

BEASTS & BARBARIANS

STEEL EDITION



Sample file

UMBERTO
PIGNATELLI



CR
G R A M E L

GAME MASTER'S GUIDE

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SPECIAL UMBERTO'S THANKS: MK, Marta, Nora, Lia and Corinna.

AND A VERY SPECIAL DEDICATION IREK TO: my wife Dagmara and our beloved children (Felicia,
Naomi, Anika, Timothy)

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

Welcome to *Beasts & Barbarians*, Gramel's setting of sword and sorcery! In this book, the **Game Master Guide**, you'll find all you need to run a game in the Dread Sea Dominions, a world of gritty heroism and savagery, where a man lives or dies by his sword and his wits! Among these pages, you will find ancient civilizations, long forgotten sorceries, and twisted tales to make the Dominions come alive for your players!

FIVE YEARS LATER...

When I designed *Beasts & Barbarians* I intended, from the beginning, to make the setting alive and kicking, like a screaming barbarian in battle.

Five years have passed since the previous edition of the game, the Golden Edition, and many adventures have happened during this time, both in official published scenarios and in the awesome stories played at your tables.

When we decided to publish a new edition, extending the timeline was only natural.

So the question is, what has happened in the Dominions in the last five years?

A lot of things, my friends, a lot of things, good and bad in equal part, and ripe for adventure, of course.

Are you sure you want to discover them?

If the answer is yes, well, grab your sword and turn the page!

A NOTE ON ABBREVIATIONS:

To save space, several abbreviations are used in this book to refer to other books of the *Beasts & Barbarians* Steel Edition line:

SEPG = Steel Edition Player Guide

SEGM = Steel Edition Game Master Guide

Zandorra opened her eyes, waking up immediately, as only animals and long-time friends with danger do.

She could still feel in her mouth the sweet taste of the wine she'd drunk at the tavern of the Blind Lady...

Too sweet, she should have imagined it was a trap...

She looked around. She was in a dark, low-ceilinged room, surrounded by a colonnade, lying on a stone slab. The only source of light was a brazier nearby, a heavy bronze thing of unknown make, full of red embers.

Cautiously, the woman raised her head, letting her eyes adjust to the darkness.



The cold, moist stone on her naked skin made her shiver. She quickly checked herself, and nobody could see the grimace of disappointment on her face. Her armor was gone, and now she was clad in a silky, evanescent bikini, encrusted with pearls, which left very little to the imagination. It was incongruous on her strong, lean body, marked by the scars of battle. Zandorra was an Amazon of Ascaia, a proud warrior-woman, more at her ease with armor next to her skin and a sword in her hand.

Speaking of which... where had her weapons gone?

She ran a hand through her hair, feeling it clean, trimmed... and perfumed, with a slightly repellent essence.

She shivered with disgust, imagining pale, unknown hands touching her unconscious body.

"You smelled of tar and ships," a rasping voice said, from the darkness behind her. "And I don't like those smells."

Zandorra quickly turned around, seeing the person speaking to her for the first time.

He was tall, and shrouded in a dark robe, his face hidden by the deep shadows of his hood. The only thing the Amazon saw clearly was the strange ring on his left hand. It shimmered in the darkness, like the scales of a Red Desert serpent under the sun.

"Where are am I?" the Amazon said. "And who are you?"

"Wrong question, my dear lady. Wrong question," the cloaked figure answered, a hint of amusement in his voice. "The right one is not where am I, but why am I here?"

With a slow movement, the man removed his hood.

"Mother Eul!" Zandorra cursed, her hand going to her side, looking for a sword that wasn't there.

"Your puny little goddess isn't involved in this," the man continued. If he could still be called a man. The skin of his face was gray and crispy, like that of a long-dead corpse, one eye socket empty and oozing with pus, while the other shimmered with black malevolence.

"Time," he said. "Time and age did this to Sovakor Kar, who walked the Dominions when your ancestors were only naked monkeys."

Zandorra remembered the name from childhood tales. The darkest ones.

"It cannot be," she said. "Sovakor Kar, sorcerer of Tricarnia, died two thousand years ago!

The laughter of the warlock echoed in the tomb. "Yes, I died. Dozens of times. But I always returned. Young and strong again. And today YOU will give me the strength I need!"

Quick as a snake the rotten creature raised a hand, moving his ring in circles, capturing the eyes of the Amazon, who suddenly could not move, paralyzed by an unknown force.

"And now, my sweet lady, you'll taste the lips of old Keron..." The sorcerer said, breathing heavily, his devastated face approaching Zandorra's lips, seeking an obscene kiss.

The Amazon, in the meantime, frantically tried to break the spell. "The brazier," she thought. "The brazier! If I can only reach it..."

A crash and a terrible howl broke the silence of the night.



SECRETS OF THE DOMINIONS

“EXTINGUISH THE CANDLE, AND HEAR THE SECRETS I WILL
WHISPER TO YOU TONIGHT JUSTINUS.”

Master Velastios, Sage of Syranthia

The **Dominions** are a strange and dangerous place, filled with adventure.

In this chapter, for each Dominion you'll find a plot hook, an interesting event or place linked to that region, which can be used to develop your own adventures.

Note that they are deliberately very vague, and in the form of rumors or tales, so that you, the GM, can decide if they are fully true, partially true, or totally false. As always, a lot is missing, so that you can fill the gaps in your own way, to make the Dominions totally yours.

Dominion Events. Each area also has a Dominion Event idea, which can be used in the After the Adventure Phase (or in other ways, see sidebar). They can be good or bad, depending on the card color (red for good and black for bad) and should be used only once, but the GM is free to create other ones or to use them as the basis for a scenario.

