with a large club-like protrusion at distal tip; (6) scorpion-like, with venomous stinger.
- 13 Grow wings like a: (1) hawk; (2) bat; (3) dragonfly; (4) flying fish; (5) hummingbird; (6) pterosaur.
- 14 Develop: (1) fish-like gills on your neck or torso; (2) ridged spines along posterior spinal vertebrae (precludes wearing torso armor); (3) long elephantine prehensile trunk-like nose; (4) porcupine-like quills on back and appendages (precludes wearing armor); (5) demonic tail with spiky growths and ridges along the length; (6) octopus-like suction cups on ends of appendages.
- 15 Develop: (1) antennae on head (scent capability and temperature sensing); (2) vibrissal whiskers on face (sense vibrations and proprioception); (3) insect-like compound eyes; (4) bioluminescent anglerfish antennae sprouting from forehead; (5) webbed appendages; (6) an ocular scale over eyes (you no longer blink).
- 16 Develop: (1) double the number of normal upper limbs typical for your species; (2) double the number of normal lower limbs typical for your species; (3) octopoid lower body from the waist down; (4) one limb which is noticeably shorter and more underdeveloped than the matching one(s); (5) loss of lower limbs and ameboid movement through formation of pseudopodia; (6) one limb which is noticeably larger and more overdeveloped than the matching one(s).
- 17 Develop: (1) constant noticeable sulfur-like smell; (2) oviparity

- (regardless of gender); (3) large, bulbous calcified protrusions underneath and emerging from skin across entire skeleton; (4) constant slime-layer exudate from skin; (5) ability to asexually reproduce (once in a lifetime); (6) turtle-like shell around torso.
- 18 Lose: (1) recognizable “head”, the features of which now reside within the torso; (2) full bipedal locomotion, but gain terrestrial ape-like quadrupedal knuckle-walking (with fingers folded at the first joint), extended longer arms comparative to rear legs and a back angled at 45 degrees due to hip rotation; (3) internal bones and gain external insect-like exoskeleton; (4) ability to ingest food, but gain ability to photosynthesize after 1 hour in sunlight; (5) ability to ingest food as typical of your species, but instead gain ability to absorb nutrients through rapidly rooting temporarily to a spot, similar to a plant (requires 1 hour); (6) the base of a carbon-based lifeform, but gain the base of a silicon-based lifeform (and a rocky, crystalline exterior carapace).

Purging Shadow

Ecclesiasts teach that Shadow Transformations only come upon the disobedient who flaunt the will of the pantheon. This is not true, and yet surely the members of the order must have some way to either purge themselves of Shadow or prevent themselves from falling into it in the first place, since they seem to use magic mostly without ill effects.

For those outside the order-- despite myriad rumors, folk remedies, and fairy tales about ways to recover those who have fallen or transformed-- there seems to be no relief. Healers cannot heal it, alchemists cannot cure it, and no cunning device of the artificers can ward it off. Shadow Transformations merely accumulate. For this reason, magic use is rare among the common folk of Diazorr. Even those who are born with the power use it only in the utmost extreme circumstances.

But as the light of dawn chases away even the darkest shadows of night, many believe that a scion of the Gods of Light would be able to recover those who have fallen into the Shadow of the Chimeric Pantheon.

Feel free to make things easier or harder on your players to fit the mood of your campaign, but a good starting place is that expunging a Shadow Transformation should require spending Rebuke plus some additional magic. Some judges may also wish to have extraordinary successes purge a PC of Shadow Transformations, instead of accumulating (likely currently unusable) Rebuke, until the character has successfully tested to awaken the demigod within.

The Chimeric Pantheon

Felor, *Mistress of Thaumaturgy* and *Font of Shadow*

Appearance: When in the mortal realm, Felor manifests as a great serpent, veiled in black and purple smoke. Those who penetrate this fog see that she has a woman's head with ram horns, along with two tentacles and two insectoid arms.

Domains: Darkness, Magic, Transformation.

Commandment(s): Approach the pantheon through thaumaturgy.

Crenist, *Battle's Rage* and *Axe of Castigation*

Appearance: A towering warrior carrying an executioner's axe. His elaborate armor does not hide his membranous wings and goat-like legs ending in cloven hooves.

Domains: Anger, War, Vengeance.

Commandment(s): Castigate the unbelievers.

Jey, *Prince of Avarice* and *The Demon Sire*

Appearance: Massively corpulent and massively strong, he carries a serrated kukri and his crimson eyes burn with insatiable hunger.

Domains: Appetite, Fertility, Wealth.

Commandment(s): Seek your own.

Reff, *Death's Right Hand* and *Watcher Without Pity*

Appearance: Diseased (or un-dead) humanoid figure of indeterminate sex. Carries a bone staff topped by a human skull, the eyes of which glow with flickering purple flame.

Domains: Death, Judgement, Secrets.

Commandment(s): Confess every transgression you witness.

The Chimeric Order

Members of the order serve the Chimeric Pantheon with a devotion that passes well beyond fanaticism. For rank-and-file ecclesiasts and devotees, use acolyte stats (p. 432, *DCC RPG rulebook*).

For those who possess some influence in the order (e.g., higher-level ecclesiasts), the stats for various members of the order are listed hereafter.

For the wretches transformed by Shadow into literal monsters, any number of mutated or bizarre NPC creatures may be appropriate. Suggestions include deep ones, colossal leeches, man-bats, owlbears, primeval slimes, Underdark slugs, sub-humans, troglodytes, trolls, vombis leeches, or any number of un-dead (see *DCC RPG rulebook*). Also, *Dungeon Denizens* published by Goodman Games is another terrific resource for strange and awful creatures!

Belligerante

Belligerante: Init +0; Atk as weapon +1 melee; Crit III/d6; AC 15 (chainmail); HD 1d8; MV 25'; Act 1d20; SV Fort +1, Ref +1, Will +0; AL C.

Description: Rank and file soldiers in the armies of the order.

Chevalier

Chevalier: Init +1; Atk longsword +3 melee (1d8) or lance +3 melee (1d6); Crit III/d8; AC 19 (full plate & shield); HD 2d8; MV 20'; Act 1d20; SV Fort +2, Ref +1, Will +1; AL C.

Description: In their shining black and purple armor, chevaliers look a bit like horned beetles. These twisted imitations of true knights comprise the cavalry and officer corps of the order's armies (most of whom are belligerantes).

Evocatore

Evocatore: Init +2; Atk ritual dagger +4 melee (1d4) or +4 missile fire (1d4) or spell; Crit I/d8; AC 12; HD 3d8; MV 30'; Act 1d20; SP servitor, spellcasting (+6 spell check): Spells (1st) *chill touch*, *second sight*, *darkness*, *detect magic*, *invoke patron*, *patron bond* (any one of chimeric pantheon), any 2; (2nd) *banish*,

binding, curse, any 2; (3rd) demon summoning, exorcise, any 1; SV Fort +4, Ref +2, Will +6; AL C.

Manufacture magic: All evocatores can make magic items as if they had the appropriate spells (*make potion, sword magic, etc.*).

