

ADVENTURE

DESIGN

IN PRACTICE

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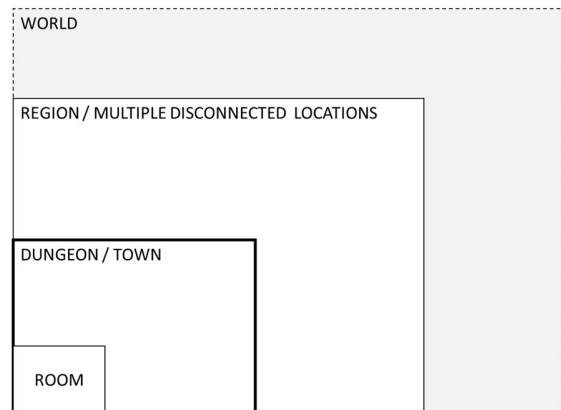
Adventure Design in Practice

Introduction and background

This is a real preparation work to my next adventure as I'm writing it. This adventure has not been played yet at the time of writing but it will be in a couple of days. In a way, it makes this a making-of documentary if you will but it's more to it than that. It's an introspection to why I'm writing the story as I'm writing it, allowing I pause and study each scene, plotline and character from design perspective.

Is this the best adventure ever written, a tome of designing virtues put together? No, I don't think so. In all honesty, it feels a bit dull reading it through. But this is the moment of revelation: role-playing games are not written stories – they are acted collaborative emergent stories. The way the preparation work reads and how the actual gaming table experience goes may be very different. The only meaningful act is the act of preparation, making game master *ready* (specifically chosen wording) to sit down to the table and let things roll.

I'm a sandbox GM but I like my sandbox to have a frame and enough sand and toys in it. The bigger the sandbox, the more content I would need to have or higher preparedness in general. Choosing your "frame size" is a critical factor of adventure design. If you master your entire world, no problem, just wing it. However, for most of us, it helps to frame the settings to a certain location or couple of preselected locations and run a dynamic adventure in that setting. Interestingly, each location and scene is a sandbox of its own. Even a single room is a mini-sandbox connected to a larger sandbox or your dungeon or town etc.



I've structure this in a format where I first explore the generic idea of a design philosophy and then write my actual adventure design notes. Also note that I've left purposefully all character names out and refer to them as their title or position only. This is to retain the generic neutral tone throughout.

In many chapters I have listings similarly like adventure generators provide. This comparison is important as my lists are specific to this adventure. In that way, I use the adventure generator principle inside my own adventure to give a layer of dynamic options.

And for clarity, this is not intended as an adventure module for you to use. It's written only for me and in the current format, can be run only by me. This also explains why it does not seem exhaustive or complete as part of it remains for me to come up on the spot.

Adventure notes are written in this format. As a background, the previous campaign arc is coming to an end and a new one is starting in a seamless transition. My setting is Robert E. Howard's Hyperborea, world of Conan the Barbarian, run under Conan 2d20 system by Modiphius. But none of that really matters for adventure design example purposes.

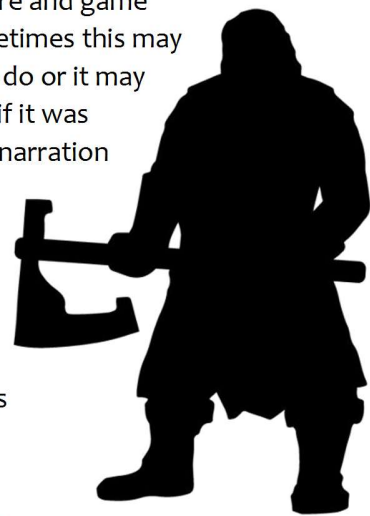
The player characters had been obligated by a lord of a local town to explore the surrounding Pictish wilderness and rescue a group of women been traded to Picts under shady arrangements. And now they are returning, expecting to be victorious but not all is as it should be...

A dramatic beginning

Whether just starting fresh or running a session zero, each adventure and game session should start with a premise that sets things in motion. Sometimes this may be fully narrated by the game master like many adventure modules do or it may be run using a selection of adventure hooks that make it appear as if it was derived from player agency. Both have their pros and cons. A fixed narration can be richer and has minimal overhead. On the other hand, especially for longer running campaigns, adventure hooks work as a smoother transition from previous events to new events in a more "life-like" fashion. A narrator stepping in would feel funny and awkward.

For my session, I'm having the luxury of a cliffhanger of my previous session. It's essentially a plot twist serving as a transition from one campaign plot to the next.

Dramatic beginning could be misinterpreted to mean "in media res" to the letter. I'm not in favor of starting things off with combat for example. A conflict, sure, but not combat. Again, what works in movies and written stories does not translate to gaming tables one to one. As active participants of the story it would be like half of the cast not having the script available if player characters are just dropped in the middle of things.

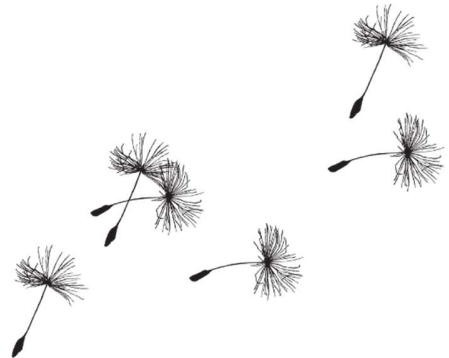


Players characters have just arrived from a successful rescue mission from Pictish lands to claim their reward but instead, they are met with a familiar and previously friendly captain of the guard and most of his men with orders to have them placed under arrest. PCs are accused of murdering a woman they set out to rescue alongside with other accusations. This is all of course a plot against them. The true power in the town, one above the lord who send them on this mission, is not wanting the PCs to snoop around any longer. He is a guild master, more specifically a thief guild's ruthless leader, running all shady business in the town.

Seed has been sown

For an on-going series of adventures, campaign style or not, each adventure works not only towards its own goals but acts as a chance to seed future adventures.

Best seeds are the ones that players create themselves. Players create meaning to things and objects and more they considering something important, the better plot seed that will be. Having a mysterious object in the players position that many different people are desiring makes it ooze of story potential. Incidentally, I have one of those.



The name of the guild master has been mentioned already during the previous campaign with unknown but apparent connection to the events dealing with Picts and the women. One of his henchmen running errands was caught by the Picts and tortured to the point of incomprehension. The noble rescue mission has been nothing but a political maneuver and now the players get to experience what they have meddled in.

Using previously established relationships

Being contacted by someone the player characters already share a relationship with sets the scene effectively. I like to start with familiar faces but maybe cast in a different light. This works as a transitioning technique: the changes in the familiar character reflect changes in overall tone. A previously joyful character now struck with sadness communicates a clear message: something is wrong.

