VIVID SYSTEM

MINIMALIST   **GENERIC**   **CINEMATIC**

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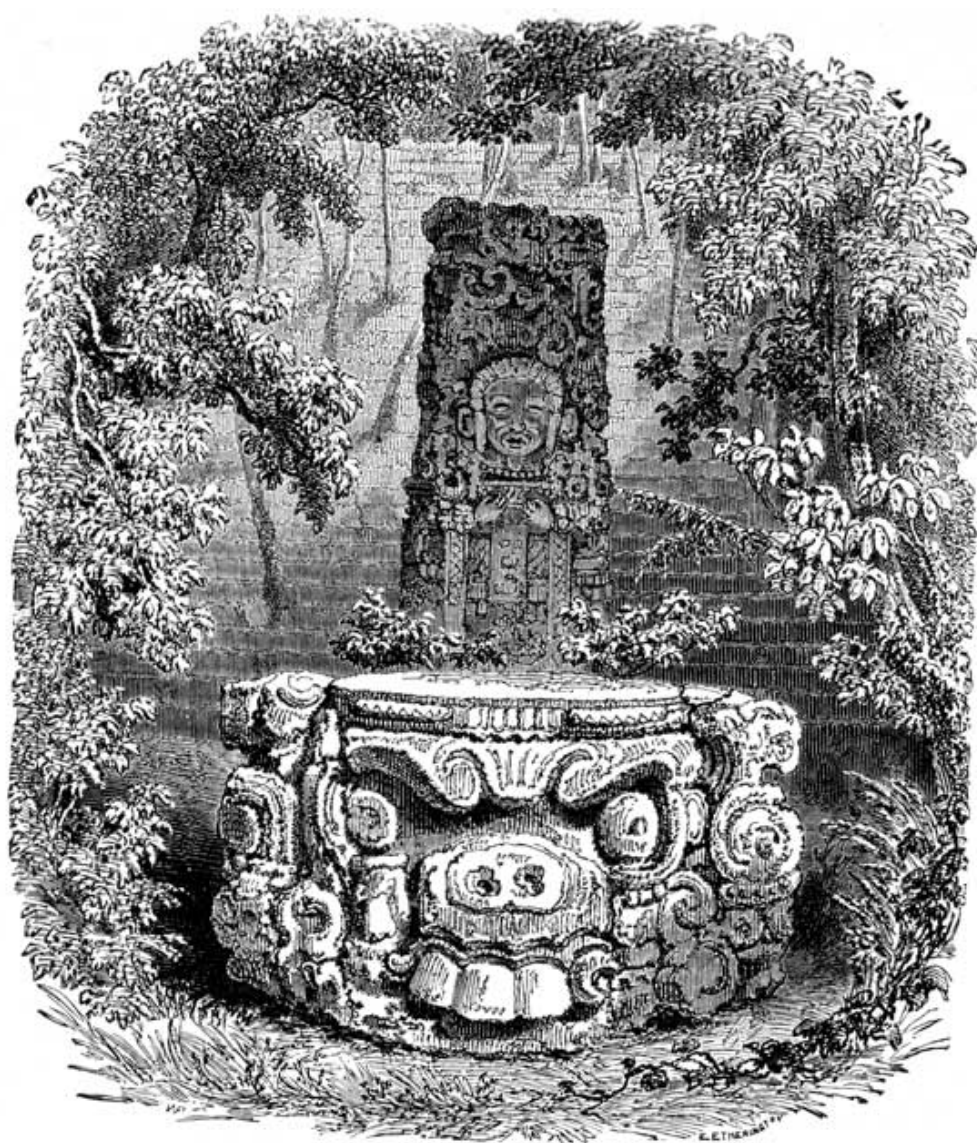
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INTRODUCTION

Vivid: (adjective) producing powerful feelings or strong, clear images in the mind - from the Oxford Dictionary.

The Vivid System is a set of rules meant for running and enjoying cinematic-style games in any genre. It's designed to be simple and easy to learn, extremely fast in resolution, and most of all, my Holy Grail in game design, to encourage hiqh quality input and narrative collaboration from the players. The main features of the system are:

◊ Fast and descriptive character creation — your concept is your character

◊ Encourages players to give vivid descriptions and narrative

◊ Only players need to roll dice, but there's an option for GMs to roll dice too

◊ Uses only the common 6-sided die

◊ Minimal math and bookkeeping

◊ A narrative treatment of damage

To play using the Vivid System you only need eight six-sided dice, three of them in a different color from the rest, plus pencils and paper. A dice cup is handy for rolling large numbers of dice, and rolling the dice into a tray or shallow box will keep them from going off the table.

Character sheets are so simple they'll fit on a 3x5" index card, though personally I prefer 5x8; a half sheet of letter-size paper or pad paper will also do. I've had players store their character info entirely on their iPhones or tablets, and that's perfectly fine too.

How the System Works

The core of the Vivid System is rolling a dice pool of 1-5 dice granted by the GM. The number of dice is based on the GM's judgment of all your advantages combined, which in turn come from your character's applicable Traits and Fortes plus your methods.

Thus to make a character more competent at something, take a Trait that indicates such competence, and one or more Fortes or Traits that support it. The more of your Traits you devote to one field, though, the less competent you can be at other fields.

For example, you want to make a good swordsman. You take the Trait: Warrior, which we can assume includes swordsmanship, and under it the Fortes: Trained by Master Gladiators plus Sword and Dagger Style, and the

Trait: Quick Thinker. The more of these factors you can apply to a situation, the more dice you can roll.

CHARACTER CREATION

Creating characters for a Vivid System game is extremely simple. Your concept is your character. There's very little you need to learn in order to make up your own character, and that little amount should have to do more with the setting than the rules.

Vivid is About Heroes

The Vivid System is inspired by the pulps and cinema: strong and colorful personalities painted in big bold strokes, usually highly competent, getting into larger-than-life trouble. Thus you will be creating a heroic character who is already at or near the peak of their ability — your character will succeed more often than not, and be capable of surviving heavy odds. The flip side of this coin however is that characters don't grow much in power over time; instead, character development rules focus on broadening the character's horizons and adding to his or her story.

How to Create a Character

Character creation consists of just eight quick steps:

◊   The GM holds a briefing for the players

◊   Come up with a character concept

◊   Choose a Heritage

◊   Choose 5 Traits

◊   Choose Fortes

- ◊ Assign 10 Asset Points
- ◊ Assign one or more Tales
- ◊ Assign the character's Outfit

GM Tip: After everyone's done creating their character, collect the character sheets and review them, and after the game session, file them. This makes it easier to spot things needing to be tweaked or clarified, and it'll help in planning more game sessions using the same characters.

Game Master Briefing

Before starting a game, the Game Master should hold a briefing session (aka Session Zero) to get all the players on board; what the game is about, a sketch of what the setting is like, and what character concepts or common bonds would be appropriate. We all have very different backgrounds and directions of imagination, but to have a good game there should be some coherence in the characters created for it. A briefing is one way to quickly establish parameters for the players to start conceptualizing, and if it's held together with all players present it lets everyone bounce ideas off each other.

The GM briefing should establish:

- ◊ A quick introduction to the setting
- ◊ A quick introduction to the adventure or campaign's theme or premise
- ◊ At least one suggested common bond for the player characters

For example: "Our theme is Warlords of Maruzar, so it's going to be a game about war and secret missions across the dying planet Maruzar. All your characters should to be residents of or have strong ties to Dor Amaris, a little city-state in the desert that's been taken over by its powerful neighbor Sarissa. Your characters should all be willing to help in the fight for Dor Amaris' freedom; other than that, you're free to make up any character that could get caught up in this action."

In addition to giving the players backgrounders, GMs can prepare a 'mood board' for the game: a collection of pictures depicting the setting and its cool tropes, and the kinds of characters that the players could use. If you've no exact images for the setting, use whatever's closest. Online picture-collecting platforms like Pinterest or Tumblr work very well for this.

GM Note: The GM should give an interesting, emotionally strong reason for the player characters to be together. Defaulting to all PCs as hirelings is not only painfully cliched, it's also a weak premise for heroes. Know what kind of soldiers have historically avoided serious fighting whenever they could? Mercenaries. Besides, being hired to do stuff is something your adult players already do in real life; give them a chance to be heroes for a cause they care about instead! Use the hired-for-a-job schtick only when it's really appropriate to the genre and tone you're playing.

GM Note: You can get a totally different vibe with the bonds you choose. For example, consider how different the group dynamics would be between a group whose only bond is they were all on the same ship that got stranded on a strange island, and a family who got cast ashore on that same island. Giving strong starters like this also helps the players get their roleplaying cues more quickly.

Character Concept

The first line on your character sheet, after your name, should be a capsule of your character concept. This is just a single sentence telling us your character's name, what he/she is or does, and for a more definite flavor, how or why. For example: "Arthur Rice Haggard, British big-game hunter obsessed with dinosaurs," and "Aman Zaor, a dispossessed prince of Maruzar."

We'll use Aman Zaor as an example for the rest of this chapter as we go through the process of building a character, as he's made for the Warlords of Maruzar theme outlined above.

Heritage

Heritage is a special kind of Trait used in game settings where species or cultural background can give significant abilities. Not all game settings

require a Heritage. If the GM is using such a setting, she should define the Heritages for the species or cultures available as player characters. A Heritage is defined with the species or ethnicity name, one or more perks and at least one problem.

Heritage perks are usually in the form of Traits that allow you to claim more dice when relevant; however you can also define them as adding a bonus to an Asset, for example a race that's bigger and tougher than man may get a bonus to Guts. For example, the GM defines:

> **Dark Elf**
> Perks: Agile, Stealthy, Talent for the Dark Arts
> Problems: Hates Sunlight, Haughty, Touched by Madness

You can only choose one Heritage. If you want a mixed Heritage, work with the GM on the mix of perks and problems that it comes with, such as half-elves having only one pointed ear.

For example, Aman Zaor is a prince on Maruzar, which means he's of the Azhir race since that makes up the nobility on that world. The Azhir are a genetically engineered race of warriors and warlords that were once masters of an interplanetary empire, fallen into decadence but still powerful; they're detailed further in the upcoming Swords of Maruzar setting. Aman Zaor's Heritage is Azhir, and it comes with the following perks and problems: Very Tall, Beautiful, Aura of Command, and Prone to the Nightfall Plague. More info on the races of Maruzar will be found in the forthcoming Swords of Maruzar RPG.

Traits

What sets your character apart? Traits are the backgrounds, qualities, special possessions, and special knowledges that define your character and make him or her unique. When you need to make rolls, having one or more Traits applicable to the action allows you to claim more dice.

You may pick up to five Traits. Your first one or two Traits should be a character background or career that gives us an idea what the character is good at. The rest of your Traits should either support your first Trait, as more Traits applied to an action get you more dice, or broaden your capabilities.

There is no set list of Traits. You're free to come up with your own, or

pick from suggestions offered by the GM or implied by the setting. For example, if the GM says the game is set in Edo-era Japan, Traits like Samurai, Ronin and Ninja are appropriate.

Continuing our example with Aman Zaor, we refer to the character concept and back story (see below), to come up with his Traits. His main background is as a Determined Noble Warrior (he's a good fighter), supported by Dispossessed Jerdun of Dor Amaris (he's a leader and well-connected in his city, but his power is constrained by his outsider status). He's also a Quick Thinker (which helps in a lot of situations), a Mentalist (on Maruzar, this means a trained telepath), and has Mercenary Cavalryman Guise because that's how he travels as.

Traits With Style

You may create Traits modified with a Style; this means giving your Trait an extra fillip of colorful wording that makes it more specific and grounded. This allows you an extra Forte under that Trait. Style can indicate something of the character's personality (e.g. Dashing Fighter Pilot), motivation (e.g. Exiled Monk Seeking Redemption), working method (e.g. Meticulous Swordsmith) and so on.

Some of the most interesting Styles are those that integrate your character more into the world, or with the GM's permission, add something new to the setting. For example, instead of a generic Sorcerer, you could make a Servant of the Spider Goddess, or instead of a generic Knight, you make a Knight of the Order of Saint Severian. The GM may not have defined an Order of Saint Severian, so she lets you suggest what its perks and problems are.

Aman Zaor has the Determined Noble Warrior and Dispossessed Jerdun of Dor Amaris as his Styled Traits. The first, being his background Trait, gives him a total of four Fortes under it, and the latter gives him one Forte.

Fortes

What skills, knowledge or actitivies is your character most focused on?
Fortes are focused applications of the Trait that make you better at specific
things. This could be a fighting style, a specific magical power, special
knowledge, and so on. Using a Forte allows you to claim more dice. You
may choose up to three Fortes for your background Trait. If your background
Trait has Style, you get an additional Forte for it.

You also get one Forte for every Styled Trait other than your background.
Thus the total number of Fortes you can have is 3 + the number of Traits
taken with Style.

This is one way we can differentiate characters with similar occupations.
For example, one character could be a Knight (Jousting, Romance,
Swordsmanship), while another is Knight (Fighting, Warfare, Fief
Management).

Continuing the example of Aman Zaor, under his Determined Noble
Warrior trait we'll take Fortes that speak of his training and fighting style:
Trained by Master Gladiators (maybe he knows some unorthodox moves
developed for the arena?), Sword and Dagger (his preferred fighting style),
Tactician, and Inspire Comrades, the last two for his role as a war-leader.
Under Dispossessed Jerdun of Dor Amaris, we take Loyal Friends in Dor
Amaris, giving him ways to gain info on and affect the city in some way
even while he's in exile.

Assets

When things go wrong, what saves your character's butt? This is answered
by your Assets, which are resources you can spend to avoid unwanted
consequences and for extra dice when rolling for actions. Distribute your
allocation of Asset points between Guts, Wits, Luck, and whatever other
Assets your GM has defined for the game.

The usual budget is 10 Asset points. You may assign up to 7 points to any
Asset, before bonuses, and you may leave any Asset at 0.

Guts is energy, toughness, and willpower — basically the core of any action hero. When your character takes a blow but comes back fighting despite the pain, that's using Guts. Spent Guts is restored by resting.

Wits is the ability to notice, think and react quickly. When someone shoots an arrow at your character but misses because he sensed it and dodged just in time, that's using Wits. Spent Wits is are restored by resting.

Luck is of course sheer, dumb luck. When an arrow aimed at your character fails to penetrate because it got stuck on the medallion you wear, that's Luck. Spent Luck is not restored by mere rest; to acquire good fortune, you must have your character undergo misfortune. Use that to add color and humor to the game.

Power is the catchall for reserves of paranormal power. You're free to re-label it anything you want as appropriate for your setting — call it Mana, the Force, Soul, the Favor of a patron deity, whatever you like. How Power is refreshed depends on your desired use for it in the game; if interpreted as internal psychic reserves Power is restored by simply resting or meditating, but if interpreted as coming from external sources like spirit bargains then restoring it may require specific actions.

Game Masters are free to alter this list of Assets as suits their planned game. Feel free to re-label any Asset, use less, or add more. For example, in a game where there are no paranormal powers the GM should take Power off the list.

For Aman Zaor, we'll take Guts 7 (he's highly trained and strong-willed), and Wits 3 (he thinks and reacts quickly). We could have moved some points to Power to emphasize his Mentalist ability, but since in our concept that's minor for Aman Zaor we'll keep his Power at 0.

Tales

What's behind your character's heroic deeds? Tales are the matters that push your character to become part of a story to be remembered. To help you come up with Tales, we classified them into several categories: Bonds, Goads, Reputations, and Failings.

Bonds are relationships that your character strives to maintain or grow, and can be a source of aid when you need it. In return, you're bound to aid and protect these people. Friendships, romantic interests, and belonging to a group that requires you follow a code of behavior or demand allegiance

vs rival groups can count as Bonds. For example, in an Arthurian fantasy game "Knight of the Round Table" is a Bond.

Goads are relationships or obligations that cause your character problems until you get rid of them. Having enemies, debts, or other onerous requirements are Goads.

Reputations can be trophies you want to defend or burdens you need to get rid of. Moreover, the game setting's society reacts to your characters Reputations, for good or ill. For example, "Best Swordsman in the Land" is guaranteed to draw challengers as well as admirers.

During the game, the GM may give your character new Reputations according to your character's deeds. For example, victory over a giant could bring the Reputation: Giant-Slayer. Wanting a specific Reputation can also be a Tale.

Failings are weaknesses such as having a foul temper or being addicted to drink or gambling. They can be interesting if roleplayed well, or add humor to the game. In general, though, Failings are weaker story-wise than the other types of Tales.

Define at least one Tale for your character. You're always free to take on more Tales during play. The GM may skip this step for one-shot games because there may be no time to explore each character's Tales. However, Tales can add a lot flavor to a character, so feel free to take Tales even if they're not likely to be used.

For example, the character Aman Zaor, a dispossessed prince of Maruzar, has the Tales: "I want my city back" and "My sister Djana is in the hands of my enemy Lemius Ras." He also Hates the Spaceclans (they helped his enemy take over his city), and of course as a hunted fugitive he has A Price on My Head.

Tales have no function in the game mechanics per se; instead, their value

is purely narrative. They give the GM clues as to how they can make the game world feel more alive and exciting to you. Take as Tales only things that you want your GM to feature in the story. GMs should provide sample Tales that suit the flavor of their game settings.

Outfit

A character starts with whatever clothes, equipment, and weapons if any as fits the concept. Look at the character's career Traits and use them as a guide. For example, we can safely assume that a knight in Arthurian Britain would have a horse, sword, shield, some kind of armor and helmet, and access to clothes befitting his station. GMs may define Outfit packages for various character archetypes in their campaign settings. If you want anything extra, ask the GM for it. If it fits the game and won't sideline the other players it's likely to be allowed.

Specially powerful items that are part of your character concept however may skew the game in a definite direction, so the GM may want to check if this is all right with the other players, and ensure they'll have characters appropriate to that new direction. For example, if a player asks for their own airship because the character is a sky pirate, giving the airship skews the game toward a sky pirate type of campaign.

Aman Zaor has the following Outfit, to fit his current guise as a wandering mercenary: a saber (standard Maruzarian sword for cavalry/upper class warriors), a dagger, a galvanic bow (a kind of bow specific to Maruzar), a flintlock pistol for added insurance, an armored robe and bracers (light armor common to mercenaries), and a gannor, a reptavian saddle animal of Maruzar.

Weapons and Armor

Damage is based entirely on how well you roll for your action, so weapons have no damage rating. The Vivid System assumes all weapons are equally effective when used well and within the limits of their design. Thus weapons have no damage rating, instead all weapon damage is based entirely on how well you roll for your action. You're free to choose whatever weapons best fit your character concept without worrying if any choice is suboptimal. Significant weapon differences in combat are handled as advantages/disadvantages and affect how many dice you can roll.t

Armor and shields work like Assets: you can spend points from them to continue fighting. Each point spent represents damage to the armor, or some hindrance to using it, such as your grip slipping from your shield as repeated blows upon it numb your hand.

As a rule of thumb, the best armor + shield combination in a setting should have a total rating of no more than 5-6. Player characters normally get a fraction of this at the start, the very best being reserved for the highest-ranked officers and lords of the land. For example, in a milieu based on Sengoku-period Japan where personal shields were little used, the armor of a lord would be 5-6, those of senior samurai 4-5, and samurai player characters might receive armor rated 3-4.

For example, Aman Zaor's combination of armored robe and bracers is determined by the GM to be Armor 2.

Sample Characters

Here are some sample characters to show you what's possible with the Vivid System:

Aman Zaor, Dispossessed Prince of Maruzar

Aman Zaor was Jerdun of Dor Amaris, until he was forced to surrender the city to his rival Lemius Ras in order to preserve it against the Swarm. Now he lives in self-exile, willing to take on any adventure that will help him free his city from Lemius Ras' griHERITAGE Azhir (Very Tall, Beautiful, Aura of Command, Prone to the Nightfall Plague)

TRAITS

Determined Warrior Noble (Trained by Master Gladiators, Sword and Dagger, Tactician, Inspire Comrades)

Dispossessed Jerdun of Dor Amaris (Loyal Friends in Dor Amaris)

Quick Thinker, Mentalist, Mercenary Cavalryman Guise

ASSETS

Guts 7, Wits 3

TALES

I Want My City Back, Djana My Twin Sister is in Lemius Ras' Hands, Hates the Spaceclans, A Price on My Head

OUTFIT

saber, galvanic bow and arrows, flintlock pistol, mercenary's armored robe and bracers (Armor 2); gannor mount

Arthur Rice Haggard, Big Game Hunter in Search of Dinosaurs
Arthur Rice Haggard is a British big game hunter who's been knocking around Africa for years and may have evidence of a prehistoric enclave deep in the interior.

TRAITS

Big Game Hunter (Excellent Marksman, Amazing Tracker, Shoot the Weak Spot)

Amateur Naturalist Obsessed with Dinosaurs (Reptile Expert)

Tough Outdoorsman, Keen-Eyed, Heir to a Fortune

ASSETS

Guts 4, Wits 6

TALES

Friend of the Zulus, Obsessed with Dinosaurs, I Swear I've Seen Dinosaurs, Reputation: Mind Addled From Too Much Time in the Bush

OUTFIT

Rigby elephant gun, Winchester rifle, revolver, binoculars and machete; bush khakis and floppy, ratty hat

Caleb Cairn, Texan Outlaw Transported to Another World
Caleb Cairn is an outlaw on the run. When he sought to take shelter inside a cave deep in the Arizona badlands, he emerged onto a desert lit by a reddening sun and the awesome arch of a planetary ring — and a strangely beautiful woman under attack by alien beasts.