Servitor: All evocatores have a servitor (p. 425, DCC RPG), which they have bound to service.

Spellcasting: The evocatore's spells are cast as a cleric and never result in corruption or misfire (although they can result in disapproval).

Description: Evocatores, often called witches, have gained power over umbral and infernal creatures. They hunt any whom the order has deemed a threat.

Monitore

Monitore: Init -2; Atk as weapon -1 melee (1d4-1); Crit III/d4; AC 9; HD 1d4; MV 30'; Act 1d20; SP connected; SV Fort -1, Ref -2, Will -1; AL varies.

Connected: As an action, establish a mental link with another monitore within 1 mile. This allows the sharing of all sensory perceptions. This ability creates a vast network through which the Chimeric Order can quickly observe happenings within their domains. While sharing information, a monitore's eyes turn pitch black.

Description: Ordinary-looking people altered by thaumaturgy to become human scrying pools.

Thaumaturge

Thaumaturge: Init +2; Atk ritual dagger +6 melee or spell; Crit I/d10; AC 13; HD 5d8; MV 30'; Act 1d20; SP spellcasting (+9 spell check): Spells (1st) *invoke patron, patron bond (any one of chimeric pantheon)*, any 5; (2nd) any 5; (3rd) any 2; SV Fort +5, Ref +3, Will +6; AL C.

Shadow puppeteer: A thaumaturge may give simple commands to those who have fallen into Shadow. Target must make a DC 14 Willpower save. On a failure, their command is carried out immediately by the target, as if under the effects of *charm person* at result 14. This ability to issue simple commands lasts until the target succeeds on their Willpower save (can attempt once per turn).

Spellcasting: The thaumaturge's spells are cast as a cleric and never result in corruption or misfire (although they can result in disapproval).

Description: Clad in sumptuous black and purple robes, these senior ecclesiasts have gained the uncanny ability to command those who have fallen into Shadow.

The Exalted

Demi-god leaders of the Chimeric Order, the exalted are powerful thaumaturges who execute the pantheon's most vital commands.

Kraed Nadom, Ascendant Ecclesiast of Felor

Kraed Nadom: Init +2; Atk *chimeric staff* +10 melee (as weapon+7); Crit IV/d16; AC 12; HD 10d8+20 (hp 85); MV 30'; Act 1d20+1d20 (spells); SP Rebuke (3), spellburn, cleric abilities, shadow puppeteer, spellcasting (+13 spell check): Spells (1st) any 9; (2nd) any 7; (3rd) any 6; (4th) any 4; (5th) any 2; SV Fort +7, Ref +4, Will +9; AL N.

Demigod of ruination: When something of significance ends with permanence (e.g., destroyed, dies, plan is upended, etc.; judge's discretion) near Kraed Nadom, he recovers 1 Rebuke.

Divine dominion: Kraed Nadom's divine dominion is magic. This represents the area of governance over which Kraed's Rebuke can be applied.

Shadow puppeteer: Kraed Nadom may give simple commands to those who have fallen into Shadow. Target must make a DC 14 Willpower save. On a failure, his command is carried out immediately by the target, as if under the effects of *charm person* at result 14. This ability to issue simple commands lasts until the target succeeds on their Willpower save (can attempt once per turn).

Spellburn: Kraed Nadom may spellburn as a wizard when casting spells.

Spellcasting: Kraed Nadom's spells are cast as a cleric and never result in corruption or misfire (although they can result in disapproval). He has access to spells from both the wizard and cleric spell lists.

Description: Only recently Ascended, this young-looking man remains first among the exalted and the pinnacle of the order's mortal hierarchy.

Chimeric Staff (+4 staff)

Divine power from the Chimeric Pantheon is invested into this staff. The staff may alter its shape into any melee weapon imagined by a wielder who reveres the Chimeric Pantheon. INT 16; AL C; Banes: creatures opposed to the Chimeric Pantheon (shattering blow; on a critical hit, staff inflicts an additional 1d10 damage), extended critical threat range (18-20); Communication: speech and telepathy; Special Purpose: destroy creatures opposed to the Chimeric Pantheon; Special Powers: infravision 120', spellburn reservoir (each day, the wielder can burn up to 3 points of the staff's Intelligence on spellburn to affect their spellcasting as if they were spellburning their own abilities. The staff's lost ability scores heal in full each night), holy smite (allows the bearer to enact holy smites [as per turn un-holy, p. 97, *DCC RPG rulebook*] on a successful critical hit. Wielder makes a turn unholy attempt and enacts the holy smite damage if the check is within the damage range [see Table 4-4, p. 97, *core rulebook*]).

Gier-Te, Exalted Master of War

Gier-Te: Init +3; Atk *Headlopper* +10+deed die melee or +12+deed die vs. Law melee (1d8+5+deed die or 1d8+7+deed die vs. Law) or mailed fist +5+deed die melee (1d5+5+deed die); Crit 17-20 V/2d20; AC 19 (*alchemical cuirass* & +1 *shield*); HD 10d12+40 (hp 95); MV 30'; Act 2d20+1d14; SP Rebuke (2), warrior abilities (loses initiative bonus), Mighty Deed of Arms, deed die (+d10+4), lay on hands (as cleric of equal level); SV Fort +10, Ref +7, Will +8; AL C.

Demigod of warfare: Whenever an action involving tactical genius, extreme violence, or cunning occurs near Gier-Te, he recovers 1 Rebuke.

Divine dominion: Gier-Te's divine dominion is vengeance. This represents the area of governance over which Gier-Te's demigod Rebuke can be applied.

Description: The only dominante among the exalted, the Master of War commands the order's armies. He is always accompanied by an honor guard of chevaliers and belligerante footsoldiers.

Headlopper (+5 longsword)

INT 14; AL C; Banes: lawful creatures (summoning; when battling bane, sword can summon reinforcements, which are a creature type antithetical to the bane [per judge's discretion] of total HD equal to half of wielder; sword can summon 1/day with 50% chance of success for duration 1d4 turns), death dealer (when bane is struck, it must make a (DC = 1d20+10) Fort save or instantly die; Communication: speech and telepathy; Special Purpose: clear the world for the invasion of Chaos; Special Powers: infravision 120', *detect good* within 40', vampiric touch (when wielder inflicts 10+ damage in a single strike, they heal 1 hp), vorpal blade (on critical hit, wielder automatically decapitates enemy, causing instant death).

Alchemical Cuirass

This magical section of Gier-Te's full plate armor creates an invisible shield around the wearer, protecting them from missile fire attacks (+2 AC). When hit by any critical physical attack, the invisible shield prevents critical effects on a successful Fortitude save (DC equal to the attack roll). The shield subsequently hardens granting +2 AC against melee attacks and +2 to saves versus magical effects for 1d3 rounds.

