THE NET PLOTS BOOK

Vol. 1 Compiled by Aaron Sher

<u>One-Liners</u>

- Help the local good, but dying, wizard to attain lichdom.
- Prevent evil nasties from overcoming the local good lich.
- Find the lost good lich and get help to cure a generic plague.
- Go to kill the lich only to find it's actually good.
- Save the Dragon from the Evil Princess.

<u>Short Summaries</u>

- An alchemist hires the party to recover a shipment of supplies that was hijacked enroute. If he doesn't get them back, he faces bankruptcy.

- Caught while stealing from a mage, the thief in the party is sent on a geas to steal an artifact from a colleague as punishment.

- You are assigned to protect a person, but don't let them know you're protecting them. Defer to them in all things, but don't let them know you're deferring to them.

- An obscure sect of a dark church is seeking the eight necessary parts/items used in summoning a sleeping demon. Just so happens that one of the PCs inherited one of the items (it should be something innocuous like a simple pendant with inscriptions) from a dead relative.

- The party uncovers a plot to replace high-ranking officials with exact look-alikes (shapechangers). Nice little conspiracy theory action. Which one of your trusted patrons is really an evil doppleganger? Who can you trust? Who will believe you? Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean someone ISN'T out to get you.

- The party is hired by the local Mage Guild to find and capture (and/or kill) a renegade wizard who is breaking Guild laws (selling magic items to criminals, assassinating the previous Guildmaster, attempting to assassinate the current Guildmaster, etc.). Local law enforcement is not involved because the Guild likes to solve its problems internally.

- There's a battle going on between a good lich and one or more evil liches. The players have to protect a town that's caught in the crossfire. The lich need not even appear in the campaign; you could just have dark noxious clouds blotting out the sun, undead armies marching back and forth, dragons eating the livestock, and other bits of largescale magical fallout. Or, if you want to bring the lich in personally, you could send the party on a quest to plead with the lich to stop the war, or to fight elsewhere.

- PCs get caught in hole (old castle, cave?) with overwhelming numbers against them. They have some warning and a time period when they will be relieved if they can hold on. Idea is that PC improvise with what is around and hold out for siege. Turns the GMing on its head. They have a plan of defenses, not the GM, and GM leads his baddies against it. Players spring their surprises in traps etc. Must have a map agreement on what can be done in time available. Players tend to cheat outrageously but great fun for all concerned with a change of pace for both GM and players.

- Here's a bunch of REAL short descriptions of adventure ideas that work well in a city: Second-story jobs, picking a pocket and finding a map, searching the tunnels under the city for a tomb or catacombs, competing with the Thieves' Guild, smuggling arms into the city, spying on foreign officials, helping an orphan fight against cruel thugs, racing another party in a city-wide search for a magical artifact, investigating a corrupt church, wooing a noble lady, searching for your weapons instructor who has been abducted by a rival, trying to get apprenticed to a truly weird mage, etc.

- Invert the "bad-lich-turns-out-to-be-good" idea: A really sinister lich would probably love to have people convinced that he's just a kindly, helpful old gent. Suppose one such lich has been working hard on his image for a century or two... he saves people from natural disasters (which he created himself), gives out magical gifts (which are cursed in some unobvious way), kisses babies, the whole shebang. The players come to suspect him of actually being evil ("Hey... two centuries old? That's before Second Edition came out! He must be evil!") and have to stop him. But first, they have to convince the locals, who love the old guy, that they've been wrong about him all this time. ("Gandalf? The old coot with the fireworks? Evil? Get outta here.")

- Go to kill the evil lich, get captured and put at his/its mercy only to have it ask "Why are you bothering me?" Apparently it was/is a good wizard who got kind of absent minded as he died and sort of drifted off into lichdom without noticing. Since he's quite powerful, none of the various local monsters that he's geased into serving him have given him any trouble, nor have they pointed out the problem of his lichdom... Play the lich as an absent minded old british gentleman, sort of surprised that anybody would want to kill him and having considerable trouble grasping the idea that he's a lich. A few accidental pats on the back while the players are held by some sort of spell should be amusing. P.S. If you can't figure out how to set things up so a lich can capture and hold helpless a bunch of PCs, SHAME on you! Liches are something like 30th level M-U/Clerics, not to mention the hordes of followers, servants, summoned monsters and demons and elementals and the like...

- A caravan is travelling through the desert. The party is hired to capture a man who is in the caravan, and it must be done quietly, so that nobody else knows. They are given the man's name, and the fact that he is a mage, but no other information about him. The catch is that the caravan consists of ten wagons, with at least thirty or forty guards (when I used this adventure, the caravan was travelling through Brin Pass, a VERY dangerous area), and everyone's wearing the standard desert gear: a white robe, with a hood and a veil. This makes it very difficult to tell who's who. The party should investigate the wagons. If they do, they will find that only one wagon doesn't have an obvious reason for existence (i.e. belongs to the caravan master, carries supplies, or carries cargo). A man is living in that wagon, and only comes out to get food. Raiding the wagon will obviously cause noise and commotion, two things to be strenuously avoided. This is a very difficult scenario; I've run it twice, and both times the party failed. Once the guy got killed and the party was arrested and held in custody by the caravan master, and once the guy ran away and the party lost him.

REWARD
(very large sum mentioned - for your world)
BRAVE Adventurers Needed!
To Kill the DRAGON of Eastmark, Kingdom of Arcadia.
(fill in location and kingdom name as necessary).
Apply at the Royal Palace.

