

email

My email address has changed, as shown below.

dundracon

It rained. I only played in two games this time around, down from my usual three or four. Monday morning had more players than I remember from previous years. Attendance seemed down for the weekend, however. Open gaming was not as crowded and food lines seemed shorter. I imagine that many people decided to save money and stay home.

Friday night, I played in a CoC game set initially in Arkham Asylum. The premise of playing insane CoC characters is risky, but turned out well thanks to the great players. I personally enjoyed playing a medical student paranoid of developing “the Innsmouth look.” “You are all nuts, whereas *I* have a medical condition and no one will believe me!” The plot was linear, but not laid out for the characters. For example, there was no obvious way to escape the asylum and when one character became very badly injured, we had to send him to the hospital and later help him escape.

My BESM superhero game on Saturday went well. I think it could have gone better had I tried not so hard to keep a frantic pace in combat. When I go too fast, I forget little things like having the villains attack. Also, the interactions with NPCs were not as deep as I would have liked. I am retooling the characters for Silver Age Sentinels, Guardians of Order new BESM-like superhero game, now that the playtest files have been posted on Pyramid (I subscribed specifically for this).

My friend Brian ran the only official Castle Falkenstein game. Based on a 13-hour LARP (with dinner and dancing), it condensed nicely into an 8-hour table-top (most of us spending little time at the table) game. The Tale of Two Countries is set in the Spanish capital of Madrid, where three generals vie for the regency of Spain. Due to an unfortunate misinterpretation regarding an agreement with a satyr and an illusion spell that was cast with all harmonics (mostly physical), my character, General Prim (the adopted son of the late King Ferdinand), ended up being exposed for the sonovabitch he was, nearly killed, and sent to prison.

All-in-all, DunDraCon remains a solid convention without the hassles, headaches, and screwups of That Large Convention.

I was going to look into the role of rules some more this month, but I got distracted by a few of my comments to issue 319 and decided to talk about what I think roleplaying is all about.

With all the discussion about making old rpgs new again or reinventing rpgs, I have yet to see anyone address what I find fun about rpgs: roleplaying! Nothing about “New Style” addresses character immersion or acting. There is no difference between D&D3e and AD&D when it comes to roleplaying a halfling fighter; only the character’s abilities have changed.

I wrote the following half a year ago when I got particularly frustrated at the whole “it’s just a game” approach to gaming. It seems appropriate to include it here.

I am a roleplayer

I am a roleplayer. I play games in which I pretend to be other people. I do it for the fun and challenge of playing someone else, typically in a setting or circumstance well beyond my own personal experience. I like fantasy, science fiction, mystery, horror, and most other genres. Roleplaying for me is an escapist activity, but unlike reading a book or watching a movie, an active one. I enjoy exploring my characters’ personalities and lives, both internally—getting inside the head of the character—and externally—as one would explore a character from literature.

I am not a gamer. I enjoy board games (Cosmic Encounter being at the top of my list) and card games (mostly traditional games like Spades and Bridge), but I would rather roleplay. I do not play roleplaying games to kill monsters, work out the puzzles, solve mysteries, or do the other trappings of roleplaying games. Granted, these can be fun, but only in the context that they give something for my character to do. These activities become a framework for roleplaying and hold no interest for me if there is no roleplaying.

I am not a storyteller. Sure, in the course of a roleplaying game, a story is told. There may even be a plot and an underlying structure that is very story-like. As a roleplayer, I want my control of the story to be limited to my character’s influence on the story. Some meta-game conventions, like “plot points,” are perfectly acceptable, and I certainly want some input on the kinds of plot I want my character to be

involved in. But I do not want to control the story from the third-person; there are plenty of storytelling games that do this very well, but I would rather roleplay.

I do not dogmatically insist that everything I do in a roleplaying game be in character. I want everyone to have fun and if that means I give up a little character control or make decisions based upon the plot or group cohesion, I am happy to do so. I do insist, however, that actions not be imposed upon my character without my consent.

