

Dead Dudes and Deities

Or
Well, Somebody Has To Deal With The
Corpses

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Death is the reverse side of Life. As life begins, it will eventually end. Sometimes: prematurely and senselessly.

Creatures that are aware of their mortality almost inevitably create superstitions regarding what awaits when life ends. Some say some greater being on a plane of reality we can't perceive will greet us as we enter the next life.

Other say that sometimes things that happened, or didn't, while we were alive can keep us from moving on, keeping us in the material world, without our material body.

...we're not necessarily here to philosophize on what the end of life may be, though. We're instead going to look at how the end of life can be used in tabletop RPGs. That, and what trying to contact the world beyond may look like.

Things You'll Need To Know:

Cosmology of your game/setting

Crafting or Time Management rules of your game

Most fantasy games have entire pantheons written out. They operate on the assumption that gods are very real, though they vary in how much influence gods can have in the affairs of mortals.

More modern settings may include some otherworldly entities that may or may not be akin to gods, but certainly beyond the scale of ordinary people.

In either case, it's important to have a general idea of what the afterlife looks like in your game, how things can go wrong, and who may be responsible when things do go wrong.

Meanwhile, how things are made, or how longer tasks are handled in games vary wildly, if they're even considered at all.

Memorializing the Dead

"How do you, Private Willie McBride?
Do you mind if I sit here down by your graveside?"
-"No Man's Land" by Eric Bogle



Sometimes, you encounter a corpse while you're adventuring, and it belongs to a fellow traveler that came before you, and had a stroke of rotten luck.

First instinct is probably to loot them, and move along; though some myths go on to say that robbing the dead is typically a good way to end up haunted.

This system exists to give some other options for what to do when encountering an unfortunate soul that came before.

Memorializing the Dead

First, the creature must be sapient. Most demi-humans will meet this criteria, though depending on setting cosmology there could be other creatures that fit this bill. If a deity considers a certain animal to be sacred, memorializing the deity's name could curry favor with them.

Second, the creature must not have been slain by the player or one of their associates. Murdering somebody in cold blood, then erecting a monument to them is psychopath behavior. As before, the cosmology of the world may present a reasonable exception. If one of the prevailing cultures of the world venerates warriors, then this system could be used for remembering somebody the player character's bested in honorable combat.

If the above two requirements are met, then the player can either build a monument of some kind, or otherwise perform a ritual that memorializes the dead. Such examples of this include engraving a stone slab with the deceased's name; marking the place of their death with a relevant religious symbol; or even moving the corpse to safety and giving it a proper burial.

Once the memorialization is complete, the player character receives some favor from the deceased. This could range from a hint becoming obvious when the player finds

themselves stuck dealing with a problem, or being given a re-roll when they're in mortal danger.

Example

The swamps in the north are said to hide an ancient temple. After reading about wars fought over this temple, Edwin decided to look for it himself.

As he wanders through the swamps, he finds several water logged corpses, soldiers of that he can date back to the wars fought over the temple. As part of his research, he keeps notes on where they were found, and has his assistants bring the bodies out of the swamp to be catalogued, and then properly interred.

After rescuing several of these corpses, Edwin has a dream about the swamps he and his team have been exploring, with soldiers marching through the swamps and reaching a grand temple.

Edwin follows the images he can remember from his dream: the very temple he was seeking, after being guided in his dreams by the soldiers he helped bring home.

When the Dead Get Angry

"My name is Stanton Cree! And I died three years before.
I shot a man to steal his drink; at least that's what they hung me for!"
-"Drink With The Living Dead" by Ghoul Town



If the dead can be grateful for how the living treat them, it stands to reason things can equally make them vengeful. Anything from a horrific or wrongful death, to having their remains or personal effects defiled after their death.

These kinds of circumstances are much more storied than simply finding a corpse tucked away in a cave somewhere: something has gone wrong, and somebody's spirit is **ANGRY** about it!

Consider the following example:

There's a wandering swordsman that wants to prove their worth by winning 100 "honorable" battles. In reality, the swordsman was simply attacking people and later rationalizing why it was an "honorable" battle, and claiming their weapons as a trophy.

One of the swordsman's victims was an old, veteran swordsman that was slain in his sleep. Later, the wandering swordsman died of a foolish accident, leaving the ghost of the veteran swordsman restless that he was never properly avenged.

Now, the veteran's ghost wanders around, materializing and challenging wanderers, desiring the honorable death, or vengeance, he was denied.

