

The Crucible

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Inside This Issue

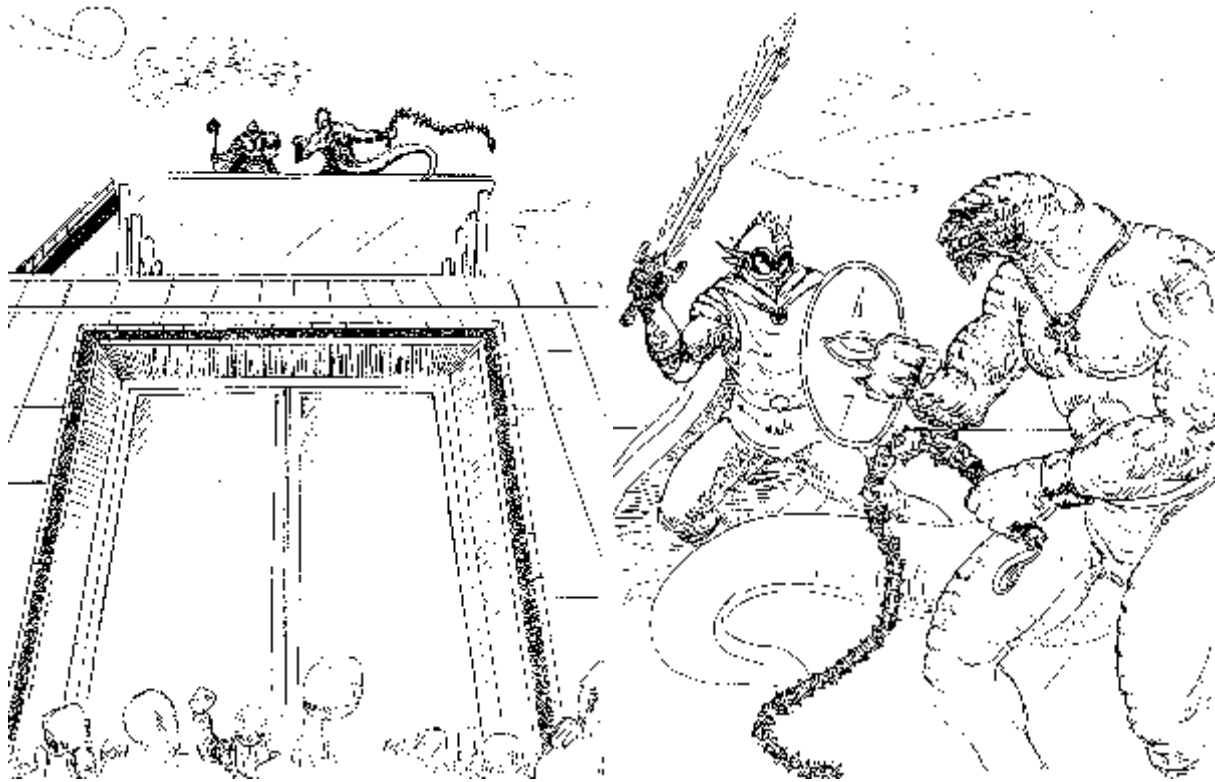
- [A Message from the Creator](#)
- [A Taste of Talislanta](#)
- [Stryx: Life Among the Scavengers](#)
- [Entrancing Events in Cymril](#)
- [Ahazu: On the Warpath](#)
- [Kang Civil War, Part Two](#)
- [Spellweaving](#)
- [Credits & Subscription Information](#)

A Message from the Creator

I'd just like to say hello to all the Talislanta players. Let me say up front that I'm not a rules hacker; as the creator of Talislanta my main interest has always been the milieu, the mood or "feel" of the setting and inhabitants, and the visual elements. I'd be most interested in hearing what players and GMs like and don't like about the game - as we begin to gear-up for a 4th edition, your suggestions would be most welcome.

Talislanta was first conceived not as a role playing game but as a world setting. From its inception, the most important part of the milieu has always been the visual elements. While writing the first draft of The Chronicles I created over three hundred design sketches of Talislantan races, creatures, costumes, weapons, and conveyances. These rough sketches (some of which appear in this issue) were sent to P.D. Breeding-Black, who turned them into the works of art that graced the pages of the first Talislanta books.