GM'S TIP: MORE ABOUT DOMINION EVENTS

You'll notice that Dominion Events are slightly more detailed than the other After the Adventure Events. This is deliberate, each of them is solidly rooted in the theme of the Dominion they refer to. Many of them include detailed rules of some sort, often with a permanent effect. Depending on your style of play, you can use them as they are, ignore the rules or tweak them to fit your needs.

Whatever you decide, remember that Dominion Events are plot-heavy, many of them changing the player character in a major way.

Additional Dominion Events will be released in future installments of *Beasts & Barbarians*, but, as always, feel free to create additional ones yourself!

Alternate Uses. Dominion Events are one of the major additions to the setting in the Steel Edition. Apart from using them in the After the Adventure Phase, they can be used in several other ways:

- ❖ As additional plot hooks for adventures.
- ❖ As material for Interludes (in case you, the GM, let the players read this part of the book).
- ❖ As ideas for heroes' backgrounds during player character creation.

ASCAIA, THE AMAZONS' ISLAND

Etu's Voice. It's no surprise that the cult of Mother Goddess, Etu, is the most important one in Ascaia. The Houses of Labor, where all births happen, are actually temples of the Goddess and the Reverend Mother, the highest priestess of the cult, has for centuries been a counsellor to the crown. There are rumors that the Mother Goddess herself visited the island, blessing it. Under the island, in fact, there is a huge cavern of white stone, where a strange echo continues to resound, even after many centuries. It is the voice of the Goddess herself, speaking in the language of the gods. Stories say that a woman in great need of advice will receive it on hearing this voice, while a man will go hopelessly mad. Nobody knows where the entrance to the House of Etu, as this place is called, is – except maybe the head of the Cult. Many people have looked for it, but not for religious reasons: the same stories say that Queens of the past amassed a huge treasure there. Could this be true?

Event – The Mating Season. This event is only suitable for male characters. The hero is captured somehow by a bunch of Amazons who keep him for a while for reproductive purposes. If the card drawn is red, the experience is good; the hero is not a real slave, more a pampered guest and the benefits of the job are, well... interesting. The hero gains a Bennie at the beginning of the next scenario, and +2 Charisma toward all Amazons for the rest of his career. If the card drawn is black, the hero is indentured in a vile sort of slavery. When he manages to escape he suffers -2 to Vigor rolls for the next session, and probably develops a grudge of some sort towards the warrior women of Ascaia (how this is expressed is left to the player). In addition, after this event the GM secretly draws a card from the Action Deck. With a face card the “entertainment” bore fruit and a child (or children) will be born. How this will affect the game is left up to the GM. This event can also be used in places other than Ascaia, wherever a group of Amazons is consistently present.

THE BORDERLANDS

A Fragile Peace. In the last few years, there has been a truce of sorts between the Borderlands and the Northlanders. This is because Commander Ascanius, the ruler of Fort Miscenium, one of the biggest on the border, married Gwynned, the daughter of an important Northlander clan chief beyond the border. From that moment on, the situation on the border calmed down, and the first, hesitant steps toward peace are being made. But it is still a very delicate time, and any misstep by either side could lead to a war of epic proportions. But nobody wants that, do they?

Event – Defending the Border. The hero is involved, willingly or not, in the defense of the border; maybe enlisted by a local lord, or forced by circumstances to defend a fort to save his life. If the card drawn is red he fought with honor, and he managed to grab some loot too. He can acquire a free item costing 100 Moons/Rank, which must belong to a fallen enemy (this can lead to trouble in the future). If the card drawn is black, the adventurer managed to save his skin, but suffered a nasty wound. He begins the next session with a Wound, which can only be healed by natural means, with a (-2) to the Vigor roll. Once the wound is healed, the character receives a Benny. The exact nature of his enemies is left to the GM, to be agreed with the player.

THE CAIRNLANDS

The Grayhorn. One year ago, in the market plaza of Felantium, Tombwolf, an infamous Cairnlander marauder chief, responsible for months of pillaging, killing and rape, was sentenced to death in front of the Count and the population. For such crimes, the condemned is tied and dismembered by two bulls walking in different directions. But before being reduced to a bloody pulp, Tombwolf shouted: “I die today, but I’ll return, thousands of us will return! I saw the Grayhorn! And it will blow soon!”

At these words, the crowd murmured, and even the Count grew pale and marked himself with the sign of Hulian. The Grayhorn is a legend widespread throughout the north: it is an ancient hunting horn, made by inhuman hands when the world was young. Whoever blows it will make the Ancestors rise from their tombs, and fight again at his orders. It is a story that periodically spreads through the north, but nobody has ever found or seen this mysterious artifact. But is it just a coincidence that in recent months many caravans crossing the Cairnlands have disappeared? And what about those strange, shrouded riders who appear on the borders of the land of the Cairns, at dusk, when the fog rises, like the scouts of some inhuman army, only to disappear at dawn?

Event – Riddling with Death. The hero, while crossing the Cairnlands at night, has a strange meeting with a powerful Ancestor or ghost of some sort, which forces him to play riddles with it, with the adventurer’s very life as the stake! If the card drawn is red, the character manages to solve the riddle and continues on his way. This deed is so important that the character can immediately raise the lower of his Spirit or his Smarts by one die step, but he begins the next scenario with one Benny less. If the card is black, the hero could not find the right answer and manages to escape, but not before the foul creature touched him with grave-cold hands, making him lose a die step in Vigor (if he already has d4, he gains the Elderly Hindrance, if he already has both, he dies). Characters with the Sage Edge can draw an additional card and use the better color.