

Steppin' Up to the Plate

BY JOLLY BLACKBURN

RECAP: AFTER BEING PURSUED BY A **DARK ENTITY** FOR WHAT SEEMED LIKE "**MILES**" OF TWISTING CORRIDORS, THE **PARTY** DISCOVERED THEY HAD BEEN **HERDED** INTO A **DEAD END CHAMBER** WHERE A MYSTERIOUS SHRINE TO THE DEMON PREDATOR **PANG** GREETED THEM.

MEANWHILE, BRIAN'S CHARACTER, **KREED**, WAS 'COMPROMISED' BY A "**DISEMBODIED SPIRIT**" -- A FACT HE **DESPERATELY** TRIED TO CONVEY TO HIS COMRADES THROUGH THE USE OF **NON-VERBAL PLAYER ADVANTAGE CODES**.

UNFORTUNATELY, THE OTHERS **FAILED** TO PICK UP ON HIS SIGNALS.

WHILE BRIAN WAS IN THE **BATHROOM** PUTTING A MESSAGE IN THE "**DEAD DROP**", THE REST OF THE PARTY READ THE **CRYPTIC MESSAGE** WRITTEN IN BLOOD IN THE **SHRINE CHAMBER** -- TRIGGERING A **GAS TRAP** AND SEALING OFF THE **EXIT**...

AS YOU **CHOK** AND **GASP** -- THE **TOXIC GAS** FILLING YOUR **LUNGS** -- THE DEEP BOOMING VOICE ONCE AGAIN COMMANDS,

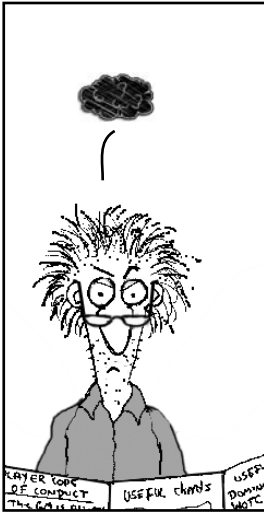
"INSERT THE **KEY** OR **PERISH!!**"



NOW WE'RE GOING INTO **REAL TIME** HERE, FOLKS.

YOU HAVE MERE **SECONDS** BEFORE....

UM -- EXCUSE ME, B.A.



-SIGH- WHAT'S SO **IMPORTANT** YOU HAVE TO **INTERRUPT** YET ONCE AGAIN, BRIAN...?

I THOUGHT WE HAD YOU UP TO **SPEED**.

YOU NEVER ANSWERED MY QUESTION.

YOU MENTIONED A CHOKING '**CLOUD**' OF GAS.

IS THAT A '**VISIBLE**' CLOUD?

WERE THERE ANY **TELL-TALE** 'WHOOSHING' SOUNDS WHEN IT WAS RELEASED?

AN ODD **SMELL** PERHAPS...?



FOR CRYING OUT LOUD, BRIAN -- THIS IS **HACKMASTER**. NOT **TWENTY QUESTIONS**.

YOU'RE **REALLY** WRECKING THE FEELING OF **TENSION** AND **BREAK-NECK** PACING I'M TRYING TO MAINTAIN HERE.

I'M ONLY ASKING FOR INFORMATION MY CHARACTER SHOULD HAVE.



THE ROOM IS FILLING WITH FRICKIN' **GAS** AND YOU ARE **SEALED** IN THE ROOM.

WHAT MORE DO YOU NEED TO KNOW?

YOU'RE WASTING **PRECIOUS** TIME.

JUST SOME **SIMPLE** ANSWERS TO SOME **SIMPLE** QUESTIONS... **SHEESH**.

SORRY IF IT 'WRECKS' YOUR **RUSHING** US TO OUR **DOOM**.



DUDE -- WHAT THE HELL -- YOU **HAVE** BEEN ASKING A LOT OF QUESTIONS...

SOME SORT OF **STALL** TACTIC?

STAY OUT OF THIS, DAVE.



I **GET** WE DON'T HAVE A LOT OF TIME TO **REACT** HERE, B.A. -- BUT THAT SHOULDN'T RULE OUT ANY AND ALL ATTEMPTS FOR US TO DO SO.