TRAITS

Hardboiled Texan Outlaw (Ex-Cavalryman, Desert Survivor, Fight Like an Apache, Devil With Two Sixguns)

Hard-Drinkin' Gambler (Drink Like a Fish)

Lady's Man, Built Like a Buffalo, Thundering Right Hook

ASSETS

Guts 6, Wits 4

TALES

A Nose for Gold, An Eye for the Ladies, Born Rebel, My Pa Died a Slave

OUTFIT

2 Colt revolvers, cavalry saber, Bowie knife, cowboy outfit

RESOLVING ACTIONS

The following rules are the backbone of the Vivid system.

Rounds

When we need to resolve actions in fine detail, specially in combat, we break down game time into Rounds. A round is a flexible span of time in which a character gets to make an action. If rolls need to be made, your roll ends your turn for the round.

The length of a round depends on the pace of the action in the scene. Fast-paced action like personal combat or a car chase is handled in Short Rounds each lasting a few seconds, while slower-paced action like combat between sailing ships is handled in Long Rounds lasting several minutes or more.

Order of Play

Play is usually led by the GM, who narrates the start of a scene. The GM will usually end their narration with the action cue: "What do you do?" Every player whose character is able to take an action may do so. The GM may resolve each player's action in a round-robin fashion, say starting from the first player on her left and going clockwise around the table, or allow the players to resolve among themselves the order in which they want to go.

Declaring Actions

To declare an action, simply state what your character will do or say and how. The 'how' is very important in this game, as it helps you claim more dice. If it's not immediately obvious or if you're doing something unexpected, make sure to agree on the action's stakes with the GM. This clarifies what you'll get if you succeed, and what you could lose if you fail. Then list the Traits and Fortes you're applying to the action.

Feel free to declare your actions as action sequences such as you would see in a movie. If a roll must be made for it, the roll resolves the outcome of the entire action sequence. Make your action declarations fun and exciting, as befits a pulp-style adventure game. For example: "I dodge around the table, tip it over on its side, and use it as a wall!" The more you entertain the GM and other players, the more dice you're likely to receive!

Actions may be resolved in three ways: by Benchmarking, by Pushing, or by Action Rolls.

Benchmarking

For very simple actions with no significant opposition, the GM may determine it's possible if the character possesses an appropriate Trait or

Forte. For example, lifting a big rock: if your character has a Trait like Strong, he can lift the rock.

Pushing

Sometimes an action is just barely out of your character's reach, but is achievable if the character exerts more effort. This is called Pushing, and requires the expenditure of appropriate Asset points such as Guts. The GM determines the cost and which Asset you can pay with; default is 1 point. Pushing can also be used to speed up the completion of tasks requiring physical effort or mental concentration.

For example, you want to repair your airskiff, which the GM says will take three days. You want to finish it in one day, so the GM offers to let it happen if you spend 2 Guts. This represents the exhaustion of working straight for many hours.

You can also Push your Action Rolls: when you spend Assets on a roll, add Action Dice equal to the points spent. Be careful doing this, though, as you may need those points later to save your character from a bad roll!

Action Rolls

When you take a dramatic or risky action, we resolve it with an Action Roll. Only players make Action Rolls. The roll resolves an entire action sequence including all the counter-actions made by your opposition. For example, in a sword fight your Action Roll resolves the overall result of all the attacks, defenses and movements made by both your character and your opponent.

To make an Action Roll:

◊ Declare the action: what you want to do and how, and which Traits and Fortes you apply to it

◊ The GM gives you Action Dice and Adversity Dice

◊ Roll all the dice and compare the highest Action Die vs the highest Adversity Die

◊ Resolve the consequences of the roll

To determine the number of Action and Adversity Dice, the GM judges your overall balance of advantages from Traits (including Heritage), Fortes, and your methods and circumstances vis a vis the challenge at hand and rates it on the Balance of Power (BOP) scale below:

Rating	Action Dice	Adversity Dice
Excellent	5	1
Great	4	1
Very Good	3	1
Good	2	1
Fair	1	1
Poor	1	2
Terrible	1	3

The more and better arguments you've got in your favor, the more Action Dice you will receive. The more formidable the opponent or challenge, the less Action Dice you'll receive; if you're badly disadvantaged, you could be pushed to the Poor or Terrible end of the scale. If the GM is really impressed, she may give you as many as 6 Action Dice. Action Dice need not equal the number of Traits and Fortes brought to bear.

Adversity Dice should be a different color from the Action Dice so you can easily tell them apart. If you don't have dice in a different color, you can distinguish Adversity Dice some other way such as by rolling them in a different tray.

GM Note: You may have realized that Adversity Dice are simply a way of making the player roll for you. This frees you to concentrate on narrating the adventure and responding to the players. However if you really enjoy rolling dice, you're also free to roll the Adversity Dice yourself.

Result

Three basic and two special Results are possible in an Action Roll, based on your highest dice. Filter the dice rolled in the following order:

◊ **Great**: multiple sixes with your Action Dice. The Adversity Dice don't matter. You achieve what you want, and something extra beneficial happens.

◊ **Terrible**: all ones with your Action Dice. The Adversity Dice don't matter. Something really bad happens.

◊ **Good**: highest Action Die > highest Adversity Die. You achieve what you want.

◊ **Bad**: highest Action Die < highest Adversity Die. Something undesirable happens

◊ **Mixed**: highest Action Die = highest Adversity Die. You may either settle for a lesser result, or spend resources or take setbacks to

achieve what you wanted — work it out with the GM.

The Impact of the roll is equal to the highest die rolled, whether it's an Action Die or Adversity Die. Impact is the basis for effects that must be quantified, such as damage. On Great and Terrible results, add +2 to the Impact. You can announce your Results as [Result] [Impact]: e.g. Good 6.

The Result of the roll guides the interpretation of its narrative consequences. For example, your character is climbing a cliff, with the intention of reaching the top. On a Good outcome, that's exactly what happens. On a Great result, he reaches the top and maybe finds an easier way up for the rest of the party. On a Mixed result, he avoids a fall but finds he's at a dead end and must backtrack to continue the ascent. On a Bad result, he falls. And on a Terrible outcome, he falls, and in doing so triggers a rock slide.

We can also speak of Results as winning or losing a roll. The results are mirror images of each other. When you win a roll the GM's character or obstacle loses, and when you lose a roll the GM's character or obstacle wins.

Gambits

A Gambit is an action or method of action that is inherently more risky than other possible methods, but may also promise a better reward. For example, trying to elude enemy space fighters by flying through an asteroid field is a Gambit.

When the GM judges that you're making a Gambit, she can give you +1 to +2 more Action Dice or allow you to perform action you normally couldn't, but with an added risk: if any of your Action Dice come up 1, you trigger a complication, whatever the Result of the roll. The more dice you take, the more likely a complication will be. The GM should inform you you're making a Gambit; if you don't want this extra risk, rethink your action.

Here are some examples of how you could apply the Gambit mechanic:

◊ You can get extra Action Dice for flying through an asteroid field to evade the enemy fighters. On a Good result you stay ahead of the enemy by weaving through the asteroids, on a Great result an enemy craft crashes into an asteroid, but if you roll any 1s, your spacecraft is the one that hits an asteroid.

◊ You can reload a matchlock musket faster than normal, but if you roll any 1s there will be an accident. The musket may misfire, you could leave your ramrod in the barrel, costing you your ability to reload when you shoot, or the musket may just blow up.

◊ The GM offers you more Action Dice to find game if you go hunting in the distant mountains instead of nearer your village. If you roll any 1s, however, you could have a dangerous encounter, perhaps even with the god of the mountains.

◊ You ask for extra Action Dice for firing a long burst with your Tommy gun, giving you a better chance to hit. If you roll any 1s, however, you're out of ammo.

◊ Claiming extra Action Dice for being motivated by a Tale counts as a Gambit. When you're acting out of passion you may have more energy and determination, but you're also less likely to see the pitfalls in what you're doing.

Sometimes, spending a special kind of resource counts as a Gambit. In such cases, the number of extra dice you can get is equal to the resource points spent. For example, your experimental aircraft has rocket speed boosters, which are represented as a resource. However spending your Rocket Booster points is a Gambit, with complications revolving around loss of control or accidents in the rocket engines.

Player/GM Tip: If you're slow at improvising, you may want to agree on what the potential complication will be when you make a Gambit before making the roll. Use the nature of the action and the scene environment as guides to what the complication could be.

Dramatic Struggles

Much of the time, your character can solve a problem with a single successful roll. But the most gripping scenes in a roleplaying game, just like in a movie, are the drawn-out, desperate struggles for high stakes. Chases, escapes, fighting, piloting a ship through a storm, and other such actions are resolved as Dramatic Struggles. Just about any action can be turned into a Struggle if the players or GM want to focus on it and play it as such.

A Struggle is played until the goal is achieved, the danger is over, or one party can no longer continue. Struggles are drawn out by spending resources such as Armor, Guts, Power, the Hull points of a ship and so on, in order to avoid consequences that end your ability to continue. Players can spend character resources like Guts, Wits, Luck, Armor and so on, while the GM spends Threat.

Dealing With Consequences

When you lose a roll, you have four options:

◊ **Accept** the consequence, and end your participation in the Struggle

◊ **Roll With the Punches:** spend resources = Impact to narrate how you avoided, endured or powered through the consequences. For example, "I block with my shield!"

◊ **Take a Setback:** spend resources = 1/2 Impact (round up) to narrate how your circumstances worsened, giving you a disadvantage for your next action. For example, "I blocked with my shield, but the sheer force sends me reeling backward!"

◊ **Take a Condition:** spend 1 resource to narrate how your character got saddled with a problem that may persist throughout or even after the current scene, giving you a serious disadvantage. For example, "The blow splinters my shield to bits and breaks my shield arm!"

If you have no resources with which to avoid or alter the consequence, you must accept the victor's intended consequence. If you take a Setback

or Condition, place a marker of some kind on your character sheet; the GM can provide tokens for this, or you can use unused dice or small coins.

Taking Setbacks and Conditions knock you lower down the Balance of Power scale, giving you less Action Dice, or if you're already down to one Action Die, increases your Adversity Dice. Conversely, when the GM takes a Setback or Condition for one of his characters or creatures you go up the BOP scale, giving you more Action Dice.

This mechanic is the core of the Vivid System's narrative treatment of combat. However, it's also applicable to noncombat situations and actions, allowing you to turn almost any kind of scene into a dramatic struggle if you want to. Here are some examples:

> **Rolling With the Punches:** You lose a roll to pilot your airship safely through a dust storm, for an Impact of 4. The GM's stated consequence is for your airship to crash. Because you don't want to take any further disadvantages, you spend 3 points of your ship's Hull to narrate how the storm's violence breaks various parts of the ship, and 1 point of Crew to narrate how the violent winds blew a crewman overboard.

> **Taking a Setback:** Your character is engaged in a rapier duel against his old enemy, the Count de Boutey, and you roll a Great 8 (6 + 2 Impact bonus) result. The GM narrates how the Count desperately throws himself backward to avoid being skewered, but takes a wound and falls down, spending 4 points of the Count's Threat. You can claim more dice in the next round. The battle continues!

> **Taking a Condition:** You lose a roll to avoid a gang of thugs pursuing you through the waterfront of Sharazad. You spend Wits to narrate spotting and ducking into an alley you've never been through before, and take the Condition: Lost in Sharazad's Back Alleys.

> **Taking a Condition:** Your character is in a drinking contest, the goal being to be the last one standing after everyone else has passed out. Every time you lose a roll, you can pay Wits or Guts to narrate any funny consequence other than Passed Out. Singing Loudly Off-key, Moping Over Lost Loves, Helpless Giggling … you name it!

The Game Master also has these options for her challenges. However, player and GM priorities are different. Whereas players should normally prioritize staying in the action, the GM's priorities are the pacing of the game and the players' enjoyment of it. The GM can draw out a struggle by taking Setbacks or Conditions, or make it go faster by just Rolling With the Punches, whichever seems to suit the flow of the game and the players'

energy better.

For example, you're the GM and you have a dragon that's down to Threat 4. The current player rolls a Good result, Impact 5 —do you accept that the dragon is down, or will you play one last delay? You notice that the next player has been eagerly listening in, visibly thinking of her next move and itching for one more lick at that dragon. That decides you to take a Condition for the dragon instead, lowering its Threat from 4 to 3 so your next player gets to attack the dragon too.

Action Rolls: PC vs PC

If ever two or more player characters compete for something and require a roll, they both make Action Rolls with Action Dice only, no Adversity Die. The GM decides which PC has advantage and gives dice accordingly. The winner is the player with the highest Action Die. Ties are resolved as Mixed results.

Oracle Rolls

Random circumstances not affected by any character's actions or abilities can be resolved with Oracle Rolls. The GM can assign the chance of this on a 1d6, with low numbers being bad and high numbers good. Players may spend Luck to roll more Oracle dice, and take the highest die.

For example, the PC's come upon a rickety old rope bridge, which may collapse under a character's weight. There's a chance it will, there's a chance it won't; the GM calls for an Oracle Roll from every player, declaring that on 3-6 their character crossed safely, 1-2 means the bridge collapses under that character. If you spend 1 Luck, you can roll two dice instead of just one and take the higher die.

Likewise, GMs are free to make Oracle Rolls at any time to help them decide on things such as whether a random person on the street knows the info you need, random encounters, and so on.

COMBAT

Combat is just another kind of action scene in the Vivid System, and uses the Dramatic Struggles as described above, with some added detail.

Range

Range is minor factor, merely determining how far a weapon can reach. Range is measured in bands as follows:

Close	the range of a thrown dagger
Short	the range of a thrown javelin
Medium	the range of a bow or musket
Long	the range of a modern rifle
Extreme	the range of artillery

Reloading

Some weapons like muskets and other muzzle-loading firearms, and large, heavy weapons like ballistas, take multiple Short Rounds to reload. Their rate of fire is indicated in the weapon's description. In personal combat these slow weapons will likely be used once, then everybody just gets to the serious business of butt-kicking! When using Long Rounds, all weapons can fire every round. The GM should make sure to announce what kind of round is being used for the scene, and when she transitions from Long to Short Rounds or vice versa.

Running Combat

Combat is resolved with the following procedure:

◊ The GM describes the scene, recapping the previous round's highlights if necessary. The GM describes the enemies making their moves or preparations as visible to the player characters.

◊ The GM then asks the players for their characters' deployments — that is, which of the enemies their characters will engage, or where they will take position. If the party was surprised or unprepared for combat, the GM may determine the deployment

by fiat, and in a way that will give the players less Action Dice.

◊ Play proceeds from the first player on the GM's left in a clockwise direction. The players however may agree between themselves on a different order every round as needed. Each player in turn declares their action and resolves it with an Action Roll. Consequences are resolved immediately.

◊ The round ends when every player who wishes to has taken an action, and a new round begins if the battle is not yet decided.

Characters not engaged with any opponent can attempt other actions such as using a device, moving, unlocking a door and so on.

Declaring Combat Actions

When you declare actions in combat, be sure to name the target of your action, describe what you're going to do or even demonstrate it as long as you can do so safely, and if necessary declare your intended result. Try to include claims of advantage, or to reduce disadvantage, when you can. For example:

Player: "I fake at the Count's head, then make a low thrust at his vitals! I've got Pirate, Italian School Rapier as a Forte, and Tricky Fighter trait."

Don't worry if you've no martial arts background at all or don't understand some of the terms the other players might use. You've seen movies, right? Just imagine your character as being in one of those movies and describe

their actions as you see them in your head.

Cinematic Damage

Pulp and action movie fights often seesaw back and forth, the hero and the villain alternately suffering one colorful mishap after another. It's what makes the fights interesting, and drives the sales of popcorn. Just watch Raiders of the Lost Ark again for some of the best examples! We bring some of this excitement into the Vivid System through its narrative treatment of damage.

Combat is fought to impose a desired condition on the foe, usually one that ends the fight at once. As mentioned earlier however, the loser of a combat roll can pay a price to change the result of their defeat. The price paid is what we usually call 'damage' in other RPGs — points of finite resources such as Guts. You have four options when you lose a combat roll:

◊ **Accept** the winner's intended consequence, and exit the fight

◊ **Roll With the Punches:** narrate enduring the punishment somehow, and pay resources = Impact. You get no disadvantages.

◊ **Take a Setback:** narrate a not-too-serious worsening of your circumstances that gives your enemy advantage, and pay resources = 1/2 Impact. You get a disadvantage.

◊ **Take a Condition:** narrate taking an injury or traumatic reaction like terror or serious loss of confidence, and pay 1 resource point. Gives you more disadvantage.

Whichever option you choose, you have to narrate how it happened. A character who cannot nullify or change the victor's intended consequence suffers that consequence.

Cinematic Setbacks

When you alter the consequence of a defeat, you must narrate your character taking a setback that disadvantages you in some way. Try to imagine what could happen based on your opponent's narrated action and the GM's description of the battlefield. Here are some ideas:

◊ Take a non-disabling injury, e.g. a cut to the face

◊ Knocked down

◊ Knocked back, possibly into an obstacle

◊ Disarmed, forcing the character to switch weapons or fight barehanded

◊ Shield broken or knocked out of hand

◊ Helmet knocked down over your eyes

◊ Dizzied momentarily by blow to the headv

Blocking, Soaking and Escaping Damage

The means by which you fend off unwanted consequences can be categorized according to what resource you spend.

Blocking damage means taking the brunt of the hit on your armor or shield. Spend Armor or Shield. Narrate how your armor stops a blow, how your character looks like a hedgehog from all the arrows sticking in his armor that failed to pierce it, how your shield breaks as you spend its last points ...

Soaking damage means you were hit but toughed it out. Spend Guts. Narrate how you your character gets knocked silly but just shakes his head to clear it and comes back swinging, or how your barbarian in the bearskin diapers keeps going from sheer determination despite rivulets of blood running all over his sweaty bare torso …

Escaping damage can mean either avoiding the blow with a last-second dodge or parry, aided by your perception and quick reactions or ability to think quickly, or through a lucky coincidence. Spend Wits or Luck. Narrate stuff like an arrow sticking in the medallion you wear on your chest, or whizzing past your ear as you twist aside in slow motion …

In games where the characters are human or human-like, damage of greater-than human scale such as inflicted by very large beasts or powerful energy weapons, cannot be Blocked or Soaked by player characters; you can only Escape such damage. This prevents ludicrous images such as surviving a T Rex's bite because your character's so tough; instead, you cinematically dive or roll away from those jaws of doom!

Poison

Poisoning is a special consequence that can be inflicted by creatures with venomous bites, stings or spines, or by adversaries using poisoned weapons. It can also result from ingesting or inhaling, sometimes just touching, a poisonous substance. Your character is Poisoned when you accept this consequence or had no choice but to do so.
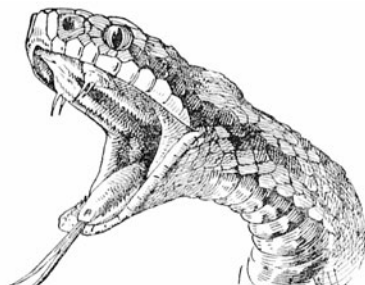
Poisons and diseases are described with an Initial Effect, which is what

happens immediately upon being poisoned or infected, and a Terminal Effect, which is what happens if the poison is not neutralized in the given time. The Initial Effect always decreases the number of Action Dice you can receive.

Example: a venomous snake's toxin is described as Extreme Pain, Death in 6 hours.

This delay before the Terminal Effect may be as long as several days to as short as a few minutes (for comparison, the king cobra's venom kills in about 15 minutes; most venoms are milder than this). This delay gives the party a chance to do something about the poison through first aid or finding an antidote. Remember Aragorn's desperate hunt for a magical herb in Fellowship of the Ring, when Frodo was hit with a magically poisoned blade? That's how it should be. Poisoning is a challenge to the party. This makes the story more interesting, and a chance for healer type characters to shine.

Recovery

Guts, Wits and Power are fully recovered after a full night's rest, unless the character is under some condition such as poisoning or sickness or a wound that prevents this. In that case, recovery takes place only after the blocking condition is cleared and the character has rested at least a few days.

Luck does not refresh on its own. Instead, players gain Luck by giving their characters bad luck. Every time you narrate your character getting into some kind of trouble, you can get back 1 or more Luck as the GM sees fit. The more entertaining the trouble, the more Luck it refreshes.

Armor and Shields are refreshed by repairing them. You may also be able to scavenge a shield from the battlefield, but it may have less damage absorption capacity than a new shield.

Option: Heroic Death

It's a real bummer to lose a character on a bad die roll, but on the other hand, a heroic end might be remembered by all the players at that table for years to come. When this option is on for your game, a player character can only die in combat if the player chooses to accept it. You have several options for your character's heroic end:

Left for Dead: Your character is left unconscious on the battlefield, but can recover with sufficient medical aid or its equivalent in a fantasy setting, and possibly a long recovery time or a permanent injury of some kind. This is the default option. If your allies were defeated, your character could be captured by the enemy.