All that made that adventure interesting (aside from the nearly 1000 mile overland journey, differing cultures, side-adventures, et al) was the fact that the "DRAGON of Eastmark" was a golden dragon, and the party was mostly Good characters. The Gold had become insane when humans had attacked and slain his mate, and spent his time laying waste to the local kingdom, which finally began posting notes (after the first three expeditions failed) to hire outsiders to come in and try to destroy the genius-intelligence, magic-using and physically awe-inspiring dragon. Since the tattered posting does not mention that the "DRAGON" is a Gold, the party had already travelled the very long way, and then had a lot of discussion before finally deciding that grief did not excuse the dragon's excesses, and that he must be destroyed.

Most campaigns have a player who loves to play politics, involve her in this. Assume for the sake of argument that the goal is the office of district attorney. Enigma has ambitions to be the D.A, the chief force for justice in Gotham. He is opposed by Buck Stevens, son of the founder of Stevens Brick Co., which is the second largest employer in Gotham. Darla Stevens is in love with the Enigma's alter ego, Bing Strawberry, and keeps telling him he ought to get in politics and make sure her slimy brother doesn't achieve political office ... etc etc etc you get the idea.

Some complications that suggest themselves are: a) Enigma discovers that candidates must turn in petitions with 1000 names in order to register for the election, and he blew it off so long that he needs to get them all *tonight*, to be turned in at 8 am tomorrow morning (where do you get 1000 valid signatures at this time of the night?) b) the primaries are a good time for enemies to show up with embarrassing photos in hand c) election season can be complicated by reporters who circle, vulture-like, over the troubled campaign H.Q., and by a televised public debate between the candidates d) the election and the aftermath

-did the PC win? What will happen to the party now? What if the press finds out about the vampires the party staked a few years ago in the abandoned buildings in the ghetto? what about the crook who recognizes Enigma's voice and threatens to publicize his secret identity?

- The lich is a good wizard who was forced to become a lich in order to remain around to counteract some powerful evil force. He/it spent the last years of his life directly restraining some powerful evil demon (make it something not quite physical, for example a demon of madness that manifests by making victims psychotically insane... evil human sacrifice cults start springing up all over the place and random people on the road start attacking out of the blue with no provocation, sort of like... gasp! PCs!) So the Lich is at the bottom of some dungeon complex using spells and powers that are so far beyond the party's understanding that they can't perceive them, to hold the evil imprisoned. He/it is also keeping random strangers from wandering in and interfering. After so long a time, the lich just sort of drifted into undeath without really noticing (keeping a set of spells up constantly for years will do that to ya). The PCs manage to get the drop on the Lich when he's weakened and... a) the evil gets loose. b) the good lich's wizardly spirit manifests before it moves on to another, higher plane, and commends them for their actions in releasing him from his unwitting servitude to undeath. He also says, "Well, I'm off to my retirement in elysium, the job's all yours, boys!" c) If you're feeling charitable, give the players an inkling of what's going to happen, or some magic to help them to combat the madness demon (personal protection against the madness would be nice, although you could have lots of fun with blackouts and sleepwalking and the like if the PCs were as susceptible as anyone else). If you're not feeling charitable, have them find out the HARD way what the ol' spook's mysterious comments were in reference to. Maybe stick a scroll (that must be laboriously deciphered) in with the treasure, describing the madness demon and perhaps some ways that it can be fought.

- The party is on some sort of extended vacation, staying in an inn/bar. A frequent visitor is a tall, dark, suave, charming man dressed in formal evening wear, accompanied by a different woman every time. He comes in every 2nd or 3d night. He always orders bloody marys and doesn't drink them. He is quite wealthy and very pleasant. There is something almost magnetic about him. He has fascinating eyes. (DM should do everything he can to make it believable that he could be a vampire, despite the unusual setting (city)). Either he charms (charm gaze) a female party member and takes her away, or a beautiful dancer comes in looking for her missing sister, who was last seen coming to this bar with the tall, dark gentleman. She tries to convince a party member to help her look for her sister being seductive about it. Both are eventually charmed by the Gentleman. In any case, make a party member disappear into this Gentleman's lair. He has a gothic style house in a nice part of town. There is nothing obviously amiss here. If the party asks around, this guy is a pillar of society, a kind, philanthropic fellow, well respected by his peers. He runs a magic shoppe. He is a mid-level wizard with a head for business, who gave up adventuring to start a business. His house looks just like a vampires house might look (black velvet curtains, etc).

He has a private sanctuary inn his basement, the only entrance to which is a rune-encrusted door (trapped or enchanted in any way appropriate to the party). He supposedly has a chapel down there, but really has a large complex, where various vampiric rituals, and all night parties take place. All of the missing people have been charmed into believing that they have been turned into slave vampires. They will aid their master if at all possible. The party must break in and forcibly take their companion away from this place. Again, make the evidence somewhat contradictory whether the Gentleman is a vampire or not. Most evidence should say yes, but make some things contradict this. The gentleman has a cursed ring of the vampire, a powerful evil artifact which makes him believe he is a vampire and gives him many of the powers of a vampire, as well as some of the drawbacks. Make him dislike things that cause a vampire harm, but don't make it obvious whether is works. Make him have a reflection, but have a dead vampire victim show up. Etc. At the end, have the party realize that he is not a vampire at all but rather is a cursed fellow with an intrinsically good nature.