* See KODT #136: A Matter of Life and Limb — The cryptic message read, "The way is blocked -- by rows of teeth. No way around -- no way beneath. No toll to pay -- no extorted fee. To open the door -- simply insert the key. Not one of metal -- that won't suffice. But one of flesh -- a limb in sacrifice." The group determined a 'limb' has to be inserted into the shrine's 'mouth' in order to exit the chamber.

WHICH YOU ARE **CLEARLY** DENYING US BY NOT PROVIDING **FULL** DETAILS.

IN REAL LIFE IF I ENTER A ROOM AND HEAR A **GLOCK** BEING CHARGED I'M **IMMEDIATELY** HITTIN' THE **FLOOR**.

LIKewise -- IF I SEE A "CLOUD" OF GAS I'M GOING TO REACT.

AH -- THERE -- YA **SEE**, B.A...

HE'S GOT A GOOD POINT THERE.

MAYBE B.A. DIDN'T FLESH OUT ALL THE **DETAILS** FOR THIS TRAP.

OH, MY NOTES AREN'T LACKING. I ASSURE YOU.

FINE! YOU WANT **FULL** DETAILS -- YOU GOT IT.

NOT LIKE IT'LL **CHANGE** ANYTHING.

THANKS. THAT'S ALL I'M ASKING.

THE **GAS** SMELLS **SULFURIC** AND LEAVES THE TASTE OF **TAR** ON YOUR TONGUE.

IT'S A DARK-CHURNING CLOUD OF **PURPLE** THAT SPREADS ACROSS THE FLOOR LIKE A **CARPET** BEING UNROLLED -- THEN **SLOWLY** RISES...

SATISFIED?

WELL THAT WASN'T VERY HELPFUL.

QUITE. THAT'LL DO **NICELY**. THANKS.

NOW THEN... AS I WAS SAYING. THIS IS **REAL TIME**, FOLKS.

YOU ARE **QUICKLY** LOSING CONSCIOUSNESS AS YOU CHOKe AND GASP FOR...

UM -- PARDON ME, B.A....

WHAT, BRIAN?!?!
WHAT...?!?!

I JUST WANTED TO POINT OUT THAT PER THE **NOTE** ANNOTATED ON MY CHARACTER SHEET --

"**KREED** IMMEDIATELY **HOLDS** HIS BREATH AT THE **FIRST** SIGHT OF ANY "STRANGE MIST", MYSTERIOUS CLOUDS OR THE SMELL OF TAINTED OR UNUSUALLY ODOROUS AIR."

ACCORDING TO THE RULES I CAN HOLD MY BREATH A NUMBER OF MINUTES BASED ON MY **CON** DIVIDED BY...

YOU'RE JOKING -- RIGHT?

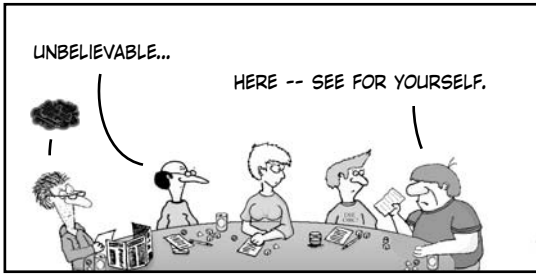
NO.

EVER SINCE YOU **SCREWED** US OVER WITH THAT "MIST" INCIDENT IN **ROGUE HAVEN** * A FEW YEARS AGO...

I'VE MADE IT A POINT TO **ANNOTATE** ALL MY CHARACTERS WITH A "HOLD BREATH" S.O.P. FOR CERTAIN SITUATIONS.

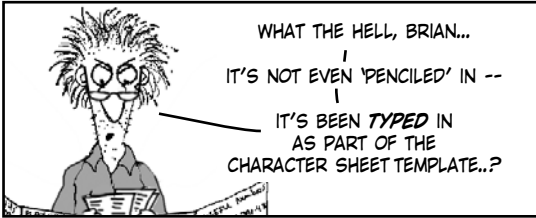
* See KODT #100: Mist Opportunity — The Party passes out when a 'strange mist' moves in -- sparking a debate over whether or not the characters would have held their breaths.