This also works with locations. Taking player characters to a location that has been transformed from its previous state communicates similarly change and drama. This can be a ransacked village as well as a restored ruin, if the transformation is significant and there are interesting powers and events behind it.

While facing a seemingly impossible situation with only options to either surrender or fight the entire town guard, the captain whom PCs have journeyed before, a man of his word, approaches the players and tells them with a silent voice he intends to let them escape when the night comes. He allows them even to keep their possessions, a sign that any player takes as symbol of ultimate trust. This should appear as the best possible choice in the situation to PCs. But as always, I'm ready for "what ifs".

Compel the players, don't lure them

As a game master, I find it easiest to compel the players instead of trying to lure them to be motivated by adventure goals. While this approach may seem forced it is better than a motivational limbo where there is no clear push or pull towards anything. Player characters wanting to do something should be their own vocation, up to the point it is not PCs choosing from ready-made options but coming up with their own. Compel situations, not wants and needs.

It is a bit of a taboo subject that sometimes player motivation and player *character* motivation don't meet. Letting it run can be damaging, as essentially the player is not playing the character and either should change.



How to compel effectively? For example, an NPC may have taken interest in the player characters regardless if they are willing or not. This may involve the NPC wanting to eliminate the PCs or worse (!), pushing them down from their hero pedestal. Alternatively, the prime motivation may be to use player characters for the NPC's own goals. This makes the PCs anything between expendable resources to a worthy ally. In any case, NPC has made the choice and the players are required to face it.

Player character renown and status directly impacts who is compelling them. A king does not want anything from level 1 warrior, or perhaps to die anonymously as part of his army. Even in that case, he would act via his officers with no direct relationship to the poor inexperienced hero-wannabe.

Requiring compelling and pushing player characters continuously is a sign of a problem of course. Either the players characters don't find anything of their own in the adventures or the game master ignores their interests. Normally, players *to-do* lists should be growing and filling with adventure seeds showered on them.

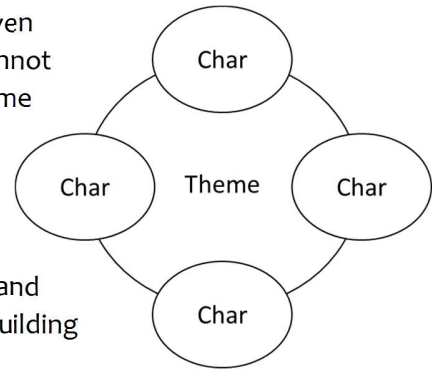
The local town guild master has taken interest in the player characters. They have meddled with his business unknowingly. The women were sent to the Picts for a reason and they were handpicked by the guild master himself. As his final heinous act, he wanted to profit from disposing of his own mistresses. Now, as PCs brought most of them back, alive and truth waiting to burst out in the open, he cannot stand idle. However, while it would be so easy to just kill all those who pose a threat to him, there is always more profitable way in his mind...

Theme and tone

Theme and tone are two essential storytelling frameworks. In role-playing games, the setting and the plot often tend to embed the two in my opinion. A party on a quest to rescue the princess from the toward of the evil wizard – what is the theme of that adventure? Is it the obvious literal theme or a more underlying value-based theme of misunderstood love, sacrifice for a greater good, a generations long cycle of revenge etc. This can make a huge difference in the overall story and guide the character motivations around the central theme.

Tone of the story is the delivery part, how the story is being told. Is it a story filled with horror, action, drama, social commentary, romance or comedy? Most settings imply a certain fixed tone like Sword & Sorcery. Importantly, the game master and the players should share the tone and coordinate in changing that tone. Players still goofing around while game master attempts to create a mood for terror will not end up well ... for the game master.

Theme is owned by the game master. Players don't necessarily even explicitly recognize the theme, similarly like most movie goers cannot separate the plot from overall theme or tone of the movie. As game masters, we are like directors in that respect. We explore a certain theme and draw inspiration from it and maintain coherence and place characters with related motivations fitting to the theme. Theme requires contradicting and different perspectives to it by the characters involved to be fully explored and realized. Therefore, understanding the theme is essential when building your cast.



Theme of my adventure is the co-dependent nature of good and evil. The guild master is the greatest scourge as well as the benefactor for the town socioeconomy. And when this dynamic is pushed and disrupted, it will lead to both good or bad, depending on whose perspective is chosen. Also, all characters are capable of doing good and evil, under the circumstances.

Toying with players (dis)belief

Players continuously drift between two states: they either have a good understanding what will happen next or they are relatively clueless, possibly even desperate, attempting various things to lead them out of the darkness. I'm exaggerating a little of course but the idea is the preparedness to handle both states of mind and use it to your story's advantage.

As game masters, we love to toy with our players, giving them (false) hope and threatening them with (almost) inevitable doom. The rollercoaster of these highs and lows is the source of a memorable storytelling.

The delivery is in a key role. How things appear and what players are expecting can anytime be turned on its head. Importantly, this can be just the perception of things, not how they really are. Anytime players are waiting for a certain result, have some hints that make them uncertain, even though you would deliver the expected result. The world is full of coincidences and improbabilities so use them to your advantage.



PCs have taken the captains promise that he will come and help them to escape when night arrives. This allows a perfect moment to mess with the players. At night, PCs hear footsteps and see a flicker of light from a torch as someone is coming down to the holding cells. To their surprise, it is not the

captain but two drunk guards who want to taunt the PCs. They throw dung and a venomous snake in PCs cell and leave laughing. Only later, possibly when PCs are still busy with the snake, the captain appears and proves good for his word.

A neighboring cell mate, only other character in addition to PCs, sits calmly in the corner of his own cell. He speaks to tell PCs of how deep they are in this mess, who they are up against and how slim their chances are to become anything else other than puppets to the guild master's will or rotting corpses if they would prove unfit or uncooperative. You cannot run or hide; the man will make sure this is understood.

Fight them when they are fresh

From adventure story arc point of view, having an epic battle take place towards the end of the adventure makes a lot of sense but runs also a big risk that players may simply be too tired towards the end of the session. I've noticed that having one or two combat scenes (max) in a session of 3-4 hours is a good amount. The big battles I try to get initiated during first half of the session simply to have the energy around the table carry it through. Other reason for this is that the result of the battle will impact the story.



Combat is a significant time investment and the story impact and payoff should be equally measured. This is why I dislike 'random encounters' as in classic role-playing troupes – their time investment just does not appear justified to me as a story-teller. While an encounter may appear as a surprise to players, it should not be a surprise to the game master.

I'm aware of 'battle fatigue' in a sense that when everyone around the table is feeling less energetic for any reason, there is natural avoidance to engage with time-involving scenes like combat. To avoid this the combat should be kept as brief as possible. Once the resolution is reached, dragging on fighting is just not worth it anymore. If PCs are clearly winning, ending the scene with narrated victory is completely fine approach unless the game master wants to do a scene twist.