Maerri Dane, Exalted Mistress of Evocatores

Maerri Dane: Init +4; Atk ritual dagger +5 melee (1d4+1), +6 ranged (1d4+1), or *staff of the summoner* +9 melee (1d4+9); Crit I/d14; AC 16 (*ring of armor* +5); HD 10d4+30; MV 30'; Act 2d20+1d14 (spell); SP Rebuke (3), servitor, spellcasting (+13 spell check): Spells (1st) *cantrip* (d16), *invoke patron*, *patron bond* (*Reff*), any 6; (2nd) *arcane affinity* (*demonologist/summoner*), *banish*, *binding*, *curse*, *monster summoning* (d24), any 2; (3rd) *demon summoning* (d24), *exorcise*, any 2; (4th) *Lokerimon's orderly assistant*, any 2; (5th) *Lokerimon's unerring hunter* (d24), any 2; SV Fort +6, Ref +5, Will +9; AL C.

Demigod of impetus: Whenever something occurs near the demigod requiring monumental impetus, recover 1 Rebuke.

Divine dominion: Maerri Dane's divine dominion is judgement. This represents the area of governance over which Maerri's Rebuke can be applied.

Staff of the Summoner (+5 staff)

INT 14; AL C; Banes: subterrane (ability score drain; staff inflicts normal damage *plus* drains 1d4 Stamina), silvestre (spotter; staff marks bane so it is more easily attacked; allies can fire into melee between wielder and bane at no penalty and no chance of hitting wielder, and allies attacking bane with missile fire within 100' of staff receive a +1 attack bonus), aberrante (beacon of fury; staff attempts to persuade everyone with whom it can communicate to attack the bane under any circumstances [ego check for wielder and potentially others]); Communication: speech and telepathy; Special Purpose: punish interlopers and those who interfere; Special Powers: obscure surroundings with 20' globe of darkness at will, armor-breaker (on any critical hit, the opponent's armor is destroyed, in addition to other effects), infravision 120', spellburn reservoir (each day, the wielder can burn up to 3 points of the staff's Intelligence on spellburn to affect their spellcasting as if they were spellburning their own abilities. The staff's lost ability scores heal in full each night), demon-binding (with any successful strike against a demon or other extraplanar creature, the target must make a DC 20 Will save or be bound to its current exact location for 1d4 turns. It cannot take any steps or teleport out unless this effect is magically dispelled), summon creature (staff is magically keyed to cyclopes p. 400, DCC RPG). The wielder can summon such a creature 3/day).

Manufacture magic: Maerri Dane can make magic items as if she had the appropriate spells (*make potion, sword magic, etc.*).

Servitor: Maerri Dane has a servitor (p. 425, DCC RPG), which they have bound to service.

Spellcasting: Maerri Dane's spells are cast as a cleric and never result in corruption or misfire (although they can result in disapproval).

Description: Beneath her cherubic exterior beats the heart of a peerless and merciless hunter.

Nalama Doan, Exalted Director of Monitores

Nalama Doan: Init +6; Atk *un-death dagger* +15 melee (1d4+5) or +15 missile fire (1d4+5); Crit II/d30+6; AC 16; HD 10d6+20; MV 30'; Act 2d20; SP Rebuke (2), thief skills (as 10th-level thief

Path of Assassin, add +3 to all skills); SV Fort +6, Ref +9, Will +6; AL C.

Connected: As an action, establish a mental link with any monitore on the same plane. This allows the sharing of all sensory perceptions. This ability creates a vast network through which the Chimeric Order can quickly observe happenings within their domains. While sharing information, Nalama Doan's eyes turn pitch black.

Demigod of warfare: Whenever an action involving tactical genius, extreme violence, or cunning occurs near Nalama Doan, she recovers 1 Rebuke.

Divine dominion: Nalama Doan's divine dominion is information. This represents the area of governance over which Nalama's demigod Rebuke can be applied.

Umbral mist: While hidden, any effort to detect Nalama suffers a -2d penalty.

Un-Death Dagger (+5 dagger)

INT 18; AL C; Banes: lawful creatures (Neutralization; after a direct hit, dagger prevents bane from using one of its natural powers [as determined by judge] for one full day; if bane does not have any specific natural powers [e.g., if bane is "humans"], sword gives victim a cumulative -1 attack modifier for every direct hit [fades after 1 day]); thieves [Hardiness; when taking damage from the bane, wielder can make a (DC 1d20+10) Fort save, success means the attack inflicts only half damage], un-dead (Unerring throw; only against bane, dagger can be thrown with a 60' range, and always returns to the attacker's hand; when thrown, it uses attacker's normal missile fire attack roll but includes their Strength modifier to damage); Communication: speech and telepathy; Special Purpose: undermine authority; Special Powers: obscure surroundings with 20' globe of darkness at will, infravision 120', speak Thieves' Cant, detect secret doors within 1d6 x 10', vampiric touch (any time the wielder inflicts 10+ damage in a single strike, they heal 1 hp), un-dead touch (weapon scores critical hits as an un-dead creature [rolls U/d30]), regeneration (as long as they wield this weapon in their hand, wielder regenerates 1 damage each round), flight (wielder can fly at a speed of 30').

Description: The woman of a thousand faces, only her fellow exalted know what the order's spymaster really looks like. You may have met her already.

BILL THE HALF-ORC SPENDS MONEY

By Brendan J. LaSalle
Illustration by Matt Hildebrand



July 14th, 2011. Reno:

Pecos Bill woke up and stared at the water-stained ceiling of his motel room, while his brain woke up and his left hand shifted under the sheets until it found the pommel of his magic dagger.

The huge half-orc scowled, remembering what day it was. The day before, he had finally received his Writ of Imperial Citizenship, effectively making him an American. He thought about the tiny private ceremony - a judge, his lawyer, a witness they had dragged from another courtroom, and a cop who just sat in the corner and read the paper. He was a little pissed off that none of the many crawlers he worked with over the years had attended, even though he told no one except his agent and threatened to break the agent's leg if word got out.

As of today, Bill was no longer in danger of being sent back to the Zura'ah'zurah, the network of underground cavern-cities of his birth.

He sat up, blinking. One thing felt different - he had lived in motels for more than a decade, surviving mostly on room service, gift basket fruit, and protein bars. Now the hotel room felt like a prison cell. He thought about trashing it to mark the occasion - he could smash the crappy tv, throw the furniture out into the parking lot, punch out the first flunky to complain about the noise, and then just peel off bills to bribe his way out of any consequences. It was a lovely thought, one that brought a half-smile to his face, but his instincts - honed over a decade of arena fights and navigating the tricky waters of American society as an imbedded outsider - said no, not now, not here.

Maybe soon, though.

Pecos Bill had come to America from the Zura'ah'zurah nearly ten years before, when he was still known by his orcish name: Thule. At age four, he was remanded by the Zura'ah'zurah credit authority for debts incurred by his recently-deceased father. The authorities sent him to a labor camp where he worked on tunnel expansions and copper mining until age sixteen. While enslaved there, he brawled with his Orcish peers two to three times a day, always singled out for his mixed heritage. As time passed, the number of his fights steadily decreased – he got meaner and smarter until eventually the reputation of his devastating mix of clever tactics, skillful mastery of improvised weaponry, and willingness to escalate the mildest of confrontations to bone-breaking violence convinced most to leave him alone, others to look to him as a leader.