Stephen Michael Sechi



The Clash of Champions

This illustration was the original design sketch for the cover of the first edition Talislantan (sic) Handbook. PD Breeding-Black produced the final version in pencils. We produced a duotone of that drawing for the cover of Tal 1, and published the pencil version in the Chronicles. A few years later PD produced a painting of this illustration which we used as a cover for one of the Cyclopedias.

SMS



The Taste of Talislanta

Authored by Alnmar Minithkant, connoisseur extraordinaire. Penned by Tom "Talisman" DeCory-Keen, humble scribe.

Greetings to all those of good taste! After a long, yet somewhat satisfying, romp through the restaurants, taverns, eateries, and inns of the always enchanting city of Cymril two words come to my mind: fair and awful.

Now, you say "Alnmar, my good friend, you never think that any place is truly good". Ok. I admit that my tastes are far too refined for most establishments, but keep in mind that there was that lovely place in Carantheum that I visited a few years back. But, I digress.

Over-all I found the dining establishments of Cymril to be fair (with a few choice exceptions). I must say, though, that I think that many of the city's cooks should cut back on their use of leeks. By the end of my third day in the city, I was ready to strangle the next server to bring me a leek laden meal. Now, I like leeks as much as anyone, but there is a limit to how much a person can stand of any single item, and Cymril's restaurants exhausted my enjoyment level of leeks pretty quickly.

Ok. Now that I have that out of my system, on with the critiques:

The Emerald Penticle

Basic Rating: * * *

One of the more famous of Cymril's restaurants, I must unfortunately report that The Emerald Penticle was one of the chief offenders when it came to the city's leek conspiracy. Still, the atmosphere was pleasant and the servers were quite attentive. In fact, if it was not for the palate murdering amount of leeks, I would be quite willing to list the Penticle among the best restaurants on the continent. The meats all seemed to be cooked to perfection and their stock of Zandir wine was of a wondrous vintage. In addition, I was quite pleased with the privacy to be found in the establishment's booths.

Thus, if you are a leek lover, you will probably find no finer food in all the world. However, if you are not in the mood for a leek overload, you will probably want to move on.

The Double-Edged Sword

Basic Rating: **Not Rated**

This seems to be a wonderful establishment in which to imbibe excessively. In an attempt to be kind, I will say nothing more.

The Orb in Hand

Basic Rating: * * *

This little out of the way eatery was a nice change of pace. I cannot say much for the decor, and the food was average at best. However, the service was wonderful.

Upon entering, a lovely, older lady led me into a private dining room covered with soft cushions and containing a short table. There, she asked me to sit and brought in a long line of beautiful serving girls, telling me to choose one. Then, as I ate, the girl I had chosen rubbed my feet and massaged my back.

All and all, it was quite pricey for the average, if not poor, food. And, while I appreciated her concern, it became a bit annoying how often my server suggested that I should retire to a bed upstairs. Still, I have never left a restaurant more relaxed.

Well, that will be it for this edition. Next time we will continue with Cymril. Until then, happy eating!

Stryx: Life Among the Scavengers

(excerpted in part from a rare unabridged copy of "The Chronicles of Talislanta", by the wizard Tamerlin.)

At best, most civilized folk find scavenging for food of any kind to be an unclean and unpleasant practice. When carrion is the food of choice, the scavenger is often regarded as grotesque, horrible, a carrier of disease and death.

It is the fate of the Stryx and others of their ilk to carry upon their persons the lingering stench of their last meal, which clings to their garments, claws, and feathers, and cannot be easily disguised. The same is true of Stryx cave dwellings, which reek from the rotten flesh that is stored and eaten within. The very sight of carrion is often sufficient to make non-scavengers nauseous; the scent of decomposing carrion, buzzing with flies and hanging off the bone, is virtually guaranteed to do so.