Eventually, the captain appears ready to fulfil his promise. He comes keys jingling, hasting to get to the player characters and see them to freedom.

He is not alone however. Guild masters' spies have followed him and are now seeing their opportunity to intervene. Whether the captain will make it to the cell or not hangs now in balance. In any case, player characters will be thanking they were able to keep their weapons.

The spies don't fight to kill the players however, they are there to take them as hostage. If this seems too difficult, they will make a tactical retreat and report back to the guild master.

One key story moment to be had in this is the survival of the captain of the guard. Will players retain their ally or lose him this early on in the story?

Interesting minions

Minions are the foot soldiers and cannon fodder of role-playing games. They don't have names or much of individuality to them. Their purpose is to fight and die. In this role, they are likely to make the most common enemy type that players are fighting against. This should suggest that making minions interesting is a good investment to fun and engagement of fighting them.

Should they have then lots of customization? One has a green mohawk and the other red eye brows? No, I don't think this is the answers. The minions need to be interested as an archetype. They have to have mechanistic tactical depth so that they don't just hit and get hit. Also, their personality whether they are cowardly or fanatic for example, has to shine through. Take Mad Max's 'warboys' for example. They are minions but they are very characteristic minions, up to the point that you can put one in the spotlight and he is full of personality.



Another key aspect of minions is that there's a lot of them and they are very expendable. They don't need to be spared or protected. Also, as they are essentially a singularity in a form of masses, they can be affected as such. Having the minions turn against their former masters makes a very good strategy and plot twist.

The guild master employs various sorts of minions in his service. The lotus addicts serve as the cannon fodder, spies patrolling the streets and paid in drugs. They all show signs of addiction and desperation, a cocktail to go to extremes. As their motivation is to get high, they will work for anyone who can deliver this, not making them very accountable.

For the purpose of more reliable protection, guild master uses specialists loyal only to him. These masked men with foreign origins are his loyal servants, going on missions that require both stealth and deadly arts. They favor hit and run tactics, effectiveness and tactical advantage over ferocity and aggression. While fighting, they use the element of surprise and have an uncanny ability to disappear in the heat of battle. If ever caught, they will slice their own tongue or throat rather than betray their master.

No next-door nemesis

Notice how many stories feature travel as a key element of the second act? There is a reason behind this. If the nemesis just lives next door, getting to him is not limited by time and effort. The time in between allows the protagonist to get ready to meet the antagonist in the end. It's the hero's journey.

Also, having space between the opposing sides allows both to act on their part without getting into direct confrontation too early in the story. Otherwise it would just appear as two neighbors were

bickering about something. Either protagonist is moving towards antagonist or vice versa. The party is going to kill the dragon in its lair or the dragon is coming to invade the town they are protecting.

The element of time also plays a critical role. Is time on protagonist or antagonist side? Should the heroes make haste with their travel or should they try to buy as much as time as possible?

What did I just note there... my nemesis is literally a couple of blocks away, living the finest three-story mansion in the middle of the town. This poses a challenge. There needs to be other reasons why players cannot get to him directly, not just yet.

The guild master is a hero of his town with very few adversaries. Think him like Escobar. Directly attacking him would make PCs look like the murderers they are accused to be and the town would surely act against them with repercussions beyond their capability. They would have to dispel his hero status first and for that they need allies and clues.

The guild master is not coming after the PCs with full force either. He's like a cat toying with his prey. He wants to test the PCs, to see what they are made of, almost as if he was looking to recruit them as much as to destroy them.

Time and space

Already earlier established, the frame of the sandbox acts as a loose boundary for the adventure. Within this space various “nodes” or “hotspots” exist, waiting for players to explore them. Many of them may be visited in order of PCs choice or never at all, however, often clues and events point to certain places of interest. Whether PCs pick up the clue and act on it is up to them.

The world moves forward with time and it does not wait for the PCs. “Time waits for no party” would be a fitting saying indeed. What this means in practice, player choices and success or failure all open and close opportunities as time passes. PCs failed to setup the ambush in time by the roadside? Then the merchant has already reached the city. PCs chose to investigate the baron’s missing daughter instead of going into the mines? Well, now the miners are dead that were needing their rescue.



On exploring the game world and its locations, if these locations (or “nodes”) are thematically connected like all buildings in the same city, the transitions can happen almost instantly. Narrating each doorway between dungeon rooms would be unnecessary. Thematically or geographically separated settings require an “in-between” node that is generally the travel. Whether travel is hazardous or uneventful, passage of time should be covered in enough narrative detail. Some PC character building may also occur in these moments as well as testing or strengthening the party morale and spirit.

The adventure takes place in a single town and players are bound to it by the unresolved situation with the guild master. The town is otherwise a normal mid-size town with trade and economy but

there is an aura of tyranny to all aspects. People are clearly afraid to voice their opinion and working under an invisible hierarchy where few privileged are in the guild master's inner circle.

The town itself has all mid-size town services from smithies, inns and brothels to merchants, church of Mitra and establishments for various guilds, both legal and less so. Moving in town is less risky at night as creating unwanted attention should not be high on PCs interests.

Options and clues

Overly trusting that the PCs are always resourceful in their exploration and pursuit can lead to dead moments of aimless wondering. Having zero “what’s next” options laid out can be a source of analysis paralysis or frustration, making PCs second guess what the adventure is about. As the game master, pointing out a few good leads but leaving PCs to choose from them or come up their own alternative is clearly a win-win without limiting the collaborative freedom.

In Lord of the Rings, Gandalf gave clear guidance to the Fellowship and the hobbits almost in a game master -like fashion. As an NPC, he was clearly the game master’s best friend. Note that Gandalf also gave options to the party on their choices where to travel. Additionally, he trusted the hobbits to reach important milestones completely on their own. Even better, having him disappear and reappear later further enhanced the hobbits own agency.

Clues are pieces of information. What is particularly great about clues is that they are passive in nature and fully empower PCs to choose which clues to follow. If clues require sense of urgency, they can be time-restricted, appearing certain time of the day only, being active only a few hours etc. Missing or neglecting an important clue may be used in “fail forward” fashion. The road ahead is now more difficult due to poor player judgement.

The players have a general idea of what is going on but miss any specifics on how to tackle the challenge. While they could go randomly seeking encounters with NPCs and that is certainly allowed, a few scenes that work as clues are in order.

As game master, I find it handy to have a list of potential clues and potential ways to discover the clue. A simple list like this can easily accommodate a dynamic player-driven playstyle but avoid dead ends and weak plot scenes.

Clue?

*Guild master is expecting a high-ranking visitor
Guild master is a known womanizer
Certain people have free access to guild master's manor
Guild master is holding hostages in his manor
Guild master works with a lotus dealer [name]*

Where?