At age sixteen, the debt authority commuted his sentence, selling his “criminal debt contract” to an American monster-broker, who brought him above-ground to fight in The Games as one orc in a lot of thousands, destined to die in a Division III event, until a trainer recognized his half-human heritage. That meant young Thule could fight as an actual crawler.

Ka-ching!

The broker sold Bill's contract to veteran Xcrawl agent Marty DeSilver for enough gold to finish his basement, with enough left over for a Jacuzzi patio. Young Thule didn't see so much as a bent penny of that windfall, naturally.

Determined to be too violent for the minor leagues, Bill was paired up by Marty with another group of first-time crawlers: the Dungeon Gangsters.

Thule picked a name for himself – Pecos Bill, the mythical cowboy that once roped a tornado. Orcs like a name with a bit of history, and Pecos Bill had a ring to it – if you yelled it loud enough it sounded like a threat.

During his first match, Bill nearly ripped the leg off a member of his old tribe he recognized in a dungeon; a referee fainted, and the fall accidentally activated his NonCom badge, teleporting the unconscious ref to the hospital. That headline dominated the sports news cycle for a full two days. One sports reporter called Bill “a cold-blooded slayer who takes special relish fighting his Orcish brethren”, and his rep grew from there.

The Gangsters won dungeon after lucrative dungeon during their rocky career and made a fortune in endorsements and personal appearances. Bill kept busy, not only shilling for his sponsors but also appearing in TV and magazine adverts, in Hollywood movie cameos, and narrating audio books. Kids loved the half-orc’s chesty baritone and careful ESL articulation, and he was in high demand as the voice of cartoon dragons and gruff-but-loveable sidekicks. Bill saved almost every copper he earned, and at this point he had a very large pile of copper.

Bill had blown some of his winnings, of course. On the road for ten months out of the year, he insisted on decent accommodations, comfortable travel, and designer outfits. Wearing a suit and a tie down to the hotel bar for his evening libation went so much smoother than wearing his

more comfortable clothes that it pissed him off every time.

Bill's largest expense wasn't exactly luxuries, though – the top of his expense report was always buying beer for strangers. Bill won on average three vacations a year during his eleven-year Xcrawl career, and he quickly discovered that the best way to relax and enjoy himself while traveling was to buy a round or two of drinks for the crowd at every bar, restaurant, and hotel he visited. Buy enough gawking idiots enough booze, and they stopped seeing a dangerous half-breed and started to see a person – not an equal, mind you, never an equal, but someone you could trust in the same room as themselves. The beer trick worked like a charm, but it still pissed Bill off that he had to make the gesture again and again and again.

In his darkest ruminations, Bill imagined that someday Empire Sports 1 would do a TV show about him, a biography or a career highlights special. The announcer would say *leading the league in bribing the world to treat him like an equal is the inhuman aberration known as Pecos Bill – too ashamed to use his Orcish name, Thule Aforovron, beloved across the globe as long as the booze kept coming.*

At times Bill hated the world and everything in it, himself most of all for playing its game.

Bill showered, dressed, threw on his armored jacket, then stashed his magic brass knuckles in the pocket of his armored jacket. He thought for a second and wound up grabbing his magical flail as well. He had a love-hate relationship with that flail, which caught with magical fire when you said the command phrase: "I'll be eatin' at Sub Chieftain." The cheesy catchphrase pissed him off every

time, but there was no denying the terror factor when he spun the striking head so fast it looked like a halo of fire.

Bill walked outside by himself into the sunny desert morning. He had left the motel alone before but never during the day when local law forbade it. Once, he had climbed out through the bathroom window at six AM to meet up with his old teammates Sleeper and Captain Howdy on a run out into the wilds to convince a druid to fix a nasty corruption Sleeper had caught when she bungled a spell at the Madison Megacrawl. Poor Sleeper's face had been on upside down for the entire three days it took the trio to find and beat the hell out of the bandits who were poisoning a local stream with the run-off from their meth lab. After the Druid made it right, Sleeper, with tears in her eyes finally running down the right way for the first time since that bungled hex, had vowed she owed Howdy and Bill a huge favor. Bill considered calling his marker in, asking for Sleeper's help in negotiating the tricky world of Reno real estate.

The fact that he considered asking for help pissed him off. He threw the flail in the trunk of the SUV and jumped in. As he left the lot, he realized it was the first time he had ever driven it without a chaperone.

He headed downtown.

Bill walked into his favorite diner, took a booth near the window, and ordered a huge breakfast with coffee. The manager was shocked at first to see his celebrity regular by out by himself but quickly realized the significance. The effusive little man congratulated Bill on his first day of imperial citizenship, comped his meal, then took a

photo with him to add to their Wall of Fame. Bill grimaced rather than smiled for the photo, mostly because he knew that, deep down, he had wanted his pic up on the wall in this place for years.

After he ate, he left a huge tip (30 gp), nodded to the round of polite applause he received from the whole diner as he left, and headed out into the hot morning, mad that he couldn't just enjoy things, pissed off that he was pissed off.

Bill decided he needed a drink before he met the real estate agent.

Bill arrived at The Alcove, the bar connected to the local Adventurer's Guildhall, just before noon. There was only one other car in the parking lot: a black sports pickup with purple flame detail, diamond-cut chrome mag spinners, and purple neon side-runners. He knew the vehicle well; it belonged to his guild sister, Shock'N' Awe. Shock was an up-and-coming brawler, a sword-and-shield killer with a great gimmick - she would scream at an enemy and leak blood from the inside corners of her eyes, like dual lines of red tears. Wouldn't tell anybody how she did it. She got more close-ups than all the other Division III half-orcs put together and was already being called the best female from the Zura'ah'zurah in ten years. Sighing, Bill felt around inside his jacket to make sure he had his magical brass knuckles at quick reach.

The Alcove was a dark cool grotto of brass and mahogany wood paneling, smelling of beer, cigarette smoke, and stale popcorn. There were a half-dozen round tables, four times that many battered chairs, a bar with six stools, and a chewed-up oversized dart board bristling with quarrels, knives, and throwing stars, all stuck out at odd angles.

Mighty Mervin, a portly and balding retired specialist from the earliest days of The Games, was behind the bar restocking the beer cooler. He nodded at Bill and started mixing the warrior's usual without saying a word. Bill nodded back, trying to keep contempt out of his face. Bill thought retiring was for pansies if you hadn't lost a leg or an arm or something. Some DJ was going to have to kill him to make him quit Xcrawl. Or take a limb. Or two.

Mervin slid Bill's Singapore Sling over. The half-orc sipped it, thinking about dismemberment.

There was a TV mounted in the ceiling over the battered Vega\$\$ Winner\$\$ pinball machine in the corner. Empire Sports 2 was airing a segment on bare-handed fighters. The big half-orc smiled a bit to see a clip of Xian, a former teammate, kicking a medusa's ass after blindfolding herself with her ever-present green headband. He liked Xian - couldn't make sense of her strange mix of peaceful inner calm and spectacular capacity for violence, but he respected her. He sipped his drink, remembering the early days of the Gangsters.