The magic energies (derived from outer space :-)) are dwindling, slowly but surely. At this time only the most advanced magicians have noticed that their most powerful spells are beginning to fail more and more frequently. My explanation is that there is three kinds of magic in the world: 1) White magic: creative magic, healing, alteration. The white magicians are generally the good guys, mostly elves, priests (Gods of Light) and fairies. 2) Black Magic: Necromantics, destructive magic, summoning. The black magicians are generally the bad guys, mostly humans, black-elves, trolls and the demons & devils. 3) The Old Magic: The magic that rules it all; but now almost a forgotten art, only used by the extinct race of Wizards (yes, wizards are a distinct race in my world) and the dragons. Unfortunately the magic energies are only dwindling for the white magicians, since the black-magicians derive their power from the negative dimension and have opened the gate, so that negative energies flow freely into this dimension blocking the white-magic. The objective is to close the gate, before even the simplest white magic is rendered useless and impotent. This cannot be done with the use of white-magic, but only with the use of the Old-Magic (use of black magic will only worsen the situation). The problem is to find someone or something that have access to the Old-Magic and is sufficiently skilled in this art, to reverse the situation. (this is what the players must think is the objective for them or initially be let to believe). The real problem is that the division between black- and white-magic is artificial, and will always lead to this problem sooner or later, and only the Old-magic can prevail (since the white- and black-magic is derived from the Old-magic, but the separation will corrupt both branches). So the players are to be the prophets of the new world order of magic (or front-runners), after being taught the basics of this by the only Wizard left on the planet (unless they destroy him in their folly!!!). But to find the information that there is such a creature alive should be very difficult and only referenced by vague hints in old legends etc. My suggestion for the Wizard is that the group can find (after lengthy research) the place he is rumored to live (e.g. inside a volcano). And when they arrive he is there, but frozen inside a huge ice block, by a pair of Ice-Dragons that he once forced to humiliate themselves to assist him, and this is their revenge.

Once every 100 year they let him free for a day to scorn him, and then deep-freeze him again. And they will not take it lightly if the players are to take away their sweet revenge.

Long Summaries

In my experience, PCs will guard a hundred caravans before it occurs to them that trading on their own account could be more fun and lucrative. Part of this is I guess a lack of interest in the "tie-downs" that trading could imply and in the boring detail of buying and selling. There are however some good advantages. It encourages a sense of group identity - all partners of Fast and Risky Quality Merchant Co. - and can have some great "plot lines". It also changes the world outlook when strangers are first thought of as "Hey CUSTOMERS!" rather then "Arm up, enemy approaching". If you ever need to lure your players in a particular direction then a rumors of profit should be easy to manage. PCs can be tempted into the business a bit at a time. For example: At conclusion of other business a friendly tribesman notes "Your people make good iron. If you are back this way, bring us one of your fine steel blades and I'll trade two snow leopard skins for it". $$$$ in characters eyes! The trick is to avoid the boring bits.

1) Give them good NPC warehouse men etc that they really can trust except perhaps once, later rather than sooner, for a plot. If they feel they can safely leave a load in trusted hands for a fling then so much the better.
2) Have NPC's offer to retail so they are doing the wholesale transit stuff and don't get lost in selling detail. "Hey, I'll take all of this stuff you can get here at xxxx - leave you free to get another load moving eh?". Failing that declare, "after 2 hours you are sold out for xxxx reward". Forget detailing trading except for casual encounters with a train.
3) Forget the unwieldy caravan bit - encourage them into the small mule train style. They'll have more fun. "Yup, de mules certainly de way. You see dat caravan train - takes 2 month to move dat round de Gap. Sheez dat costs! I ken move dis stuff over Hawk Pass on mules in meebe tree weeks on a good run."
4) Emphasize the exploratory opening up of new country rather then the big-haul routes. If they start into going back and forth on the same lucrative route too often, send in a big merchant with a massive caravan to drop the prices. They'll thank you for it in terms of game interest.

Some typical sorts of plots.

- -Guarding the goods train. They'll really do it in earnest.
- -Spying on the side under their legit cover.
- -Involvement in local politics Exploration
- -Building of fortified outposts and defense thereof
- -Very dangerous goods! (i.e. magic)
- -Recovery of stolen goods
- -Dealing with a protection racket
- -High risk winter route to relieve a starving outpost.

One potential problem is the possibility of too much coin. Relax. Early in their career get them used to the idea that high profits come from real high risks and sometimes its better alive poor then rich and dead. ("You are surrounded by 20 young mounted warrior louts looking for trouble. They request 'presents' with broad grins. All are bow armed (and they've been training since 3 years old)". Remember that elaborate trading has high overheads in paying NPCs etc. If there is somehow got a money excess then introduce credit offered by bankers - on risky routes they will sooner or later lose a train bought on borrowed money and the overheads will put them on the back foot!

A powerful wizard and his apprentice (also powerful) are after an artifact which is carefully guarded (by various traps, magics, etc) in a labyrinth. Put in there years ago by various leaders and since forgotten. They cannot think of a brute force way to get it, but they are clever enough to have figured out some loopholes which will allow a low-level bunch of adventurers with various characteristics (tailor to your players, one obstacle per player or combination of players) to get in safely and escape with the artifact.

The wizard cooks up a long term plan (perhaps he is an elf) to obtain such a party of adventurers. This plan is subtle and tricky as that is the style of this wizard (he likes to manipulate and deceive people, like a game). He has his apprentice disguise himself as an old storyteller/bard who takes a liking to a young PC or NPC and tells stories of the PC/NPC's grandfather who stopped a great evil by sacrificing himself, sealing the evil and himself into a labyrinth (yes THE labyrinth). The grandfather was lost with his family sword and more importantly an amulet which signified the family's power and destiny as heroes of the realm. Various stories of the grandfather, sword, and amulet should convince the PC/NPC to go after this stuff.

The storyteller also tells of the PC/NPC's family talent for dowsing, and helps him cut a dowsing rod and casts various covert magics to make the character believe he has such power. Eventually he replaces the dowsing rod with an identical duplicate which is set up to find the other characters who are needed to get the artifact back (yes, the party). The character recruits or finds the party and they go and get the amulet back. The wizard and apprentice appear at the exit from the labyrinth and reveal the hoax (part of the fun), demanding the amulet. The apprentice is either given or takes the amulet for the wizard, then gets a greedy look in his eyes and makes to put it on. The wizard vaporizes the apprentice and takes the amulet.

