

Presents

THE SECRET OF ZIR'AN FATE BOOK

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Running the Game.2
Chapter 2: Environment....20
Chapter 3: Conspiracies....38
Chapter 4: Magic.....68
Chapter 5: Antagonists.....86
Index.....110

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A terrifying scene of transmutation from deep within the Tilerian Empire.



CHAPTER 1

RUNNING THE SECRET OF ZIR'AN

Sample file

The Hand of Fate

In role-playing games, one person becomes a meta-player, a combined storyteller, referee, and character actor who describes the people, places and things the other players encounter during the game session. In *The Secret of Zir'An*, this person is known as the Hand of Fate. She is responsible for creating the framework of the adventure's plot and antagonists beforehand, creating an atmosphere, narrating and adjudicating the game during a session, and visiting the consequences of player's action in the adventure's epilogue: treasure, experience, tragedy, or all three.

Preparation

Each Hand of Fate has a different way of preparing. Some buy supplements or published adventures and run them with no modification whatsoever. Others create their own adventures, complete with maps,

NPCs, timelines, and rewards. Still others make a few mental notes and dive into running the game, making things up as they go along. Most mix all three methods to their own tastes and what they know their players desire in terms of a fun gaming session.

Experienced storytellers try to bolster their weaknesses with preparation. A HoF who isn't good at making up names might keep a list handy for randomly encountered NPCs, while one who isn't comfortable with off-the-cuff environment descriptions would write paragraphs to read when the players enter a new area. The main thing is to keep the session flowing and not lose the suspension of disbelief that allows the Hand of Fate and the players to immerse themselves in the adventure.

Suggestions for things to take care of beforehand include:

- A map for every important location. It's helpful to have the locations of your adventure sketched out on paper so you have an idea of the environment and resources available to your NPCs and players in terms of travel distances, tactics in combat, hiding and ambush locations, secure areas with locks and traps, placement and awareness areas of opponents, and so on. Making maps also is an effective way to concretize in your imagination how an adventure will unfold, like scouting locations for a film.
- Create and define the puzzles and traps that might be encountered. These are particularly hard to make up on the fly, so it's a good idea to define a puzzle before the session. Traps or hazardous situations are a bit easier to improvise, but it's usually easier to define the how the trap is activated, how it can be disarmed or avoided, and what it does to anyone caught in it so that game play can continue when it's encountered without a pause.
- Keep a summary sheet of your players' characters. Items to include are their Acuity + Awareness total (for secret surprise or notice situations), Vitality & Lethal Wounds, and any negative Valdreyr so you can incorporate them into the game (if they chose to have a Dark Fate, they deserve to have it affect 'em during the game!).
- Add up all rolls that NPCs will be likely to make (Acuity + Personal + Awareness, Physique + Personal + Stealth, Physique + Personal + Weapon Skill, Intelligence + Knowledge + Runemagic, etc.) and note them down for reference (you'll only have to roll a d10 and add one number to it to determine their totals this way). Note one or two Finesse Effects they will employ if they get the chance. Also helpful is a sentence or two for each NPC to remind you of their goals, their favorite combat tactics and general role-playing attitude and style. For spellcasters, make sure you decide what Runes or Cardinal

Spells they have available and what their current Fatigue or Animus pools are.

- A list of significant events in the adventure that you can check off to determine experience awards and skill grants.

Atmosphere

The transition from sitting at a table with drinks and munchies to feeling immersed in a land of exotic adventure needs all the help it can get! Since the Hand of Fate is the nominal authority figure he should endeavor to create a game session that removes distractions and enhances mood to the benefit of the game. Some suggestions:

- Sit around a table if you can
- Have chairs for everyone
- Set cell phones and pagers to silent mode
- Have a private area close by but out of earshot for 1-on-1 conferences
- Keep the lights low but bright enough to read character sheets and dice
- Play appropriate music at a low volume in the background
- Use props that help players visualize, like Items of Power, maps, notes, telegrams, and dossiers their characters find in the game.

Narration

The Secret of Zir'An is all about adventure: heroic people discovering secrets, challenging adversaries, and exploring a world filled with excitement and mystery, guided by the enigmatic designs of Fate. Zir'An is a big place, and it is possible to create a variety of narrative tones in games that use it as a setting. Scattered through the following are sections of boxed text with hooks for adventures for the various tones.

Adventure

Drawing from pulp fiction, action/adventure movies, and wondrous fantasy stories, *The Secret of Zir'An* has many dangerous places that players can go to simply explore and see what they find. Underground remnants of ancient civilizations like Gondolon and Casseonae

hide treasure from mighty empires. In their long history, the Seven Gods' cults have constructed and abandoned uncountable temples, catacombs, palaces, and secret caches. Vast tracts of unexplored land may hide rare fauna and flora whose discovery could bring fame and fortune were they brought back to civilization. The very stories of adventurers' travails can be sold to tabloid publishers at a tidy profit, and the promotional tour for a novel or exploit can be a whole new source of social adventure in a continuing campaign.

This type of game is the easiest for the Hand of Fate to prepare for and run. Create a far off or deeply hidden mysterious place with a population of monsters, traps, treasure and you're ready to go.