Bill heard a flush then the quiet whir of a hand dryer. A moment later, Shock'N' Awe stepped out of the bathroom. She was wearing a flame-embossed red leather vest with matching cowboy boots and fingerless gloves. Her pinstriped blue jeans were torn in a few places, and Bill could see crisscrossed scars on her knees and thigh.

"So that's what I smelled." She cracked her knuckles with a snap like breaking pencils.

Bill rolled his eyes. "So, when did this turn into an elf bar?"

“Soon as you got here.” The hefty half-orc hopped up on a stool just two down from Bill’s – a little close for comfort. “Merv, pour me one of those humanish drinks that Billy here likes so much. On second thought, make it a stale beer with a hair in it, just like my last one.”

“May as well serve that in a bowl on the floor,” Bill called after Mervin.

Shock’N’Awe switched to the snarling consonants and bitten diphthongs of Orcish. “Get bled.”

“You get bled.” Bill switched to Orcish as well, and it cheered him to be speaking his native language for a change.

“Your mom can get bled!” Shouting now.

“Your unwashed goblin-sucking dad can get bled!” says Bill, now fully roaring in the quiet dark place. The Xcrawl veterans bared their teeth at one another.

“Come on, everyone, take’r easy,” says Mervin, timidly approaching with a sudsy bottle of Reno Beast Genuine Draft held in both hands.

There is a word in Orcish that resists simple translation, a three-syllable threat that means both “*shut up*” and “*unwelcome outsider*.” Bill and Shock shouted it at Mervin in unison. Startled, they glanced at one another then laughed uproariously. Bill tilted his head back, roaring with good humor. Marv put Shock’s beer down and walked away, shaking his head. “So, what’s the world-famous recluse doing out?” asked Shock’n’awe. She took a noisy gulp of her Beast.

“Gonna go spend some gold, if you can’t mind your own business.”

“Oh yeah? I heard you give all your money to a one-legged stripper.” Shock took another fistful of pretzels and shoved it in her mouth. The sideways look she gave Bill made it a competition, and the pair scarfed every last pretzel in less than three minutes, making ever more disturbing faces at one another as they chewed everything to a disgusting paste.

When they were out of pretzels, each chugged the remainders of their drinks. Bill resumed the conversation. “I just got my Writ of Citizenship. ‘Til now I’ve mostly been sitting on my winnings in case I ever got deported back underground.”

“What were you gonna do, bribe the Emperor to let you stay in Reno?”

“I’d sooner eat one of his dogs. No, if they ever sent me back underground, I was going to hire an army. It was my only chance of living long enough to make liars out of all my relatives. I get about a dozen death threat letters from them every match I win, and every one of those rat-eaters is dumb enough to actually try it.”

Shock laughed and waved to Merv for fresh drinks and another bowl of pretzels, leaning past Bill as she pointed. Bill inhaled deeply – he could smell a dozen flavors of her, skin and leather and steel and boozy breath. He liked it but stifled his feelings. Warriors who tried to make the Burning Bridge with other warriors pissed him off.

“So. So, how much money you got saved anyway?” She snatched her fresh beer from Merv and upended the glass over her gaping mouth to drink it in one go.

“Just shy of nine million.”

Shock coughed, hacked, spat, hiccupped, spat again, found a napkin, and then coughed into it for a while, trying to get a hold of herself. “How bleeding much?” she finally managed to get out.

After twenty minutes, two more drinks apiece, and one shouting contest that very nearly became a brawl, Shock’N’Awe invited herself along for the ride. Bill balked, but Shock wouldn’t be left behind.

“Come on, don’t be a dwarf about this. Spending money is a bitch if you have never done it before. I spend every gold piece I get on good times and expensive junk – I’m, like, an expert on financial debasement. Take me with you to watch your back, or the bastards will snatch your last penny. Just let me bleed the goblin real quick, and we’ll go.”

“Fine, whatever. But we’re taking my car. That purple thing you drive pisses me off.”

Snarling, Shock stomped into the bathroom and slammed the door behind her. Bill told Mervin to put the drinks on his tab. “Wait a sec ...” he said, and a bemused grin revealed his savage teeth. “How much is on my tab, anyway?”

Merv blinked, caught quite off guard. Catching himself, he mumbled apologies while he fumbled under the bar,

finally bringing out a three-ring binder stuffed to bursting with yellowing paper and sticky notes. He took a pair of thick-lensed glasses out of his breast pocket while he carefully flipped the pages. "Ur, says here you owe... including this from today... *cough, cough* sorry, m'allergies y'know... carry the seven, and... uh, looks like five hundred and eighty-nine gold." He smiled apologetically. "Heh heh. Sure has been some kinda long time, I'spose."

It filled Bill with pleasure to know that this cringing idiot was about to get his. He took a fat ball of bills out of his wallet and, stretching out the rubber band that kept it together, peeled off three thousand-gold notes. "Here - take this. Pay off my tab - pay off Shock'N' Awe's tab too. Oh, and Xian's too if she has one here. Keep the rest."

Merv brightened "Ah, hey there Bill, awfully nice of you. Are ya sure bout alladat?"

"Do I look like I'm not sure?" Bill failed pointedly at not looking terrifying. Merv thrust his hands in his apron like he could hide behind it. "Just make sure you buy something decent for that wife of yours, dog vomit." Bill threw the crinkled bills at him, suddenly in a good mood.

The sound of a running sink came from the women's room. Gill pointed at Merv "Don't you say a word about her tab, or I'll bleed you. Tell her I'm in the parking lot smashing her neon." Bill stomped out, trying not to laugh out loud. *She is going to be so bleedin' pissed off*, he thought, imagining Merv telling Shock the news next time she came in and getting a broken nose for his trouble.

Shock came outside and found Bill looking out over the

city. "So, you are going to finally spend some money. Where do we start?"

"A house."

"Rusty Cardineux, Reno Northwest Reality. It's so good to meet you!"

The real estate agent was waiting for them at a coffee shop. She was a middle-aged woman in a crisp purple-and-crimson business suit. She smiled and shook hands with the two massive half-orcs, comfortable and confident. Her easy manner took the crawlers by surprise, and for the most part they forgot to act mean.

"Do you know what my motto is? Next! That's what I say. I have a list of places that I think you might like - one that I think you'll absolutely love if you don't mind living next to a Junior High school, but I'm getting ahead of myself. If you see anything you don't like, if it isn't the house of your dreams - Next! We move on."

The orcs could respect that.

They looked at a dozen houses in a slow two-hour meander around Reno's fashionable neighborhoods. Something pissed Bill off at every place.

He didn't like the manicured lawns, the well-groomed kids in matching baseball outfits running around laughing, the oversized patch of gardenias in front of the house across the street. He made Rusty stop the car before she even got into a subdivision with a sign that read "A Swim and Tennis Community."

Shock eventually lost patience. "Aw, for the pit's sake, Bill! You're like an elf at a pretty leaf swap. Quit your trifling and pick one, you wishy-washy bee-yotch." It sounded like a death threat - could have been a death threat.

"I won't trade gold for trash! This is all so phony and dumb and... and *fancy!* I hate all of it."