"SHEESH!! YOU'VE WRITTEN **ONE** POEM AND YOU THINK YOU'RE FRICKIN' **SHAKESPEARE!**"
—Brian Van Hoose, **KODT Issue #78, Ballad of the Twenty Sider**



UNBELIEVABLE...

HERE -- SEE FOR YOURSELF.



WHAT THE HELL, BRIAN...

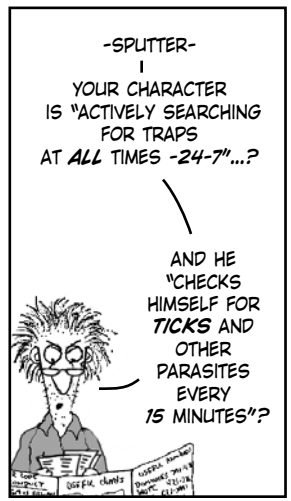
IT'S NOT EVEN 'PENCILED' IN --

IT'S BEEN TYPED IN AS PART OF THE CHARACTER SHEET TEMPLATE..?



LIKE I SAID -- ALL MY CHARACTERS FOLLOW THAT PROCEDURE -- JUST SAVES TIME.

NOT TO MENTION IT HELPS TO AVOID ARGUMENTS.



-SPUTTER-
YOUR CHARACTER IS "ACTIVELY SEARCHING FOR TRAPS AT ALL TIMES -24-7"...?

AND HE "CHECKS HIMSELF FOR TICKS AND OTHER PARASITES EVERY 15 MINUTES"?



OH AND I SEE HE "ALWAYS HAS ONE HAND ON HIS COIN POUCH WHEN IN A CROWD..."

YOU MUST HAVE A DOZEN "CHARACTER S.O.P.'S" TYPED IN ON THE BACK OF THIS SHEET.

LIKE I SAID -- IT HELPS TO AVOID ARGUMENTS.

WHOOAH -- WHAT A GREAT IDEA.

CAN I GET ME ONE OF THOSE CHARACTER SHEETS?

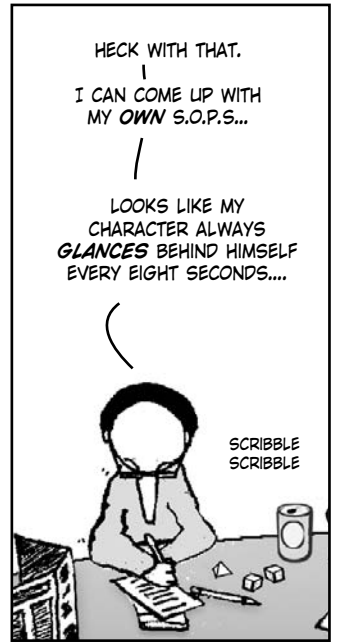
YEAH -- ME TOO.



SURE...

FOR FIFTY CENTS A PIECE...

BUT I ONLY SELL 'EM IN PACKS OF TWENTY-FIVE.



HECK WITH THAT. I CAN COME UP WITH MY OWN S.O.P.S...

LOOKS LIKE MY CHARACTER ALWAYS GLANCES BEHIND HIMSELF EVERY EIGHT SECONDS...

SCRIBBLE SCRIBBLE



OH OF ALL THE...

CHARACTER STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES, HUH...?



YOU WANNA WALK AROUND CONSTANTLY PERFORMING A SHORT LIST OF ACTIONS AND TAKING SPECIFIC PRECAUTIONS?

FINE!



I'LL TAKE ALL SUCH "DISTRACTIONS" INTO ACCOUNT IN THE FUTURE.

YOU KNOW -- WHEN SURPRISE, INITIATIVE AND ATTENTION TO DETAIL IS AN ISSUE...

SOUNDS FAIR TO ME...

HOW IS BEING CAUTIOUS A DISTRACTION?

"WHAT THE HELL DO YOU THINK THOSE DISGRUNTLED HIRELING TABLES ARE FOR? HUH? EVERY TIME YOU'RE TOO HARD ON ONE OF THE HIRELINGS, B.A. IS OVER THERE ROLLING DICE TO BEAT THE BAND. IT'S LIKE FEEDING A BELT OF AMMO TO A MONKEY ARMED WITH A FIFTY CALIBER MACHINE GUN."

—Brian Van Hoose, KODT Issue #82, The Dad Factor...