You might want to put some sort of treasure in this labyrinth so the party won't be too pissed that they have been deceived.

The wizard invites the characters to join in his "games" (see below). If they decline, he does various things to convince them to comply. If that fails, he cooks up another complicated deception to get them to join in. He will not force them to join, unless he feels that he has sufficiently deceived them.

The party is asked to go on a quest by an older man, a merchant, to save his daughter's life. She has the dreaded Indigo Flu, usually fatal. The only known cure is to make a medicine out of the Caiman stone, an odd fruit that grows out of a mineral/plant hybrid only in the most obscure places. The party is referred to the sage who told the merchant of this cure, for more info. The sage is of course an agent of the Wizard of the previous segment. He cooks up a quest designed to bring the party eventually to a spot at which the wizard has planted a "Caiman Bush". The Caiman stone and the Indigo flu are complete fiction. The party will not find anybody else who knows about these even if they ask around. The Caiman Bush is an elaborate magic item, which will teleport the party into the Wizard's lair. The wizard will then inform them that the only exit from his lair is to win the game. The game is versus another party which has been in suspended animation waiting for opponents. (Losers of the game are suspended and continue to play until they win, whereupon they are released). Make the game whatever you wish. You should maybe allow the party to acquire some limited magic items from the game, so they won't be quite so pissed to have been manipulated.

Riddle-maps (idea based on "song-maps" that the old time Maori people used to describe journeys).

Basically sage-type person translates a song-map that someone earlier had written down in its original form. Lots of scope for errors. It's a translation so no need for poetry. Sage identifies one point in song as being nearby and wants the map followed. Fit into your world. The characters can only "see" what you describe so very careful descriptive work is necessary but red herrings can be fun.

An example of full riddle map:

"here the VALATAS people live above the halls the congress of tide and land, thence two noon suns cross your face and take you to the silver path. Up the path you onward go past three cold threads in summer still, then into the shadows of RAMATIS realm till the path is crossed at the weeping rock. Shortly the path splits at last, so turn your face and walk two sunsets till RAMATIS greets with open arms again. The laughing braid just in the shades, leads high to towers of earth, and there above the last falling tears, find the gates of night. No moon to light the halls of night but ocher stars will mark a path to those who walk in here. Pity you who have no meat to sacrifice to the Old Ones hidden within. Once met and your offering received dash for life to the halls of teeth. Beyond there lies the ribbon of red, rushing fast to meet the sun again, then bounding down past flaxen steps, to greet the ghost in its bed of gold."

Translation:

Capitalized bits are phonetic translation of unknown words. The sage has identified VALATAS so begin here.

The party walks towards the noon sun for 2 days and finds...

GM: "Towards end of second day you climb to top of ridge and look down on large river valley with the river glistening in the sun."

Following it upriver past three side-creeks that would wet you even in summer you get to woods. RAMATIS is the old people's God of forests but the PC's or sage wouldn't know this. They should easily guess though when you announce forest in the way. The river hits a gorge and a crossing is forced where a waterfall comes down a cliff face. After that the river divides at two big tributaries and you take the west one for two days. Should encounter woods again... however, the puzzle can be sharpened by woods that are no longer present (keep talking about NEW building in the area - ruins of a saw mill ??? etc). A quick flowing tributary is traced up into the mountains and above the top waterfall is a cave mouth. A path through the cave is marked by ochre crosses on the floor but it is also the lair of monster worms that fall on any meat. The travellers of old would carry a sheep up and run like hell for the cave of stalagmites (which block the worm) while it is devoured. Hope the PC have something ready... torch light will shortly show an underground river flowing the other way (no more ochre) which will lead to high mountain basin. Geologically an inlier of gold-bearing basement capped by limestone. Problem - it exits over a sheer bluff and the rope ladder has long since rotted away. The creek joins a larger creek with the disconcerting habit of disappearing an hour or two after rain (the "ghost") leaving a dry bed. And yes, this is based on real place in NZ. The creeks are gold-bearing if PC ready to dig for it the hard way. Remnants of digging all over the show.

You get the general idea. Quite a bit of work and you can lead characters by the nose through it if so inclined. Mis-translations can also help.

◌ Every ten years, the Mages' Guild holds a contest. The prize of the contest should be left fairly vague, unless one of your PC's is a high-ranking member of the Guild... I usually use some statement about "material considerations... well, it's politics mostly..." However, since Guild mages tend to be not particularly active types, the contest is structured as follows: each mage hires a group of adventurers (here's where the PC's come in), who then compete for the prize in a maze set up and run by the Guild. The party should be hired by a mage, who tells them basically the information above, plus the number of other groups competing (I usually use four groups total, since in my maze they tend to meet up at the end for a final battle, and dealing with more NPC's than that would get hellish). The mage gives each PC a magical "token"; basically just a little one-use magic item. The tokens can have effects like Levitate (for a duration), Light (ditto), Invisibility (as the spell); just go through the Player's Handbook and pick out spells to use. Make up a maze to put the party though, and don't forget that several other groups are doing this at the same time! The way I run it is that I have a map of a maze, with four relatively distinct paths to a final room. They do cross over, but not very often. Each has several large empty rooms on the map, and some marked spots in the corridors. Then I have a list of rooms to use, and corridor tricks, and I just insert whichever ones I feel like when they come to a room or a corridor spot. The four groups race through the maze, and the objective is to find a large flashing gem. I usually set it up so that when the party reaches the last room (where the gem is), most of the other groups arrive at the same time. If the party tries to hang back and let them fight it out, I have some of the NPC's start going for the gem. Remember that this was set up by a Mages' Guild, so you can put in almost anything you want...