*Talked openly on the market square
Eavesdropped at the inn*

Who can we trust?

Writing each NPC as potential ally or enemy can add a lot dynamic options to the adventure. It is as if all NPCs had two sides to them. This works particularly well when players are cautious and eager to label NPCs based on their archetype. Also, as GM, you will enjoy the flexibility that you can just-in-time choose a NPC's allegiance. This does not mean their motivation and goals are ambiguous, only that they have not made their mind about the PCs.

Creating scenes that portray NPCs either as a potentially allies or enemies are great. Subtle hints may be placed that the presumed disposition of the character may not be as black and white after all. Whether this is a *red herring* or not can be decided when required. A lot of improvisation can be reached with a simple design that NPCs are flexible in this regard.

Town smith, innkeeper, priest etc. are all willing to work with the PCs. Most of them seem sympathetic to PCs side of the story but who will really give them shelter and who will sell them to the guild master...

Guild master is seen/reported to make visits to the priest. He is presumed a pious man but they meet under circumstances that don't fully support this.

The innkeeper speaks critically of the guild master and people are wise to keep their distance to this otherwise warm and friendly character. Is he really against guild master's businesses and his influence over his home town – or is it just a ploy to flush out potential real conspirators?

A more complete list of character roster and their potential role looks like this:

Who?

Miller
Innkeeper
Blacksmith
Tanner
Town idiot
Lord
Priest
A guard
Visiting stranger
A shady merchant
A master thief

Role?

Secret spy for the guild master
Wronged in the past by guild master
A mistress of the guild master
A patient of guild master's wife
Murder victim of guild master
Accomplice
An addict
Plans to kill the guild master

Demonstration of power

Antagonist would not have a place in the story unless they hold some power and the finale is too late to explore that power in depth. The antagonist needs to be felt and experienced in the world in a form of a constant reminder why the protagonist took up the quest in the first place. Sauron in the Lord of Rings, while never met in the story in person, continuously demonstrates his power over characters of Middle Earth and the world is tainted by his influence.

The way the power is demonstrated paints the picture of the antagonist. Is he merciless and brutal? Is he sadistic or drunk of power? Each such scene also holds clues about a potential weakness. Every type of character trait can be exploited. A megalomaniac character will take the bait of an easy conquest. A warlord cannot hold himself back from scenes of slaughter. An egomaniac will seek to grow his personal influence at any cost.

Guild master has the town in his pocket. No-one in town would publicly speak against him and live. This general tone guides all encounters with NPCs.

He is also a criminal and a profiteer. He deals in all illicit goods from lotus to contraband. The travelling merchants entering and leaving the town all pay an additional tax. The impact of these practices is seen everywhere.

He is rarely seen in public and always protected by his bodyguards that are clearly above a common guard. When he does, he acts as a true politician, a savior, almost a messiah type of character.

To demonstrate that he is above the law, he can use his intimidation tactics as a method of crowd control. A brazen bull, a gift from a foreign land, is waiting for its first victim.

However, if only he was an archetypical tyrant. Revered priests of Mitra praise his contributions to the church, a sign of universal good will.

In the shadow of epicness

The adventure “space” is suggested to be a limited sandbox but what is beyond the current adventure is open for any magnitude. The background and motivations of characters and events alike can all have subtle (and less subtle) hints to grander machinations.

This feeling that whatever the player characters are dealing with now will have consequences and everything is connected is important. Otherwise, when the quest is over, nothing has been achieved. The world seems as it resets instead of evolves and adapts. We don't want that feeling, that is not the hero's journey. We want to peel the layers of epicness, as the hero grows in experience and levels, so does the world around him level up.

Playing a long-term campaign benefits of the history it builds up. Any unresolved plot line or unidentified artifact can be revisited and re-purposed for future adventures.

As the events are very localized around a central antagonist and the town under his iron rule, it is important to show signs that there are connections to the outer world. This can be best demonstrated with noticeable characters coming to town and all of them pitted in the center of events.

These people are for example:

A bullish barbarian seeking blood and glory and does not ask too many questions

A high-ranking visitor to the guild master with unrevealed connections to his wife

Scene twists

I'd like to separate two types of twists from each other. Plot twists change the assumptions about the story itself whereas scene twists change the on-going scene making it more difficult / easier or otherwise impacting the dynamic of the scene.

Combat is for obvious reasons generally best suited for scene twists.

Any direct attack by the PCs is retaliated by hurting the innocent people.

A lotus addict is not interested to kill but to rob the player characters instead. They will favor non-lethal attacks and attempt to run away with something of value.

Any combat scene may be interrupted by the town guards but whose side they choose is not pre-determined.

Any attempt on guild master's wife will be swiftly blocked by her demonic powers and servants.

Gimme danger

Your scene repository itself can have multiple hazardous encounters in it but I tend to require a separate list of various "dangers" or hazards that I can use to make things a bit more challenging. Think of it like Grimtooth's Traps collection but with more variety than traps only.

The town is a dangerous place under the guild master's rule, particularly dangerous for the PCs.

Guards may stop them and start asking questions that can only be answered in gold or violence.

Suspicious looks remind the PCs that they are being watched.

An NPC PCs learn to trust gets brutally murdered.

An attempt of PCs life is made by letting a crazed bull run at their way on a narrow street.

A group of lotus addicts circle the party or a separated member of the party with demands.

Empathy for the NPC

A stereotypical player character is often quite opportunistic, prone to meta-gaming without even acknowledging it. Tangible stuff is yours to keep, NPCs come and go, so why invest in them? As game masters, we don't go and take away their favorite toys at a whim and neither should we let NPCs that are important to PCs vanish either. It is our job as game masters to make NPCs appear as valuable and trustworthy and lasting as a magical weapon, even up to the point that a PC would choose an NPC over loot.

NPCs don't need to be assets and resources to players however. A completely worthless NPC, someone who is likely to create more harm than good even, can become a party favorite. These characters are often entertaining on their own right, good company if you will. I've had a certain

demolition expert dwarf make an appearance multiple times after being considered dead resulting from a “occupational hazard”.

Captain of the guard is a likely candidate for PCs to feel indebted. He has shown his trustworthiness and even put his family on the line to help the PCs. A complete ignorance by the PCs could be punished with events that make them seem like less of the heroes they think they are. Following their moral compass and staying true to their character, be that even slightly different than what I have anticipated, should be rewarded. I hope this is leverage I can use to raise the stakes if required.

Sweet revenge

Revenge is a good motivation. Easy to relate to and comes very naturally to players of all experience levels. Someone had wronged them and they get to serve justice. It's part of the power fantasy: you just don't mess with my character. I would go as far as to say that any “go kill this guy” -mission fails unless the player characters really have beef with this character.