Conversely, the Stryx regard rotting carrion as the choicest food, not unlike the way non-scavengers favor a well-aged cheese or bottle of wine. To the Stryx, the odor of carrion is as appetizing as the scent of a home-cooked meal is to others. The sound of buzzing flies is like music to their senses; the pale forms of writhing maggots are like a delectable garnish to the main

course. Given such differences, it is not surprising that the Stryx do not get on well with other folk, who tend to regard them as ghouls.

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Entrancing Events

by Tom "Talisman" Decory - Keen

Greetings, and welcome to the first of a new series, Entrancing Events.

"What's going on in Cymril?" "Where will the best traveling entertainers be?" "Who's having the best parties?"

Entrancing Events will be a (semi-) regular feature within these pages which will attempt to answer these and other similar questions.

After some deliberations, my good friend, "Palthor the Ever Entertaining" of Cymril, has agreed to take some time out of his very busy social calendar to author this feature. Truly, there could be no better choice. For the past three years, Palthor has been the most renowned host of social events in all of The Seven Kingdoms. Everyone in Cymril knows that if you want to know what's

going on (and you can find him at home), you talk to Palthor. So, it is with much oohing and aahing that this humble scribe most thankfully accepts the famous entertainer's help in writing this article.

In the meantime, Jai Kel "Sage of the Great Southern Wasteland" has asked me to briefly explain how this feature will be useful to you, his readership. Well, this is somewhat dependant on what role you play within your company's travels of Talislanta. If you are simply one of the company, you may see something which interests you. In this case, you might wish to bring the item of interest before your company's administrator, often referred to with love and admiration, as the grand and glorious GM. Being kind and generous souls, most GMs will see your desire to attend the wondrous event and therefore lead you there. If, on the other hand, you are the company's omnipotent GM, you may find some event which you might devilishly twist and then inflict upon the rest of your company.

It is important to note, at this point, that while the majority of this feature will be authored by Palthor "the Ever Entertaining", I will be inserting information useful to GMs as follows: "...regarding Tarra [Danuvian Swordswoman; 1st Level; SPD +2; CR +4; Hit Points 15], she is...". Of course, those GMs out there who have others of their company who read this feature may wish to change, alter, transform, or otherwise hack this information. Please feel free (in all cases this information is only close to the truth anyway).

Well, that about does it for this introductory installment. But, before I say farewell, Palthor wanted me to give you his "Three Rules of Entertaining":

- Always make sure that your guests know that the event is going to take place.
- Always smile at your guests (regardless of what inane or insulting things they say to you).
- Always mark idiots off your guest list (unless they're important idiots).

Until next time, farewell and may all your events be flawless.

Ahazu: On the Warpath

The Thrall warrior, Cesta, once worked as a mercenary guard on an expedition into the Junglegrounds. Her account of an attack by a band of Ahazu, as related to Tamerlin, follows:

"Far in the distance I heard the fierce shrieking howls of an Ahazu band on the warpath. There was little time to take defensive action. We herded the mounts into a grove of parasol trees and took cover behind a stand of thornwood. A moment later the Ahazu war party came into view, running towards us through the dense undergrowth. Now I understood the reason for the Ahazu's striated skin: it helps them blend into the jungle shadows, and makes them difficult to see clearly.

We fired our crossbows as the first line of warriors came into range. The Ahazu took several casualties, but kept on coming. The magician, Balmundos, prepared to send a spell of fire into their midst. The Ahazu unleashed a hail of three-bladed throwing knives. That was the end of Balmundos.

Another second and the Ahazu were upon us, leaping and scrambling over the thornwood barricade. Now the fight began in earnest. The four-armed warriors reveled in this type of close combat, where they enjoy a decided advantage. I countered with wide strokes of my greatsword, using the long blade to keep the attackers at arm's length; an excellent strategy, but an inadequate response. The Ahazu were too many. They overran our position, until at last I was the only one of my group still standing. Surrounded and outnumbered, I could devise no tactical response but to fight until the end.