I want to make it perfectly clear that I do not think my approach to roleplaying games is superior to other ways of playing these games. I have nothing against people who use lots of miniatures and move their characters through dungeons of ever-increasing difficulty. I also have nothing against basketball fans. But their games do not capture my interest. There are simply other things I would rather do.

Roleplaying games are just games—enjoyable pastimes like playing catch or crazy eights. It is possible to take them too seriously, but it is possible to take them not seriously enough. When playing volleyball, I try my best. I do not let balls fall because “it’s just a game”—I run and dive for every ball I can conceivably get. Not to do so is not as fun for me. When roleplaying, I try my best to roleplay well. I do not succeed as often as I would like, but the fun is in the trying.

As a kid, I played “make-believe” and “let’s pretend” a lot—probably more than most other boys my age. Roleplaying is just a natural extension of that early activity. In many ways, I see most roleplaying games disrupting the minimalist purity of those childhood games. As an adult, I cannot play those games any more. There was no character development and no plot. The issues and themes that were fun and new to a child are not interesting to the adult. This is natural—I do not enjoy playing Hungry, Hungry Hippos any more, either. The key to roleplaying games is to take the raw imagination and abandon we had in childhood and apply it to characters and situations that interest us in adulthood.

character immersion

Back when the ignorable theme was sense of wonder, I said that while I have not had a sense of wonder about the setting, I have had epiphanies and moments of clarity about my characters. Character immersion is also related to a sense of flow, when you act and react in-character, perceiving the world through your character’s eyes without player-level filtering. The suggestions for achieving sense of wonder, sense of flow, and character immersion are all interrelated. These are my personal guidelines.

Do not say what your character is saying, say it was your character. Do not say, “Astrid asks the guard for information.” Say, “Astrid asks the guard, ‘Have you seen any suspicious individuals?’” Or just skip the narration and say, “Have you seen any suspicious individuals?” but this can cause confusion between in-character and out-of-character speech.

Accents are great if you can pull them off. I try to focus more on tone and mannerisms. Is the character terse or verbose, cheerful or morose, considerate or gross? Your character’s voice is an expression of her/his personality and might take a few sessions to nail down.

If your character smokes, do not say, “My character is smoking.” Rather, act like you are smoking. You do not have to show every mundane action, but it adds to the visualization of the scene of the other players and GM if you act out what your character is doing. Props and costuming are nice, but not always practical and more appropriate for LARPs, anyway.

I prefer to narrate my character’s actions in first-person, “I climb the wall,” but others prefer third-person, “Astrid climbs the wall.” I do not think either approach adds or distracts from character immersion.

When describing your character (appearance, injuries, etc.) do not use phrases like “Appearance of 12” or “3 HP down.” Combat can be particularly tricky, especially when describing specific maneuvers. Hopefully, the game designer has helped you by naming the maneuvers in a manner that would be appropriate for the character. In games like *Champions*, where the players create their own powers, the players should create appropriate names and not use “12d6 Energy Blast, Penetrating.”

It is not required or desired to stay in-character all the time; most can quickly change from “playing a game” mode to “roleplaying a character” mode fairly quickly and smoothly. It is important, I think, to try to be in character even if my character is not doing anything in the current scene.

michael cule

BESM characters can be frighteningly competent, but this is a feature of the game, not a bug. The goal is to have characters attempt the nigh impossible and succeed. Just remember that what is good for the PCs is good for the NPCs.

robert dushay

I agree with you in your comments and observations about US foreign policy, arrogance, and our current president.

lee gold

My favorite treatment for french-fries is to dip them in a milkshake (vanilla or strawberry). This is the only way I like fries from Jack in the Box.¹

I agree with you. I do not like mechanics that require the GM to tell the player what the difficulty is (like WW). As a player, I want that kept from me except in the broadest sense (“It looks pretty difficult.”). As a GM, I want the flexibility to secretly change the difficulty after the roll.

steve gilham

Photo-realistic painting does show great technical skill and ability even if the composition itself is not very interesting (or even soulless and dull). Imagine how impressive it was before photo-realism was even a word.

victor haag

Welcome

One would expect in-genre skills to be overused. So, in a violent genre, if characters use their costly genre skills and use the sword and gun to solve their problems, it is appropriate. When they overuse their marginal skills, genre conventions get broken. In general, breaking conventions is not a bad thing, but it can ruin the tone and mood of the game.

paul mason

Mechanics do affect how the game is played and an important element in conveying how the world, genre, or society works. The trick is to make the mechanics so natural that they assist in immersion and do not leave players with a tactical board game mentality of using the rules to get optimal results.