Shady, backstabbing NPCs are great ‘revenge snacks’ for PCs. They don't need to be villains by design, only characters that have crossed the PCs. I love the sneaky coward backstabber stereotype as they come in some many forms and professions.

In their previous mission, PCs were accompanied by a scholar specializing in Picts and their culture, acting as a guide and translator. His true motivation was revealed later: he is after a Pictish artifact that PCs now got in their position. As his last attempt to overpower the PCs, he went and framed them for murder.

While finding him may not be a required for the story arc itself, the PCs are likely wanting to track him down when learning the truth. As the scholar cannot physically match the player characters, he will try to outwit them. Maybe he runs into safety of the guild master, being either welcomed or shunned. Or he creates an elaborate booby trap in his house waiting for players characters to barge in. Or perhaps he convinces that killing him would make player characters actual murderers after all. In any case, he is not going down without a fight and is far more resourceful than his demeanor suggests.

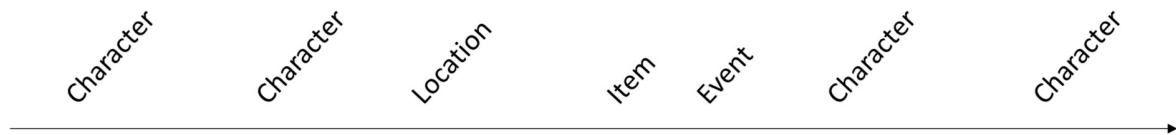
Introducing new characters

Every story is about exploring the unknown, be that about travelling to fantastic locations or uncovering deep secrets. And every exploration requires discoveries to be a thrilling story. These discoveries can come in various forms and tones but one of the most dynamic discoveries can be found in discovering characters and their nature.

Compared to locations, events and items, characters have more depth. They are active agents similarly like PCs. They can impact the story and they can be interacted with. Their allegiance can be to whomever party and this may be hidden or revealed and can change. That said, introducing new characters along the story line will guarantee a dynamic gaming session.

While you as a game master should not rely on a certain plan of sequenced events, it does not hurt to create yourself a rough timeline of the story how various characters, items, locations and events are

encountered or discovered. If it all seems to lean towards either end of the story, you may wish to level it more evenly. Use this as a story analysis tool more than a script however.



Change in tone

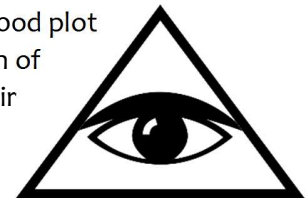
While not always advised or applicable, changing the tone of the adventure as a pre-planned twist option or something that is generated during the play, may create an interesting dynamic. In the movie *Titanic*, if there had been no iceberg at all, the overall tone of the movie would have been much different. The change in tone when the iceberg hits creates this dramatic tension and re-casts all characters: scoundrels become heroes, upper-class pompous tycoons are revealed as cowards etc.

For an RPG adventure, this may also give a completely new perspective on characters. For example, a murder mystery interrupted by a sudden invasion of a foreign enemy may temporarily shuffle PC and NPC roles. The tone may still change back to the original to have that story plot concluded, depending on the level of investment that PCs had in it. While on the subject of sub-plots, they are a vehicle in story telling that allow exploring a different tone without requiring adjusting and re-adjusting the main plot. A romantic passage in a movie, that is otherwise focused on a grand epic war and all the horrors in it, serves as an archetypal example.

From the previous campaign, there are unresolved sub-plots dealing with the Picts. As the Picts have a pre-established connection to certain characters in town and the nature of those affairs have been disrupted, it is a very plausible and logical plot twist to have them invade the town. The turmoil of this can be used to shake up the status quo, creating a necessary opening for the players to make their move.

True form and hidden power structure

Finding out the true form of your nemesis early on robs the narrative of a good plot twist when finally encountering him. Part of the enjoyment and gratification of defeating your enemy is to expose them truly as they are, tearing down their façade, belief system, status and position in general. This may be a good addition or even a substitute for killing.



“Nemesis revealed as villain” is a satisfying but common plot twist. The true power is held by someone else, potentially a one that has been operating in secret but in plain view all along.

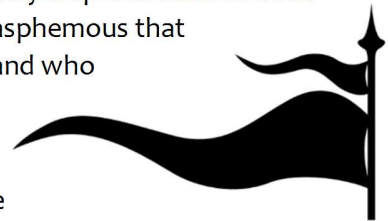
“Tip of the iceberg” is another popular discovery. What player characters originally believe to be the case is revealed to be just a part of a larger scheme. Much larger.

“Guilty innocent” is also quite popular. A seemingly innocent character has a side to them no-one can see. This may be a child, a woman, a simpleton etc. A person that is not considered by their attributes as a threat unlike a demonic fiery humanoid in black glowing plate armor would be.

While guild master appears to be in control of everything that goes on in the town, a grand scheme of things, his wife is the true power. She is a foreigner hailing from the East, land of Khitai, and has connections to a cabal, an ancient order, that they both serve. When visited by highest ranking members of their cabal, she is the one what does the talking. Also, her powers when revealed are far superior to mundane power that her husband commands.

Lots of factions make a good setting

Game of Thrones is thrilling, there’s no going around it. The usual fantasy tropes are mixed with something that would happen in Bold and the Beautiful, even how blasphemous that sounds. The strength of the story is in the strength of the characters and who they represent. Factions form their own universes with the ability to have own internal protagonist and antagonist.



For a role-playing game world setting, I cannot think of anything more reusable, long lasting and adaptive as having a set of well-defined and interesting factions. The Game of Throne -sauce if you will.

Guild master’s reign over the town and local region is a faction on its own right but behind the scenes operates a much larger and mysterious organization called “One-Eyed Spider. This ancient order is long believed disbanded. Their signature method of killing with black lotus and sewing shut one of the victim is still recognized by anyone dealing with Eastern influences.

They are not without enemies and rivals however.... there are other factions in play and those will be only hinted at this stage.

Alien and fantastic

Player characters have certain set of core values and sense of familiarity. Presenting them with concepts that they consider alien inherently builds tension. Better yet, if PCs have different perception on what they encounter, it leads to tensions between PCs. Having PCs always be like-minded about everything diminishes their individuality. Note that ‘tensions’ does not necessarily mean conflict. PCs can lightheartedly disagree on important matters, a basic ingredient of any cop story with two partners as protagonists.

Alien works also to disgust and horrify, further fueling an aggressive motivation. Whether the motivation is justified or not can be explored separately. A group of Paladins encountering a horde of undead does not count as ‘alien encounter’ however. These are familiar nemesis. Paladins encountering a scene of undead in a service of a respected cause will shake their core values.