Suddenly one of the Ahazu let out a blood-curdling scream. Frothing at the mouth, the creature set upon his own companions like one possessed, wielding a three-bladed knife in each of its four hands. From the other Ahazu I heard the cry, "Shan-Ya!", repeated several times. While they were occupied with the mad one I made a strategic withdrawal into the jungle."

c. Stephen Michael Sechi

Kang Civil War: Part Two

by John Harper

The guys find themselves at the Farad's estate (big, big place.. this Farad is one of the key players that "borrowed" the windship arcanology from the Phantasians / Cymrilians and "loaned" it to the Rajans). They are escorted into a massive hall that is prepared for a feast of some kind. There is an awful lot of seafood on those tables... and what's that smell? roasted land dragon? who eats dragon? Wait a minute...

I really wish you all could have seen the looks on their faces when they put 2 and 2 together. It was a priceless moment. And it was far too late. They were promptly surrounded by a zillion bowmen and ordered to drop their weapons. Just as several fat Imrians entered and took their places at the table, to watch the slow, painful death of the group (revenge for what happened to their countrymen). The Kang entered as well (the middle aged one and his two young bodyguards / aides). In my mind, the Kang were somewhat glad to see a group of honorless thieves die. Also, they were cutting a major deal with the host, so they were content to watch. Who cares about foreigners, anyway?

This was the crucial moment. Everything stemmed from the events of the next minute. Ready?

When Abdul saw the Imrians, he snapped (he had been a slave in childhood to some Imrians). The rest of the party put down their weapons and were preparing their groans of "great..." and "not again". Everything was going according to plan. This capture was going to get the adventure back on track... or so I thought. Abdul looks at the Imrians and says "I will drink your blood and eat your hearts." The Imrians chuckle and then everything goes straight to hell.

You see, Abdul has these little "acorn" type things. He got them many adventures ago in the Aberrant Forest. So long ago, I'd forgotten he had them. They were from a peculiar kind of tree that would fade in and out of existence (the ghost willow). When crushed in the palm, they would make you fade into a noncorporeal, "ghost" form (along with anything you were carrying) for a random amount of time. Not terribly useful (the random time thing could be a killer). Or so I thought.

Abdul reaches into his cloak to get an acorn and the bowmen react like they're supposed to... they shoot him. The rest of the party is just looking at Patrick like, you are one dead Arimite. And he almost was. Two things saved him. None of the bowmen got a critical hit, and the last one rolled a 5 for damage instead of a 6. Abdul had 1 hit point left. The effect was, he got peppered with arrows, but none in a vital organ (normally I would have dropped him from shock, but killing Imrians was Abdul's life-long quest... he struggled on somehow). The party almost cheered. Abdul drew his knives, crushed the acorn, and stumbled past / through the dismayed archers. He charged the banquet table shrieking at the top of his lungs (screaming ghost bristling with arrows... scary) and his acorn wore off. Thinking to protect the warlord, one of the Kang bodyguards (the youngest most foolish one, it turned out) jumped in front of Abdul. Abdul was almost berzerk at this point, and he attacked the Kang with a frenzy, in order to get past him and at the Imrians (who had stopped chuckling and were running for their little fish-lives).

Now, here's a very important part (and why I like dice systems, they lead to funky stories). Abdul and the Kang have equal combat ratings (both 10 if I recall right) so it's pretty much up to the dice who wins this (barring great tactics). All I have to do is hit and Abdul goes down. Six or higher on d20. No problem. The other players are beginning their "nice try, Abdul" speeches.

Patrick rolls and gets a 20! First thing. Just like that, he criticals the Kang with a vicious knife cut to his abdomen. The Kang makes his CON roll and stays up. Now he's mad. He lunges with his falchion and... a three. I rolled a 3. Whoosh... a clean miss. Patrick says Abdul ducks under the sword (I'm expecting him to run) and cuts the Kang again, this time on his sword arm. We all look at Pat like he's crazy. He looks back like, yes, he is crazy. He rolls. Guess what? Yep. Another 20. Slash! the Kang's arm is cut to the bone. The Kang makes his CON roll with a partial success, so he stays conscious, but drops his weapon. The Kang goes to his knees clutching his ruined arm and Abdul (and Pat for that matter) laugh at him as he runs after the Imrians. The other characters (and their players) stare open-mouthed at the Arimite-Who-Could-Not-Die. It was one of those moments.