¹ A fast food chain (for those not familiar with Jack and his Box).

brian misiaszek

Total character immersion is impossible without some form of psychosis. As a player, I always know I am playing a game of make-believe. But I also imagine the world through my character and try to think *as my character* and not as a player of a game. At the best of times, I forget I am playing a game. I do not always succeed to my satisfaction, but it is hellafun when I do.

clinton r nixon

Welcome.

Don't tell us the “R” stands for Reagan. :)

In your example of Donjon, it seemed very odd to me that the GM would parrot much of the player just said. I would skip the formality and just have the player narrate the scene and leave the GM out of it unless a veto is in order.

For me, good stories flow from interesting characters and by extension, good roleplaying. The story created by an rpg is a by-product of roleplaying, and not the reason I roleplay. The fictionality of rpgs is always there—it does not need to be emphasized. Without character immersion, roleplaying is lost and the game becomes a writing gimmick.

lisa padol

When I run “diceful” systems, I probably do not use dice as often as others. I do, however, use perception rolls far too much.

simon reeve

What you call “backslang,” I have always known as “pig latin.”

doc stevens

Why do so many people struggle over what is or is not a roleplaying game? If it has roleplaying, that is playing a role/character, then it is an rpg. If there is only narration, it is not an rpg but something else, like a storytelling or narration game. It can be that an rpg session can feature no roleplaying whatsoever and exclude itself from being an actual roleplaying game.

I completely agree with you that we should “abandon any deliberate attempt to turn an RPG into a story.” All games tell a story. Most of these stories are not very interesting. To say that rpgs “tell a story,” is missing the point. There are many ways of telling a story that are not roleplaying. The journey of creating the story through roleplaying (not through parlor games, script-writing exercises, or tactical war games) is the key for me.

Well, I have decided to go ahead and present the adventures of Daphne and Bertwald here in its entirety. What follows is essentially a transcription of the game logs (a major advantage of online, chat-based games). I would like to know if this method is entertaining or useful, as it takes a lot of space.

When playing online, spelling and grammar errors are common and while I have gone through it a couple of times, there are bounds to be many errors left.

Another aspect of chat-based roleplaying is that conversations and actions become threaded. One character does something, the GM writes a response to a previous action, a second character does something, the GM writes a response to the first character, the first character does something else, the GM writes a response to the second character, and so on. This leads to a narrative style not found in conventional sources (novels, movies, comics, etc.). For the most part, I kept the threads intact, though I did untangle them when I thought it necessary.

our heroes

Daphne, played by Matt Helms: Independent assistant forester.

Bertwald, played by Avis Crane: Jester's son turned knight-in-training.

Full character descriptions and attributes were given in xenonazine 74, which is on my website.

the beginning of our tale

Each month, Duke Leopold holds an open court to meet with subjects one-on-one to resolve disputes, make judgments, and be "in front of the people." Daphne, in her duties as assistant game warden, is filling in for her father during this month's audience. After hearing a few scattered pleas from various farmers about the long winter and low stores, the Duke decides privately (and whispers to Daphne) that he will turn a semi-blind eye to poaching for the next few weeks.²

Marcus Smith, from the village of Brennon, comes before the Duke, very upset. He weaves a tale of woe about three youths who went hunting four days ago and never returned. Furthermore, several men who went to search for them have not returned either. Marcus assumes it must be some great beast, but Leopold is dubious.

Leopold asks, "Do you know of any great beast to the North, Daphne?"

"My father tells me there used to be wolves to the north, but they haven't been seen in many a year."