Let's Finish This: You accept your character's death, but your character will not die until after the current fight scene is ended. You may continue fighting or taking other actions as normal until the fight ends, after which your character collapses and is beyond aid.

Blaze of Glory: You accept your character's death, but get one last chance to strike a telling blow with +5 bonus dice. Immediately afterward your character falls down dead or dying, and cannot be healed.

Gift of Fury: You accept your character's immediate death, but this inspires your allies to strike in vengeance or strive harder to fulfill your common purpose. You get a pool of 10 Fury Dice which you can distribute at will to the other players as bonus dice.

SAMPLE GEAR

Gear is handled very simply in the Vivid System. For mundane items, you can use your common sense to judge what something can and can't do. Items that have game-significant strengths or limitations will have Traits to indicate those properties. Here are some example items and item properties from various genres and settings to give you an idea of what's possible:

Armor and Shields

Armor and shields provide a resource you can spend to block damage. The weight may count as a disadvantage in some actions such as swimming. As a rule of thumb, the best armor/shield combination in a setting should total no more than 5-6 points or so. A suit of armor is assumed to include a helmet.

Light or Partial Armor: This armor is either made of light or soft materials, such as padded cloth, or covers only parts of the body, such as the armor of some Roman gladiators. Protection 1-2.

Medium Armor: This armor usually covers at least the torso, and consists of hard materials or some combination of hard and soft materials. Often made to be used with a shield. Protection 3-4.

Heavy Armor: This armor can cover most of the body, and consists of hard materials or some combination of hard and soft materials; it is typically more rigid and confining than medium armor in addition to being heavier. Wearers often don't bother with a shield so they can wield long, two-handed weapons. Protection 4-6.

Shield: Shields vary in size from the buckler, which is little more than the size of a breakfast plate, to tower shields that cover a man from ankles to chin. Protection 2-3.

Weapon Properties

Weapons do not have a damage rating, as all weapons are considered equally effective when used properly and for their intended purpose. Their

other capabilities can be expressed as Traits. These are the most commonly used weapon properties:

Range: The weapon can shoot or reach up to the specified range band.

Rate of Fire: ROF means rate of fire, that is how many times you can shoot the weapon in a round, or how many rounds it takes to reload and get it ready to shoot again.

Burst Fire: The weapon is capable of firing repeatedly in a very short time, giving more chances to hit and have a greater effect, allowing you to claim more Action Dice. Most Burst Fire weapons come with the Gambit: Long Burst. Firing a longer burst gets you even more dice, but on rolling any 1s you're either out of ammo or the weapon has a problem such as a jam.

Ignores Armor: The weapon can punch right through or otherwise nullify the protection of armor from the same milieu. Armor from a more advanced milieu usually gives its normal protection vs the weapon. For example, muskets can pierce through most Renaissance era armor, but a Kevlar suit may be another matter.

Poisoned: The weapon delivers some kind of poison. The Initial and Terminal Effects are defined by the poison used. For example, a tranquilizer dart may have the effects: Dizziness, Unconscious in 3 Rounds.

Massive Damage: The weapon is capable of harming extremely large creatures and hardened vehicles or structures made of materials from its own milieu. Some materials from more advanced milieus may be immune.

Explosive: The weapon delivers a destructive blast over an area/volume, possibly affecting multiple characters or creatures.

Common Weapons

Here are some weapons common to many game settings and how they're handled in Vivid:

Sword: No special Traits. Your GM may ask you how long your character's sword is when weapon reach could be an advantage or disadvantage. Swords are sized to their wielders' reach and height for balance; thus the typical sword for a human is about 30 inches or less.

Dagger: Daggers shaped and balanced for throwing can be thrown to Close Range.

Axe, Mace: No special Traits. Smaller axes can be thrown to Close Range.

Bow: ROF 1/1, Medium Range

Spear: Can be thrown to Close Range, or Short Range if the spear is a lightweight one made for throwing. Your GM may ask how long your character's spear is when weapon reach could be an advantage or disadvantage.

Matchlock Musket: Among the earliest kinds of firearms, matchlock muskets are single-shot, muzzle-loading guns that are so heavy they must be fired using a support of some kind. The gunpowder is ignited by means of a burning matchcord, which is applied to the powder charge when you squeeze the trigger. A matchlock musket has the following Traits:

Matchlock Musket: Medium Range, Ignores Armor, ROF 1/3, Gambit: Faster Reload

This gun takes 2 full rounds to reload after firing, so you get a shot only every third round. Loading it faster is a Gambit and can cause accidents.

Tommy Gun: A staple of pulp-era fiction, the Tommy gun is the historic Thompson submachine gun which somehow became available even to gangsters in the 1930s. It has the following Traits:

Tommy Gun: Medium Range, Burst Fire, Gambit: Long Burst

If you want even more dice, declare a long burst, which is a Gambit; you'll get more dice, but if any roll 1s you could run out of ammo or the gun can jam.

Exotic items

Here are some weapons, vehicles and gear from various settings and how they're handled in Vivid:

Sonic Stunner: A non-lethal weapon introduced by the Spaceclans to Maruzar, this pistol-like device fires a blast of ultrasound that can knock

most human-sized creatures unconscious with one or two hits. Larger creatures may require multiple shots to knock out. Greater effect and better chances to hit can be had by spending more than 1 Charge for a shot. The weapon has no effect on Spaceclan robots or Spaceclansfolk wearing an encounter suit (aka shellsuit), which they always do on Maruzar.

Sonic Stunner: Close Range, Ignores Armor, 20 Charges
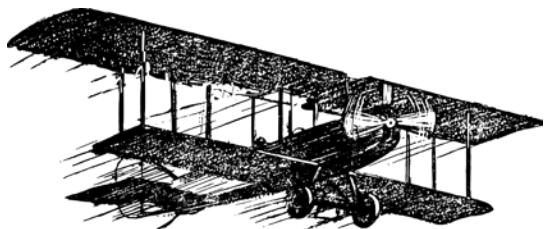
Biplane, Two-Seater: This airplane is representative of a type that would be common in 1920s-30s pulp settings. It holds two people, the pilot and one passenger, plus a minimal amount of cargo. Biplanes have two wings, one atop the other, and the whole plane is made of canvas stretched over wood and a little metal, held together with many wires. It has the following Assets and Traits:

Two-Seater Biplane: Hull 3, Highly Maneuverable, Lightweight Construction

It has no pressurized cabin or oxygen supply, so flying to altitudes where the air is too thin to breathe easily can cause problems.

Spanish Galleon: This enormous 16th-17th century sailing ship would make a formidable adversary or target for a pirate crew. Every rated Asset can be used to absorb damage. The crew and marines are considered Minions, so the rating is an abstraction of their actual numbers and their quality, ie their training and morale.
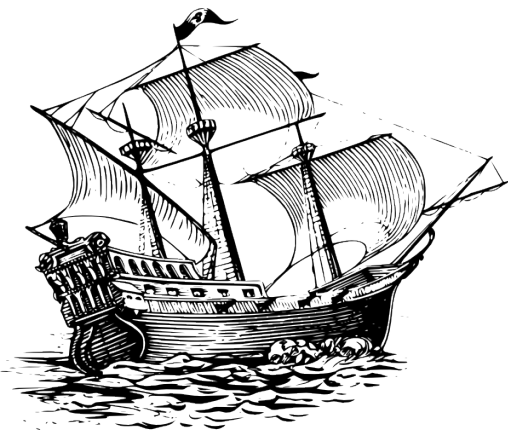
Cannon is a resource that abstracts the total artillery on board, and can be spent for more Action Dice to represent salvos with multiple guns. Cannon is refreshed fully after every Long Round.

Spanish Great Galleon: Hull 30, Crew 20, Armored Marines 15, Cannon 6 (Massive Damage)

Merchant Airship: On the world of Maruzar, the elite use skyships buoyed by gravomagnetic levitator spheres. The levitators are extremely expensive and only available from the Spaceclans, so some merchants have commissioned airships buoyed by hydrogen-filled balloons for their own use. These ships can't carry great amounts of cargo, so they're used to transport wealthy passengers and high-value, low-bulk items such as important mail, spices and drugs, and the like.

Every rated Asset can be used to absorb damage. Firepower is a resource that abstracts the total anti-aircraft armament on board, and can be spent for more Action Dice to represent salvos with multiple weapons. Firepower is refreshed fully every Long Round.

Merchant Airship: Hull 6, Crew 5, Firepower 3, Hydrogen-Filled Balloons

The gasbags lifting the airship are of course highly prone to damage. Large and/or multiple punctures will let out the hydrogen, and if the balloon is set on fire it could blow up the whole ship.

Wingcloak: The wingcloak is a personal flight device from the world of Maruzar. It is a harness that mounts small gravomagnetic levitator spheres along the user's back, along with fabric-and-strut wings that hang from the shoulders like a cloak when not in use. The levitators give the wearer just enough buoyancy for him to rise and propel himself by flapping the wings with his arms.

Wingcloak: Extremely Maneuverable

Psi-Scrambler: An artifact of ancient technology from Maruzar, this baton-like device sends some kind of psychic energy pulse into the mind of whoever it's pointed at when triggered. If the target has any psionic abilities, the target feels extreme pain and is rendered unable to use their psionic abilities for several hours. Any creature without psi however feels no effect. Because it's so old, however, the device can fail any time; every use is considered a Gambit, and if any ones are rolled the device breaks down.

Psi-Scrambler: Close Range, Scrambles Psionic Abilities, Gambit: every use is considered a Gambit, device becomes unusable and irreparable if any ones are rolled.

SAMPLE MAGIC SYSTEM

The flavor of magic can be different for every setting. Thus there's no generic magic system offered for Vivid. Instead, what follows is a module that can be used in sword and sorcery settings such as inspired by the works of Robert E. Howard, Clark Ashton Smith, Karl Edward Wagner and the like.


Pulp Sword and Sorcery Magic

This flavor of magic is meant to be dark and mysterious, grisly in its special effects, prone to calling upon inimical beings, and thus costly and dangerous. Characters with magic for this module are referred to in general as sorcerers, but ideally should have Styled Traits to tie them to a specific theme of magic. It is based on the following premises:

◊ Magic is mysterious and mostly sinister, which in turn requires sorcerers to be secretive or isolated from the hate and fear of the populace

◊ Magic comes from bargains with otherworldly powers and beings

◊ There are no 'good' gods

◊ There are no 'academies' for magic, sorcerers are too jealous of power to teach whole classes

◊ Magic is learned by self-study of forbidden tomes or by apprenticeship

◊ Magic is either thematic and subtle or thematic and grand, but never mundane

◊ Magic use can cause Corruption

◊ Magic should not just substitute for a gun

The last premise doesn't mean a sorcerer can't use magic in combat, but rather encourages thinking of magic use in a more wondrous way instead of just throwing glowing bolts of some variety.
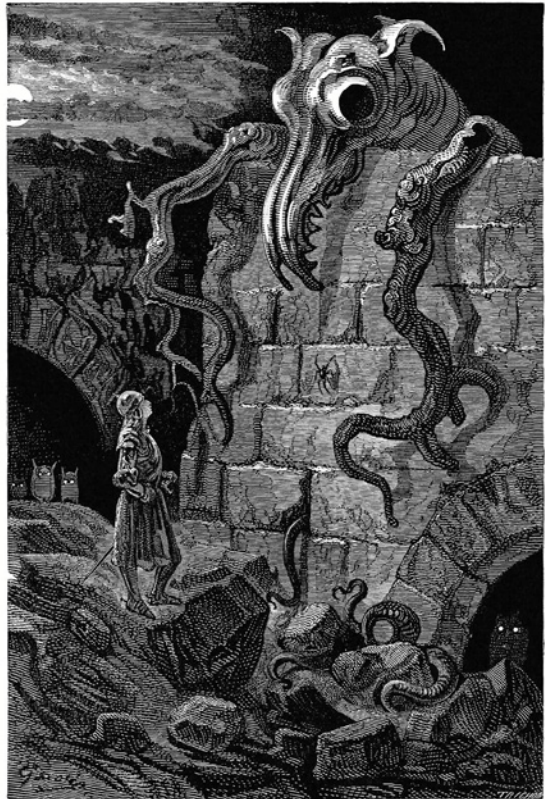
Basics of Sorcery

Sorcery is mostly freeform: just say what you want to do, and as long as it's within the concept described by your Traits and Fortes you have a chance at doing it. There's no preset list of spells, instead players are free to make up what their characters' powers can do on the fly.

Narrating your spell-casting preparations and actions in a way that's more colorful and in-genre will gain you more Action Dice. Powerful magics require the expenditure of Power points and are considered innately more difficult, which means the GM will require more preparations and role playing of the casting in order to grant more Action Dice.

To recover spent Power, sorcerers must spend time communing with or performing services, such as giving sacrifices, to their source of power or patron. For example, a necromancer may sleep in a graveyard or tomb, while a priest of the snake-god may offer victims to snakes, specially to the gigantic one living beneath his lair.

Creating a Sorcerer

Create your sorcerer by following the same steps as given in the Character Creation chapter, collaborating with the GM wherever necessary. Here are some guides for fleshing out each component of the character along with an

example character:

Concept: How did the character gain magic? What is the character's source of power? What kinds of powers do you want your sorcerer to have.

We'll be using the character Araneus as our running example. Concept: Araneus is a sorcerer-priest who derives his powers from worship of the spider goddess Rakne.

Traits: Flesh out your character's kinds and sources of power and how they're used with Traits. Does your character serve some kind of dark deity? Who? What special knowledges, qualities, or special items support your character's career as sorcerer?

We give Araneus the Traits: Secret Servant of the Spider Goddess (a Styled Trait indicating his source of power and the theme of his magic), Scholarly Aristocrat (his cover identity, also explains how he learned of Raknea's cult in the first place), The Widow's Bite (a spider-themed dagger enchanted to be permanently poisoned), the Black Jewel of Raknea (a special item used as a spell focus), and Good at Dissembling (so he doesn't get found out!)
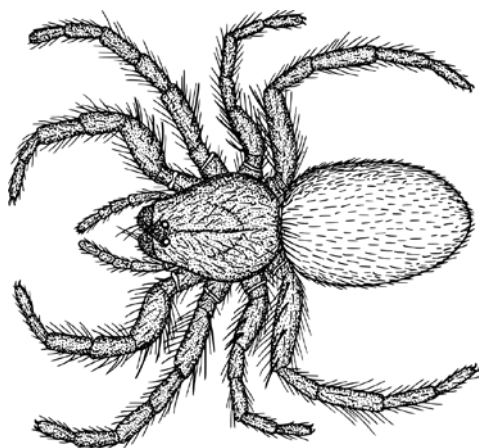
Fortes: Use Fortes to flesh out specific spells or kinds of spells you want your sorcerer to be capable of casting easily.

Araneus has the arachnid-themed Fortes: Command Spiders, Weave Webs of Lies and Deceit, Spit Webbing, Spiders in My Sleeves under his Secret Servant of the Spider Goddess trait, and Academic Connections under his Scholarly Aristocrat trait.

Assets: The most vital Asset for a sorcerer is Power, or a specific flavor of Power. It's spent to fuel spells, and the more you have, the less likely you will be to take Corruption.

We'll give Araneus Favor of Raknea (Power) 6, and Wits 4. With 0 in Guts, this means that if ever Araneus has to get into physical combat he'll have to duck and weave a lot since he can't just tough out a hit. Macho the Mage, he is not.

Tales: Why did your character become a sorcerer? What are his aims, and

what are his troubles arising from the requirements of his power?

We'll give Araneus the following Tales: Follower of a Forbidden Cult (Raknea's considered an evil goddess so her cult is banned), Devoted to Princess Iriane the Heir in Hiding (this is what makes the character a potential hero despite his dark themes), I Can Fight Evil with Evil (how he justifies his means), Torn Between Raknea's Demands and Humanity (establishes some interesting internal conflict), Considered a Useless Bookworm (good when Araneus wants to be ignored, bad when he wants to convince someone not impressed by bookworms).

Outfit: What does your character carry?

We'll give Araneus the following items: enchanted dagger (the Widow's Bite), a court sword as befits his aristocratic background, and courtly attire.

Formulating Spells

Spells are classed as Minor, Major, and Great based on their intended effects. A spell's class determines how much Power must be spent to even attempt it and the level of possible consequences if the casting goes wrong.

If the caster's personal Power is deficient to cover the cost, he can source more by casting with the aid of other sorcerers or acolytes who can each donate some Power, or by taking the difference between spent Power and the Power requirement in Corruption.

For example, if you only spent 3 Power for a spell that required 5 Power, you gain 5 - 3 = 2 Corruption.

Minor Spells

Minor spells have limited, subtle, low level effects that would easily be possible to achieve even with non-magical means. For example, magically augmenting your voice in such a way as to be much more convincing is an effect that can also be achieved by naturally great persuasiveness or eloquence. Minor spells don't cost any Power to work at all.

For example, Araneus can use his Weave Webs of Lies and Deceit to persuade a guard to let him into a place he should be barred from.

Major Spells

Major spells can have flashy effects that are definitely paranormal, but can only affect a limited number of people, creatures, objects or a small space. Major spells require the expenditure of 1-3 or more Power points just to allow casting. If the spell summons, creates or modifies a creature or force, its Threat is equal to 3x the Power cost.

40

For example, Araneus can use his Command Spiders forte to summon a giant spider to fight for him. The GM asks the player how a big a spider he wants, and when the player says big as an elephant, the GM asks for a price of 3 Power just to try it. If the spell is successful, Araneus summons a giant spider with Threat 9 (3 x 3). Had he spent 5 Power, he could have summoned a Threat 15 giant spider. Eek.

Great Spells

Great spells wreak great changes on a wide scale, affecting entire areas or large numbers of people or creatures. Just attempting a Great spell requires the expenditure of 5-10 Power. If the spell summons, creates or modifies a creature or force, its Threat is equal to 3x the Power cost. The price for failure at casting a Great spell should be really dangerous, even life-threatening.

For example, Araneus wants to use his Spit Web and Command Spiders fortes to block an entire mountain pass with unnaturally thick and strong cobwebs guarded by a swarm of big spiders. The GM assesses this as a Great spell, and levies a price of 7 Power for it. Since this is over Araneus' Favor of Raknea 6, he takes 1 Corruption to make up the difference.

If Araneus succeeds, he creates his web-and-spiders barrier with a Threat of 7 x 3 = 21.

Possible Effects

◊   Players will usually have a clear idea of what they want to do, and most will have a pretty extensive library of tropes from literature, comics or movies and TV in their heads. Converting these ideas to game terms however may be a challenge for the GM, so here are some rules and guidelines for judging and implementing spell effects:

◊   A spell that creates, summons or modifies a creature, character or force creates a Game Master Creature (GMC) with Threat = 3x the spell's Power cost and up to three Traits.

◊   A spell can give the target a new Trait, or modify an existing one; e.g. a spell to make oneself Look Like an Old Man. If the new Trait contradicts an existing Trait, it overrides that Trait while the spell lasts, e.g. a spell to make one Weak will override Strong for a while.

◊   A spell can reveal information that would otherwise be hidden from the caster.

◊ A spell that causes direct harm to a target is treated like a weapon attack, with damage = Impact. The GM may want to discourage this in a sword and sorcery game by classing such spells as Major, meaning they cost Power, and by giving less dice unless the player comes up with a really interesting and genre-appropriate way of inflicting harm by magic.

◊ A spell can override the will of a target if successful, e.g. enspell someone to say something they shouldn't.

◊ A spell can impose a Condition or remove a Condition, e.g. a spell to impose the Terrified condition, a spell to neutralize the Poisoned condition.

◊ A spell can create or add to a resource that can be spent to avoid unwanted effects, e.g. a spell that gives magical armor or enhances physical armor; the amount is equal to Power cost of the spell. Thus a spell to give 3 Magical Armor costs 3 Power.

◊ The cost to avoid an unwanted consequence from a spell is equal to the Impact of the roll or the Power cost, whichever is higher. Power can be used to resist any spell effect; Guts can be used to resist or endure spells that cause physical harm or try to subvert the will; Wits can be used to resist spells that try to deceive the mind or senses, or act like a ranged weapon; shields and armor can be used to resist spells that inflict physical harm like a projectile.

This list is by no means exclusive! Feel free to come up with anything that sounds reasonable, and let the GM puzzle out how to deal with it.

Anchoring

Magic effects are ephemeral by default. To make them last, the effect must

be 'anchored' to something. Some possible anchors include:

◊ A physical, symbolic mark, e.g. tattoos, or runes on a blade, an inscribed magic circle

◊ To an object; the magic is bound to the integrity of the object, e.g. a spell of shapechanging into a wolf is bound into a wolfskin cloak, if the cloak is badly torn the magic goes away

◊ To an event in a natural cycle, e.g. "Until the next full moon."

◊ To a contingency that's unlikely to happen, e.g. "Until the sun rises in the west." The GM should factor this in as an increased Power requirement of 1-3 additional points.

An unanchored spell may be maintained by an effort of the caster's will, which means the caster has to concentrate on it, and is at a disadvantage to do anything else while maintaining the spell.

Casting Spells

There are two ways to cast spells: as quick Invocations, which take no more than one Short Round, or as Rituals, which take multiple Long Rounds. Both are based on the Action Roll: say what you want to do and how, and use that plus whatever Traits and Fortes apply to get more dice. The better you narrate and roleplay your casting, the more dice you can get, and the more powerful the spell's effect the less dice the GM will give easily.