The Imrians were already out of sight, however, and the Farad had regained his senses enough to order his bowmen to shoot the other characters if Abdul didn't stop and lay down his weapons. The tension in the air was very thick as Pat debated what to do. Abdul wanted those Imrians more than anything. We all knew it. We all knew that Abdul would go after them, and damn the consequences. The other players expected to die. And that's the moment that changed Abdul forever, and changed the campaign beyond all recognition. Abdul turned around and said to the assembly:

"Your weapons cannot harm me. I am vengeance. I kill whom I wish. I do not wish the deaths of my companions, so I will not pursue the Imrian scum. But I will not surrender to you. Ever. If you want these knives... come and get them."

For the third time in as many minutes, we all looked at Pat with open-mouthed wonder. He was the bravest thing we had ever seen. And that's when I decided. The Farad turned and was prepared to give an order when the older Kang stood from his place at the table. His commanding presence captured everyone's attention. He spoke in thickly accented Talislan:

"Stop."

Everyone stopped.

"These foreigners will not be harmed."

He sat back down. The Farad looked meekly at his bowmen, then gestured curtly. They returned to their guard positions. The other characters rushed over to Abdul as he collapsed on the intricate mosaic floor.

=====

Okay, some comments... I love that session. Several great things happened during it. This is to help define those events.

1. Pat recognized a turning point for his character and acted accordingly. He didn't sacrifice his concept to save the party and he didn't sacrifice the party to save his concept. It was a very artful (and brave) solution to the problem. He sacrificed Abdul's life, instead. This was a real sacrifice, despite the fact that Rakshan (the Kang warlord) stopped the archers. That leads to my next point...
2. The session was so powerful for all involved, no one said "Oh great the big, nasty NPC saves our bacon. Wonderful." No one even thought it at the time. It was Abdul that had saved the party, and every one knew it. Abdul's fanaticism and bravery and Pat's careful attention to his character's motivation had saved the party... simple as that. Rakshan's commands were just reactions to Abdul's bravery. Without the actions of Abdul, they would have been slaughtered. Which leads to my next point...
3. A particular method of Game Mastering seems to work suprisingly well. Pat uses it often, and I used it accidently in that session. It works like this: Put the PCs in a no-win situation, and when they succeed, it will be a real success. Not a scripted victory by the GM or a "difficult" scene, but a real success. The GM puts the PCs in immediate, dire, danger, from which he has planned no escape. If they escape, they do so because of their own merits, not because of the demands of the story. It's a big if, too. What if they don't escape? What if they die? Well, you have several dead PCs. However, if you want "real" danger from a roleplaying scene, you have to have "real" consequences (of course, I DON'T mean "real" as in "real world"). Not just the illusion of danger, but danger. No GM safety net. This is a very iffy style of play, one I have done only three times. Pat runs all his CyberHERO games like this, however, and we have yet to loose a character. And

believe me, when we succeed in CyberHERO, we feel it. It's real success. Pat was not going to pull our butts out of the fire if we messed up. Just an aside about GMing... back to the War...

4. The reason Abdul's actions radically changed the campaign was because Rakshan had witnessed them. The Warlord of the Kang Empire watched a crazy little Arimate survive a dozen arrow hits, stagger up to a trained Kang warrior and beat him without getting a scratch, and then jog after a pair of slavers in order to exact his vengeance. He then defied all the powers in the room and dared them to attack him. Abdul displayed more raw courage in those moments than Rakshan had seen in a long time. So, he decided Abdul was too valuable to allow him to die (even with an honorable, warrior's death). Remember this... this attitude colors almost everything Rakshan does regarding Abdul for the rest of the story.
5. At this point, there was no civil war. All I had in mind was that there was a deep conspiracy going on in the Empire, and the Warlord was travelling abroad personally to "secure" something or other. I didn't know what yet. The actual civil war was sparked by... you guessed it, Abdul. But that's a ways off yet...

Next... The Far Seas... and Flyn in action...

John "I'm blessed by great gamers" Harper





On Magical Theory: Spellweaving

by Matthew Krepicz

Magic is arguably the most important element of a fantasy roleplaying game, one which provides magicians to defeat monsters with the ever-popular fireball, to summon fiendish demons and to heal their comrades. Yet in the process, magic seems to have been reduced to nothing more than a push-button effect, a sort of spell-grenade that the mage learns to throw, requiring no more effort than a sword-slicing and emphasizing statistics over style. How many times has your mage calculated the advantages of a Level 6 spell of Elemental Fire over a Level 7 Mystic Bolt? It seems that, well, the magic has been lost.