"Very well. Marcus ... umm.... (Smith, milord)... Smith. Return to your village. We will send men to track down this beast... and should Aurora's light guide the way, return the youths to their families."

With that, Marcus leaves, though he it was obvious he wanted a full garrison sent out immediately.

"Daphne, I would normally charge this to your father, but in his absence, I turn to you."

"Of course, milord." meanwhile thinking: 'as if I don't have enough to do with training the new hounds, now this!'

"Take that Bertwald with you as well. I expect you to leave tomorrow."

"Of course, sir. Err, highness." She does an ungraceful curtsy and leaves the audience chamber.

Leopold gives a "you can leave now" wave to Daphne (this is not done in a derogatory way).

She gets outside before she realizes she has no idea who the hell Bertwald is.

Meanwhile, Bertwald is in the practice field with the other young would-be knights. Bertie tries standing atop a galloping horse, and manages to gather the attention of a few passing maidens. Seeing his success, the other lads try to copy his antics.

Brian, one of the Duke's sons, comes up behind Bertie, "Show off."

Bertie grins. "I'm sure you'll do just as well next time."

"Aye, but I can still knock you on your rear in the joust." He adds, "I think perhaps Harmony takes a liking to you."

"Harmony? That skinny little thing? ...Besides, she's too well born for the likes of me."

Daphne interrupts, "Ahem. Sorry to intrude, your, ummm, excellency, but could you direct me to a Bertwald?"

Brian says, "I'm not an 'excellency' fair Daphne, but I will be," as Bertie watches this exchange with appreciation.

"Well, whatever it is that you are,³ I'm looking for someone named Bertram. Bertwolf. Something like that."

Bertie interrupts, "Isn't Bertwolf a famous cook?"

"I wouldn't know. Sir."

"I'm no Sir."

"I will keep that in mind."

"Well, then. I had better leave you two alone." Brian then slugs Bertie in the upper arm, bows slightly to Daphne, and then walks off.

"What about this Bert fellow?" she calls after him. Brian turns around, laughs, and then turns around again without stopping. Daphne mutters something about fixing him like a gelding.

Bertie says, "Bert? You mean Bertie?"

"I am supposed to find someone named Bert, ummm, Bertwald."

Bertie bursts out in laughter. "I hope you don't plan to fix me the same way, Mistress. I'm Bertwald."

She looks him over. "Terrific. Pack your gear -- we're going on a trip."

² Leopold is a Good Guy.

³ Daphne and her Poor Courtly Graces strikes again.

Bertie looks a bit stunned. "Pack? A trip? Umm... who are you?"

"Sorry," she says, thrusting out her hand. "Daphne Strongbow, as sistant game keeper."

"Oh, yes, that's right, I have heard of you. I've seen you in the dining hall." He looks her over more carefully.

"Some folk up in Brennon got themselves lost and, if you believe the locals, eaten by some ferocious beast.

Guess who gets to go find them?"

"The Duke is sending us? I see.⁴ Do we need supplies or should I just bring a light kit?"

"We'll probably be traipsing around the woods for a week or so, I'm sure."

"I'll get my travel kit together, and a few days worth of rations, then. When do we leave?"

"We'll leave at sunup. Don't be late, or you'll be riding catch-up."

"I'll be ready when you are."

Daphne ends the conversation with "See that you are."⁵

After getting his kit together, Bertie sleeps in the stables next to his horse to be sure he doesn't oversleep.

Well after dark, when Bertwald arrives at the stables, Willam, the stable hand is up and about, unusual for this time. He is cleaning up, putting the horses to sleep, etc.

"Why so late, Willie? Aren't you usually abed by now?"

He grumbles about someone who couldn't wait until morning like any sane person. No, he just had to go tonight and wake the horses and throw the schedule out of whack

"Who was foolish enough to go riding out at this hour?"

"I dunno who he was; he came in to see the Duke. I hate this time of the month. Anyway, I am going to retire. What are you doing here?"

"I'm leaving early in the morning with Mistress Daphne."

"I will wake you up early, then."

"Night"

Daphne takes the lead and starts down the north road. Bert shrugs, grins at Willam then rides off after Daphne.