Some examples of rooms I use are:

1) The room has a chasm cutting it in two. There is another door on the far side, and a bridge across the chasm. (The chasm is actually an illusion, but falling in will take the PC out of the contest) On the bridge, there are two "knights". These are merely animated suits of armor, and they have orders to prevent anyone from crossing the chasm. They will react predictably to actions by the PC's, and so can be lured into traps; for example, a thief tries to climb across, one of the knights moves to block him, the party tosses oil onto the bridge where the knight would stand, then the thief goes back. The knight walks back and slips in the oil. Make the bridge very narrow and no handrails.
2) Another room with a chasm, but this one has a maze of invisible paths crossing it. The party would have to move very slowly, feeling their way along and probably mapping the maze as well. Therefore, you put a monster (I usually use a nonafel, or cat-o'-nine-tails, from the Fiend Folio, or else something called an amorph hopper which I made up) on the bridges to mess them up. Let the monster leap infallibly from one spot to another (it knows the maze perfectly), or else let it fly.
3) A circular room with a pillar in the center. As soon as one person enters the room, tell them that they see the door slam behind them and the room begins to spin. They are plastered against the outer wall by the centrifugal force, and are slowly being crushed. Then send them out of the room, and tell the other players that they see the guy enter the room, and then throw himself against the outer wall. It's an illusion, of course, and the other players can do whatever they want, but whatever they do, the trapped character will interpret it as something that would be happening, or else just something weird happens and he can't figure out why. For example: they tried slapping the "trapped" character across the face. He felt the blow, but had no idea where it came from. However, there's a catch: the crushing is real. After a little while, ribs begin cracking... the idea is to try to get the "trapped" character to disbelieve his surroundings.

The PC's have been meandering around different continents, and they wind up at this town. The people of this town are very suppressed, and do not like strangers. It seems as though the strangers they have dealt with in the past are pretty dangerous.

There is however a thriving community in this town... centered around a magic users guild. I admit, a very rare thing indeed.

As the PC's begin to find out things about this town, they find out some of the following things:

1) A powerful MU "owns the town" whether by money or power nobody knows.
2) The town government is set up similar to a company: mayor at the top, and vice presidents below him each in charge of some community welfare. This group of people votes on decisions concerning law, including trials.
3) There are one or two members from "the guild" on the council.

4) Some others of the council are suspected of being influenced to abstain or cast a certain vote.
5) Every three months people with handicaps, the aged, and the dying are removed from this town.
6) The town is located at the base of a cliff against the sea. The only way to the top is a dangerous road with several hairpin turns.
7) Criminals are put to work mining a roadway through the cliff wall up to the surface above.
8) The rocks from the mining are quarried in blocks and are valued in some lands for building. The rock is very hard, and has a uniform black color.

If the party tries to find out what happens to those who get taken away, they will find they are taken to a dead volcano, with a large valley inside. This valley does not go through seasons, and the trees are fruit trees, which always bear fruit. There is a portal into this valley. The portal of mourning. It opens up every three months on the solstice dates. Can you guess what time of day? At sunrise. Written on the archway of the portal is the purpose of the portal, valley, and since it is old and worn, when the portal was discovered thirty years ago there was a loss of translation of the portal of "The Morning."

There is an evening portal too. But that one is the entrance to an old abandoned dwarven kingdom. It opens up every night. Each night, undead skeletons emerge with two tasks. Gather fruit. Look for newcomers, and "welcome" them to shelter. Skeletons will try to capture anyone alive with nets.

Inevitably the PC's will want to go dungeoning and kill off hoards of skeletons, and free lots of suppressed people. Insert your own dungeon in this part or use a prefab.

Eventually, they will meet the lich in the dungeon. He will ask several questions about why they killed the skeletons. Now the poor people will starve... and so on and so forth. It will be increasingly aware that the lich is a good lich. The lich became a lich to forever take care of the orchard.

It turns out there is another lich. The Good lich is in fear of the Bad one, who happens to live in the town... heading the MU guild. The guild is a structure in which the Lich collects power, items, spells... it is great if the party has an MU who joined the guild without knowing. The guild is structured like a membership thing. Access to libraries is based on level of membership. Level of membership changes based on donations of magic items, artifacts, spells and of course money.

The possibilities branch out from there... But the deal is to free the good lich from the wrath of the bad. They could...

1) Infiltrate the guild to a level at which it will topple.
2) Kill the bad lich.
3) Ignore the Deal.
4) Rally the town.
5) Retrieve the good liches talisman from the bad one's possession.

Any option is bound to piss someone off. Good or bad lich, or the 40 or so MU's who have invested their life's savings into the guild. But think of all those magic items that must be in there.

Part 1:

Chief honcho feeling old, needs to test suitability of daughter as heir. A crafty sage NPC called to help. Sage's plan: A honcho's man will pretend to turn traitor and with PC's will kidnap daughter. (Big deal - everyone is cooperating). They will tell daughter she is to write note saying father to come alone with ransom. He will be bumped off by ambush and they will see daughter confirmed as heir but she will take orders from rival evil honcho. They have permission to scare her with anything short of real torture. She passes test if she refuses to write or finds a way to warn, or manages an escape. A largish group is hired as daughter normally well protected and PC will really be acting as a guard and protect her whatever her choices... Pretty boring easy money for players huh since all set up?

Catch:

The man chosen to play traitor really is a traitor in pay of uncle. The opportunity to dispose of daughter and become heir is seized. The traitor will suggest a cave in isolated area (which just happens to be moderately fortifiable - not by design; he just likes the isolation) as place for the hold-out and the father (anxious to be fully informed) agrees. PCs may have a better idea but unlikely they will be in a place unknown to the traitor or father. Traitor is a coward and won't attempt on the life of the girl himself but will use any excuse to leave PCs with girl. Uncle will bring large force to bear on the PCs to wipe her out. (and them). Traitor to blame the PCs.