Casting by Invocation

When casting with an Invocation, you get one Action Roll and that's it. On a Good or Great roll the spell goes off as desired, on a Bad or Terrible roll something undesirable happens, and on a Mixed result you can either settle for less of an effect or get the full effect for a price, either in Power or Corruption or a troublesome consequence.

To work an Invocation:

◊ Declare what you want to do and how, including the Traits and Fortes you can apply. Try to include actions such as:

◊ Reciting rhymes or chanting; more dice if you can improvise a verse on the spot!

◊ Gestures or other body language, e.g. a whirling dance to summon a whirlwind

◊ The use of special or thematic materials, e.g. "dust from the mummy of King Tepoc-Xia" for a necromantic spell

◊ Make an Action Roll

◊ Resolve the consequences, including Power expenditure and Corruption if necessary

Casting by Ritual

When casting with a Ritual, you get *three* Action Rolls; you only have to succeed once, but if you roll a Mixed or worse result you get two chances to roll again. If you haven't succeeded by the third roll, you have to abide by the result of the third roll, whatever it is. The price of Ritual casting however is that it takes at least three Long Rounds, and requires more elaborate preparation and actions.

To work a Ritual:

◊ Declare what you want to do and how, including the Traits and Fortes you can apply. Be sure to include at least one of the following elements for more dice:

◊ Ceremonial preparations of some sort, e.g. fasting, a special kind of bath, drawing runes all over one's face and body, etc etc

◊ Use of special materials or paraphernalia

◊ A sacrifice of some sort, e.g. a live animal, fruit and flowers for a nature spirit, etc.

◊ A performance of some sort, e.g. chanting, dancing, etc., possibly for hours

◊ Working the ritual in a place of power, e.g. atop a mountain sacred to the deity being invoked

◊ Working at an astrologically determined auspicious time, e.g. during a solar eclipse for a ritual invoking an entity that hates the sun

◊ Make up to three Action Rolls

◊ Resolve the consequences, Power expenditure and Corruption

Something Always Happens

When resolving spellcasting rolls, the GM should observe this narrative principle: Something always happens, even on a failure. It's boring for a spell to just fizz out if the casting fails, and it also fails to live up to the theme of dangerous power. You may work out with the GM beforehand what happens on failing to properly cast a specified spell, or the GM may wing it with you when it happens. Here are some ideas for spell backfire effects:

◊ A summoned or controlled creature becomes hostile or out of control

◊ The intended effect happens to someone other than the intended target

◊ The intended effect is twisted or reversed, e.g. a spell meant to heal causes a deformity instead, a spell to transform into a wolf turns you into a Chihuahua

◊ The intended effect occurs but in excess, e.g. a spell meant to rejuvenate someone turns them into an infant

◊ The intended effect occurs but its intended duration is cut short, e.g. a spell to transform into a wolf wears off while you're in front of witnesses

◊ The intended effect occurs but is irreversible or cannot be undone at the caster's will, e.g. a spell to transform into a wolf leaves you in wolf form and you can't change back for some time

◊ The magic disturbs something you wish you hadn't — the weather, a powerful spirit or local deity, etc etc

◊ The caster experiences a vision or apparition that leaves him or her terrified or mentally imbalanced for a while

◊ The caster immediately acquires a new Corruption effect, or an existing Corruption effect worsens

Feel free to come up with other spell misfire effects as fit your game.

For example, Araneus botches a spell to summon a giant spider with a Terrible roll result. The GM thinks of two interesting effects, and allows the player to choose: either the giant spider appears but is hostile to Araneus, or instead of a giant spider, Araneus suffers a swarm of spiders pouring out of his clothing for several minutes — and they'll bite him if he moves, roll to control himself two or three times.

Corruption

Corruption is a gauge of how much a sorcerer has been warped by the unnatural act of working magic. With every 5 points of Corruption accumulated, a sorcerer must take a new Tale or modify an existing Tale reflecting these changes. Some possible effects of Corruption include:

◊ Unnatural aging

◊ Physical disfiguration according to the sorcerer's theme, or the theme of the spell that caused it

◊ Mental imbalance in the form of delusions, obsessions, phobias, and the like

◊ Unnatural appetites, e.g. for blood, for bugs, etc

◊ Unnatural reactions in animals, e.g. cats always hiss at the sorcerer

◊ Unnatural weaknesses, e.g. the character is burned by the touch of silver

◊ Any other unnatural phenomenon that fits with the character concept or the character's actions

For example, when Araneus reaches 5 Corruption, the player must choose a Corruption effect. The GM suggests something to do with spiders, and the player comes up with Spider-Haunted, defining it as "wherever Araneus goes, he leaves a spider infestation." The GM and other players find this entertainingly weird, and it's approved. When Araneus reaches 10 Corruption, he must choose another effect, or modify the existing one to make it worse.

SAMPLE PSIONICS SYSTEM

The following system is used for playing out the use of mental powers, aka psionics or psi, in the Swords of Maruzar setting. In this setting most psi powers known are based on telepathy, the ability to receive and transmit thought-waves from other minds. Other abilities were rumored to have existed in the past but the bloodlines that carried them are extinct.

Psionic Characters

Psionic ability is considered an inborn talent, so only those characters who start the game with a psionic Trait can have them. Specific psionic disciplines are taken as Fortes. Trained psionic characters usually come from one of three origins:

Mentalists are characters whose telepathy was trained by the mind- and science-priests in the Primogen Temples, which are the traditional guardians of psi studies. Mentalists belong to a semi-monastic order, being bound to follow its code and obey instructions from the temple. Those who wish to may join the priesthood, and many do. The priesthood is dedicated to the recovery, preservation and regulation of scientific knowledge.

The priests only teach Disciplines considered benign. However, it's suspected that they secretly train an elite few to be secret psionic enforcers and given them one or more of the forbidden disciplines to use as weapons.

Mystics are characters whose telepathy was trained in tribal traditions by other Mystics. Like the Primogen Temples, Mystics teach only disciplines considered benign, and in fact have stricter rules on what Disciplines are

allowable.

Rogue Telepaths are characters who started training as Mentalists or Mystics, but absconded before their training was complete, or discovered their talents on their own and never joined a training institution. The Primogenist priests try to track down any Rogue Telepaths they find and bring them to the temples for training and induction into the order; it's said those who do not submit simply disappear.

Rogue Telepaths often live in secret, some using their abilities for personal gain or in ways their teachers would have censured — they may be merchants who always gets good deals, gamblers who always win, uncatchable thieves, etc etc. Some experiment with forbidden Disciplines.

Psionic Disciplines

Psionic Disciplines are the specific applications of psi ability, and are taken as Fortes. They are divided into Benign and Forbidden Disciplines. The Benign Disciplines are:

Mind Sense: The ability to detect, locate and identify other minds.

Mind Speak: The ability to send and receive telepathic messages.

Mind Read: The ability to sense and understand another's thoughts and intentions.

Mind Shield: The ability to block unwanted mental intrusion, including psionic attacks.

Mind Cloud: The ability to befuddle the senses or cognitive abilities of another.

Mind Bend: The ability to telepathically compel another to do as you command. Each command is a separate use of the Discipline. This is taught to some trusted students in the temples, but is considered forbidden by Mystics of the Irajin tribes.

Truth Read: The ability to telepathically determine if another is speaking or thinking the truth, as the subject knows it.

Pranic Control: The ability to channel psi power to augment the body's performance. With Pranic Control, a psion can spend Power to boost her physical actions such as running, jumping, fighting, etc etc.

The universally Forbidden Disciplines are:

Mind Thrust: The ability to cause severe brain damage by telepathically sending a 'lance' of pain into another's mind.

Mind Scream: The ability to cause fear and potentially brain damage by

telepathically broadcasting a 'scream' of fear or anger.

Mind Break: The ability to warp or shatter another's mind, leaving the subject a drooling, memory-less idiot.

Puppet Master: The advanced form of Mind Bend, this is the ability to completely control another while concentrating on the subject.

Other Psionic Talents

Once in a rare while, individuals are born with psionic Talents other than telepathy. There are few if any available teachers to help these individuals develop their Talents, so they're on their own. Some Talents are valued, and some are so feared that most who're born with them are slain or exiled as soon as the Talent is discovered.

Talents are taken as Traits. Some of these Talents include:

Healer: The ability to enhance and accelerate the body's natural healing functions, either in oneself or in another. Requires the subject to have a functional mind; Healing will not work on a subject that's already brain-dead.

Beastfriend: The ability to telepathically communicate and bond with a certain kind of animal. Beastfriends usually impress on one kind of animal in childhood, and their affinity remains with that kind of animal for life. Choose what animal you have affinity with:

◊ Lizardhawks: genetically engineered reptavian falcons

◊ Gannors: reptavian mounts

◊ Maulheads: hulking draft and war beasts

◊ Gorgoronts: hulking, four-armed dragon-apes used as work and war beasts

◊ Gekkus: clever, agile lizard-monkeys with a penchant for thievery

These are the creatures a Maruzarian child is likely to be exposed to long and often enough to bond with. It's also appropriate to buy one of the creatures as a companion while creating the character.

Prescient: The ability to have visions of the future. The visions are usually chaotic and fragmentary, giving only a vague, general picture of what is possible. For example, a Prescient may sense danger approaching, but only has a vague idea what it is or where or when it will strike. On successful rolls, the Prescient can give her allies advantage with her foreknowledge.

Psychometric: The ability to psychically 'read' an object and gain impressions of the minds that have interacted with that object. For

example, using this ability on a murder weapon allows the Psychometrist to have a glimpse of either the murderer or the scene of the crime at the time it happened.*Mind Leech:* The ability to vampirically draw energy from another's mind, leeching away the subject's Power, Guts, Wits or Threat. The leeched resources become temporary Power for the Mind Leech.

This 'feeding' may occur involuntarily during the Mind Leech's childhood, and for this reason Mind Leeches are often slain as soon as their Talent is discovered. Any living Mind Leeches are those who learned to control their power and conceal it early in life.

Creating a Psionic Character

Create your mentalist by following the same steps as given in the Character Creation chapter, collaborating with the GM wherever necessary. Here are some guides for fleshing out each component of the character along with an example:

Concept: Where is the character from? Is the character a trained telepath, the possessor of a rare talent, or both? What does the character use her psionic powers for?

For example, we'll go through the creation of Ferala, a Vyari courtesan and spy with hidden telepathic abilities.

Traits: Take your desired psionic career or talents as Traits. Remember that taking these Traits with Style allows an additional Forte.

Ferala's Heritage is Vyari, a genetically engineered species created to be perfect concubines and courtesans for the decadent lords of Maruzar. They're not supposed to have any psi potential, but Ferala does, a genetic freak, and so far she's been able to keep the ability hidden. She has the Trait: Secret Rogue Telepath. She also has Wily Courtesan-Turned-Spy, she uses her beauty, charm and training in the social arts to gain information.

Because her former master enjoyed her company so much, Ferala was often taken on his hunting trips and taught hunting and archery. Out of this, Ferala gets the Trait: Amateur Huntress. To support these, we also give her Dancer's Grace and Highly Intelligent.

Fortes: Take specific Disciplines or specific uses of your powers as Fortes.

Ferala has the following Fortes: Under her Courtesan/Spy trait she has Subtly Manipulative Conversation, Versatile Performer, and Read Between the Lines. Under her Secret Rogue Telepath, she has Mind Read. And under Amateur Huntress, she has A Knack for Archery.

Assets: Be sure to place some points in Power, as this is what you'll spend

to avoid unwanted psychic effects and to power more ambitious uses of your powers.

Ferala has Guts 2, Wits 6, and Power 2.

Tales: What troubles did your powers come with, if any? What are your character ties and goals, who are your character's loved ones or enemies?

Ferala has the following Tales: My Power Must Remain Secret, I Want to Live Free, Friend of Djana Zaor, and, when she escapes, Hunted by Agents of Lemius Ras and the Spaceclans

Outfit: What clothes, gear and weapons does your character have?

Normally Ferala's sole outfit is her fine robes and jewelry, but when she escapes she sensibly acquires a nomad's robe and headcloth, a nomad longknife, and a bow and arrows.

Using Psionic Powers

Psionic power use is usually resolved with an Action Roll when the character is actively employing the power. To actively use a power:

◊ Declare what you want to do and how, and name the Traits and Fortes your're applying

◊ Make an Action Roll

◊ Resolve the consequences and Power expenditure

The GM may require you to spend 1 or more Power in order to surmount some difficulty like range, the number of subjects you want to affect, getting through a barrier, and so on. The price must be paid whether the roll is successful or not.

For example, you want to use Mind Cloud to sneak past a roomful of guards. The GM decides you need to spend 2 Power for it. The GM grants you 2 Action Dice, and you roll a Good 5 result. You may narrate how you made all the guards believe they neither see nor hear anything untoward as you walk right past their open door. Had you rolled a Mixed result, the GM may have caused one guard to say "Hey, did you hear that?" as you go past, and on a Bad or Terrible result, the guards see you.

If a psion has spent Power, she can recover it simply through a night's rest or a few hours of meditation.

Contact

The use of telepathic powers requires contact with the target's mind. This can be made more difficult by physical range, the presence of a mental shield or a barrier such as thick metal or thick stone, interference from

solar radiation or the presence of certain crystals, and by the nature of certain alien minds. Creatures with the Alien Mind trait are almost impossible to affect by telepathy.

Physical contact creates a stronger connection, which can be claimed as advantage when using telepathic powers. Strong biological and emotional bonds such as to family, close friends and the like also make telepathic contact easier.

Passive Use of Psi

Some powers like Mind Sense, Mind Read, Truth Read and Prescience may be considered to have a passive mode, and can be used by the GM as a means to feed your character information. The GM may just give you the info as if you were automatically successful, or test if you were able to correctly interpret your psionic impressions by asking for a roll. The GM cannot ask you to spend Power for a passive test of psi.

THE GAME MASTER'S ROLE

The Vivid System is designed to be used with one player taking on the role of Game Master (GM). A GM wears multiple hats throughout the game: Host, Narrator, World Mind, Referee, and in most cases, Creator of game settings (worlds), challenges and adventures.

GM as Creator

As a the Game Master, you may create game settings and adventures yourself, or share this role with the players. For every adventure, you will also need to create or choose characters, creatures and other challenges for the player characters.


Fill your settings with interesting conflicts, problems and risky opportunities for the players' characters to sink their teeth into. The player characters are heroes, so give them threats only they can deal with. Monsters no one else even dares to face, cunning plots only the heroes are in position to stop, a community whose precarious survival depends on the heroes' protection, things like these make great adventure hooks that will leave your players feeling their characters are doing something special.

When you create adventures, you create the *beginning* of a story, along with its characters and challenges for the players' characters. However, you do not create the ending — that is something you leave to be revealed through play. Let the players surprise you!

GM as Host

As Host, you are usually the lead in organizing when and where to play. You're also the social keystone of the group; it's your job to make every player feel welcome and comfortable, which includes stopping any offensive speech or behavior so the game can remain fun for everyone.
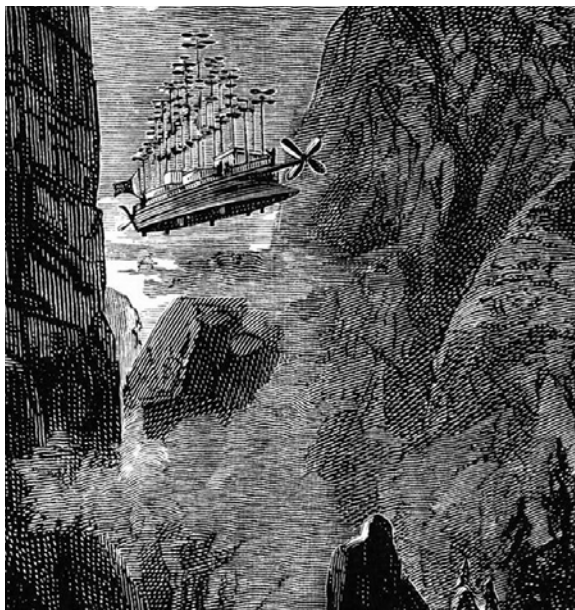
GM as Narrator

As Narrator, you are your players' camera into the world and events of the game. Describe locations, characters and events as clearly and entertainingly as you can. Sometimes a player won't understand you as clearly as you thought, so be patient — be ready to explain in alternative ways, and always be receptive to questions.

When you need to, use drawings or a map to help the players visualize your scenes. Have visual aids handy — nowadays it's so easy to load images into your tablet or smartphone and just call it up when needed.

You can spice up your narration by learning how to talk in different patterns and voices for different characters. How would rough, half-drunk pirate talk? How would a fussy old professor who's used to dealing only in theories talk?

GM as World Mind

As the World Mind, you run the game setting itself similar to the way the players each play a character. As the player characters act, you narrate how the world responds to them according to the setting's logic. By doing this you make your game world feel alive, and thus more real and immersive for the players.

What happens when the PCs go to Perilous Location X? What happens if the PCs inadvertently insult a tribal king? What happens when the PCs successfully perform a ritual to speak with the ancestor spirits? As the World Mind, you're constantly improvising your world's responses to these and describing them. The more consistently responsive your world is to your players' inputs, the more interested they will be in the game and the more creatively they will play.

In order to do this, you have to have a feel for your game's setting. Run games in settings that you love and have consumed a lot of media inspirations for. Take ideas for locations, characters and creatures from movies you enjoyed. When running an adventure in a new setting, consume inspiration for that setting in whatever form you can get your hands on — movies and comic books are great for being so visual, but also go to books for completeness, and of course there's the Internet.

If you suddenly need a setting detail that was never described in the setting book or reference you're using, just make it up. Then take note of it so you can use it again if needed and stay consistent. Sometimes players will ask or suggest things you didn't expect; often these suggestions are good and can be worked into the game for the better, sometimes they're not right for

the genre or the setting you're playing in.

GM as Referee

As Referee, you are in charge of applying the game's rules to determine the course of the game. You will decide how important actions are and the pace at which you want to resolve them, which in turn helps decide which of the resolution mechanics you will use.

Remember that you can use the Benchmarking and Pushing mechanics when you believe a roll is unnecessary. Call for Action Rolls only when the action is risky enough, and the consequences of both failure and success interesting enough, to justify using dice. When you want to introduce tension and unpredictable twists, call for Action Rolls. And when you want to zoom in and play out an action scene in cinematic detail, use the Dramatic Struggle mechanics.
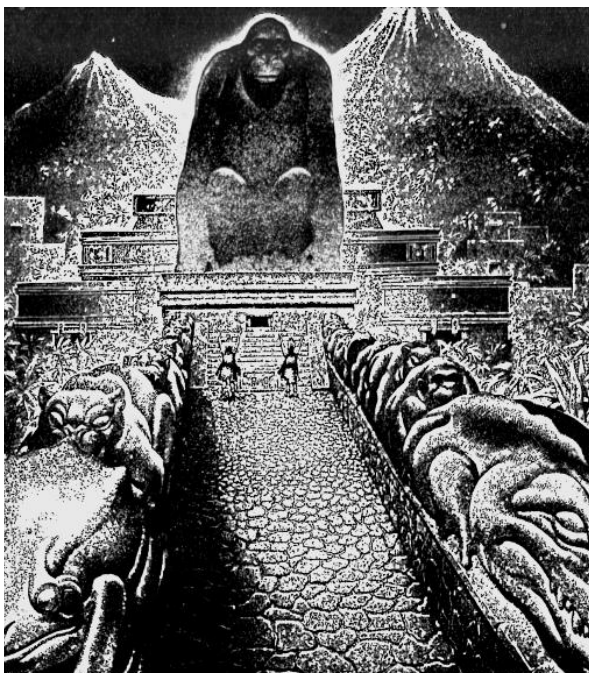
Game Prep

The Vivid System is made for busy players and GMs; easy to learn, plays fast so you can get a lot of adventure done in the time you have, and minimal prep. That said, a GM who prepares to improvise will improvise a lot better, so here are some prep tips:

◊ Have a strong, urgent premise for the adventure. The very nature of your premise should make the player characters want to act, act fast, and keep going. You can do this by positing an unbearable consequence if the adventure problem is not solved in time.

◊ Plan a strong starting scene for the game — every session if you can. If you can get the players stoked with that scene, that momentum can drive the rest of the game. Go watch any of the Indiana Jones or James Bond films again. Take note of the very first scene. Note how it introduces the hero, an exotic and exciting location, an immediate threat, and the scene's end usually points to

the villain or the larger story problem. Use that as your template!

◊ Remember that you only need to plan to start things; the players will choose the way to go from there. Rather than prepare a whole slew of locations, characters and creatures that may never be encountered, build a good picture of your game world in your head so you can readily come up with anything needed when the players trigger it. The only things you should prepare in detail are the locations, characters and creatures that are key to the story you have in mind, such as the main villain.

◊ Visual Research: I'm finding Pinterest a great tool for world and game creation. I can assemble a board of inspiring pictures from all sorts of sources, and share that with the players or have it on my tablet when we play, so when I need a visual aid I can just open the app.

◊ Have a short list of character names appropriate to your setting, so when a PC tries to talk to some random person you've got a name ready. Try saying the names out loud to see if they have the feel you want. Let action-oriented characters have short, punchy names, and let sophisticated, pretentious or pedantic characters have the long exotic names.