There is a short road through town and then they turn north. To the north of town, it is mostly farmland and scattered woodland. As they move farther north, the trees become denser and the farmland gives way to forest. There is light traffic on the road, mostly farmers going to town in wagons. The North Fork is not navigable, but there is little need or desire to travel north, so the road thins out and becomes less used as they move north.

"So, who exactly are you, if you don't mind me asking? Some nephew come to learn the Path of Merik?"

"Hunh?"

"Who are you? Why are you in Leopold's court?"

"Oh, I'm Hedric the Jester's son.

The morning air is quite chilly and patches of snow are still visible on the ground. As the afternoon approaches, the sun is warm, but there is a very cool breeze that keeps their cloaks drawn close.⁶

"The jester's son?"

Bertie looks at her. "Yeah, the jester's son. You got a problem?"

"Not with you. Yet."

He looks closely at her. "You got a problem with my dad?"

"I wouldn't think that would be uncommon."

"Yeah... well..." His voice fades off. "Who did you think I was a nephew to?" he asks.

"The Duke."

"Why?" Bertie looks quite astonished at the idea.

Daphne shrugs. "I don't know—you hang out with his sons, you're built the same..."

He looks at her like she's daft. "So why are you doing your dad's job?"

The woods to the north have an ominous reputation. There are whispers and wives tales of dark fey who prey upon lone travelers. Daphne's father does not take any of this talk seriously, but does admit that the hunting is poor.

"He's gone south to Montross to buy some falcons for the Duke."

Bertie is keeping an eye on things as they ride and talk, of course.

"I didn't mean just for today."

"Why aren't I cooking and cleaning, then, you mean? Why is a girl out leading hunts? Is that what you meant?"

Bertie looks at her again, to see if she's mad. "Well, yeah, I guess."

A few hours after you enter the woods, proper, the sun in low on the horizon and they move in and out of shadow. They have not seen another traveler for several hours. There is little movement in the woods, so the occasional movement by a bird or squirrel is startling.

"Let's get one thing straight, okay? The Duke sent me on this fool's errand and sent you along to help. If you don't like me being in charge you can head back right now."

"I never said that, did I? I know I'm the hired muscle on this trip. Lead away." He sees how low the sun is getting, and opens his mouth to suggest setting up camp for the night, but glances at her and closes his mouth.

Out of the corner of her eye, Daphne catches the sight of blood on the ground, like that left by game.

Daphne pulls to a halt. "Shhhhhh." Bertwald reins-in.

She dismounts and looks it over. She finds horse tracks, also heading north, less than a day old, paralleling the drops of blood. All she hears is the chirping of bugs.

Bertie draws his bow and loosely fits an arrow, to be ready if need be.

"That's odd."

"What?"

⁴ No doubt another test for Bertwald.

⁵ And this pretty much sums up their relationship for the rest of the campaign.

⁶ As the players talk in character, I fill in the scenery and background.

“A wounded animal generally won't use a road” After she says that, Daphne begins feeling watched.

“Shhhhh” She stops and listen for anything unusual, but only hears the chittering of bugs and chirping of birds. She starts to follow the track again.

Bertie closes the mouth he had just opened, and follows.

Bert says quietly, out of the corner of his mouth, “What are you looking at?”

After a few hundred yards, the blood stops but the tracks continue. The blood drops had been getting smaller and further apart. The ground is getting rocky, making the tracks harder to find, though still well within Daphne's abilities. Bertie sees only dirt and rocks, no tracks.

“I'm beginning to think there might be a predator of some sort up here.” Daphne continues to follow the tracks.

With about an hour or so of twilight left and the tracks unwaveringly following the road, Daphne decides to press on. “We'll go a bit further before breaking.”

He shrugs and continues following her, checking around for danger, keeping alert, nodding at her suggestion.

After a bit further, they come across the ruins of an abandoned village. All the dwellings have been vacated for several decades, but most are still standing, sans roofs. Fifty years ago, someone tried to start a village here, but it never survived. Some blame the surrounding woods; others blame the fact they northern trade route dried up.