The daughter:

Really a good choice. Will not at first agree but will grovel and pretend submission. Will write note but encoded to warn. If no other opportunity has arisen, the traitor will say he will take note. If the players later tell her its a setup (when trouble begins), she will demonstrate fine combat skills.

Baddies:

Whatever number to test your PCs. Will (treacherously) offer free passage if they will hand over girl. (PC's may think the daughter worthless and be tempted to hand her over - mine were! If they do, they will not be allowed to leave alive since they are to be blamed with it. Dead men tell no tales. Fortunately mine remembered orders to protect no matter what and girl will reveal the actual contents of her note when she realizes the PC are on her side). The negotiation delay will give some time for setting up defences if it occurs to players to hedge. Too bad if they don't.

If the PCs can hold out 2 days, a concerned father will arrive with relieving force.

Part 2:

[This was an extension as players grumbled about tiny pay (it was supposed to be an easy job) and here the sage helps.] I made an earlier post on the net frp conference on moral dilemmas and here is the detail.

In reward for services, a sage offers this little test to a group of PCs. This is a variation of the famous Prisoner Dilemma based on an essay by Douglas Hofstadter in Metamagical Themas. This will work best with a group that are really involved with their characters and have played them for some time.

Players given a counter which is red on one side, black on the other. They are to hand it secretly to the sage either red side up or black side up. They will be rewarded according to how all play.

If a PC returns the piece BLACK side up he/she gets:

For every other player turning in a RED side: A Big reward.

For every other player turning in a BLACK side: Nothing or very small

If a PC returns the piece RED side up he/she gets:

For every other player turning in a RED side: A moderate reward

For every other player turning in a BLACK side: Only a small reward

It is important the player really understand the reward system before they make the choice. It is also very important that they can't discuss with each other what they will do and the returns are made in secret. When I did it, I had the sage claiming (quite wrongly) he could magically increase basic attributes and the matrix was:

BLACK choice:

For every RED piece: Attribute of choice increased by one unit.

For every BLACK piece: nothing.

RED choice:

For every RED piece: 50s in money

For every BLACK piece: 5s in money

The advantage of offering an attribute change, is that to the players (more than the PCs) it was a very real temptation to offer BLACK. Of course, if they all chose black, nobody would get anything. If only one chose red, that player would be fairly annoyed while the rest get one attribute bumped up. If you were the only player to choose black, then you sit very pretty... the details of this dilemma are well discussed by Hofstadter. He tried it for real money on his friends, here's your chance to do the same. For once, the game is as interesting if the player is trying to choose for a PC or doing it for him/herself.

Of course, all hell breaks loose when the sage reveals he is lying and just gives each a little more than if all had chosen red.....

The GM should decide what reward matrix the game balance can handle and whether the sage is honest, but do recommend the attribute lift as bait.

One obvious device for side-line action is the good old vendetta, or Even Orcs Have Mothers. Sooner or later, (sooner usually) PC's will by their actions have ruined someone's plans, killed someone favorite son/uncle/mother/etc and be due for a spot of revenge. This brings that most dangerous of monsters up against the PCs - another thinking human. If the GM looks at the world from the Offended

One's point of view, lots of ways for to get even should suggest itself but here are few ideas. Toss them into the game at the same time as other action- the vendetta may become the main gaming focus but it shouldn't start that way.

The hired thugs:

Predictable, common but not a bad opening shot anyway to start the players going. Chances are this will tell the Offended One (OO) that it wasn't luck and these guys are good, while telling the PCs that life isn't that simple.

The Trap:

Can be variation of above but much more creative ways around. How about a desirable NPC that spends some time winning the PC's confidence (helping out on a couple of expeditions say?) before some suitably creative putting the boot in? (from the unsubtle knife in back through poison to "inadvertently" leaving the wrong door open).

Using their greed to send them against a strongly defended position with a totally false plan about a supposed way in? (This got my players past thinking of the vendetta as an sideline nuisance. They were mean and cold and looking for blood when they returned).

Or how about when the player are off to visit an unfamiliar culture, making sure they get stunningly wrong information on cultural sensitivities. (I haven't play-tested this one, but I imagine could be very good in a light-hearted game)

My favorite is close to above. On an expedition to tribesmen, a functionary they hadn't much noticed offers them an ornate tribe weapon. He/she tells them this is could be the key to getting close to the chief. Tell any barbarian that they can talk to, that they got it by "Melstilatuk" from a barbarian chief. He/she further explains that melstilatuk (use your own languages) is a ceremonial battle and winning against a chief accords them high status. In fact the functionary is the in employ of OO and will quickly vanish. The weapon was obtained from the father of current chief in a particularly cowardly ambush that the tribesmen know about. If the PCs are curious about the word, a nontribal linguist can only translate it as "raven work". A tribal linguist if they even bother to find one, would them that melstilatuk is a colloquial abusive term for corpse-robbing - regarded VERY badly by tribesman. The weapon will be instantly recognized by the close tribesmen to the chief and effect of the characters proudly reciting their claim can be imagined.

The Frame up:

Often PCs leave themselves very wide open to being framed and dealt to wrongly by the law. This should make it a good option for the OO. The trick to playing this so your PCs have a chance is to very thoroughly think out how the OO sets it up - exactly who is talked to, bribed, where, who could see it. PC's will have to pursue what really happened and they need good detail. I failed at this on first attempt really but made up for it belatedly working in a lot of detail.

The lying witness or false complaint. This is the simplest by far if a bit obvious. Remember that if all or part of the PC party are free to investigate then the OO is likely to take measures to protect the implicated. My PCs actually utilized this. They figured the witness would be guarded so looked out for the guards and followed them (and a few false trails as well) to locate the OO.