The fantastic makes us awe. Any sight of a grand or rare scene with mythic quality delivers us that. If it serves also as a major plot moment the more impactful it will make the story itself. Again, Lord of the Rings does this with each location the Fellowship travels. While majestic locations are a surefire, I personally favor fantastic characters doing fantastic things. Any powerful sorcerer knows exactly what I'm talking about. The trick is to make seemingly 'small' characters perform fantastic feats. Again, those Hobbits come to mind...

Guild master's wife a mystical figure not only because of her station and origin. She masters the healing arts and has often prestigious patients visiting their manor. How much of mind-influence is involved in these practices, only few rumors persist.

A more disturbing rumor is the Night Demons she is believed to summon and control to do her bidding. People just go missing behind locked doors with no sign of break-in or violence. If these people are dead or taken, no-one has any records of it and none have come back except for one: a miller who hang himself to the blades of his windmill, eyes completely turned black..

Presenting an opening

All plots deal with overcoming a challenge, many of them having the challenge very practical as how to get into a fortress, how to slay an undead prince etc. Part of the fun in the game is to have players come up with ideas on how to overcome this challenge and the best idea is the right answer.

In a situation where players are getting frustrated or are short of ideas, playing a scene that inherently serves to present an opening to the players to exploit makes sense as a game master move. Instead of just giving it to them, a game master initiated opening should come with a price. Pursuing that is never the optimal solution. The optimal solution would have been the one that players came up with.



If my players would struggle to build a strategy to relieve themselves of the unspoken servitude and threat presented by the guild master, I would start to expose him more and make his defenses appear less impenetrable. These would not be flaws in his part but a deeper look into his character and how he interacts with the town and its characters. For example, he may be a fan of gladiatorial combat and hosting such event he lets his guard down... ..

Breakthrough moment

A breakthrough moment is generally a transition that moves the story to third act. The players finally make their way to their destination and/or are ready to face the final challenge. Breakthrough is an achievement, a victory on players' behalf.

The manner of the breakthrough can be used to setup the finale. If players used brute force, this will be met with opposition or cunning. If players used cunning, they may be given an advantage. We tend to reward thinking over acting in role-playing games. The ingenuity and novelty, originality even, of the breakthrough is rewarded in equal measure. Technically, the breakthrough may be on the level that it itself acts as the finale. Why did they not use the eagles in *LotR* to carry the ring..... if it had been a role-playing campaign, this would have been a viable choice.



The more oppressed and beaten the PCs are when they finally make the breakthrough the more satisfying it is. If the PCs have been winning all the time, it feels like nothing to break through the final barrier as well. Also, if the breakthrough was not of PCs doing the story needs to take a dramatic shift and realign to cast the PCs back in the spotlight.

The breakthrough in my adventure can come via any of these results:

PCs can infiltrate the manor and break down all defenses.

PCs can sway the public opinion and erode guild master's position and popularity in the town.

PCs can find strong ally's that help them to re-balance the hunter and the hunted.

PCs are able to strike a deal with the guild master ... only to be betrayed later.

Inside the inner sanctum

As a result of the breakthrough, the PCs gain access to where they originally were unable to enter. This may be a location, a person or more abstract like knowledge or patronage. They get to learn all the secrets and are able to fulfill their mission. The antagonist is now vulnerable but the game has moved to his home turf as well so the threat is not over.

While exploring the "inner sanctum" the PCs learn more of their opposition. They see the books the evil wizard has been researching. They grimace the bodies in the troll's cave. This all builds up towards the finale and allows a short breather before a full-on action breaks loose. It is also a perfect moment for a plot twist, resulting PCs being captured, puzzled etc. As game master, you can use this moment to further enforce the nature of the events and create confusion so that the PCs are unsure if what they are doing is really the right thing.

The manor is luxurious and from inside appears as if it would belong to a different world. All ornaments are of foreign origin and unfamiliarity of the setting is unsettling itself. It is like any of the stuffed wild animals could be come alive any moment or the knife collection on the wall if touched would most certainly trigger a foulest trap ever devised by man.

A (big) decision

The heroes must decide. While big part of the enjoyment is to see how players tackle the challenge presented to them, adding up to this challenge a major decision testing their morals and beliefs will elevate the story to a new level.

What are these big decisions? Essentially, they are about choosing what side of the story the players want to explore. There is light and dark, moral and immoral, right and wrong to start with. However, these may appear rather one dimensional and loaded decisions. More interestingly the players choose between two different choices that both involve a dilemma. Who lives and who dies? Based on what reasons?



Decisions don't always have to be involving grand events and characters. Even seemingly small decisions may grow over time to a big impact. Whether the players side with the serf or the landowner may appear as a small sociopolitical decision but it may cumulate in butterfly effect style to something much more meaningful.

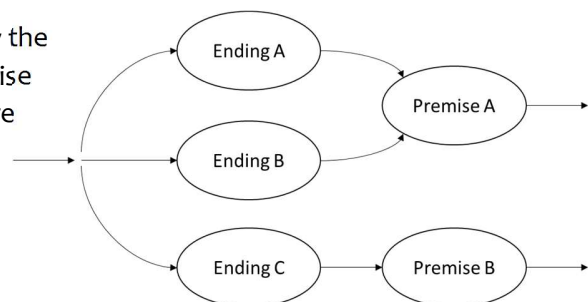
When finally confronting the guild master and his wife, it offers another chance to put players into a test. Firstly, the guild master can come up with a credible story that he is benefiting the local community and driving equality, values we modern people can relate to. Alternatively, he and his wife may turn on each other, both blaming the other and players would have to make their mind who is the real villain of the story. Anything they choose can be either right or wrong in retrospective.

To add to this, guild master's wife is seven months pregnant! Knowing this, slaying her in cold blood would be a quite ruthless act. However, if she poses a clear threat to PCs or is working with forces that are considered opposed to values of PCs and society around them, how will the players deal with the situation? Do they attempt to make her harmless, strip her from her power? How much are they willing to risk themselves and others to achieve this?

The Finale

In general, I discourage against building a story plot with a fixed climax. I often find that flexibility and improvisation and player agency are associated with how things *begin*, and while that is important, personally I find flexibility in middle of the story and towards the resolution much more satisfying. The investment to playtime should suggest that the players have most influence on how the story *ends*.

And each end serves as another beginning. The way the campaign or the adventure is resolved gives a premise for events to come. In this way you could say you are not dealing only with a dynamic finale but a set of *transition options* from here to next.



The confrontation between PCs and guild master and his wife and all their minions is likely to be aggressive. The allegiance of various parties will play a large role in this epic conflict. Guild master fights to survive and so does his wife, first together but if push comes to shove, it's every man for himself. There is no loyalty and self-sacrifice in this marriage.