“I guess we might as well camp here.”

Bertie dismounts, ties his horse to a tree, and starts gathering firewood.

Daphne dismounts as well. She surveys the area around where the tracks enter the village, looking for anything out of the ordinary.

In the center of town (not much), she notices the tracks. The horse is starting to go lame.

Bertie comes back with a huge armful of wood.

“Where do you want to set up the fire?”

“Pick a building that isn't going to fall down on us.”

The tracks lead to one of the larger buildings—used to be two-stories but is now only one and a half.

Bow in hand, she follows them, telling Bertie, “I'll be right back.”

Bert sees a likely looking building, drops the wood, and then follows Daphne quietly.

The tracks lead straight through what used to be a two-door opening. It is night, and the skies are overcast.

She turns to get something to use as a torch, but runs into Bertie.

Bertie pulls a torch out of his pack.

“So are you going to light it, or am I just supposed to be impressed by your wood?”

He grins broadly at her, and pulls out his fire-making apparatus, gathers some dry grass, and starts working on setting it alight. Once they have torchlight, Daphne says, “Let's have a look, shall we?”

Bertie lights one for himself, hands her the other, and nods, torch in left hand, sword drawn in right. Daphne, with her knife out, sticks the torch in and looks around

without actually going through the doorway. Bert checks behind them and around, and then looks into the doorway.

They see the ruins of the building, collapsed roof, moss-covered beams, and a small circle of stones with the remnants of a small campfire. Daphne slowly enters the room and has a closer look around. Bert follows, and then stations himself next to the door where he can see both inside and out. Around the fire circle, most of the debris has been cleared, but they otherwise do not notice anything out of the ordinary.

“Hmmmmm.”

“What?” Bert asks her.

“I was expecting a horse.”

“How come?”

“There were horse tracks leading up to this building.”

“That's what you were looking at? Hmm. Let me check out back.” Bertie slips gracefully out the door, and heads silently toward the back.

There was definitely a camp here very recently, but whoever stayed here cleaned up well. Out back, Bertie does not see anything out of the ordinary.

“I think we should get back to our horses.”

Bertie continues around the building and hears Daphne's comment just as he gets to the door. “Are we going to continue in the dark?”

“No, but I'd feel better with them in sight.”

“How about if I bring them and the wood here? This looks like as good a place as any to camp.”

“Someone else has been here. I'm not sure if I'd want to be there when they get back.”

“Seems like they'd already be here if they meant to come back. Besides, aren't we looking for some lost people? Maybe this was one of them.”

“I don't think so. I'd feel better somewhere else.”

“Fine, let's go to the horses then.” Bertie gestures gallantly toward the door, bowing with only a little sarcasm in his gesture.

Daphne heads to the building Bertie had first picked out. Bertie, once he realizes where she's headed, moves ahead of her and starts to build the fire.

“I've done this before, you know.”

“Of course. But I'm here to help, aren't I?”

“Yes, I suppose you are.” Bertie watches her setting up camp as he gets the fire going.

“Going to be a cool night, maybe?”

The camp is all set up, the fire is going, and the night will be quite cold.

“I'm sure it will. But don't let it give you any ideas.”

Bert gives her a grin. “Merik forbid!”

“My arrowheads forbid.”

“But if you should get cold, I've been told my body is like a roaring fire at night.”

That comment renders Daphne speechless. Bertie turns away, stifling a laugh.

Daphne sleeps with her knife near her. Bert stays awake, his bow and sword handy, keeping watch.

About halfway through the night, he wakes Daphne. She steps outside and has a look/listen before going back in. It is a quiet, cold night.

Once Bert decides she's going to watch, he curls up next to the fire, which he has been keeping well stoked, and falls asleep instantly. Daphne sits with her back against a wall, trying to remain awake.

She manages to stay awake, but is very tired come dawn. Bert is more rested.⁷ In the light of day, it takes Daphne a while to figure out the tracks, but it does appear the horse was lead out of the building and back to the road, going north. Bert looks for water, but notices that Daphne is looking tired.