Doubles. Illusion magic to make the others look like the PC in a witnessed crime? I haven't actually tried it but sounds good.

Here's a complex one that the players may tumble at any stage but will land them in serious trouble if they don't. Baddie in employ of OO poses to players as a rich jeweller from within a city. He meets them at a location outside the city and describes some imaginary double-dealing in the trade. The upshot is that he thinks a rival has wrinkled him out of a distinctive ruby necklace. His mission for the PC is to probe or watch a house in the outskirts to see if any sign. He tells them that the necklace has a vague enchantment (improve looks, raise charisma that kind of thing) and could be picked up by detect magic abilities. Small reward for successful location. Big reward if they can get it. He tells them he doesn't want them anywhere near his city shop. They pass a message to him via person in local pub in writing. It mustn't mention the goods, just say party of extra people needed if they can't get it, else tell him to come alone to a meeting point if they have managed it all themselves.

The house is the real jeweller's house and the necklace is not heavily protected as the rubies are fake (which the jeweller knows) but the magic isn't (of which he is unaware). The reward should tempt the PCs to go for it. They will then send a note to the appropriate place. Make sure they write down what it says. The note goes of course to the OO who then murders the real jeweller, places the note on his body, then tips off the watch on where to find the PCs. Chances are the PCs have written a highly incriminating note and in addition will be holding property know to belong to the jeweller.

Final Vendetta notes:

If a prolonged vendetta is plaguing the players then a certain amount of paranoia is liable to set in. You may be accused of inventing ways around their precautions because they tell you them in advance. If you are, I hope they string you. If otherwise, don't get angry - suggest a play fair system. They write down their precautions when you warn them that you need to know. You write down your attack. At the moment of truth, notes are compared and a very enjoyable game can be held BETWEEN GM and players. This assumes enough maturity on your players that they build protection that they reasonably could manage by their skills and money without going through you. If so have some fun. This play really only applies to the Hired Thug approach - the others shouldnt really be open to abuse.

Ashburn Man

For this adventure a group of younger but promising members of the Odyssians are invited out for a weekend at the country estate of Sir Henry Ainsford, one of the older members of the club. Sir Henry is noted as a hunter and explorer, but he is getting on in years and spends most of his time at his estate outside of the town of Ashburn in Kent.

Sir Henry regularly invites Odyssians out for weekend visits, but this particular weekend is special, because he believes he has made a discovery of great scientific importance on the grounds of his estate. This means that he will make sure that Odyssians of particular interests will be in his group. He will invite archaeologists, paleontologists, physicians, historians and ethnologists in particular, plus an assortment of others who are interested. He will also invite his two oldest friends in the Odyssians, Professor Milton Morrisson of the Language and Ethnology faculty at Oxford and Admiral Sir Joseph Porter (retired). All he tells anyone in advance is that he has made a discovery which may revolutionize the history and science of human origins.

Ashburn House

Sir Henry's ancestral manse is a 16th century monstrosity, somewhere inbetween a manor house and a castle, ornate and over decorated. It is located on the edge of the range of hills known as the North Downs. The trip from London to Ashburn by train takes around two hours. When they arrive in the town Sir Henry will have several carriages waiting to take them to Ashburn House.

When they arrive they are greeted by Sir Henry, who excuses himself and seems rather agitated. They will then get a short tour of the house, conducted by the major domo, Burton. Burton shows them the gun room and the trophy room (lions and tigers and bears, oh my!), the game room, several parlors and dining rooms, and eventually he shows each of them to their bedrooms. Each of the bedrooms is decorated in a different motif, reminiscent of different parts of the world. The American Room is decorated with trophies of caribou, beaver and bears. The East African room features lions and giraffes. The Egyptian room has crocodile and rhinoceros hide chair covers and the like. The Indian room has a beautiful tiger skin rug. The Amazon room has a giant stuffed anaconda on the wall. The Orient Room has elephant tusks and panda fur rugs. There are many more along the same lines.

After they've settled in, Burton will call them down for dinner. At the meal Sir Henry seems agitated, smokes a number of cigars, and barely touches his food. When asked about his discovery he is evasive and tells everyone to wait until after dinner. Once the meal is concluded, they retire to the Smoking Room, where a large, coffin-like box, about 2 by 5 feet is waiting on a table in the middle of the room. Cigars are handed out, and Sir Henry launches into a speech to the effect that he has travelled far and seen many things, but that he has made his greatest discovery literally in his own back yard.

He goes on to tell how one of his grounds keepers, a man named James Dearing, was mowing in a grove of ash trees on a hill behind the house, when he discovered a series of depressions in the ground, all very regularly spaced. He reported them to Sir Henry because he was suspicious that they might be deadfalls set by poachers. Sir Henry investigated, had one of the holes dug up, and in the hole they found -- at this point he opens the box -- a small, manlike skeleton buried in the fetal position, surrounded by garlands of what appeared to be extremely well preserved wild flowers. The skeleton he reveals is in rather good condition, completely bare, about 4 and a half feet tall. What makes it remarkable is that while generally manlike in appearance, it has an elongated lower jaw, pronounced cranial ridges and elongated upper and lower canines, all characteristics of great apes, rather than man.

Everyone crowds around, and Professor Morrison, and possibly others, declare that it must be a hoax. Someone is clearly trying to put something over on Sir Henry, taking the jaw of an ape and the body of a deformed human child and putting them together. But on closer examination it is clear that the jaw fits perfectly with the rest of the skull, and the skull clearly fits the spine, and all the bone appears to be of the same age. Professor Morrison can't be sure, but given the style of burial and the condition of the bones he believes that they predate the early Celtic settlement of the British Isles, and if it is not a hoax, he theorizes that this might be one of the 'Dark Folk', the aboriginal inhabitants of Britain who were wiped out by the Celts and survive only in legend.