"You don't like this one?" said Rusty, still not frustrated. "No problem. *GAAHCT!*" They had taught her to say "next" in Orcish, and she kept doing so with great relish. It never failed to crack the two burly humanoids up.

They stopped for coffee at a Caffeinous Rex (Bill left such a huge tip the barista openly wept) and talked about the houses they had seen. More accurately, Rusty spoke while Bill shook his head and looked at the TV.

"Let's start again," said Rusty, just the smallest bit frustrated. "Which of those properties did you hate the least?"

Bill killed his steaming white mocha in one single impressive gulp. He saw that both the real estate agent and his fellow crawler were waiting on his answer.

"Ah, rocks, I don't know. I guess I pretty much hated them all the same."

Both women sighed.

"I mean the buildings, the bathrooms, and the closets, and that one place with the fancy dwarvish fixtures were all fine. But..." He racked his brain to express his feelings with words while wishing he could just be himself and

express them with a baseball bat and a can of gasoline.

“Corny! That’s the problem. It was all so stupid and corny. That one man in the sweater who was wiping that shiny blue pixie-mobile in his driveway down with that *sparklingly* white towel? The women walking those babies in strollers at that beige stucco near the stadium? That little girl who wanted a silver piece for a cup of that nasty lemonade... Blood! That place had a bleeding neighborhood association. *A neighborhood association!* I bet they got rules about parking on the bleeding lawn. Do you know how many prize cars I’ve won? I’ve won three cars, a motorbike, and a sixty-bleeding-foot-long RV bus, and I can’t sell even ONE of the damn things without pissing off a sponsor! Do I look like the kind of guy that’s going to take guff from some pud in a sweater from the neighborhood association with a sparklingly white bleeding towel who doesn’t want me to park my *own* bleeding cars on my *own* bleeding lawn while I buy his brat’s hose-water lemonade?” Bill realized he was both standing and shouting, and he sat down, gulping deep breaths to lower his blood pressure.

Rusty looked dismayed, then got a gleam in her eyes. “Gaahct - oh a great big gaahct! Come on, I know something downtown. It might even be perfect!” She clapped her hands.

Twenty minutes later, they pulled up in front of 297 Fifth Street. The building itself was a duplex situated between a Chinese restaurant and a check cashing place. The trio looked in through an open gate.

The house had to be forty years old, and it sat in the center of a big parking lot surrounded by a privacy fence ringed

with ancient three-row barbed wire. Three American fat-tailed touring bikes stood amid hundreds of bits of engines and hubcaps and the odd flame-emblazoned gas tank. Two men in leather biker jackets and blue jeans were sitting on the porch. Their hands and t-shirts were smudged with black engine grease. One of them stood and looked them over with the eyes of a predator.

"It's a *rental*," said Rusty with just the smallest hint of distaste. "You would live in the right side; there is a couple who live on the left. But at night you can see the lights from the casinos. That way - the strip is right there, under that bypass and about six blocks down. The right half would be yours, and you could move in right away; it's been empty for months. I believe the folks who would be your neighbors are into... motorcycles and things like that. You said you owned several cars? You would have room to park them all here. Maybe you and your neighbors could talk about engines, that sort of thing."

Bill scanned the debris strewn parking lot, the dumpster in the alley by the Chinese place covered in gang graffiti, the two outraged bikers - one of whom had picked up two baseball bats and was handing one to his friend. The place had a tall fence and small windows - that meant defensible.

Here, his instincts said. Now.

"I'll take it. Yeah... I'll take it. But screw that duplex noise. I'm buying both sides right now, today."

"Ooh, well that's fantastic, but I'm sure the neighbors have a lease. We could see about some kind of lease-purchase, maybe, or ..."

“Yeah, turns out the neighbors are moving.” Bill walked around to the back of his car, popped the trunk and hefted his magic flail, giving it a few warm-up swings. He smiled over the edge of the open hood at the two bikers who were now standing at the edge of the ramshackle porch, menace in their postures. Bill could see concealed fear in their eyes. “Moving today, matter of fact.”

“Um, Bill? Mr. Pecos? As your real estate agent, I have to advise you that this kind of altercation could become a difficulty when we go to close on the property. I just want you to know that up front.”

“Hey!” the taller biker shouted, waving his wooden bat at them. “This here’s private property! Don’t you even think about coming on up here, ya halfbreed freak!”

“I’ll be eatin’ at Sub-Chieftain!” roared Bill.

The next several hours were a blur.

Once he had reached an agreement with the former residents, and the ambulance left with the one hold-out, Shock’N’Awe, Rusty, and Bill drove back to the real estate office to call the listing agent. The listing agent, who was also the property owner, nearly passed out when he heard that the famous Xcrawl star wanted to buy the run-down duplex for cash that very afternoon. Two hours later, the listing agent was back with a contract, two lawyers, and two witnesses. By five o’clock that evening, Bill was a homeowner (48,500 gp, plus 3,880 in agent’s fees, 4,000 in bribes, and a 250 gp celebration dinner for everyone involved but the bikers who, until five hours earlier, had lived in unit B).

“A what?” said Bill.

“A party!” said Shock’N’Awe. “We have to throw a party!”

It was nearly nine o’clock, and the two half orcs, the real estate agent, and the closing lawyer were standing around in the parking lot outside of the steak house where they had had the celebration dinner. Shock’N’Awe had just returned from the bathroom and spoke at the top of her impressive lungs.

“It’s early, we’ve hardly put a dent in your gold, and we have tons of stuff to celebrate! You just got your...” she hiccupped violently and gurgled up a bit of Champaign, which she spat in the bushes. “...American citizenship writ! You bought a house! You’re still mother-stomping ugly but can’t nothing be done about that. Rusty, are you in for a party?”

“Oh, don’t I just wish!” The real estate agent pulled a card out of her inner pocket. She handed it to Shock. “I have a seven AM meeting tomorrow with an extremely finicky unlanded Duke. But I really do hope you’ll make it to our Saturnalia cookout. And don’t forget to call me if you decide you want to sell. Bill, congratulations again. I think you are going to be very happy in your new home. Minerva watch over you.”

She and the lawyer left, leaving the two half-orcs alone in the parking lot.

“Come on, I’ll drop you off at your car.” Bill pointed his remote key at his SUV – the lights flashed; the horn gave

a beep.

“Ah you wus! You’re going to drop me at my car? I’m serious about the party. Have you ever thrown a party before?”

Bill screwed his face up. “No.”

“Well... are you scared of parties? Scared somebody will come by while your pansy ass is passed out drunk and paint your toenails pink? You don’t have to lie to me.”

“Get bled, you mangy goblin wad.”

“Look - we can go right now up the Imperial Hotel. They have private--” she hiccupped again, and Bill stepped back least she spit something else up, but she didn’t. “Crom, that’s nasty - banquet rooms. We could rent one out, get booze and food sent up, call everybody up...”

“Who is everybody?”

“Everybody! Every half-orc in the games lives in Reno since they changed the law. I got every one of our in-town kinfolks numbers in my black book. Let’s see, we’ll invite Nero, McBrain, Backwash... uh... oh I’ll call Rockbone, Doodlebug...” Shock’N’Awe looked up at Bill’s face, took a second to focus her eyes on his. “You cheap dwarf bastard. You are going to beg off. God, you’re soft as yoghurt.”