Fortunately, Talislanta is one of those few games where magic is still unpredictable and prone to misfiring, unlike the traditional 'bullet' approach. Too often magic is seen simply as another physical force of reality, logical and predictable, albeit not completely understood. A pseudo-science of cause-and-effect, of logically reversible spells and sympathetic magic (ie : feather to flight). Magic is much more than that, and should be played appropriately. The fundamental meaning of magic is "that which cannot be explained, neither with logic, nor common sense nor rational thought". Magicians - be they Druhk shamans, Aamanian priests or Dracartan Thaumaturgists - create magic not simply by repetitive chanting or rote somatic motions, but by weaving an infinitely complex creation, a fluid energy mosaic which cannot be defined, but can be described by its effects. The element of mystery and wonder must at all costs be maintained during spellcasting, or as I call it, spellweaving. Spells are like living entites (and are in fact living in astral space), not inanimate objects to be 'cast' at others. Spellweaving allows a magician to perform true magic: making any spell possible. Yes, any spell. However, before I'm assaulted with accusations of game imbalance, munchkinism and favouritism, let me define what spellweaving encompasses, and its restrictions.

Spellweaving allows any magician to theoretically perform any effect similar to a spell. The only limit is the player's imagination (and I have found that this can indeed be a stiff barrier); the player may not consult any manuals or lists - simply creativity. The success of the spell is never guaranteed. I don't want to get into the exact mechanics here because I use a custom system, but the biggest restriction is that the chance for success is slim at best. The Level (complexity) and Force (raw power) of the spell act as penalties. The consequences of failure are severe, and cause physical damage at best. The role-playing aspect must be heavily emphasized: poetry, dancing, strange twists of thought which defy logic and plot all weigh heavily on the success of the spell. Furthermore, the process takes from one hour to several days to complete (depending on the Force) and may be interrupted. Needless to say, this limits spellweaving to non-combat situations.

Spellweaving adds an extra dimension to playing a mage beyond the known 'rules of magic' (an oxymoron if ever there was one), and allows the player to fully make use of his creativity, ingenuity and experience. Presiding over such a magical alteration requires flexibility (especially in creating plots), but can be adjudicated in such a way as to justify almost any magical happenstance; "a result of spellweaving failure, no doubt!". Under no circumstances should spellweaving be used as an all-purpose tool; the fear of magical failure should be sufficient to restrict spellweaving to important or emergency situations.

This brings me back to spellcraft. Spells are as unique and distinct as people, and the GM should treat them appropriately. Shamanic magic is especially suited for 'wild' magic, where spells aren't simply unpredictable (that would be too frustrating), but are all slightly altered. An example would be to have a Spell of Armour create a full suit molded from tough, chitinous insects which protect the mage from blows. This could be left up to the GM, or a lenient GM might allow the player to customize his spells. This should in no way change the basic effect of the spell (unless it's a failure) - simply the appearance. Strict by-the-book interpretation has the effect of making magical activity predictable and tame:

"Oh goodness, the other mage has drawn a pentagram, I wonder what spell he's casting..."

A minor, but often very effective method of adding pizzaz to spells is to change the standard names, as from "Eldritch Bolt" to "Morra's Divine Energy Strike" or some other melodramatic title. Misleading spell names can cause havoc for a mage who has recently 'liberated' a grimoire.

Finally, it must be noted that Spellweaving must - like everything - be taken in moderation. Players should quickly and painfully learn the hazards of wild magic, and yet always remain tempted by its power. Spellweaving offers the promise of magical release, of unexplained magic in all its wonder and mystery, of impossible things coming to life. If used wisely, Spellweaving can be a mage's true friend, allowing him to tap into the unknown forces of magic to do anything, as long as the mage is willing to pay the price.

Also, read FUDGE's excellent discussion of magical systems which emphasize various aspects of spellcraft.



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