As Morrison seems to have become convinced, Sir Henry becomes even more excited, and explains that there are 7 more burial shafts and that he intends to excavate them all in the next few days with the help of his fellow Odyssians. That said, he closes up the box, leads everyone out of the Smoking Room and locks the door. At this point some of the guests are probably tired and retire, and others go to the game room or to the Library for some recreation.

Night at Ashburn House

During the night several things will happen. One of the characters with a relatively high PSI will happen to peer out of his window late at night. Off in the distance he will see a round hill with a grove of grey ash on the top of it. The ash are swaying in the wind. Then he notices that none of the other trees in the garden or beyond seem to be swaying at all, and he gets the feeling that there's something almost conscious about the movements of the ash.

Another character will have a dream during the night. He will dream of a procession of thin, regal looking women bearing glowing spheres of light passing through his room, passing through the door as if it or they were immaterial, and moving on into the hallway.

In the Morning

When they awaken in the morning they notice that Professor Morrison doesn't join them for breakfast. Then Sir Joseph mentions that he was up late with Morrison drinking brandy in the library and that when he went to bed at 2am Morrison was still there reading. He suggests that Morrison might want to sleep late. Sir Henry is a bit non-plussed by this, but is ready to set out to the wilds of the backyard anyway.

Burton brings picks, rubbers and shovels after breakfast and everyone heads out to the burial site. It is a small clearing in the middle of an ash grove on top of a hill. The ashes are of a miniature variety, but healthy and well established, clearly well cared for. In the middle of the clearing is a 6 foot high, very worn menhir surrounded (after some searching) by eight depressions in the ground, spaced evenly in a circle, one of them recently filled in. The digging commences.

In each of the burial shafts they will find a skeleton similar to the one already found by Sir Henry. It is unlikely that anyone will dig in the shaft which the first skeleton was taken from, but if they do, they will find the mangled body of Professor Morrison there.

It will take most of the day to dig out the shafts. And at noon or so Burton will bring out tables and campaign chairs for a leisurely lunch at graveside.

Professor Morrison never joins them, and as they prepare to head back to the house, Sir Henry tells Burton to make sure the Professor is feeling well and have him meet them in the Smoking Room.

When the grisly trophies are gathered in the Smoking Room, Burton arrives with the announcement that Professor Morrison is missing, and not only that, but it is clear that he didn't pack up and leave, because his clothes are still there and his bed has not been slept in.

The last place the Professor was seen was in the Library, and a close inspection of the Library will reveal an open copy of Tacitus on the floor, some dots of blood around it, and the fact that the tiger skin rug which is normally there is missing.

What's Going On?

The grove of ash trees is an ancient holy place. Each of the eight largest ash trees contains a powerful guardian spirit which can manifest as a young woman (as in the dream above) or can possess and animate nonliving flesh (tiger skin rugs, etc). These Ash Maidens will attempt to get the skeletons back, or replace them with new sacrifices, like Professor Morrison.

If they go and dig out the original burial shaft, they will find Professor Morrison's body, mauled as if by a tiger, wrapped in the tiger skin rug from the Library, and garlanded with wild flowers. It may take them a while to figure out to do this, so let them stew and be mystified.

The spirits can only be placated by returning all the skeletons and maintaining absolute silence about their existence. In fact, if they go to re-bury the skeletons they will find that there are now ten holes instead of eight, eight for the skeletons, one for Professor Morrison and one for Sir Henry. The spirits will do all they can to make sure that hole is filled.

The powers of the spirits are limited. They can only operate in darkness. They cannot travel more than a mile from the grove. Each spirit can only animate one thing per night. Passing through solid objects is relatively strenuous for them, so they do it as little as possible.

The Second Night

Most likely, by the second night they will either be working on or not have solved the mystery. That night as they sleep, several things may happen.

Most likely one or more of the characters will be awakened by the sound of pounding and rending as an assortment of elk and gorillas and the like attempt to break into the Smoking Room.

Someone, or maybe even two of the characters, will find that the stuffed anaconda or bearskin rug or boarskin bedspread will come to life as they are drifting off to sleep and attempt to attack them and drag them out to the grove.

The same character who saw the ash swaying the night before will look out the window at midnight and think that he sees the ash transformed to women who then move in a procession towards the house.

Someone who is relatively susceptible to such things will be visited by two of the Ash Maidens who will attempt to seduce him, take him to the grove, manipulate his mind and will, essentially enslave him, and then send him back to the house to get the skeletons and Sir Henry for them.

Can they Save Sir Henry?

Most likely not. The only way to save Sir Henry would be to keep the Ash Maidens and their animated creatures away from him throughout the second night and then get him away from Ashburn House immediately in the morning, never to return. In fact, in that situation the house would have to be permanently abandoned because the Ash Maidens would keep looking for sacrifices.

Alternatively, they could burn down the grove. This would be sick, cruel and immoral, but would get rid of the Ash Maidens until saplings which escaped the burning grew to maturity in several years, at which point the problem would reemerge.

Finally, they could offer someone else in sacrifice, but finding a willing victim is unlikely, and giving an unwilling sacrifice would be inappropriate.

Regardless of how they deal with the situation they will face moral dilemmas which will not be easily resolved, because the Ash Maidens should really be preserved as an invaluable paranormal resource, and though their demands of sacrifice are justified by their lights, it will be hard for reasonable people to go along with them.

<u>Contributors</u>

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Phil Scadden (Again, and again, and...thanks a lot!)
Aaron Sher (Couldn't let this go by without adding something myself...)
Brett Slocum (A late addition to the credits)
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