◊ If you're using a real-world country or culture as a setting, learn a few words and phrases of their language and pepper your narrative with them. For example, maybe in a far-future Tokyo the robot waiters still yell "Irrashaimase!" whenever a customer comes in.

◊ Have a good picture in your mind what an environment that your player characters will travel through is like. How does it look? Is it open or choked with obstacles such as rocks or large trees? How would it feel to walk or ride or sail through that environment? What problems might a traveler run into? If there are creatures there that are a danger to travelers, what could set off a hostile encounter?

◊ Keep a notebook of old, unused ideas that you can refit and reuse. Also have some index cards, notebook or memo pad and pen handy when you play, so you or the players can write down stuff you want to remember for later at any point. Once a game is underway, you'll often find it's raining creative ideas you can use later. For example, in a recent game a player decided on the spur of the moment that his character was a gold digger looking for a rich guy to marry. Aha! That can make a good plot or subplot hook for another session!

◊ If you're planning a full campaign, hold a Session Zero in which you

can tell players about the game, have them create characters with your guidance, and then plan using the ideas the players give you.

Dials and Settings

Vivid can easily be customized to your preferred genre and tone by adjusting some parameters, such as how many Asset points the players start with. Here are some suggested tweaks:

◊ Come up with a list of genre- or world-specific Traits and possibly Assets for your players to take up, or give examples and guidelines.

◊ Alter the way Assets can be refreshed. You may require longer or shorter rests, or specify exactly what actions can replenish special Assets like Power, and at what rate.

◊ Create new Assets, with novel ways of increasing them. For example, in one mythical setting you may have a Spiritual Power Asset that only grows when the PC consumes the heart or liver of a spiritually powerful creature.

◊ For a grittier tone, you may lower the starting Asset points say from 10 to 8 or lower, and be stricter with your allocations of Action Dice.

◊ For a more gonzo style of game, you may increase the starting Asset points say from 10 to 12 or 15, and let players earn up to 5 or even 6 Action Dice. You may also allow the use of additional Asset types such as Destiny or Fury (see the Character Development and Advanced Options chapter).

◊ For a wacky style of game, you may consider all actions to be Gambits, with complications occurring on any roll of 1s on the Action Dice. If you want it even crazier, complications can happen on a 1 or 2. These settings make complications much more likely. Just be ready to come up with more complications on the fly.

◊ To make powerful weapons, gear or powers inherently more risky to use, you can designate them as Gambits by default. For example, for your sword and sorcery setting you declare that summoning any kind of otherworldly being is automatically considered a Gambit. In the Swords of Maruzar setting, using an ancient energy weapon is automatically a Gambit.

The Adventure

The core experience of a role playing game is the adventure: an interactive story whose course is determined by how the players navigate and solve a series of challenges, and ends when the players either achieve the objective or their characters can no longer continue. An adventure may be played out in a single session or more than one, and may be a stand-alone, like a short story, or just an episode in a series. You can create quick, simple adventures using the following template:

Act 1: Start With a Bang!

Get your players all fired up by placing their characters in some immediate peril. This could be combat, a chase, a scramble to survive a shipwreck, whatever as long as it's an emergency. End by revealing the core problem or goal of the adventure.

For example, your first act is about the player characters trying to bring a stricken tramp steamer close enough to an uncharted island so they can swim or raft to safety when it inevitably sinks. The PCs must choose and obtain, under time pressure, the things they will use to survive. At the end of the scene, you reveal that this island is inhabited by dinosaurs! Can the PCs survive long enough to find a way off the island?

Act 2: Exploration, Interaction, Raising Tension

You've given the players a story problem, now let them work on it through their characters' choices and actions. The PCs can spend this act exploring the setting and interacting with each other and with NPCs in order to obtain information and the things needed to solve the story problem. Meantime, you bring up hints and signs, then actual encounters, that raise the stakes and drive up the game's tension.

For example, the PCs surviving on your Dinosaur Island may want to look for a safe place to hide from the dinosaurs, argue with each other over proposed solutions for getting off the island, and when they finally settle on building a raft with sails, obtaining the materials and building the raft. As they gather the timber and such, they may encounter dinosaurs, and your next surprise: One kind of dino has evolved into organized, tool-using intelligence, and they have detected the PCs and are hunting for them. They need to get off the island, pronto!

Act 3: Climactic Event

The PCs have found or created the key to solving the story problem, but there is one last, huge obstacle in their way. It could be a villain, a monster, a natural disaster or other catastrophic event, whatever it is it must lead to a big bam boom action scene. If the PCs are successful, the story problem is solved at the end of this act.

For example, the climactic event of Escape From Dinosaur Island is the PCs' attempt to launch their raft. This bestirs either the dinosaur-men or a monster you have in reserve, perhaps a giant Kronosaurus, to attack. Can the PCs survive long enough to get away?

Act 4: Wrapping Up

This is where you reward the players for success, or if they failed, show them the consequences and perhaps offer another chance in the form of a second adventure. Secrets get revealed, romances come to fruition, life returns to normal — you're draining away all the tension built up over the past acts to give the players the relief and satisfaction of success. If, on the other hand the player characters failed, you can present a cliffhanger to hook the players into the next adventure.

For example, if the PCs succeeded in the climactic encounter with the dinosaur-men or the Kronosaurus, your last scene could be the tired PCs, glad just to be alive, spotting a steamer in the distance and realizing it's spotted them and is coming to help.

Or, if they failed, cliffhanger: they've been taken prisoner by the dino-men, kept in a dark cave, then brought out into the blazing sun only to discover they're in an arena, outfitted with stone and bone weapons, and facing a maddened Triceratops to the cheers and jeers of the dinosaur-man crowd! Stay tuned for Escape From Dinosaur Island II!

To Roll or Not to Roll

Remember that you don't need to roll for every player action. The Vivid System has two diceless methods for resolving actions that you can use when a roll is unnecessary, and many actions can be simply too minor and easy or too difficult for the characters, making success or failure a certainty. You can use the following guideline for choosing how to resolve an action:

◊   The action is so easy success is a certainty, or the action is simply impossible for the character. Automatic success/failure.

◊   The action can be done by someone qualified by possession of a specified Trait or something similar. This is the basis of the Benchmarking mechanic. Tests of knowledge can also be handled in this manner. If a character has a Trait giving them knowledge in a certain field, it usually helps the flow of your game to simply say they know the facts needed or at least have a clue to work onThe action can be done simply by spending effort on it. This is the basis of the Pushing mechanic. Simply specify what Asset the player must spend, and on spending the cost the action is accomplished.

◊   If failing a non-conflict action would dead-end the game, consider resolving the action by Benchmarking or Pushing, or let the PCs get help. For example, if the characters need to correctly read a treasure map to move the plot forward, you can resolve it in several ways. You can ask if any PC has the Navigator Trait or something similar; if they do, they succeed. Or you can declare that spending X Wits allows a PC to solve the puzzle. Or you can declare that if no PC can solve the puzzle themselves, they can try finding someone who can do it for them, which in turn could initiate a role playing challenge.

◊   You are testing for a circumstance that is not influenced by character ability — things like "Is the door locked or not?" or "Will this rickety bridge collapse beneath me or not when I cross?" This is when you use the Oracle Roll mechanic.

Only if an action or situation is risky, dramatic, and both success and failure lead to interesting consequences will you need to call for an Action Roll.

Trust your players to get their characters into trouble often enough that you'll need quite a few Action Rolls every session.

Allocating Dice

One of your most important functions as Referee is in allocating Action and Adversity Dice. Unlike other dice-pool based systems where players have a fixed number of dice to roll, the Vivid System is based on making the players *earn* their dice. This transfers the players' attention from optimizing a character's numbers to creatively working on how their character does things, and elicits more entertaining input from them. As the GM, it's up to you to make your players feel they are getting a fair amount of dice for the input they give.

The Action Roll mechanic has a baked-in reward system for creative thinking — the better a player can apply their character's Traits and come up with sensible, creative methods for taking an action, the more dice you should reward them with. Reward your players for coming up with good plans, creative approaches, both cautious and daring, and for playing to the genre, for example in a high-action space opera it's totally awesome to fly through an asteroid field at high speed.

If you're giving your players a really low amount of Action Dice, tell them why, and try to work in clues as to how they can improve their situation. For example, if they're being creamed by a dragon, hint at finding ways to impede the dragon's flying and fire breathing abilities.

To help you judge how many Action Dice to give, here's a table of success (Good or Great roll) chances by proportion of Action Dice to Adversity Dice:

1:3	21%	3:1	79%
1:2	35%	4:1	91%
1:1	41%	5:1	96%
2:1	65%		

Beyond 5 dice, what you're increasing significantly is the chance of getting a Great result (Action Dice have multiple sixes) and decreasing even further the chance of a Terrible result (Action Dice are all ones). Because the rolls are made against another die roll, success and failure chances will never reach 0% or 100%.

Also pay attention to what your players want to do and how, for the chance that you might want to resolve it as a Gambit. Remember that Gambits allow a player character to get more Action Dice, or do something they otherwise couldn't, at the price of triggering a complication should any

Action Die come up a 1 (regardless of failure or success). If you're slow at improvising, try to agree with the player beforehand on what form the complication for their Gambit could take.

Game Master Challenges

A Game Master Challenge (GMC) is any character, creature, object or force that you use to present a trial to the player characters. Even entire groups of characters or creatures can be handled as a single GMC. To free the GM to think and respond quickly with the pace of this cinematic system, the rules for handling these are simplified and minimal.

Creating a new GMC is very easy and can be done on the fly. You can prepare your major GMCs and any meant for scenes that you're sure will happen in the game ahead of time, and whip up new minor ones on the spot where needed. To create a GMC:

◊ Concept and Purpose: what is it, and why should the players have to deal with it?

◊ Assign a Threat of 0 to 10 or higher, or a Duration of 1 or more rounds

◊ Assign one or more Traits; three or less for manageability, more for special GMCs

For example, here's a monster from the world of Maruzar: Cave Kraken 14, Cunning Ambusher, Camouflaged, Multiple Tentacles, Infrared Vision, Echolocation.

GMC Threat

Threat is a catchall resource for the GMC's resistance to the player characters' efforts against it. For creatures and characters this incorporates size, toughness, natural armor and aggressiveness or morale, also numbers if the GMC is made up of multiple members. For natural obstacles or forces it can represent things such as distance or height, the roughness of the terrain, the force of wind or current, and so on. You spend Threat to buy off or alter consequences when a player wins a roll vs the GMC.

0-5	Low	a few scruffy bandits
6-10	Medium	skilled and motivated henchmen
11-15	High	an elite, highly skilled opponent
16-20	Very High	a really big monster

GMC Traits

GMC Traits are used to claim disadvantage for the player characters opposing the GMC, that is to justify giving less Action Dice. However, they're also clues for the players on how to reduce the odds against them. For example, the Cave Kraken of Maruzar has the Trait: Multiple Tentacles. It uses this to put its victims at a disadvantage. However by cutting off some of these tentacles this ability to give disadvantage is reduced, and the players can get more dice for their subsequent actions against it.

GMC Duration

Any noncombat challenge that you want to play out as a protracted struggle, but shouldn't have a Threat the PCs can reduce, can be given a Duration. This is the number of times the players must roll to avoid an unwanted effect.

For example, you want to challenge the PCs, who're flying an airship, with a dust storm. You determine the storm to be Duration 3. This means the players, specially the one whose character is piloting the airship, must make three rolls.

GMC Minions

Minion ratings are a special form of resource indicating possession of a band of followers. An individual Minion has Threat 0, but in groups they can have more. The Minion rating is an abstract of the group's numbers and quality.

Minions can be used in four ways:

◊ Claim advantage/disadvantage when your Minions outflank an enemy.

◊ Spend Minion Threat to buy off or alter consequences: this represents your Minions taking casualties or stress as they fight to cover their leader. My group likes to call this 'Summon Stunt Double!'

◊ Spend Minion Threat for bonus dice: this represents your Minions taking casualties as they support their leader's attack.

◊ Detach a Mob to act independently: this represents tasking a group of Minions with a separate action, such as staying behind to cover your retreat. Put some of your Threat points in the mob.

You can stat up entire groups of foes that comprise many cannon-fodder type minions as a single entry. For example, a band of nomad raiders led by the chieftain Karnos Mar: Nomad Chieftain 10, Nomad Raiders 20,

Mounted on Fast Sand Lizards, Desert-Wise.

Character Growth

At the conclusion of an adventure, every player character receives a Growth Opportunity. You may use this Growth Opportunity for any one of the options below:

◊ Acquire a new Trait

◊ Alter an existing Trait

◊ Acquire a new Forte under an existing Trait

◊ Add +1 to any one Asset

◊ Resolve a Tale by removing it, e.g. the character pays off a debt or clears his name

◊ Resolve a Tale by altering it, e.g. the character who was In Love with Ferala is now Married to Ferala

For example, in an Arthurian fantasy game a Growth Opportunity may allow your character, a Spunky Squire, to change into a Fledgling Knight. The Spunky Squire Trait was altered to reflect the character's new status and roles.

Pace of Growth

The GM may elect for a slower or faster growth track. Doing so is a simple matter of requiring the completion of two or more adventures before offering a Growth Opportunity, or giving more than one Growth Opportunity between adventures. The former is appropriate for adventures that happen within just a short time of each other, while the latter is appropriate for games where the characters may go on an adventure only once or twice in a year. For a faster pace of growth, the GM may allow for two Growth Opportunities at the end of an adventure.

Growth Caps

The GM may cap the increase of Assets like Guts, Wits and Power. A suggested limit is 7 + Heritage bonuses, with one and only one Asset allowed to reach 10 + Heritage bonuses.

Mementos

One way to make the players feel good and remember the game is to give them memento-type awards, sometimes in mid-adventure. Conversely, the characters can also be given Tales that the players will want to get rid of, perhaps to reinforce a previously agreed-upon genre convention or to play

out a fall-and-redemption story arc. These mementos can be in the form of:

◊ New Tales representing Reputations the characters have earned, good or bad

◊ New Tales representing new relationships, e.g. the heroes won an ally

◊ Resolving a Tale, e.g. a hero marries his romantic interest

◊ A new Trait from acquiring a new special skill or special item

◊ A purely narrative reward that affirms the character concept in some way, e.g. the character has a vision of his patron deity after undergoing a hard trial, or the character receives a commendation from his patron

Memento awards are specially appropriate to reward excellent and proactive role playing, and to celebrate character exploits. For example, a player of mine still remembers, nearly twenty years after, the moment his character learned he was going to have a son.

Option: Wealth

When acquiring wealth is a focus of the game, feel free to include Wealth as an extra Asset. It's up to you if you also want to increase the default budget of Asset dice. What Wealth represents exactly in your game depends on you: it could simply be cash, or cattle, or property and savings.

As a rule of thumb, consider Wealth 0 to be just barely enough to live a typical peasant's lifestyle, while Wealth 10 and up is royal.

When the heroes return to homebase with plenty of treasure, allow them to increase Wealth by a set amount. You can also give them on-the-spot Wealth increases to celebrate the acquisition of a particularly rich treasure.

For a slower Wealth growth, you can add Wealth by 'pips.' The cost of a new Wealth level is pips equal to the current Wealth. For example, at Wealth 3 it takes 3 pips of new Wealth to attain Wealth 4. You can express the pips with a decimal point, for example Wealth 3.2 means the character needs only one pip more to attain Wealth 4.

Characters can spend Wealth to acquire special items or services, or to otherwise help them get their way in social actions, say through making expensive gifts. Characters who squander away all the Wealth they earn after an adventure may also get some kind of memento reward for it.

Option: Destiny

In some genres, it may be appropriate for the player characters to start with or have the opportunity to gain Destiny, or a combination of both. Destiny is a special Asset that can be spent in lieu of Luck, or even replace Luck entirely.

Unlike Luck, however, Destiny has a definite purpose: to help the character achieve a specific goal. Destiny can only be spent on actions and situations where the character is trying to advance their goal, or when survival is at stake. In play, Destiny can only be earned through heroic deeds and trials relating to the character's fated purpose, and through forging bonds with other characters or forces that relate to the fated purpose. Pace the awards of Destiny so the characters have a lot to unload on the climactic adventure.

For example, your character has Destiny: Lead the Oron Tribe to Freedom. You can gain Destiny dice whenever you try to advance that cause at significant risk and effort, and by winning allies for the Orons. You can spend that Destiny to make sure your character stays alive, and to aid in your efforts to free the Orons, for example in a quest for a magical treasure that will confirm your character as the new chief. You cannot however spend that Destiny for anything else, for example you cannot use it in lieu of Luck to avoid losing a roll at gambling.

Option: Doom

Doom is a reverse-type Asset. It starts at zero, and anytime you want to use it you just add however many dice you want. However when Doom reaches a preset number, something really bad happens to either the character or the character's world. Negotiate what this consequence is with the GM.

Option: Fury

In some genres, characters don't get weaker as they take hits in battle, they get stronger. You can model this trope with Fury. Whenever the character gets a Bad or Mixed result in combat, he gets 1 Fury Die. Fury Dice can be spent to add bonus Action dice or as resources for soaking damage. Fury Dice only last for the scene in which they were earned. Once combat is over, any unspent Fury Dice are simply lost.

Option: Companions

Players may ask for their characters to have a special pet, bodyguard, or the like. Sorcerer characters may be conceived as having a familiar. Knights can have squires. These can be integrated into the game as Companions. Companions are created as follows:

◊ Conceptualize the Companion and discuss with the GM

◊ Take the Companion as a Trait

◊ Assign Asset points and multipy by 3 to get your Companion's Threat

◊ Give your Companion up to 3 Traits

For example, Marc's character Habagat has a sea-eagle companion named Hagibis. Marc uses one of his five Trait slots for Hagibis, and one Asset point to give Habagat 3 Strength. Marc then takes the following Traits for his eagle: Champion Flyer, Understands My Speech (but only mine), and Vigilant Sentinel.

Option: Player Character Minions

In some settings, player characters may command sizable retinues of followers. These are treated as Minions, and treated as a special Asset. If the players are allowed to buy Minions, the Wealth Asset must also be in play. The GM may wish to increase the Asset dice points to allow players to purchase Minions.

You can buy Minions with Asset points on a 1:1 basis like any other Asset. Minions are supported by Wealth, so Minions should never exceed Wealth for long. A character whose Minions exceed his Wealth at the end of a year of game time may lose Minions as the dissatisfied ones desert.

Rules for using Minions are found in Game Master Challenges, above.

SAMPLE ADVENTURE: MESSAGE TO MANDATOR

Message to Mandator is a one-shot adventure meant to introduce the Vivid System and the upcoming game Swords of Maruzar. In this adventure, the characters must get word of a sinister plot to the Jerdayin, or ruling princess, of the city of Mandator. Along the way they'll have to fight off an attack of giant alien insects, recover the vital parts of their airskiff to repair it while surviving the perils of the alien desert, then elude or fight off a vicious sky pirate who's been hired to stop them.

What is Swords of Maruzar?

Swords of Maruzar is a swashbuckling and pulpy roleplaying game of adventure on the alien planet Maruzar. Maruzar was once the throneworld of an interplanetary empire, but is now in the grip of a dark age after being devastated in an interplanetary war that culminated in the destruction of its closest moon. A large fragment of the moon fell onto the planet, and out of the rift it plowed in the crust came a terrible infestation of alien life: the Swarm. Maruzar is now divided between many warring kingdoms and barbaric tribes, while its fragile civilization is menaced by the yearly irruptions of the Swarm on one hand and the greed of the parasitic Spaceclans on the other.

Players and Player Characters

This adventure is made for a group of 2 to 6 players. All the player characters are pre-generated for convenience and to show players the possibilities of the setting. Just print out the character sheets and let the players choose one character each. You may allow the players to make minor modifications of

their characters if you like and you have time.

The character Ferala should be in the game, whether a player picks her or not; if no player chooses to play Ferala, run her as an NPC

Background

The adventure is set in the desert between several of the warring Inland Kingdoms, and is part of a long-running struggle that could eventually shake all of Maruzar. Ferala, a Vyari concubine, overheard Lemius Ras and a Spaceclan envoy plotting treachery against Miria am-Amaris, Jerdayin of Mandator. When she reported this to her secret master, Djana Zaor, Djana tasked Ferala to take a message of warning to Miria in return for what she wants most — her freedom.

The timeline below shows the origins of the conflict and the events leading up to the opening bang of this adventure:

> **4 Years Ago:** Lemius Ras, the ambitious Jerdun of Sarissa, forces Adon Zaor, Jerdun of Dor Amaris, to give him his daughter Djana Zaor in marriage. Lemius Ras then sends assassins after Adon and his only son Aman Zaor, Djana's twin brother. Adon Zaor is killed, but Aman Zaor survives and becomes the new Jerdun.

> **3 Years Ago:** Aman Zaor makes war against Sarissa but is badly defeated. The city of Dor Amaris is further impoverished and its forces greatly weakened. In the same year Gordius Ras, brother of Lemius Ras, acquires a Vyari concubine with a unique and secret gift. This concubine is Ferala, who contrary to all expectation is a telepath. Vyari are supposed to be genetically incapable of becoming telepaths, but Ferala is. Ferala successfully conceals her telepathic ability from everyone in court.