"Let's get moving. We'll want to reach Brennon by sundown."

Bertie makes sure the fire is out, then packs up his horse, and vaults into his saddle. "Ready when you are."

The ride north goes smoothly and uneventfully. The tracks still follow the road, but the horse is obviously moving more slowly. Daphne isn't very talkative today, making Bertie a little miffed that he's been ignored all day.

As sundown approaches, they reach the village of Brennon. The woods give way to farmland. They pass scattered farmhouses first. Brennon itself is a quaint little town with many buildings, only a few over a story. There is light and commotion coming from the largest building. It appears to be an actual tavern, evidence there are more people living here than they thought, but there does not appear to be an inn.

"That seems to be where the action is," Daphne comments.

"Ayuh."⁸

Daphne dismounts when they reach there and head inside. Bert also dismounts, ties up his horse, and heads in as well.

The lantern light spills out when they open the door. All the locals seem to turn to watch as they enter. Conversation stops. There is a single man behind the bar and a woman carrying trays and mugs; they have also stopped.

Daphne catches sight of Smith, sitting at the bar. He is one of the few who did not turn around. She makes her way across the room to him, and Bertie stays close behind her.

"Master Smith?"

"Huh?" He looks like he's been drinking for hours and hasn't slept in two days. "Who are you?" He slurs.

She involuntarily wrinkles her nose a bit, and then turns to face the crowd.

"We have been sent by Duke Leopold. Is there someone here in charge of this village?"

"YOU?" Smith stands up. "I asked for a legion of men and he sent us a lass?"

Bertie stands very tall. "I'm no lass!"

"You have been sent one of the Duke's best foresters, sir. And one of his finest men-at-arms to boot. But if you no longer require our services we can leave here immediately."

The smith staggers to Bertie. Bertie gets a sense of how BIG this guy is. As a smith, he swings more iron in a week than Bertie does in a month. "Eh" the smell of ale drips off him, "ye might as well be."

Bert thinks to himself, "She's not much of a lass either, if only he knew," but carefully doesn't say it aloud.

"Is there anyone here besides this drunken lout who can inform us of the situation?" Now Bert looks askance at her.

"First we have lost our sons, then our brothers looking for them," Smith rails.

"Then it seems high time to send a woman to do the job, doesn't it?"

Bertie looks at the smith's biceps with dawning respect. "Can you tell us what's been happening from the beginning?"

"If ye think you can help, you are more than welcome to try, but..." he starts blubbing.

Now Bertie backs away, looking embarrassed. He looks around for the serving girl.

Daphne looks at the ceiling, and then puts her hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry. If anyone can find them, we can."

"If you do, it had better be soon, because ceremonies for the dead⁹ will be held in two days." This is from the bartender.

Bertie goes up to the barmaid who has moved behind the bar and is standing besides the bartender. "Two ales, please, and two suppers. We're thirsty and hungry." He smiles at the girl, but as Bert gets closer, he realizes she is no girl and probably the bartender's wife. Bertie moderates his smile a little, but still smiles at her and at the bartender.

"How long have they been gone?" Daphne asks.

"Six days now?" the bartender answers.

"And the second group?" Daphne sits down at the bar, by where the smith had been sitting.

"Five"

"How many in each group?"

"We had three lads go missing and we sent four men after them. None have returned." The bartender is matter-of-fact and she can see in his eyes that he never expects to see any of them again.

"We'll set off first thing in the morning. We'll need a local guide—someone who knows which way each group wandered off. And rooms of some sort. I'm beat," she adds.

"We have a room upstairs, and ye are welcome to it." The woman says.

"We'll need two," Daphne says.

"We lost our best guides in the search." Bartender again.

⁷ (Having recently slept and being of better conditioning than Daphne.)

⁸ Avis says "Ayuh" = "Yep" for you non-New Englanders.

⁹ The ceremonies are purely symbolic. Without a proper cremation, the souls will wander and never reach the land of the dead.

“Can I get something to eat and drink first?” Bert pleads.

“I apologize, but we only have the one room.”