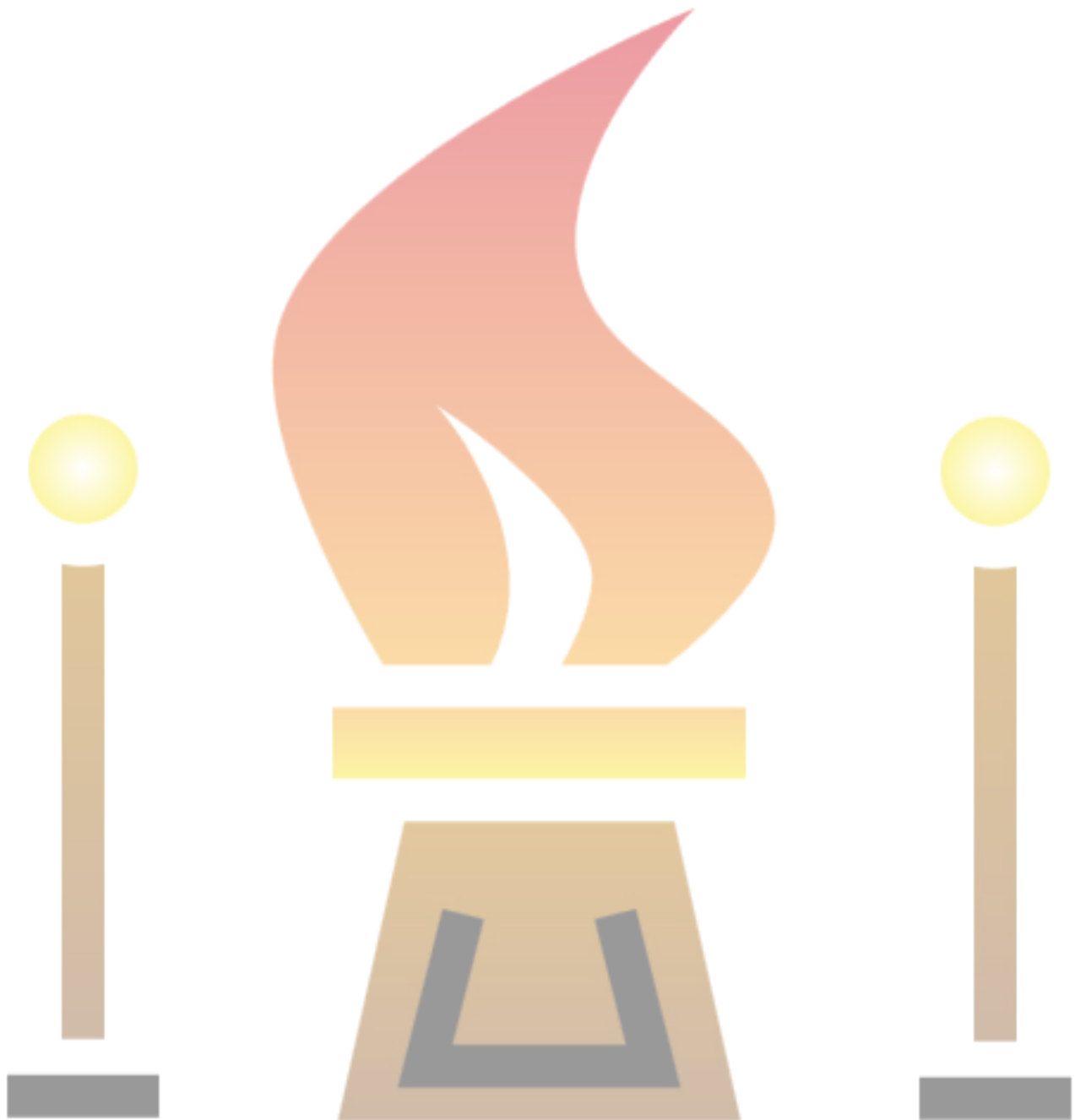
The above story has numerous angles and resolutions. Returning the ghost swordsman's lost weapon may bring him peace, as could managing to defeat him.

A less obvious solution could be to find the family of the wanderer that slew him, bring them to the ghost, and have them properly memorialize the ghost as an apology.

The key here isn't that the player's must find the right solution to the problem, but rather they take an action that makes things right!

Other Higher Beings

"He prayeth best, who loveth best all things both great and small."
-"Rime of the Ancient Mariner" by Samuel Taylor Coleridge



This booklet so far has dealt a lot with mortal beings and remembering them. This is something that often gets tied to beings that exist on other planes of reality. If somebody in the physical world is meddling around with affairs in the spectral world, you can bet spectral denizens are going to eventually take notice. Or our physical meddler may start wanting different otherworldly attention.

And so, this section is about getting the attention of Deities and otherworldly Entities.

Getting Their Attention

The attention of a deity can be gained in many ways. For Positive Attention, praying at an altar dedicated to them, with an appropriate offering giving more chance of success.

Negative Attention can be gained by desecrating such altar, destroying something sacred to the deity, or some other such insult to them. (Assuming of course, the deity in question is even paying attention. It's hard to be insulted if you're not even listening!)

Dedicated Altars

This is where understanding the cosmology and pantheon of a setting comes in. Most deities, gods, demons, or general otherworldly entities have certain things associated with them. These could include symbols, materials, colors, objects or common mantras of the deity.

Dungeons and Dragons's Saint Cuthbert of the Cudgel obviously had bludgeons, as well as the mantra "Foolishness can be beaten." Such an altar could have such affects placed around it.

Meanwhile, The Dark Eye's Phex is a god of thieves, merchants, and lawyers. So an obvious and easily accessible altar would not be of his interest, even if it did have a deep coffer for offering one's earnings. (Legitimately acquired or not.)

Communicating Across Worlds

You've got their attention, you have an altar that you can use to reach out to them, all that's left is to make your requests of them. Mechanically, this is trading in the Attention (as if it were an item or resource) for some other benefit.

Some things that could be asked for:

Protection for an upcoming journey
Guidance on what needs to be done
Intervening in another deity's wrath

Or, the most obvious possible thing a deity could give a mortal that keeps begging for attention: a quest!

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