2 Years Ago: The Swarm attacks Dor Amaris and comes close to overwhelming its weakened defenses. Lemius Ras brings a relief force just in time to save the city, transported in Spaceclan airfreighters, but in return compels Aman Zaor to yield the city to him. Aman Zaor exiles himself and disappears into the Drylands. He begins a career of doing all he can to frustrate Lemius Ras' ambitions, secretly aided by Djana who uses their powerful telepathic affinity as twins to keep in touch.

1 Year Ago: Gordius Ras is killed in battle, so Lemius Ras takes Ferala into his household. Djana Zaor discovers Ferala is a telepath and longs for her freedom, so she befriends Ferala then recruits her into her little ring of spies.

Two Weeks Ago: While hosting a meeting between Lemius Ras and a Spaceclan envoy, Ferala telepathically overhears a plot against the city of Mandator.

When the Swarm attacks Mandator, Lemius Ras will bring a picked force of Sarissans to their aid aboard Spaceclan freighters. However, the Sarissans will use the opportunity to capture Miria am-Amaris, Jerdayin of Mandator, so she too can be forced to become Lemius Ras' vassal. Their efforts will be aided by the Sylarians, who unknown to Miria have secretly broken their alliance with Mandator to side with Lemius Ras.

Ferala reports this to Djana, who then offers her her freedom in exchange for escaping and bringing warning to Jerdayin Miria. Djana telepathically contacts her brother to help Ferala.

Last Night: Aman Zaor helps Ferala escape from Sarissa aboard a stolen airskiff. However they are discovered, and a Sarissan sky-frigate on patrol gives chase.

A Few Hours Ago to Present: The frigate has damaged the airskiff's gravomagnetic drive, slowing it down. The pursuit takes the two aircraft over an oasis which turns out to be infested by the Swarm. A flock of vaspids attacks both aircraft, but fortunately most of the insects go for the frigate, which is overwhelmedFerala and her companions guide the airskiff out over the deep desert, but the vaspids keep attacking, and in a totally unexpected and never heard of before development they start chewing off the housings of the airskiff's levitator spheres. A crash is inevitable. They make for the ruins of a tower to make a last stand there.

In the meantime, on a distant planet called Earth, some outlaws

fleeing from a posse enter an ancient Anasazi pueblo. They go to hide in one of its underground kiva chambers, where they become enmeshed in a strange glow — and the next thing they know, they're in a fantastic, baroquely futuristic laboratory. Looking for a way out or to return to where they came from, they find a strange-looking rifle, the remains of a long-ago battle with some kind of monster, then emerge onto an alien desert under an alien sky.

Lights. Camera. Action!
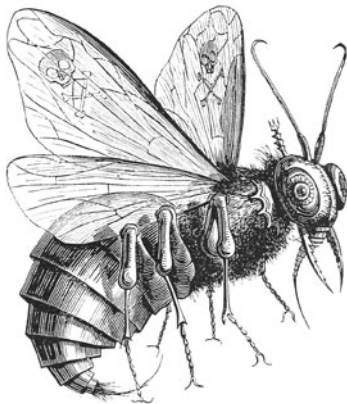
Act 1: Vaspid Attack!

The adventure opens in media res, with the player characters converging in a single action scene. Run this scene at breakneck speed, alternating between the Maruzarian characters on the airskiff and the Terrans if any players chose to play the Terrans.

**Challenges:** Fight off the vaspids, Land the airskiff safely, Get the Terrans to help

Location

This scene occurs around a ruined tower in the desert. Only its top four levels are exposed, the rest being buried in the sand. Some of its huge windows are broken, allowing passage to and from the interior. Once the castle of a sorcerer-scientist, it houses a portal that will bring in the Terrans. The airskiff begins having just spotted the tower, and is heading for it to make a last stand against the vaspids from inside.

Vaspids

Vaspids are six-winged, six-limbed predatory insectoids that make up much of the yearly Swarm. A vaspid stands as tall as a man on its four hind limbs, the foremost pair end in curved dagger-like claws. The four-eyed head and the segmented body are entirely covered in black chitin, as are the legs. The tail ends in a pincer that it can use to grasp prey. In combat, a vaspid uses its hooked claws and pincer tail to grab victims and drag them in close to finish off with a bite. Their jaws are very strong, and they've been known to chew right through earthen and mud-brick walls to get at prey.
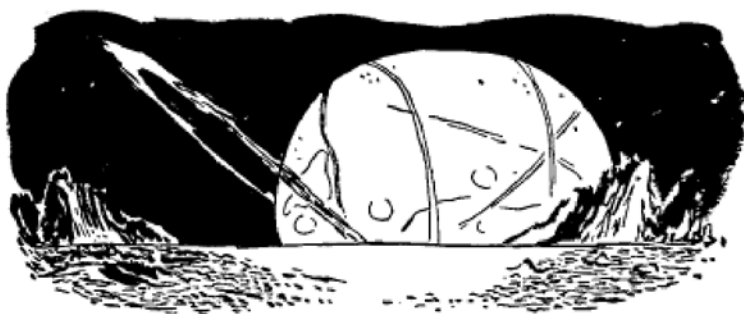
Vaspid Flock 20, Flying, Pincer Tail, Chew Through Anything But Metal or Stone

There are about two dozen vaspids, four to six of them attacking the airskiff at any one time while the rest fly above it, ready to replace any that are slain.

Aboard the Airskiff

The airskiff is already in critical condition. The attacking vaspids, in addition to making direct attacks, are also chewing off the supports to the remaining levitator spheres, and have already removed three of the skiff's eight levitators. This behavior has never been seen before. Vaspids are known to chew through walls of brick or rammed earth to get at prey, but never in a seemingly deliberate attempt to disable an aircraft.

Already the skiff is losing altitude and is growing hard to control. If they lose one more levitator, they could go into an uncontrolled crash. The Maruzarians have 2 rounds to stop the vaspids from chewing off another levitator, and if successful in that, another 2 rounds to impact with the ground.

Countdown Tokens

Use some kind of token, plastic stones or small coins will do, to track the airskiff's remaining ability to fly. At the end of every round, give the players one token. If by the time you've given four tokens the PCs have not yet landed the airskiff, they'll crash. Fortunately by this time they'll be low enough in altitude to safely jump out, where their fall will be cushioned by the soft sand.

Whoever is piloting the airskiff knows that the ruined tower represents their best chance of surviving the insects' attack, as it offers cover and could force the insects to engage without their advantage of flight. If the Terrans are in play, they have just emerged from the tower at this point, with what the characters on the airskiff will immediately recognize as a fulgurator

rifle. But can the strangers be made to help?

If there are no Terran characters in play, the PCs can get to shelter in the tower if they land safely. They will have advantage to fight off the remaining vaspids from inside the tower. After 2-3 more rounds of combat, any surviving vaspids will break off and fly back to the oasis. If the PCs reach the second upper level, they can find the fulgurator rifle there.

The Terrans

If the Terrans are in play, they have just emerged from the tower and see the beleaguered airskiff heading right toward them. Play up the terrifying aspect of the giant insects, to make plain which side they should enter the fight on. While shooting at the vaspids on the airskiff will endanger the skiff's occupants, the Terrans can get a clear shot at the vaspids flying above it.

The key to this scenario is the strange weapon the Terrans found inside the tower. Before exiting the tower, they found a fulgurator rifle that still works. It fires ball lightning that explodes on contact with a target, and holding the trigger button down fires the lightning balls in a stream — give bonus dice for it, but the rifle will overheat faster. A single hit with it will incinerate most of the flock as all the vaspids save those already on the skiff are flying close together.

If the Terrans score a hit with the fulgurator rifle, the flock pursuing the airskiff will be mostly wiped out, allowing the Maruzarians to deal with the remaining vaspids more easily as they're no longer being reinforced.

The fulgurator rifle however will emit a loud, alarming beep while rapidly growing warm, then hot. It will explode the round after, possibly injuring one or more PCs if they didn't throw the rifle away immediately.

At your option, if the Terrans never used the fulgurator rifle or never hit with any of their shots, it remains operational and can be used later in the adventure.

Interlude: Well-Met on Maruzar

Give time for the player characters to interact. The main challenges here revolve around the Terrans and what to do next. You may also do a flashback to the background scenes described above to explain how the characters got here.

Challenges: Communicate with the Terrans, Recruit the Terrans, Decide what to do next

Understanding the Terrans

If any Terran is in play, they will find they cannot understand a word of Maruzarian nor vice versa. This is a challenge for any telepathic character to try teaching the Terrans the Maruzarian language. Telepathic teaching succeeds in giving a basic level of fluency in Maruzarian on a successful roll. Every failed roll results in a worsening headache for both parties.

If there are no telepathic Maruzarian characters in play, or none of their players think of this, let the players roleplay the start of making introductions and teaching their language. Have fun with it! As this is pulp, though, assume that after this interlude scene the Terrans will at least be able to understand some basic words and phrases.

Recruiting the Terrans

If any Terran is in play, they may want to return to Earth. None of the Maruzarian characters present will know how to operate the portal, but can promise to direct the Terrans to likely scholars who can help. The Terrans could also be recruited by offers of a chance to realize their dreams here on Maruzar. Adventure, freedom, a cause to fight for, a new life, any of these might tempt the Terrans as their players see fit, specially since they have outlaw backgrounds on Earth.

The Spur: If either Aman Zaor or Ferala are in play, Djana will contact them by telepathy (preferring her brother if both are present). She breaks bad news — Lemius Ras has hired the notorious sky pirate Delok Shan to prevent them from reaching Mandator.

Act 2: Repairing the Airskiff

The airskiff must be repaired in order for Ferala and company to continue their journey and get to Mandator in time. The skiff is missing three to four of its levitator spheres. At least two must be found and reattached in order to fly. It also has a damaged gravomagnetic drive. Levitator spheres when disconnected from an aircraft will simply float down to the ground and deactivate, so the spheres lost should still be intact. The challenge is finding them. The drive can be fixed more easily, it's just a matter of getting the bullets out of it and rewiring its circuits.

There is also the problem of supplies — the party only has food and water enough for two days, but only one day if they share with the Terrans who need more water than any Maruzarian. The party will need enough to sustain them through the days searching for the levitators and repairing the airskiff, plus one to three days more for the flight to Mandator. Mandator can be reached from here in one and a half days' flight if the airskiff is fully repaired, more if it's missing a levitator and the drive is not repaired.

Challenges: Find the levitator spheres and repair the airskiff, Find food and water, Explore the tower (optional)

Exploring the Desert

Searching the desert for the levitator spheres and for food and water can result in various encounters to test the heroes' nerves and wits. Finding the spheres in itself is relatively simple — just backtrack along the skiff's flight path, the spheres would not have fallen far from this relatively straight line. Two will automatically be found in three days of searching, just one if the heroes use the wingcloaks from the tower for the search, two

if the heroes acquire at least one mount and use it in the search. The third levitator sphere can be found with an extra day of searching. Every day of searching for the levitators however opens the possibility of an encounter.

Desert Encounters

Roll 1d6 every day that the characters go searching for the levitators or for food and water in the desert:

1	Yarguun! One or more Yarguun savages try to ambush the searchers
2	A bloodfinder tries to entice the PCs into following it
3	The carcass of a large beast, being feasted on by lizardharpies
4	A clump of stonebuds can be harvested for water
5	Vaspid carcass, on and around which are sprouting desert blooms and moss
6	Great luck! Let the players roll or pick from the lucky breaks below

Yarguun

A small band of Yarguun ambushes the searchers. If their leader falls, the rest will flee. They fight with sharp iron boomerangs, hooked swords, and gaff-spears with multiple hooks. The leader however will have a two-handed sword with a hooked tip, of very fine forging. The Inland Kingdom characters have never heard of Yarguun with such fine weapons — and this sword looks new. It's not of any type used in in the city-states, and looks made for Yarguun hands.

> Yarguun Chief 4, Yarguun Band 8, Fast Runner, High Jumper, Long Reach, Low-light Vision, Hollow Bones, Immune To Telepathy, Armed with gaff-spear or clawsword, 1-3 iron boomerangs

Yarguun stand about 8 feet tall when standing erect, but have a naturally stooping posture, they have a gaunt, practically skeletal build, gray-skinned with a ridge of red feathers from the top of the skull to the base of the tail, with huge red eyes, no external ears, short fanged muzzles like a baboon's, clawed hands and feet, and long, whip-like tails. Their hind legs are jointed like a heron's, and their feet are clawed. Like birds, their bones are hollow. They are also completely immune to telepathy.

In combat, the Yarguun rely on stealth, speed, and sheer ferocity. They never wear armor, and as they can run as fast as a gannor for hours, they never need mounts. Most Yarguun warriors carry only a couple of sharp iron boomerangs plus a two-handed clawsword, a serrated, hooked blade on a long hilt that is used to trip or snag foes and prey.

If the PCs spend time investigating the ambush site, they'll find the hidden entrance to the Yarguun lair, which seems to have been an ancient building of some sort. Inside hang several drying carcasses that any of the Maruzarians can identify as gannors. The remains of gannor riding tack lies strewn on the floor. There's another leg hanging from the ceiling; it's *not* from a gannor.

Counting only the gannor carcasses, there's enough food here for a month. There is no water, though, the Yarguun get all they need from the blood of their kills, which is why all the carcasses in the lair are so clean and dry.

Bloodfinder

The bloodfinder is a lizardbird about the size of a crow and with plumage like a macaw's. It will try to entice the PCs to follow it first by calls and flying back and forth in the desired direction, and if ignored, by biting and clawing the PCs then fleeing. The nomads Soran and Zohara, and Aman Zaor, will know that the bloodfinder lives by leading predators to prey so it can feast on the blood and leavings of their kill — but sometimes it does the reverse, leading prey to a predator. Which will it be? You can pick from the list below or roll 1d6:

1	A wounded gannor in tribal trappings
2	A flock of garzah
3	A hungry sithan!
4	The Yarguun lair (see above)
5	Keshai caravan (see below)
6	A wounded Keshai nomad, his mount is missing

Gannor and Nomad

Taking the gannor will speed up the search for the missing levitators. It belongs to the wounded nomad in #6. If the PCs successfully aid the nomad he revives and can lead the PCs to his tribe's camp, where they will be welcomed and given whatever supplies they need. The nomads are of the Zor clan of the Zorai tribe — the same group detailed as the nomad caravan below.

Garzah

Garzah are flightless reptavians that are Maruzar's equivalent of goats and gazelles: basically ostrich-like feathered dinosaurs. They are found both wild and domesticated. Each weighs about sixty pounds and will provide three days' worth of light eating for the party. They're very fast

and skittish, though.

Garzah 0, Fast Runner, High Jumper, the flock has 9 members

Sithan

Sithans are one of Maruzar's most widely distributed and successful predators. These warm-blooded reptiloids can reach fourteen feet from snout to tail, with a heavy, powerful build like a fusion of gorilla and lion. Their powerful arms end in clawed hands, and they walk on their knuckles like an ape. Their large skulls are felinoid, with long, dagger-like fangs, and the males have shaggy manes and a pair of curling horns. A ridge of spines runs down their backs to the long lizardlike tail. The hunting scream of the sithan is one of the most unnerving sounds of Maruzar, and is used to panic prey out of hiding.

> Sithan 9, Cunning Hunter, Prodigious Leaper, Good Climber, Grasping Claws, Lashing Tail, Terrifying Scream

Maulhead Carcass

The carcass is that of a maulhead, a hulking, armored and six-legged beast of burden often used by caravans. The remains of a cargo howdah can be seen strewn around the area, as can bits of broken cargo and torn cargo wrappings. A flock of lizardharpies is feeding noisily upon the carcass.

> Lizardharpy Flock 6, Flying, Act in Mobs, Noisome Spit, Scent Carrion from Afar

Adult lizardharpies have a wingspan of five feet, their plumage mostly dark brown or ocher to match the desert, save for their ugly heads which are bald and warty, crimson-eyed, and sport many snaggle teeth. When irritated, they will mob the offender, making mock attacks, shrieking, and spitting their extremely noisome stomach acids.

If the PCs drive the lizardharpies away, they will find signs of a Yarguun attack, and items from the list below — roll 1d6 twice or thrice:

1	A packet of medicines and bandaging material
2	A dented but usable helmet
3	A working crossbow, plus a quiver of bolts for it
4	A good sword (long, curved saber type)
5	Gourds filled with water or wine, several are still intact

| 6 | Packs of high quality preserved food (pressed cakes of meat and fruit cured in spices) |

The lizardharpies will fight only to retain the carcass and drive the heroes away if disturbed. They will leave of their own accord at nightfall though. Further investigation will reveal a trail of remains, broken weapons and wreckage indicating a caravan that fought through a Yarguun ambush.

Stonebuds

The stonebud is a desert plant camouflaged to look like a round stone. It takes a good look to determine it's not a rock, and has no scent either, making its disguise almost perfect. The Maruzarians know that nomads sometimes test likely stones by biting them. Stonebuds are edible, and the pulp can be squeezed to extract water. The PCs can harvest enough water for 1d3 days, 2d3 days if Soran or Zohara are present.

Vaspid Carcass

The carcass of one of the vaspids slain during Act 1 lies on the sand, and its body fluids have triggered a miniature explosion of life. There are little white blossoms growing from the body, and around it a carpet of purple desert moss. The carcass and the vegetation growing around it has attracted sandcrays, which can be harvested for food. Catching sandcrays requires an Action Roll, and every PC gets to make two rolls before the creatures burrow too deep to be caught, Soran and Zohara get up to three rolls. Each sandcray caught makes a small meal for one person.

Lucky Breaks

The players may pick from this list or you may roll 1d6:

1	Garzah nest
2	Passing caravan
3	Wrecked airship
4	Wrecked merchant barge
5	Keshai nomads
6	Water seep

Garzah Nest

The PCs find the communal nest of a garzah flock. These reptavians lay their eggs together in buried nests deep in the desert, where no predator would be likely to find them. By sheer chance, the winds have uncovered some eggs and so betrayed the nest's location. The PCs can harvest enough

eggs from the undefended nest to have food for ten days.

Passing Caravan

A caravan is sighted. The code of the desert calls on all who pass through it to aid any stranger in need, so the PCs can ask the caravan master for a limited quantity of food and water, and the loan of some spare mounts.

The caravan master is a half-Keshai named Zarek Harras, taciturn, highly perceptive, and a stickler for honor and courtesy. He is well-known in this region as a reliable caravaneer. He shares, sotto voce so no others from the caravan can hear, that they were accosted by Delok Shan yesterday and the sky pirate was looking for characters answering to the heroes' descriptions. He is off the normal caravan track because he changed course to avoid Delok Shan, should the unpredictable sky pirate come back to raid them.

Zarek Harras is headed for Sarissa to sell them mounts and weapons, he knows Sarissa is arming for war. If the players think of dissuading him from selling to Sarissa and going to Mandator instead, Zarek will be willing and the Mandatorians will remember the favor.

Wrecked Airship

The wreck of a corvette is found lying under a thin veil of sand. It has the insignia of Dor Amaris painted on its prow, and was one of those lost in the war with Sarissa several years ago. One of its auxiliary tensor fins is still intact, and can be used to replace the airskiff's tensor fin, it's a more powerful model, and will make the skiff faster. Its levitators however are too large for the airskiff.

In the corvette's armory locker is a set of 3 undamaged bows and 24 fire arrows in usable condition, and/or an orruk gun — a seven-foot long, 0.90 caliber musket used against airships, along with powder and shot for it. At your option, there may also be intact bottles of water and preserved food in its hold.

The remains of its last crewmen, naturally mummified by the dry desert winds, lie strewn about. If Aman Zaor or Garn Dakar are in the search party, point out that these were their loyal followers or comrades and ask the players if they want to do anything about it.

Wrecked Floater Barge

The wreck of a merchant's floater barge is found partially buried in the sand. Nomads or Yarguun have already found the wreck and taken most items of value, but overlooked or disdained its cargo of food preserved in jars, which are still good. The jars contain pickled kelp bobs — little, round-bodied

squid-like creatures — whose pungent aroma sends nomads reeling but are considered delicacies in the Inland Kingdoms. Buried under the kelp bob jars however is a cask containing succulent, superbly aged sea lizard steaks in brine, plus bottles of fine wine. There's enough food for five days. The floater's levitators are too big for the airskiff.

Keshai Nomads

The PCs run into a caravan of migrating Keshai nomads of the Zorai tribe. This is the tribe of Soran and Zohara Bek, and will be automatically friendly if either of the two Beks are involved in the encounter. In fact their leader Koram Zor is an uncle of the Beks.

They are hostile to Sarissa, and friendly to Dor Amaris which they used to trade with often. If befriended and made aware of the mission, and that it will strike a blow against the hated Lemius Ras, the nomads will gladly provide mounts and supplies to the party, or help them look for the remaining levitators.

Koram Zor also warns that Yarguun encounters have been increasing in this area, which is strange. The chieftain notes that these signs point to there being more Yarguun in the area than normal, since the Yarguun travel in small hunting bands, and they are much bolder than usual.

Water Seep

A patch of crimson desert moss reveals the location of an underground aqueduct that's leaking. Digging here for an hour reveals the aqueduct and the crack in it, from which water can be tapped. Alternatively, laying an

ambush at the seep allows the party to hunt garzah that will come here to feed later in the day. See the entry for the garzah flock above.