Adventure Hooks

The Jewels of Fire

It is said that gemstones litter the very ground of the Fire Reaches. Diamonds, rubies, and emeralds all encrust the volcanic rocks, guarded by the giant Gogachi. A Merchant Islander pirate (perhaps a player character) thinks she has the location of an isolated mine and she needs some muscle for the raid. The players might come along for a split of the loot, for the rare opportunity to see the Fire Reaches, or for the challenge of facing the famous brutes. What the would-be pirate queen doesn't know is the mine is inhabited by a powerful Mamba Brolo who has foreseen the coming of the small thieves, and has prepared her people in the mine accordingly...

Screaming Shadows

A powerful Shadowmage has gone mad, and has enslaved a small town in the wilderness in Drakan, Bhuket, or Ba-Dur. The people of the town are now soulless undead, stripped of their shadows. For weeks they have mindlessly dug, constructed, and built labyrinthine monuments to their liege, not to mention preyed on travelers to swell their ranks and the coffers of their master. The players may

be a force sent in to subdue and liberate (or eliminate) the people and the Shadowmage by the local authorities, or may merely happen upon the cursed place as they travel. Is there a way to restore the people's shadows? Or is the place doomed to be haunted by the undead and their screaming master? Even worse, the players may be the last of those in the town who have yet to be stripped of their shadows, though this may be more suited to the Horror narrative tone, below.

The Power in the Stones

Dorallia is uninhabited, even though it is prime tactical territory for the war between the Forces of the Treaty and the Tilerian Empire. Its very stones hide immensely powerful secrets, but these secrets protect themselves from all who would discover them. The entire country is a ruin of granite, tunnels, glass, and broken monuments that constantly shift, as if uneasy with the power that infuses them. Explorers can sometimes steal in and survive the traps and strange Rune Magic manifestations that the ghosts of the ancients left behind to emerge with wondrous Items of Power. Shadekin, military expeditions, slouching Kleshti merchants, and other prospecting adventurers who aren't picky about finding treasure in the hands of others can also be encountered there, making the place even more dangerous than it already is.

Horror

Investigating the secrets of Zir'An leads inevitably to encounters with terrifying beings and horrifying truths. The long history of Zir'An's cults, the machinations of Fane past and present, and the sleeping abominations of ancient civilizations all provide excellent trappings for a scary evening of gaming. Though adventurers are heroes and used to fighting toe-to-toe with villains and monsters of every stripe, there are things that lay in wait that can drive even the most

jaded to raving madness.

Relatively weak player characters, normal people who stumble upon something that was best left alone, best serve a horror narrative. Set the adventure in an isolated locale that limits the players' ability to get help and escape. If running an expressly horror-themed campaign, consider keeping the number of Character Creation Points available for new characters to the Tyroic level. This will ensure even minor monsters are a threat best defeated with quick thinking rather than brute force. Be sure to employ the Insane Handicap liberally, calling for its effect if the players encounter gruesome scenes or creatures like the undead, abominations, and Shadekin.

Horror Hooks

The Watcher in the Fog

The taint of Mirkule is felt in the savage lands of Neoll and Mikesk. When their airship crash lands in the middle of nowhere, the players have no option but to search for the closest village. The dwellers in Yhob are unfriendly at best, and warn the players to keep to their tents at night, for it is the time of the Festival of Yhob. Amid crazed dancing and scream-like chanting, a fog comes. When it lifts, the villagers are gone. What happened to them, and what is the buzzing in the fog? Why does it seem to emanate from a black structure to the north? And why do Shadekin suddenly begin to attack from out of the swamp?

The Isle of Four

Even the Periphery Marshalls, who aren't afraid of anyone or anything on the face of Zir'An, even their voices tremble a little when speaking of the cursed Isle of Four. An anomaly in the desert-swept Periphery, the small isle is visible as a curiously jungle-covered speck almost over the horizon to the South. Rumor has it no one has ever returned who has gone there, but occasionally the gnawed bones of would-be explor-

ers turn up on beaches facing the Isle. Those that dwell there are said to be cannibals, to transform from men to beast, and to possess strange Rune Magic powers never before seen, all ruled by four debased priest-chieftains who are not of any known race. An lanu Vossian royal has decided to mount an expedition to show the "savages" there the civilizing might of his country. The players might be adventurers drawn to his expedition, or be a marshal and some deputies investigating his disappearance.

Black Milk from the Hills

The small mountain town of Wahaida in Harakyr is famed for its desserts. Deeply devoted to Drandlur, it dwells in a wooded valley surrounded by green hills upon which contented klunfa and ponko graze, from whose milk the townsfolk make butter, cheese, and cream. Everyone smiles there in the town, all are happy and content as their livestock. The players may be simply traveling through the mountains, or be trying to find a relative who came to live here and no longer writes or responds to telegrams. They may be trying to find the secret of the surprisingly addictive pastries and cakes that the place exports all over Zir'An. The place has a rotten center underlying its cloying sweetness, a debased cult of Drandlur has operated for hundreds of years out of caverns in the hills, where a living pool of black milk demands blood from its worshippers. In hyper-religious Harakyr, concealing a scandal like this would be a priority for the highest theocratic authority — the players may find themselves facing not just the cultists, but religious forces bent on suppressing the situation.

War

Overt and covert warfare is occurring constantly in a variety of places in Zir'An. This sort of adventure might involve players as a squad or unit of a military