“I just don’t see the point.”

“The point is you bleedin’ made it! The point is that our kind is born to nothing and don’t hardly never amount to

nothing but grieving families and a pile of corpses. But you... you made it! It's like..." *haaaack, sputter, hock, spit* "Sorry about that, this Champaign is making me phlegm up like a bastard... it's like if you don't do something to mark the occasion, you tell everyone else like you and me and all the other half orcs in this putrid city to go stick it! We got to make some *noise* about this. *You* got to make some noise about this! Do it for all of us like you who just want to make it, have something, amount to something. Pecos Bill *means* something to all of us halfies who kill and die for a livin'!"

She held his gaze for a ferocious moment, then had to spit up once more. After a few deep breaths, she said "Plus, if you don't, you're a cheap cave hermit. Why you gotta be a gold grubbin' wallflower? What are you gonna do with money if you don't spend some on your brethren - buy some pretty pink cupcakes for the orphan's home or something?"

She stopped ranting long enough to glare at a group of humans who were walking across the parking lot and staring. "What, you like this?" she roared at them. "Looking for some sweet lovin'? Come get a kiss!" The humans stumbled all over themselves getting back in their car and drove away.

Bill had to laugh, and then he heard himself say yes to the party. "But screw that hotel crap. We're going to have it at my new house."

Shock pumped her fists in the air and roared her victory roar.

Fifteen minutes later they were standing in the nearly

empty duplex. The remaining biker was still in the yard, loading up a moving truck with the last of their engine parts. While Shock got on her spellphone and threatened, cajoled, and embarrassed every half-orc in Reno into promising they would make the party, Bill helped the man pack up the scattered remains of his bikes. He apologized again for kicking the snot out of the guy's friend and gave out a few more notes to pass on to the family (200 gp).

Shock hollered from the porch. "Okay, Bill, this thing is happening. If half of those dirt bags actually show up, we'll have enough brethren to staff the next Emperor's Cup. Doodlebug said he would stop by the liquor store and pick up two kegs of beer and some hard stuff. I told him you'd pay him back when he got here" (150 gp plus 10 gp for gas) "What are we gonna do about food?"

The Chinese place smelled good - even their dumpster smelled garlicky. Bill wandered over and went inside.

The half-orc inspected the interior of the Imperial Gold Fortune - mahogany paneling, black chairs with red vinyl cushions, and a massive aquarium with koi fish turning lazy circles. A hostess scurried up to Bill, trying hard not to look him in the eye.

"We are very sorry; we close in five minutes."

Bill smiled. "You don't want to do that. I just bought the place next door - I'm your new neighbor." The young hostess blanched, eyes wide. "Anyway, I want you to cater something I have going on next door tonight."

"Yeah, we're closing in five minutes, so sorry."

Bill's instincts told him definitely not to smash the fish tank with the nearest chair, a tempting act that would unfailingly bring the cops to his new neighborhood for the second time on the first day he lived there. He scooped out a few bills, handed them over one at a time. "I need food for fifty (100 gp) – no, one hundred (200 gp). I want the works: noodles and dumplings and plates of all the fried stuff you got."

"I am so sorry, you don't understand, closing in—"

(+100 gp) "Also I'd like to use your ice machine for a few..."

"So sorry, mister, so very sorry."

That's all it took. Bill went red and his face screwed up into his dungeon camera scowl. "You know what, neighbor? That's not what I want from you. That's not what I dog-bleeding-well need! What I need is 'Oh thank you, Pecos Bill! How generous of you to hand me all this bleeding gold, Pecos Bill! Here, have a drink while I go get the manager, PECOS BILL!"

Four minutes later, Bill stood in the restaurant's tiny office, rattling off what he wanted for the party.

"And I want plenty of drinks! Bring over a bunch of those drinks that come in half a pineapple."

The manager, smiling, dapper, eyes livid with greed, kept giving instructions to his hostess, who scribbled madly to keep up. "Get the drinks too, tell Donald to keep the bar open. Okay, no problem, very good, good deal. So, you are our new neighbor, no? Famous Xcrawler, no?"

Bill shrugged. "I kill stuff on TV for gold. Is that a problem?"

The man smiled. "No, no, yes, very famous. Ever think of being a partner in a restaurant? You know, this is just a small little restaurant, just my family, but with just very little work it could be best place in town. Could make lots of gold for an investor. And if you live right next door... well, we could put your name right on the sign! 'Pecos Bill Imperial Xcrawl Best Pan Asian Restaurant!'. Bring customers in, keep burglars out!

Bill's eyes widened. He pictured wandering next door for chow at all hours, eating whatever he wanted without paying, and never ever cooking again. He smiled hugely.

(Informal agreement for 20,000 gp, plus 1,000 for food and beverages for the party, including a generous bribe for the staff to work all night).

When the half orc finally returned to his new duplex, he had an unofficial bill of sale for half of the newly renamed Pecos Bill's Imperial Fortune in his pocket, a massive plate of fried wantons, and a double Mai Tai in half a pineapple. A huge sports pickup, bed full of half-orcs dressed to party, was turning into the driveway. Bill thought he recognized one of them as a brawler for the Cleveland Goldaholics. One half-orc sitting on the passenger side window hurled a six pack to Shock, who caught it without taking her spellphone away from her ear.

I'm throwing a party, thought Bill. I own a house and a half restaurant, and I'm throwing a party.

An hour later, there were more than three hundred half-orcs in and around Bill's new place and the Chinese joint. Bill owned a massive surround system that he had won in Tucson the previous year, but it was in storage along with the rest of his swag, so Shock and a few others had cranked their car radios up. The entire party rocked out to the local Mexican station, commercials and all. Trash barrel fires burned merrily in the yard, and brawlers handed bottles around them and shouted, cursed, and laughed. By the time Geronimo Nick, Bill's halfling team mate, showed up in his mini town car, there had been a half dozen fist fights, a stuffing-egg-fu-young-in-the-mouth contest (declared "inconclusive" by the ad hoc judges' panel), and another visit by two cops who were so obviously looking for a bribe that Bill just threw some bills over the fence without saying a word to them before turning his back and heading over to the newcomer's tiny car (200 gp).

"Nick!" he roared, opening the door for his friend. "Did Shock call you?"

The halfling got out, tiny bare arms showing his tattoos. He had a huge smile. "Actually, Shock called my boy Fist O. Rage - Fist called me. Congratulations on your citizenship, big guy." He reached in the back of his car, drew out a fifth of bourbon with a handsome silver brushed label, red velvet ribbon tied around the neck. "Brought you a little something for the occasion," he said, handing his teammate the bottle.

"Aw, Nick this is great! You didn't have ta." He started pulling the cap off.

"Happy to. Yeah, I picked that up at an auction a few years

back, been saving it for a special occasion. Cost me almost three hundred..." he trailed off as Bill took a massive swig, bourbon running down his chin in thick rivulets, then handed it to the nearest random partygoer who did the same. The dismayed halfling took one deep breath, then laughed. "Anyway, congratulations. Show me around your new place?"