Exploring the Tower

Characters not involved in the search for the levitator spheres, or just waiting for the repairs to be completed, can explore the tower. The tower has seven accessible levels, three below ground and another four aboveground. The tower is circular in cross section and has a radial plan revolving around a central spiral staircase, with three to six chambers on each level. Not every chamber is accessible or contains anything of interest, and the lower levels are filled and blocked with sand that has fallen in over the ages.

There is no water at all in the accessible parts of the tower, so there's very little life here. Only insects, spiders, and a few small, brightly feathered lizards. Yes, the lizards on Maruzar have feathers.

There is some 'treasure' in the tower, which can provide a little debating point for the PCs. There are quite a few items of value, not to mention the portal itself which is priceless even if no longer functioning, but point out to the Maruzarians that weighing down the airskiff will compromise speed and altitude. The only items of real value at this time are food, drink and weapons. Returning to loot the tower can be run as a follow-up adventure if desired.

The following can be found in the tower:

Ground Level: This level can be entered through either of two large broken windows, which are as big as a typical Terran house's door. There are two accessible chambers, the entrances of the rest are choked with sand. The ceiling seems unnaturally low, until one realizes that they're standing on a thick layer of sand that covers the entire floor. The two accessible chambers seem to have been a sort of dormitory.

First Upper Level: There are three chambers here. The largest is a dining room with several low tables but no chairs — Maruzarians eat sitting on carpets or mats. The second room is a kitchen, and the third a pantry-cum-tableware storage. There are a few bottles of wine in the pantry, but they must be centuries old. Do you dare open them? No other food items have survived in usable state.

You may roll for the wine's quality if the players want to sample them. Roll 1d3 for every bottle opened, for humor if nothing else:

1	Yechh! This bottle is undrinkable.
2	Yow, that's strong! A PC can get intoxicated on a single mouthful or two
3	Wow, that is excellent! You could sell this for a nice sum

Second Upper Level: The four chambers here are configured as luxurious apartments. All their doors, of precious woods from now-extinct trees, have been shattered. Ancient silks, furniture, and assorted bric-a-brac, quite a lot of it in gold or other precious materials, lie scattered as if from a violent fight. The skeleton of a very tall human (an Azhir) lies just inside the shattered door of the largest room, a fine sword under his hand. Behind him is another fulgurator rifle: roll 1d6, on a 5-6 it still works.

There is another skeleton, a big animal of no recognizable species: it seems to have had eight limbs, was covered in bony, spiky armor plates, and none of the Maruzarians can recognize it as a creature known on the planet.

Third Upper Level: The uppermost level is a hangar, its domed covering locked in open position as though the tower's occupants flew out in haste. Everything is covered in sand drifts. Chests and cabinets line the walls: most are filled with tools and parts, but one cabinet is stocked with 1d6 wingcloaks, amazingly still in working condition. Using the wingcloaks to search for the levitators will speed up the search, and also avoid the bloodfinder encounter.

First Lower Level: The six chambers here are configured as private aparments, and hold nothing of value. A child's toy lies forlornly on the floor, apparently abandoned in great haste.

Second Lower Level: Only one room is accessible here. It is configured as a private apartment. A crested helmet and a weapon rack with two good swords on it reveal it as an officer's room. There is also a galvanic bow on the rack, but it's no longer bendable. A quiver of arrows for it however remains in good condition.

Third Lower Level: This is the laboratory floor. In its largest of three chambers is the portal. The portal chamber and the one next to it are stocked with what the Inland Kingdom PCs — Aman Zaor, Garn Dakar, Ferala — will recognize as scientific instruments and equipment. None of the instruments will work anymore, but many of these are valuable in the artifact market.

There are about a dozen human skeletons here, all of them scattered and broken as though the bodies had been violently torn apart by a large predator. The tumbled furnishings throughout hint at a violent struggle. A few swords, daggers and spears still in usable condition can be found strewn around. Some of the men also had crossbows, but these have become too brittle to shoot. The bolts for them though remain usable. From this floor on down the stairwell is choked with sand and impassable.

All in all, the tower appears to have fallen centuries ago to the attack of one or more large creatures, possibly aliens from another planet or dimension that came through the portal. The tower was home to a reclusive Azhir noble, very likely a sorcerer-scientist obsessed with researching other worlds or dimensions using the portal in his lab, the portal itself being a relic of prehuman technology. There are no signs that the tower was ever disturbed by humans after its fall, so there should be more in the currently inaccessible lower levels.

Repairing the Airskiff

The airskiff has lost three levitator spheres and may have damage to its tensor fin, depending on how well the pilot succeeded in landing during Act 1. At the minimum it needs two levitators. Either Garn Dakar or Aman Zaor will automatically succeed in repairing the airskiff given time, Garn in a day, but Aman will take two days.

Act 3: Flight to Mandator

Once the airskiff is repaired, the heroes can start on the last leg of the journey. Mandator lies about three hundred miles away, on the other side of the Shangari Badlands. If the airskiff was fully repaired, with three levitators and any damage to its tensor fin fixed, the journey will take only a day and a half. If either one levitator is lacking or the tensor fins remain damaged, the journey will take three days. Somewhere along the way, however, prowls the sky pirate Delok Shan.

Challenges: Get past the sky pirates and bring the message to Miria! At least one PC must reach Mandator.

Progress Tokens

You can track the PCs' progress toward the safety of Mandator with tokens. Every round that the heroes succeed in moving closer to Mandator, give the players a token. Every time they're forced to move away from Mandator, take back a token. When the players have accumulated eight tokens, they've reached Mandator and trigger the adventure's conclusion. If Delok Shan is still in pursuit at that point, the Mandatorians will fire upon him and his frigate; it's up to you to decide whether that kills Delok Shan or merely drives him away.

Delok Shan

The Jakharan sky pirate Delok Shan has an evil reputation that's well deserved. He's cruel and sadistic, a savage fighter crazed and inured to pain by drugs, and the core of his bloodthirsty crew are Jakharans of his own tribe, who also fight hyped on drugs. Delok Shan flies a reconditioned frigate named the Red Zor Hound, and this together with his savage crew makes him one of the most powerful and feared sky pirates in the Inland Kingdoms.

Having failed to find the heroes over the desert, Delok Shan has changed his plans and taken station between the edge of the Shangari Badlands and Mandator. Flying at high altitude, he watches for the fugitives who will surely fly this way, as he's guarding the one safe passage from the south through the tall mountains of the badlands. Once the heroes' airskiff is sighted, he plans to dive upon them, disable their engines, and capture the skiff by personally leading a contingent of his pirates to board it using wingcloaks.

In addition to the rich rewards promised him by Lemius Ras for stopping the heroes, he has a more personal stake against several of them: he has seen Ferala before and lusts for her, he was once almost killed when Garn Dakar shot down his previous ship, and a few years ago he had to abandon his then-hideout when it was captured by Aman Zaor. When the encounter begins, he knows only that Ferala is on board the airskiff. However, as the battle progresses he will recognize Aman Zaor and/or Garn Dakar, which activates his revenge motive.

> Delok Shan 12, Jakharan Marauder Turned Cunning Sky Pirate, Drug-Maddened Strength, Savage and Dirty Fighter

Delok Shan has a fearsome reputation for his cruelty, rapacity and cunning, and his personal fighting prowess. He towers close to seven feet tall and is heavily built, and has never been seen without his black iron skullface

mask which completely hides his visage save for his mouth. His teeth have been filed into points. What look like white-beaded dreadlocks are actually human fingerbones, strung with human hair and attached to the top of his mask. His ears, belt and necklace also drip with human fingerbones, all said to have come from his own victims. He wears a crimson robe of rich material, open at the chest to reveal skin painfully grafted with a multitude of little bone plates. Delok Shan fights with a short, heavy cleaver-like sword that he can swing like a twig.

In combat, it's suggested that you dribble out Delok Shan's Threat parsimoniously, taking Setbacks to reduce the expenditure and to make the fight more cinematic.

> Jakharan Thugs 12, Drug-Crazed Berserkers

Delok Shan's six bodyguards are picked fighters from his tribe, all of them large men, and like Delok Shan they delight in ornamenting themselves with human bones, specially fingerbones and even entire hands. Each has a unique appearance, heightened by bizarre tattoos and piercings, and wears a different design of partial leather armor. They fight with an assortment of strange-bladed swords and axes. In combat, it's suggested that you let a bodyguard drop with every PC success until the last two or three, then hoard their remaining Strength by taking Setbacks.

> The Red Zor Hound: Hull 12, Crew 10

> The Airskiff: Hull 4, Fast (if the drive is repaired, if the corvette's tensor fin is installed, the skiff become Very Fast), Maneuverable, Missing a Levitator (if the PCs failed to find all three levitators)

The Battle

Run the encounter with Delok Shan in the following phases:

Sighting

When the PCs arrive at the northern edge of the Shangari Badlands, they have a chance to delay being sighted by the Red Zor Hound's lookouts. Give the players three Long Rounds to spot the Zor Hound and to avoid being sighted. Once the PCs are aware of the Zor Hound, they can try to use the terrain of the Badlands to hide them until the last dash for Mandator. After the third round, the airskiff will be spotted automatically and the next phase begins.The consequences for the spotting rolls are as follows:

> Great: The heroes spot the Red Zor Hound, but remain unspotted themselves. Give two Progress Tokens the first time a Great result is rolled in this phase, subsequent Great rolls only give one Progress

Token.

Good: The heroes spot the Red Zor Hound but remain unspotted themselves. Give one Progress Token.

Mixed: The heroes and the sky pirates spot each other simultaneously. Give one Progress Token.

Bad: The heroes fail to spot the Red Zor Hound, but are spotted by the pirates. The Zor Hound begins its attack run next round. Give one Progress Token.

Terrible: The heroes fail to spot the Red Zor Hound, but are spotted by the pirates. The Zor Hound begins its attack run next round, with the heroes at a disadvantage and the Zor Hound is between them and Mandator, forcing a change of course. Do not give any Progress Tokens

Exchange Fire

The Red Zor Hound opens fire at Medium Range. Its gunners will target the airskiff's tensor fin, in order to immobilize it. Because Delok Shan desires Ferala, however, the sky pirates are under strict orders not to fire at the heroes themselves or at the levitators. However, the pirates will also fire shots across the airskiff's bow to make it slow or turn away from Mandator. The pirates' helmsman will also try to position the Zor Hound between the airskiff and Mandator.

At the same time the dive is initiated, Delok Shan and his picked guard of six Jakharans jump from the Zor Hound wearing wingcloaks. They spend the first round of this dive with wings folded, and will be extremely hard to hit due to being small and fast-moving targets.

The airskiff mounts no weapons, but the heroes can use personal ranged weapons to shoot at the Zor Hound's gunners, and at Delok Shan and his away team. The skiff has a maneuverability advantage due to its much smaller size.

On the second round of exchanging fire, the Zor Hound finishes its dive and levels off, slowing to its normal speed. From this point onward the airskiff will likely enjoy both a speed and maneuverability advantage vs the pirates' frigate, specially if all the skiff's lost levitators were restored and its gravomagnetic drive repaired.

If the airskiff's tensor fin is crippled, it slows and begins to drift on the wind. The Red Zor Hound will try to maneuver into position above the skiff so the remaining pirates can jump onto it if their captain needs support.

Remember to give Progress Tokens according to the heroes' progress or failure to make progress.

Boarding

Whatever happens, Delok Shan and his remaining bodyguards will reach the airskiff after two Long Rounds of exchanging fire. The six Jakharan warriors will split up and board the skiff from two sides. Delok Shan will fly under the skiff and board from a third side, likely the stern, which is where the controls are. If the six Jakharans are shot down, Delok Shan will still try to board the skiff alone — he's under the influence of a berserking drug. Can the heroes stop this blood-mad killer?

The boarders' objectives are: To get control of the airskiff's helm, To kill all the PCs save for Ferala, Aman Zaor and/or Garn Dakar, who're to be saved for Delok Shan himself, and for Delok Shan, to kill Aman Zaor and/or Garn Dakar himself.

Mandatorian Patrol

This is an optional twist that you can use to either add trouble for the PCs or give them help, or even do both. At some point in the battle, a Mandatorian corvette streaks from the city toward the combatants. A heliographic flash from it signals, "Do you require assistance?" Let the players react as they like. There's a heliograph in the chest at the prow that they can use, if no one's blocking access to the prow.

Then drop the bomb — the *Zor Hound* returns the signal: "Yes. Prevent intruder from escaping, but they must be taken alive." The Mandatorian vessel moves to block the airskiff's escape, and may fire warning shots.

What's going on here? Even before Ferala's escape, Delok Shan had gotten himself hired by Mandator as a privateer. On paper, he's supposed to watch for the Swarm, and also for aggression by another city-state, which Lemius Ras' agents have convinced Miria is planning war against Mandator. Actually he's been in Lemius Ras' service all along, and is supposed to aid in the takeover of Mandator.

The Mandatorian corvette is under the command of Aranya Vanor, an upstanding officer absolutely loyal to the Jerdayin and her city. If the players think to communicate with her and clear things up somehow, she can be persuaded to help them instead. Aranya knows Aman Zaor and Djana Zaor are cousins and allies of her Jerdayin Miria, and she personally knows Garn Dakar from when the two cities regularly exchanged state visits. Aranya also personally mistrusts Delok Shan and is only supporting him out of duty, and concern over the intentions of the unknown craft hastening for

the city.

Concluding the Adventure

The adventure is a success if even just one of the heroes manages to reach Mandator alive. The message must be delivered to Miria am-Amaris, the Jerdayin of Mandator, and there are several ways the PCs can gain admittance to her presence.

If the PCs have encountered Aranya and convinced her of their bona fides — automatically successful if Aman Zaor or Garn Dakar are in the party — Aranya personally escorts them into Miria's presence.

Any of the PCs can point out the battle with Delok Shan as proof that they had something important to say, important enough for the notorious pirate to lay an ambush for them. Aman Zaor can immediately get an audience, as the Jerdayin is his cousin. So can Garn Dakar, as he's flown to Mandator before and is known to some of the Jerdayin's officers and court functionaries. Ferala's mind bears the imprint of genuine contact with Djana Zaor, which she can invite any telepath of Miria's court to verify.

Miria thanks all the heroes sincerely and offers her the unlimited hospitality of her palace until they wish to move on. Any character who wants to stay in Mandator is free to do so, Miria will grant them a means to make a living and quarters in the city. The Terrans are free to consult old Jor Horus, the Primarch of Mandator's Primogen Temple and keeper of its library, for means to get home. And everyone is welcome to help against the coming of the Swarm and the planned treachery of Lemius Ras … but that is a tale for another day.

Pregenerated Player Characters

Allow the players to choose from the following characters. The filled-out character sheets are included as PDF files with this package.

Caleb Cairn, Texan outlaw

Caleb Cairn was born a slave, but escaped and joined the US Cavalry's Buffalo Soldiers regiment. Discontented with military life, he later deserted and became an outlaw.

HERITAGE: Terran/African-American (+1 Guts for your hard life, Needs more water than a Maruzarian, Ignorant of Maruzar)

TRAITS: Hardboiled Texan Outlaw(Ex-Cavalryman, Devil With Two Six-Guns, Desert Survivor, Fight Like an Apache, Tactician), Hard-Drinkin' Gambler (Drink Like a Fish), Lady's Man, Built Like a Buffalo, Ride

Anythin' With Four Legs, Thundering Right Hook

ASSETS: Guts 7, Wits 4

TALES: A Nose for Gold, An Eye for the Ladies, Born Rebel, I Won't Be a Slave

OUTFIT: 2 Colt revolvers, cavalry saber, Bowie knife

Sally Two Feathers, Half-Comanche outlaw and trick shooter

Sally Two Feathers was captured by the Comanche as a child and brought up as one of the tribe. When she was later 'rescued' by the Army, she had nowhere to go and drifted until she was recruited by a traveling circus. Later impressed by her shooting skills, they made her one of their star performers. She also took to thieving on the side, but when caught, she ran away and became an outlaw.

HERITAGE: Terran/Raised as Comanche (Good Rider, Desert Survival, Rootless Without Her Tribe, Needs more water than a Maruzarian, Ignorant of Maruzar)

TRAITS: Circus Sharpshooter (Nail Moving Targets, Nail Tiny Targets, Quick Draw, Aim By Ear), Occasional Thief, Silent Footfalls, Wilderness-Sharpened Perception (Keen Hearing), Feisty Scrapper

ASSETS: Guts 3, Wits 5, Luck 2

TALES: Need to Be Free, Need to Belong, Fascinated by Gadgets, Gold Can Buy a Better Life

OUTFIT: Winchester rifle, revolver, hideout knife, cowboy attire with Indian ornaments

Ferala, Telepathic Vyari courtesan-spy

Ferala is a Vyari, a Vatborn created to be the perfect concubine for an Azhir lord, but possesses an atypical independent and freedom-loving streak. She's also telepathic, though Vyari are supposed to be genetically incapable of becoming telepaths. She bears an important message for the Jerdayin of Mandator, and she or at least the message must reach Mandator at any cost.

HERITAGE: Vyari (Extremely Beautiful, Gracefully Athletic)

TRAITS: Wily Courtesan-Turned-Spy (Subtly Manipulative Conversation, Versatile Performer, Read Between the Lines), Secret Rogue Telepath (Mind Read), Amateur Huntress (Knack for Archery), Exceptional Dancer, Highly Intelligent

ASSETS: Guts 2, Wits 6, and Power 2

TALES: I Want to Be Free, I Want to Know What Real Life is Like

OUTFIT: nomad clothes, nomad longknife, hidden dagger, bow and arrows

Aman Zaor, Dispossessed prince of Dor Amaris

Aman Zaor was Jerdun of Dor Amaris, until he was forced to surrender the city to his rival Lemius Ras in order to preserve it against the Swarm. Now he lives in self-exile, willing to take on any adventure that will help him free his city from Lemius Ras' grip.

HERITAGE: Azhir (Very Tall, Beautiful, Aura of Command, Prone to Nightfall Plague)

TRAITS: Determined Warrior Noble ((Trained by Master Gladiators, Sword and Dagger, Tactician, Inspire Comrades), Dispossessed Jerdun of Dor Amaris (Loyal Friends in Dor Amaris), Quick Thinker, Mentalist, Mercenary Cavalryman Guise

ASSETS: Guts 7, Wits 3

TALES: I Want My City Back, Djana My Twin Sister is in Lemius Ras' Hands, Hates the Spaceclans, A Price on My Head

OUTFIT: saber, galvanic bow and arrows, mercenary's armored robe and bracers (Armor 2)

Garn Dakar, Dashing aeronaut from Dor Amaris

Garn Dakar was an aeronaut for Dor Amaris, the city of his birth. When the city was taken over by the Sarissans he left to become a mercenary, only to run into Aman Zaor who recruited him to help in the secret campaign against Lemius Ras of Sarissa. A fine pilot and commander who's scored many aerial victories, Garn Dakar is supremely confident of his abilities, suave and smooth-talking, and an exceptionally handsome Marud with boyish good looks.

HERITAGE: Marud (Adapted to Desert, +1 Guts)

TRAITS: Dashing Aeronaut (Instinct For Aerial Combat, Insane Aerial Maneuvers*, Wingcloak Racer, Gunnery), Daring Swordsman (Furious Flurry), Avid Carouser, Knack For Mechanics, Roguish Charm

*Using this Forte is considered a Gambit. You can get more Action Dice, but if any ones come up you trigger a complication.

ASSETS: Guts 7, Wits 4

TALES: Loyal to Aman Zaor, Hates Lemius Ras, Prone to Overconfidence, Loves the Good Life a Bit Too Much

OUTFIT: saber, pistol crossbow and bolts, feather mantle (indicates aeronaut status), leather armor and bracers (Armor 2)

Balan Zais, Retired Zhar gladiator looking for peace

Balan Zais is a former champion of the arena who wants to get away from a life of nothing but violence and death. Unfortunately, his being a Zhar and his combat skills are all the world can see. The Zhar are a hulking reptilian race genetically engineered to be perfect soldiers. He was assigned to guard Ferala, but he instead aided her to escape.

HERITAGE: Zhar (Big and Strong, Four Arms, Powerful Tail, +2 Guts, Considered Subhuman)

TRAITS: Retired Gladiator Tired of Killing (Master of the Zhar Greataxe, Four-Handed Fighting, Fight for Show, Win Without Killing), Former Lord's Bodyguard, Big for a Zhar, Great Sense of Smell, Gifted Cook

ASSETS: Guts 9, Luck 3

TALES: Looking For Meaning Now That I'm Free, The World Won't Let Me Find Peace, I Just Want My Own Tavern But Lack Money, Harek Karkos: Vashtian Gladiator Who Wants a Rematch With Me

OUTFIT: Zhar greataxe, gladiator's manica (Armor 1)

Zohara Bek, Keshai nomad warrior and scout

Zohara Bek and her brother Soran were the sole survivors of their nomad clan, which was massacred by Jakharan raiders hired by the Spaceclans. Even worse, the two siblings blame themselves because the Spaceclans wanted something the two of them had discovered in a ruin. Zohara Bek is a fiery, wandering nomad warrior who works as a caravan and expedition guide. Zohara has the olive skin, dark eyes and dark hair of the typical Keshai, and a scar on her face from when she escaped the massacre of her family.