If guild master is disposed of, the town will go under a transformation. This will not be a peaceful liberation but chaos will ensue. It is not as PCs are considered heroes by everyone. Their efforts are noted by many but the common people are too afraid of the change itself to commend them. As in every change, there are losers and winners and everyone is too busy to make their lot. It is as the town finally allows PCs to leave and even hastes them on the way.

Rewards!

Loot! Fame! Gold and silver! Lands and titles! As game masters, we may sometimes forget the importance for players to be rewarded for hard earned success. While survival and the story itself are great rewards, it may feel like a losing game to some players if their wealth and power does not increase adventure by adventure.

The level of rewards can be scaled accordingly based on how successful the players were in their mission. Alternatively, a great loss for players may be compensated with slightly increased rewards. The type of rewards can reflect the nature of the resolution as well. Killing the dragon and taking its loot is the simplest analogy of this. Taming the dragon and gaining a kick-ass as ride in the process is a completely different thing.

Gold is the easiest to give but also prone to inflation. In a low fantasy setting acquiring the necessary gear and weapons the adventurers need does not require a lot of gold. Wealth comes and goes is my favorite style of play in general, the dynamic of it is interesting and can be woven into the tone of the game. "Wealth can be wonderful but success can test one's mettle as surely as the strongest adversary" (Conan the Barbarian)

Unique (maybe magical) loot is obviously worth noting. A shiny new sword is however difficult to split among party members, creating inequality by design. An elven sorceress handing each party member a specific item fitted to their character is too much of a cliché also and one of them will end up with a rope.

Renown, recognition, contacts, patrons and all that the game world has to offer are the greatest rewards for storytellers. They can be directly put into the heart of the story and role played to the heart's content. However, whether your players view it similarly comes down to the ancient wisdom of "know your players".

Guild master is a wealth man and stealing from him if possible would be profitable. His potential downfall would have many glory seekers wanting to have their share. However, stealing any unique notable items would be considered stealing from the cabal itself, inviting trouble (and adventure!). In that sense, all of his most prized possession are "cursed".

Dialogue

While I know what my NPCs want in general, I may not always be very concrete what they would say to PCs in various encounters. It helps to have a set of dialogue prepared, not necessarily to be used exactly as written but more as preparation on how the NPCs would respond in different situations. This is also an aspect of character development, similarly like describing the motivations and appearance of a character.

Guild master is sure of his position and will use primarily subtle methods to best profile of player characters while still ensuring they are not a threat to him.

“This town wakes up when I wake up and while it sleeps, my eyes are always everywhere, watching”

“You and I, we could both profit if you would not be so stubborn on your morals and ideals”

“I have always use for capable men, such as yourselves.”

His wife is much sparer with words.

“I have nothing to say to likes of you”

“Touch me and you will regret it”

“Look around you... there is nothing you can do”

Town people quotes vary like this

“You ask who is in charge of this town – officially, the lord. Unofficially, someone else”

“This town had nothing before he arrived – now, we are envy of all our neighbors”

Detailing and contrasting characters

While good stories are primarily about interesting characters, I've found it useful not to focus on character details too much when writing narrative. Instead, the character can be molded to meet the requirements to make that narrative believable. It is arguable more important to have a good flow of an interesting plot than a great character behind a mediocre or clumsy narrative. The characters are only as much as the story reveals of them. Players don't get to see the game master notes and designs otherwise.

Character details and story are connected and feed of each other. Don't be afraid of rewrites when new ideas come in. Each character, when they grow in detail, leave a more noticeable mark on the story. It is like the character wants to write part of the story. The story evolves with rewrites.

Contrasting and *juxtapositioning* characters is crucial. Evil is stops feeling evil unless there is also good in comparison. Having interaction between contrasted characters and their motivations enhances this. If the big bad buy and the wise old sage quest giver never really meet in any form, they lack in full potential of the story. It's no coincidence stories often have flashbacks of conflict between two sides to signify the importance of the quest and to add to dramatic tension.

Opposing characteristics within a single character work equally well. There's rarely just one truth to a person, especially when considering all the people around him. Almost everyone can be and has been described as best of the best and worst of the worst, depending on circumstances.

I don't worry about appearance and demeanor that much. Often, that can be resolved from how the NPC presents himself/herself. The description comes naturally fitting their behavior.

Guild master and his wife form a basic man and wife institute reflecting all conventions of the time but with a twist in their internal power hierarchy. The wife is a foreigner, making her different from everyone else in the town, exotic even. They represent wealth and power, success carved by their own hands and ruthlessness to do whatever it takes to stay in their position.

Guild master is a silver haired older man, small in stature. He is unflustered in all situations, able to keep his composure without giving into anger or poor judgement caused by hot temper. He is calculative with no regard for human life. His motivation is to stay and rise in power, one town at a time, with goal being a ruler of small nation even.

Dealing with what ifs...

The narrative structure as written assumes a certain sequence and an outcome. However, when brought to the gaming table, it's all prep work and the table is where the final story takes form. The key question is: "am I prepared enough to provide an adventure to my players?"

Having a healthy set of "what-ifs" as part of the prep work makes sense however. Partially because it is an acid test to the story structure and dynamic. Would everything fall apart if players get innovative, unmotivated, distracted etc?

Key considerations for this adventure are:

What if PCs don't want to surrender and be captured? *Would they fight 30 armed guards? Likely not. Would they attempt to flee? That could happen. Could they succeed? Sure. Then all the scenes about being imprisoned are not required. How would the players know to stick to the adventure goals as presumed? There can be a warning as an attack by guild master's thugs, spies and assassins and then the trustworthy captain finding them and explaining them what they are in for. If even at that point players would choose to relocate, the whole adventure as written can be ditched and improvised chase sequence and surprise attack can serve for content of that session. And then lots and lots of re-writes.*

What if PCs want early on to face the guild master without too much bothering to hone their tactics? *They just march to his front door demanding an audience or try to sneak inside his mansion? They will either make their way in or not, both options are viable, also a good chance to demonstrate that direct infiltration may be risky. Maybe the mansion is empty- guild master got informed and decided to avoid the conflict, potentially leaving a trap behind.*

What if PCs run into problems in town, drawing too much attention to them? *Wouldn't they be captured as fugitives? Technically yes but this may be intervened. The first plague victims are noticed and PCs are given opportunity to haul bodies or similar dirty work in exchange of rotting in the cell.*

What if PCs have a great plan of taking guild master's wife as a hostage? That can be fun to play.

What if PCs consider guild master as an employer after all, seeing no issue to become his pawns? They work for shady characters anyways. They are giving an assignment that will clearly make them think otherwise and seek revenge. The assignment may be morally questionable or a suicide mission, one-way ticket for the disposable heroes.

Rules of Improvisation

Regardless of your preference, every game session is bound to have improvised situations. Players are improvising their part to start with 100% so a game master cannot avoid the need (or opportunity!) to improvise, by minimum in reaction to what players come up with.