Inside were wall-to-wall half-orcs drinking and stuffing themselves with egg rolls and crab Rangoon. There were more Orcish speakers together in one place than Bill had ever seen above-ground – their combined chatter cheered him more than he could possibly articulate. Frustrated by the task of staying together through the throng, Bill finally picked the halfling up and set him on his shoulder so he could show him around. It was a maneuver they had done in dozens of dungeon encounters, and each was perfectly comfortable with it. Half-orcs laughed and knocked knuckles with the elevated Geronimo.

They ended the tour on the left-side living room. Geronimo had to shout a bit to be heard as Bill set him down on the floor. "Well, it's a great house, no doubt – but a little weird, Bill. I mean, you have a house in two sections that don't connect. You are going to have to go out through the front door of one half to get into the other half."

Bill, now more than a bit tipsy, looked about, considering the logistics of his new home for the first time. "That *is* weird," he mumbled to himself.

It took almost ten minutes to organize a dozen drunk half-orcs into a battering ram team.

Shock and Bill were the anchors, holding the two rear corners of the ratty couch the bikers had left on the back porch. Four other half-orcs – Billy Backwash, Doctor Dogbody, Merv the RIPper, and some newbie with a diamond-studded gold grill that Bill didn't know – held the sofa by the rough hand holds Bill had hacked into the frame with his axe. The other six were in the room on the far side of the wall, holding back party traffic. The whole crew was tense, concentrating hard through a haze of alcohol and loud norteño.

Shock shouted in Orcish, “Kay, on one now. Get ready. Three. Two – wait for it, you worg stain – One!”

The whole crew charged but were stumbling down before they even hit the wall. The couch struck with an unsatisfying *wump* that made a dent in the drywall smaller than a basketball. The crowd of onlookers jeered in derision.

Shock jumped to her feat, would not be defeated. “That sucked goblin so bad... okay, pick it up again, mates. And put your hearts in it! Where's your fire, you dog-bleeding crawlers?” Two tears of blood leaked from her eyes. Standing right next to her, Bill found the twin red trails intensely endearing.

“Get hot, you inhuman sons'a bitches!” Cries of rage went up from the battering ram team, cries that were picked up by the three dozen onlookers and everyone on the far side of the wall as Bill's squad hefted the battered old sofa into position.

“Get ready! On 'Go! Go!”

The team smashed through the wall in an eruption of dry wall dust and splintered wood, continued across the now connecting room into the far wall, where it struck and made an arm-rest size hole. The entire house cheered – even Nick, who had been waiting on the far side of the breached wall snapping shots with his tiny camera, put it down and saluted the crew with a mug of beer as big as his head.

Bill staggered to his feet, looking down fondly at the prone and dust-encrusted battering ram crew, the ruined couch, and the huge, ragged hole that now connected his two living rooms. The newbie spit out a bloody tooth and laughed. They all laughed.

It was the best time Bill could ever remember having.

By dawn almost everyone had either left or passed out wherever they had finished drinking. Shock and Bill sat at the top of the stairs, sharing the last plate of sesame balls they had scored from the Chinese place before the manager had begged off and locked up. The house was a wreck of dusty dry wall debris, smushed pineapple halves, beer cans, and snoring half-orcs.

“Do you know what the funniest part is for me, Bill?” Shock’N’Awe pronounced her English in careful drunken articulation.

“What’s that?” said Bill.

Shock articulated very carefully, “You almost didn’t want to have the best party of the year! I had to talk you into it!”

Bill laughed quietly and nodded.

“Well, now you owe me, bleeder. You can throw me something for my next victory. Something with whiskey and blood and fire trucks. Heh! Okay, I’m gonna piss then get going home.” She stood up resolutely, controlling her sway as best she could.

“You’re too drunk to drive!”

“I live eight blocks from here. Gonna walk.”

“You pee more than anyone I ever met!” called Bill over his shoulder.

Shock turned around, considered Bill for a moment then jerked down the front of her jeans to display an amazing spider’s web of distended scars on her pelvis. “Only got half a bladder left. I got caught in that elf-bleedin’ portcullis trap in San Diego last year – ripped me all up and healed bad before our that wussified messenger of ours got around to putting the glow to it. One beer and I feel like I’m gonna bust.” She hiked her jeans back up then staggered off to the bathroom.

Bill sat looking down at his new house, as trashed and homey as you could possibly ask for. He thought about everything that had happened that day, looking for clues as to why he felt so good, so right about everything in the world. He got up to his feet, his body making a decision before his mind ever realized it.

Go, his instincts said. Now.

He stood outside the door to the bathroom. He heard a flush, then running water. A second later the door opened

up, Shock surprised to see him. "Got to go?" she managed.

He swept her into his arms and kissed her hard enough to break a coffee mug. She froze up for a second, then two, then Shock wrapped Bill up tight in her massive arms. They kissed and butted heads, grabbed and jabbed, rubbed teeth and caressed. Tangled, they fell together to the floor in the bathroom, dragging down the towel rack off the wall and onto the floor with them.

Somewhere in the hot Reno night a police siren wailed off into the distance.

"How do you do it?" asked Bill.

Bill lay side by side with Shock'N'Awe in the square of dirty sunlight let in by the bathroom window. They had talked for nearly an hour without shouting, and it didn't seem strange at all.

"Do what?" asked Shock, half asleep.

"That thing with your eyes, the blood?"

Shock giggled. "Truth for truth - what's your orc name?"

"What does that ever matter?"

"I wanna know. I don't have an orc name; I kind of wish I did."

Bill considered this. "So, your real name is..."

"Shock'N'Awe. Shock. I was born here and called 'runt' or 'nothing' or that kind of crap growing up in the

Menagerie. The trainer called me Shock'N'Awe the day after my first kill, and I kept it. It's my name, the only one I got."

"Thule."

Shock smiled a bit, nodding as if she had suspected it all along. "Good orc name. I'll call you Thule if you want me to."

"Don't really matter. Bill is my legal American name - for almost twenty-four hours now."

"How's it feel?"

Bill considered.

"It feels... regular. Normal. 'Kay, enough stalling. Out with it - how do you do the eye thing?"

Shock smiled slyly. "I don't know. It just happens. Has ever since I was a kid." She laughed as the frustrated Bill tried to hit her with his elbow. She got him in a choke hold; they grappled then kissed for a while.

"So, what now?" asked Shock.

Bill shrugged.

"Of course, you don't know. Well, I'll tell you what needs to happen," Shock said, sitting up and sifting through the mingled pile of their clothes and weapons. "You need to get out of here so I can pee. Then take me someplace that does all-you-can-eat and buy me breakfast. Then furniture shopping."

Bill snorted. "Is that what I have to do, spend more of my blood-earned gold on you?"

Shock looked down, smiling a mild smile. "It's what you have to do if you want me to help you wreck a bed tonight."

(50 gp for breakfast including unheard-of tip, 879 gp for furniture including delivery, 35 gp for clean-up crew, 18 gp on sheets and bed skirt, 10 gp for flowers)