HERITAGE: Keshai (Adapted to Desert, Desert-Wise, +1 Guts, Blood Feuds With Other Nomad Clans)

TRAITS: Nomad Warrior-Woman (Spear/Staff Play, Two Knives Flashing, Desert Survivor), Lithe and Agile, Keen-Eared, Stealthy Scout, Erratic Telepath* (Mind Scream)

*Using this Trait is considered a Gambit. You can get more Action Dice, but if any ones come up you trigger a complication.

ASSETS: Guts 6, Wits 5

TALES: Hates Jakharans (they destroyed her family), Hates the Spaceclans

(they hired the Jakharans to destroy her family), Always Protect Soran, I've Yet to Meet a Man I Have Any Use For

OUTFIT: spear, pair of Keshai longknives, 4 throwing knives, nomad robes and hood

Soran Bek, Keshai nomad scout and archer

Soran Bek and his sister Zohara were the sole survivors of their nomad clan, which was massacred by Jakharan raiders hired by the Spaceclans. Even worse, the two siblings blame themselves because the Spaceclans wanted something the two of them had discovered in a ruin. Soran Bek is the younger brother of Zohara, and funny enough the more level-headed of the two. Soran is short for a Keshai nomad, with olive skin that's darker than his sister's, dark eyes, and dark hair.

HERITAGE: Keshai (Adapted to Desert, Desert-Wise, +1 Guts, Blood Feuds With Other Nomad Clans)

TRAITS: Stealthy Nomad Scout (Desert Survivor, Archer, Hunting, Sneaking), Tricky Knife Fighter (Confusing Flurry), Cool Thinker, Alert and Wary, Skilled Tracker

ASSETS: Guts 3, Wits 8

TALES: Hates Jakharans (they destroyed his family), Hates the Spaceclans (they hired the Jakharans to destroy his family), Watch Zohara's Back, Let's Not Be Hasty

OUTFIT: bow and arrows, longknife, dagger, nomad robes and hood

VIVID SYSTEM CHEAT SHEET

Character Creation Procedure

◊ GM Briefing

◊ Create a character concept

◊ Choose a Heritage, if used in the game

◊ Choose 5 Traits

◊ Choose 3 Fortes for your career Trait, and one Forte for all other Traits with Style

◊ Distribute 10 Asset points to Guts, Wits, Power and Luck; max of 7, any can be left at 0

◊ Assign one or more Tales that drive the character

◊ Finalize Outfit of clothes, gear, weapons if any

Careers with Style

◊ Just add descriptors or rephrase a Trait to give it Style

◊ Style can refer to character background; e.g. Barbarian from the Snowy Mountains

◊ Style can refer to character methods or personality; e.g. Dashing Fighter Pilot

◊ Style can refer to character motivations; e.g. Gladiator Ready to Rebel

◊ Style can include weaknesses; e.g. Absent-Minded Professor of Egyptology

◊ Style can describe sources of power; e.g. Servant of the Spider God instead of vanilla Sorcerer

Action Rolls

When you need to make a roll:

◊ Declare Action, claim advantage, agree on consequences

◊ GM gives you Action Dice and Adversity Dice

◊ Roll Action and Adversity dice together

◊ Compare highest Action Die to the highest Adversity Die

◊ Resolve consequences

Action Rolls: Outcomes

◊ Great: highest Action Dice are multiple sixes

◊ Good: highest Action Die > highest Adversity Die

◊ Mixed: highest Action Die = highest Adversity Die

◊ Bad: highest Action Die < highest Adversity Die

◊ Terrible: nothing but ones

◊ Impact = highest die rolled, +2 for Great/Terrible rolls

Dramatic Struggles: Consequence Choices

When you lose a roll (Bad or Terrible result), choose how to deal with the consequences as follows:

◊ Accept the winner's chosen Consequences

◊ Roll With the Punches: spend resources = Impact and narrate what happened

◊ Take a Setback: spend resources = 1/2 Impact and narrate what happened

◊ Take a Condition: spend resoures = 1 and narrate what happened

Action Rolls: Mixed Outcomes

◊ Offer a price to get what you want, or

◊ Settle for a lesser result to avoid unwanted consequences

Action Rolls: Gambits

When you make a Gambit, you can either

◊ Get more Action Dice, or

◊ Accomplish an action you normally cannot

◊ If you roll any 1s on your Action Dice, there's a complication

Swords of Maruzar

Maruzar. Former throneworld of a multiplanet empire, now fallen into a dark age.

Every year more of the Fertile Hemisphere falls under infestation by the alien Swarm.

Space pirates fight tomb robbers for the treasures of abandoned cities.

Princes of a fallen, dying race war with each other and their nomad kin.

Encouraged by the scheming Spaceclans, a decaying empire dreams of reconquering the planet.

And an ancient evil from the prehuman ages stirs again.

Welcome to the world of Maruzar. Coming in 2021. Check out the sneak preview after this page!

Learn more at http://www.swashbucklingplanets.wordpress.com.

A Quick Glossary of Maruzar

The world of Maruzar is a vast and diverse setting, overflowing in possibilities for adventure. To give you a quick handle on this milieu and what it's like, here's a short glossary of concepts that will easily fit on a couple of printed pages. Feel free to send this to your players by email or photocopy it so they can start getting acquainted with the setting.
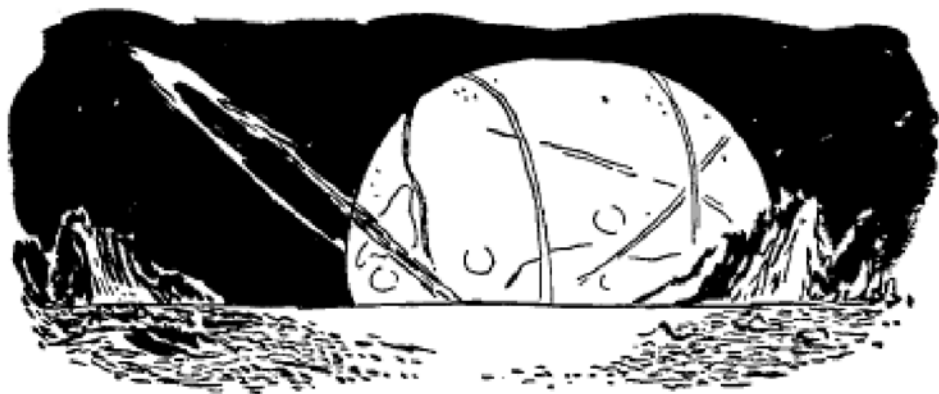
Maruzar

Maruzar is the arid fourth planet of Azhrad, a yellow dwarf that has started to turn red. It is a savagely beautiful world, with its vast ochre deserts and majestic craggy mountains, under a sky gloriously lit by a ring forming a glowing arch from horizon to horizon. The ring is made up of the fragments of a moon destroyed in the Nightfall War. The destruction of this moon and the cataclysms it caused are remembered as the Shattering. Two moons remain, golden Zardon which is home to the Spaceclans, and crimson Balaor, which may be the no-longer secure prison of a mad god.

Together, the Nightfall War and the Shattering plunged Maruzar into a long dark age. The only water remaining on the planet is in its three small and shrinking seas, in the polar icecaps and snowy peaks of its highest mountains, and in deep underground pockets. The Maruzarians are divided into many warring kingdoms, while their civilization is menaced by alien invaders who swarm yearly from the jungles of the Viridian Deep.

First Men

The First Men are the ancestors of all mankind on Maruzar. It is believed they arrived ten thousand years ago or earlier by accident, their ship trapped in a wormhole that closed after shunting them to the Azhradin system. They used genetic engineering to create the various human races as adaptations to the planet's hostile environment and for war with Maruzar's rulers, the Anuur, when the Anuur oppressed the early colonies.

Azhir

The Azhir race make up the proud, decadent aristocracy of Maruzar, being descended from the founders and rulers of the Azhiran or Iridium Empire. They are tall, averaging 6 feet, with bronze or gold complexions, fiery golden eyes, and black hair. However, present-day Azhir are a mere shadow of their ancestors. The ancient Azhir were much larger, averaging 7.5 feet, and were gifted with greater speed, strength and psychic potential than ordinary humans. Once in a rare while a Trueblood, a throwback to the old phenotype, is born.

Marud

The Marud race make up the majority of human population on Maruzar. Long ago they partnered with the Azhir in their conquest of the planet, serving as warriors, civil servants, farmers, merchants and craftsmen, and most of them continue as such in Maruzar's cities. A minority however have gone nomadic, and are called the Keshai or Sand Marud. Marud have olive skins, dark hair and dark eyes. Quite a few have lighter brown or even amber eyes, evidence of Azhir blood in their ancestry. Marud were originally bred for hardiness and adaptability to Maruzar's arid conditions.

Marazhiran Culture

Together, the Marud and the Azhir races have created the Marazhiran culture which dominates the Fertile Hemisphere. The keystones of this culture are walled cities, control of water, a single shared language, and a symbiotic society with Azhir aristocrats on top supported by clans of Marud officials and warriors, and a martial code of honor akin to bushido. The Marazhiran language is the lingua franca for most of the planet and is written with the same script throughout Maruzar. The Marazhiran culture has technology comparable to 16th century Europe, but with some remnants of ancient superscience such as skyships.

Aryamehran Empire

The Aryamehran Empire is the largest and most powerful state on Maruzar. It occupies the entire Fertile Strip, between the Opaline Sea and the Drylands. The Emperors claim to be the successors to the Iridium Empire, and with it sovereignty over all Maruzar and the other planets of the Azhradin system. The Empire was founded six hundred years ago by Princess Aryamehr, an Azhir exile from the Inland Kingdoms who conquered the coast.

Inland Kingdoms

The Inland Kingdoms are a group of diverse city-states in the eastern Drylands, most of them ruled by princes of the Azhir race. Now these decaying petty kingdoms are locked in a state of constant war and intrigue against each other, while trying to resist the efforts of the Empire to take them over, the efforts of the Spaceclans to bind them into parasitic treaties, and irruptions of barbarians and the Swarm.

The Age of Chaos

The Age of Chaos spans the roughly twenty-five hundred years from the Shattering to the founding of the Aryamehran Empire 600 years ago. It was marked by migrations and wandering of the remnant populations, extinctions of entire peoples as well as many plants and animals, the rapid rise and fall of successor states, and barbarism. These conditions only slowly gave way to a return of order, but only in parts of the Fertile Hemisphere.

Fertile Hemisphere

The Fertile Hemisphere is that half of the planet containing the Nacreous and Opaline Seas. The seas feed the winter snowfalls in the mountains, and are tapped by the Empire using massive desalination plants to fill its network of canals. Thus this hemisphere has much more life than the drier Far Side. The eastern coast of the Opaline Sea that is covered by the Imperial canal network is called the Fertile Strip.

The Drylands

Between the narrow Fertile Strip and the mountains of the eastern Inland Kingdoms stretches a vast, arid wasteland of shifting sand dunes, rugged mountains and the still awe-inspiring ruins of the First Empire's greatest cities. Once this was the most populous part of Maruzar, but the destruction of the ancient canal network turned the land into desert. Now the only inhabitants are various nomad tribes, strange and secretive remnants hiding in underground refuges, and savage desert wildlife, including cannibalistic feral men who dwell in some of the ruins.

Spaceclans

The Spaceclans are a cartel of ten family corporations created by the Zardonites, a human culture that arrived in the system about two centuries ago. Like the First Men, they were trapped in the system by the closing of the wormhole they had passed through. By treaty with the Aryamehran Empire, they are now the Empire's tribute collectors and were allowed to settle on the moon Zardon. They are hated across the planet for their their exactions of tribute, stranglehold on commerce and technology, and their ceaseless political meddling.

The Swarm

The yearly irruption of alien life from the Viridian Deep is called the Swarm, and the species that make it up are collectively referred to as swarmlings. The deadliest swarmlings are the gigantic dragon-worms, multi-winged centipedes reaching up to sixty feet long, and the man-sized vaspids which arrive in millions. Nearly all swarmlings are carnivorous, even the hydrogen-filled zoas that sail across the skies like so many flying jellyfish.

Cult of the Red Moon

Some kind of telepathic alien intelligence lives on Balaor, the Red Moon. Whenever its erratic orbit brings the moon (actually a rogue planet) close enough to Maruzar, its psychic sendings blanket Maruzar causing lurid,

disturbing dreams, violence, and grotesque crimes. Cultists of the Red Moon practice human sacrifice and periodically stage violent riots called Ravenings, in which masked cult members rampage through the cities spreading murder and mayhem, hoping by their actions to enable the god to come down to Maruzar, upon which he will destroy the old order and create a new golden age for his followers.

Old Ones

The Old Ones or Anuur were a telepathic alien species that used to occupy Maruzar, warred with the First Men, and were driven into extinction by the Iridium Empire. Or so most Maruzarians believe. The Old Ones lived underground and may have been aquatic or amphibious, for they were obsessed with water. They built most of the ancient canal network to supply the reservoirs of their subterranean cities, using armies of telepathically controlled slaves.

Traces of the Old Ones can still be found in remote places in the form of megalithic, eroded statuary, and the deepest tunnels and reservoirs beneath many cities date back to their reign. Because the Old Ones are never depicted in art save as vague shapes, no living Maruzarian has a clear idea what they looked like. What little is known suggests they were quadrupedal, given to crouching or squatting on all fours, and heftily built.

Primogenism

The First Men are venerated as ancestral heroes in Primogenism, the most widespread religion of Maruzar. Primogenism recognizes no gods, but bases its tenets and rites on the mythical deeds and words of the First Men. Its main principles are reverence for the ancestors, the demonization of the Old Ones and their works, respect for tradition, and a martial code of honor akin to Bushido. Moreover, the Primogen temples are the main training centers for telepaths across Maruzar.

Skyships

Aircraft were so common before the Shattering that the First Empire never built roads outside their cities. Now the numbers of skyships are starting to increase again as the Spaceclans have begun selling their most important components, the gravomagnetic levitator spheres that give them buoyancy. The typical skyship has a boat-like hull with one or more large fins projecting from its underside; this is its gravomagnetic drive. Weapons are mounted on the open deck, and for larger skyships, in the keel. Merchants who can't afford levitator-buoyed craft may use hydrogen-filled blimps.

Vatborn

The Maruzarians of the Inland Kingdoms and the Empire breed several kinds of genetically engineered humanoid servitors in their gene vats. These Vatborn races are often stronger and hardier than humans or better suited to certain tasks, but with generally low intelligence. Most Vatborn are created male and sterile so they cannot reproduce themselves. Since most Vatborn are bred to be low in intelligence, "Vatborn" and "spawn of the vats" are used as insults across the planet. The commonest Vatborn species are the squat Druj laborers, the similar but larger and smarter Drujan soldiers, the hulking Zhar guards, the small furred Dirinn kept as combination pet and servant, and the Vyari concubines.

Barbarians

The haughty citizens of the Aryamehran Empire refer to all people outside the Marazhiran culture as barbarians, but to most other Maruzarians barbarian refers to the primitive tribes inhabiting the deep mountain fastnesses and other hidden places. These tribes are descended from survivors of the Shattering who remained isolated and never rejoined the rebuilding of the cities. Urban Maruzarians like to characterize these tribes as savage and warlike, while to the barbarians, the city dwellers are rapacious slave raiders, water thieves and land grabbers.

The Far Side

The hemisphere opposite the Opaline and Nacreous Seas is considered the Far Side of Maruzar. It is even more arid, having only one very small sea, and frequently swept by terrible sandstorms. A poor backwater region even in the time of the First Empire, it is now the Great Unknown of Maruzar. Some say it is overrun by savage Yarguun tribes, others say it is the home of the Mad Moon Cult, and some say living beneath its sands are creatures and sapients seen nowhere else on the planet.

Drylands Adventure Seeds

The Drylands are a rugged, dangerous frontier between the Inland Kingdoms on the east and the Aryamehran Empire to the west, a vast wasteland dotted with broken and abandoned traces of a glorious past and inhabited by hostile nomad tribes, strange remnants hiding in remote pockets or underground, and savage desert predators. Feel free to adapt the following Drylands adventure seeds to your own campaign.

The Feral Witch

An Azhir family was lost in an airship crash near the ruins of Sarijan, but one of them, a young girl, was captured by a band of feral humans and kept alive. She was a telepath, and in her need she telepathically bonded with the cannibals. That was years ago. Now the nomads who range near Sarijan speak of a demoness who hunts with the ferals, leading the pack and blasting the minds of their prey into catatonia. The player characters are tasked with hunting the monster down and killing it, but an Imperial noble has appeared, offering even greater rewards for the demoness to be captured and brought to him alive — and in total secrecy.

Outcast's Quest

An Irajin swordswoman is forced to leave her tribe in disgrace, for she unwittingly led plunderers through the secret entrance to the vaults of Az Daikaris, from which they stole one of the Sacred Mysteries of the Lost Age. Now she hunts for the thieves, vowing to recover the holy treasure wherever it happens to be, whatever the cost. The player characters get caught up in this quest somehow. Were they the thieves? Irajin tribesmen sent to find their sister and reinstate her? Or are they after the artifact themselves? (The Irajin are a tribe known for wearing all-black clothing, and for inhabiting and ferociously guarding some of the Azhir Empire's ruined cities.)

Marooned in the Desert

The player characters are on board a frigate chasing a sky pirate ship fleeing over the Drylands. Suddenly their aircraft is shot down by a strange beam from a ruin, and the player characters are among the few survivors. It is at least two hundred miles to the nearest friendly outpost, through desert blazing by day and frozen by night, over barren, rocky hills, past predators from the sky and hidden in the sand, and hostile nomad tribes. Where can they get food and water, and how? And who, or what, was responsible for the energy beam that destroyed both their ship and the sky pirates?

The Remnants

While traveling across the Drylands, the player characters stumble upon the entrance to an underground city whose existence has been unknown, or forgotten, for centuries. The inhabitants of the city appear kindly and hospitable, but they will never allow the player characters to leave. Why? Are the inhabitants cannibal cultists of the Red Moon, waiting for the right time to offer the player characters to Balaor and then devour them? Are they are a forgotten race of aliens, unwilling to reveal the secret of their continued existence to mankind? Or do they possess lost technology that they know the rest of Maruzar will kill to possess?

The Emperor's Eyes

The Emperor has agreed to mount an expedition into the Drylands for Spaceclan scientists of Houses Manteius and Gemon, providing armed escorts, airships, mounts and supplies. The player characters are tasked with accompanying the expedition to look out for the Emperor's interests. By treaty, the Emperor is entitled to first pick of any artifacts found, but of course the Spaceclan scientists and agents are also under secret orders to smuggle anything interesting to the Spaceclan headquarters on the moon Zardon for study. The player characters will have to face desert predators, Irajin tribesmen guarding the lost city that is the expedition's goal, and attempts by expedition members to get to the treasure first or scarper off with it once it's found.

The Heir to Jazarion

An Inland Kingdoms airship bearing the child heiress to the city of Jazarion has crashed somewhere in the Drylands. The Jazarionites ask the player characters to go and search for the princess and bring her back, but two other Inland Kingdoms and the Emperor himself have also sent their own teams to capture her. The Emperor wants the princess as leverage to compel the Jerdun of Jazarion's submission.

The Hunted Monk

A Zomiin sand monk is being hunted by enemies, and turns to the player characters for shelter. He neglects to tell them however that it's his own order that's hunting for him. What did he do? What terrible secret does he carry? (The Zomi order is an order of warrior monks known for their crimson robes, custom of wearing masks at all times, wandering the wastelands alone in search of a mystic Answer, and for prowess with the halberd.)

Embassy to the Irajin

The player characters are tasked to accompany an Inland Kingdoms envoy to negotiate a treaty with the Irajin tribes. Unknown to them, the envoy has been possessed by the will of Balaor, and the Mad God of the Red Moon has instructed him to foment a holy war against his own city.

Temple of the Forbidden Paths

The Primate of the temple in Belkaris has recently discovered that one of his failed pupils, a powerful telepath named Dathar Sion, has established a secret school of psis somewhere in the Drylands. There are disturbing signs that they are delving into forbidden paths and trying to revive the Lost Disciplines. The Primate tasks the player characters with finding the school and bringing back Dathar Sion and his secrets. And the Emperor, who is also Archprimate of the Primogenist faith, must not know ….

The Cleansing of Garthalis

The Garthalian Irajin have been forced to flee their city after a night of terror that left their Holy Matra and nearly all the tribe's telepaths dead, along with many warriors, and more abandoned in the ruins when they went uncontrollably mad. Now the tribes are gathering to cleanse Garthalis of the threat, but some whisper that all the swords and the massed mind-power the Holy Matras can direct will not be enough against the apparent return of the Old Ones ….

The **VIVID SYSTEM** is a rules-lite game system designed for playing fast-paced and colorful adventures inspired by the pulps and action cinema. It is meant to be simple and easy to learn, very fast and transparent in play, and require minimal preparation on the GM's part. Character data can fit on a 5x8 index card, and you only need six-sided dice to play.

Make your adventures come alive. Make them VIVID.

Inside, you'll find:

How to make characters just by describing them;

Rules for resolving actions when a roll is unnecessary, but should still cost something or require a qualified character;

Rules that reward players for smart, creative and colorful narration;

Rules for cinematic, descriptive consequences in combat and other kinds of dramatic struggles;

Message to Mandator, an introductory adventure set on the exotic, decadent and danger-filled planet Maruzar! **Swords of Maruzar** setting preview included!