Daphne says to Bert, “Looks like you’ll be sleeping on a table down here, then.”

“Got stables?” Bert asks the bartender.

“Of course.” He whistles and a young boy comes out from the kitchen. “Ean, we have two horses that need attention.” Ean goes out the front door.

“I’ll sleep out there. Can I get something to eat and drink?”

“Of course, sir.” And the wife goes in back.

Bert sighs with relief. “Finally, thanks be to Aurora!” Shortly, the wife returns with food and ale. The food is great—though maybe it has more to do with the journey than the food itself.

The smith has finished his ale, and is now standing around not sure of what to do next. Daphne pats the stool next to her. “You must have been anxious to get back.”

“Huh?” He seems confused. “uh... aye. My horse pulled up lame.”

“Did you stop in an abandoned village?”

Bert sucks down half his mug of ale, sighs with happiness, and tucks into his food.

“For a few hours after dawn. Needed to rest.”

“Any trouble on the way?” Daphne asks.

“None, though the way was dark.”

“You know someone who is lost, don’t you?”

“We all do.” He swings his arm around ungracefully.

“Son?”

“Since his mother died, he was all I had.”

Bert still eats, though slowing as he fills up. He is amused watching Daphne try to be tactful and diplomatic.

She pats him on the shoulder. “Why don’t you go home and get some rest. It sounds like we might need you tomorrow to point us in the right direction. And don’t worry—the Duke wouldn’t have sent us if he didn’t know we could get the job done.”

“Aye.” He gets up and slowly walks to the door, careful with each step. He turns around, “Thanks.” Daphne smiles at him and he goes on.

She then turns to Bert. “What?!”

“What what??” He adds, “Are you going to eat, or just go up to sleep in your private room?” stressing the “private” just a little.

“Maybe you should think about something other than your belly.”

“Maybe you should think about the needs of your men once in a while.” But he says this very quietly.

Daphne picks at her food a bit, muttering, “My ‘men’ aren’t usually so whiny.”

Eventually, Bertie gets up and heads out back to the stables. At the stables, Bertie sees Ean brushing down his horse. He tosses him a coin. “Thanks for taking good care of him.”

“Thank you, Sir.” He bows several times.

“Do you know anything about the missing people?”

Ean says, “Not much, sir.”

Bert asks Ean, “Do you know where the first group was headed? Maybe somewhere they didn’t want their fathers to know?”

“Not that I know, sir.” He thinks, “Melany may know, but she would have told her father.”

“Who is Melany?”

“Nigel’s girl. They are supposed to be married come the spring festival.”

“And who is Nigel?”

Now Ean looks impatient. “One of them that went off.”

“Nigel, eh? What were the other two called? ...Are called, I should say.”

“Uh, Irwin and Rolf, I think.”

“I take it you didn’t know them well?”

“They did not like no kids tailing about.”

Bert tosses him another small coin. “Thanks. I’m going to sleep in the hay over there. Could you make sure I wake up at dawn?”

“Yes, SIR.”

“I’m no sir,” but Ean is already gone. Bert lies down in the hay, thinks about the things that guys often think about in their beds at night,¹⁰ and eventually falls asleep.

Meanwhile, as she eats, Daphne tells the barkeep that they’ll need supplies for a couple of days. She stresses that the Duke will surely remember their largess come tax time. They put together a well-stocked pack.

“Which direction did these people head off?”

“That’s the thing, we don’t rightly know.”

“You don’t even know which way the second group went?”

The barkeep says, “They started off going north, but where they went after that is not known.”

Daphne sighs. “Six days. Probably not much of a trail left. Can you have someone wake me up first thing?”

“As you wish, milady.”

“Just Daphne.” She hauls her things up to the room and collapses on the bed. The room is a large loft with several cots and a single lantern. “I guess this would have been big enough for two. Oh well.” She is asleep before too long.

¹⁰ This led to an OT, OOC discussion in which Matt details his theory that whenever there is a song that mentions males masturbating, it is humorous or pathetic, but whenever there is a song about female masturbation, it is sexy or empowering.