There are rules to improvisation however. Improvisation does not mean “anything goes”. Improvisation means staying true to the character. This applies to players as much as to the game master. Therefore, knowing who your characters are and what they want is in the heart of all preparation, and in general, role-playing. You will know how to react if you can think like your character. If you don't have a mental image of your character, he/she is likely to appear as one dimensional stat block.

The adventure I'm planning will be probably 2 x 4-hour session which allows me to do edits (a pivot, if you will) somewhere mid-point of the adventure. I will use this to my advantage.

Arrest scene

Escape + fight

Exploration

Raised tension

Breakthrough
of some kind

Time to hit the table! If you are thinking I'm taking this document as a printed script, that's far from the truth of my intention. This is the prep work. What I bring to table is this little note on the right, similarly like I was participating a debate or a panel talk. In addition, I would have some of my lists as well as some basic stats and spells to choose from when they become needed.

Death of a Player Character

Something that cannot be planned or even anticipated to any extent is death of a player character. It's an eventuality waiting to happen. Preparation to what the meaning of a player character dying is however in my view necessary. It's celebration of a character's life and death with a meaningful plot impact. PC death should not just be a “one man down” but should ideally impact the course of the game.



In this adventure, a PC death is a clear victory to the nemesis. The guild master will use that to further manipulate the rest of the party. Also, his wife may find the dead character fascinating for her disturbing and mystical reasons. Multiple deaths may even make the guild master so overconfident that he leaves any remaining player characters in peace. However, players themselves are likely to feel differently at this stage.....

Lasting impact

In the end, no matter who won and how, the world has changed a little (or a lot). Continuing and living under a frequent reminder of this result may be a powerful way to put more emphasize on “your decisions matter”.

If player characters succeed at killing the dragon terrorizing the local village, the whole area changes, potentially allowing new threats to emerge. PCs are obviously recognized of their heroic deed but with fame comes also more responsibility and other distractions. It’s much like being a celebrity (I should think): your life is less of your own when you are a fabled warrior.

The changed NPC dynamic is also interesting. Maybe there is a new ruler thanks to the PCs. Or maybe they have a new nemesis stalking them, someone who got the short end of the stick. Dead NPCs are lost, having NPCs die all the time makes the active roster of familiar faces short in supply. Getting to know both your friends and enemies is part of the experience.

Finally, the PCs themselves have changed. How else would they claim experience points as rewards otherwise? A physical mark may be one, a permanent injury that does not cripple your stats but works as a reminder and a role-playing element, building up the character. Mental traumas can work the same way. Playing a little more worn and rugged character goes well with increase in levels and aptitude.

I cannot write this before the session. I don't want to. If I did, I would railroad subconsciously towards those predetermined options. This will be in my “after the session” section in a future update.

In retrospective

As promised, I will complete this work by documenting the actual game play sessions for you to see how much they went and to what degree they used the preparation and how much new story lines and events emerged.

Note that this relies on pre-existing knowledge presented in the previous chapters and I will not overly illustrate any of the points more than the necessary. Again, I’m leaving character names out for clarity.

Also note, I’ve written this now in reversed formatting order i.e. first the game play session notes and then my analysis of it.

Session 1

Player characters faced the captain of the guard and presumably the entire town guard. While they had some issues to trust the captains offer, thanks to a PCs good judgement of character, they were able to go along with his proposal.

As they marched voluntarily escorted to the dungeon cells, they were greeted with the town people and in their mixed opinions on the alleged accusations. Why would they be murderers – they were ones sent to rescue the poor women in the first place? Many know that in this town anyone can be accused of any crime under the rule of the guild master.

Another poor soul in the cells speaks about the threat of the guild master. He establishes the PCs situation further. If they were trying to run or confront the guild master directly, they would surely die. There must be another option, a subtler strategy, that PCs are required to find to get out of this forced predicament.

The two drunk guards have their fun at the PCs, providing a comical short scene.

The captain of the guard arrives at a late hour. He rushes to see PCs out of their cell but that is when the ambush is triggered. Masked men from the shadows and more running down the stairs attack the captain first. He manages however to see PCs free and they join the frantic fight in a narrow corridor between two cell rows.

One of the PCs gets mortally wounded in the fray and has to withdraw. The rest of the PCs fight on furiously and are able to kill and drive off the assassins. A single assailant has surrendered and when unmasked the captain recognizes him as a local. The last sight of him has been several months ago when he left for a pilgrimage to the nearby monastery. After a short questioning, the man reveals a connection to the guild master and how he uses the monastery for his own purposes.

They are not to linger any further however and the captain leads them out.

Using the captain's diversion the PCs make their way to the local inn. It is a safe place to hide for the night, the captain has explained. They attend to the wounded PCs injuries and wait for the morning.

At dawn, there's a public event at the market square which PCs are able to observe from safety of their room. Three men are to be hanged, one of them the prisoner they just met last night. This is the first time they lay eyes on the guild master. He greets the sentenced men for the final time, smilingly mocking their fate.

After the event, the PCs are joined by the captain again. He lets them know that this morning an important member of the insurgence has died. He was the only member knowing the name of the contact the guild master trades with in the monastery. Without it, the captain says they would not be able to investigate any further.

However, a message beyond the grave is delivered to the PCs. Before meeting his end, the man had written the contact on a piece of paper and this is handed by a local boy to the PCs.

Preparing to leave for the monastery, they sense danger outside the inn. Waiting to see what happens, a cart with two men takes off and leaves the town. The PCs choose to pursue them into the cold winter night.

Staying on their tail it is obvious they know they are being followed. It is hard to tell who is in charge of the situation, them or the PCs. Their trail takes them deep in the forest.

Another sight catches the PCs attention. In a winter stream, not deep in the clear water, there's a glimmering golden object. Cautiously, suspecting all kinds of dangers, they pick it up. An unknown object of unknown origin and purpose but presumably valuable.

Meanwhile, the cart has gained some distance and it has stopped. The two men have vanished but their tracks are found in the snow, going opposite directions. Further down the road a shape of high tower is drawn against the winter night sky... ..

Now, my GM notes of the session.

As you can see from the game log, the first scenes were played out quite exactly as I had imagined. It was likely to go this way due to lack of viable options on players part. However, it was entertaining and starting a session with some level of more direct guidance can help the player to orientate, especially as there was almost 2 months from our previous session. This is important to note.

The monastery came out of necessity to both explain the masked men and give the adventure context outside the town. It deepens the lore around the guild master and builds up the tension and mystique. There's more for me to explore in second session as all my previous prep work on high level is still all valid and now I can introduce a new faction in addition.

As PCs are out of town for a while, events in town can also advance during their absence. They can be met with a different situation when they go back and this can be based on whatever goes down in the monastery.

Until the next session