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Dreadwood, Missouri

by Jason Walters

Dreadwood, Missouri is a one-shot *Western Hero* adventure for between five and seven players which uses pregenerated characters based on real historical figures. These are rough and dangerous men, hunted fugitives who, in their desperation to escape a group of relentless pursuers, must brave a ruined town filled with restless, malevolent undead creatures bent upon wreaking a terrible vengeance upon the PCs. Their only ally in this reckless undertaking is a mysterious Indian medicine man who, incidentally, may be an incarnation of the ancient Roman god Janus.

The adventure is essentially a morality play intended to teach the players that sometimes the only way to defeat a great evil is with, well, yet more evil. The Medicine Man, who intercepts the PCs at a dismal crossroads in a cursed natural maze, makes it clear that he has few delusions about the nature of his chosen champions. They are hard, callous veterans of Bloody Missouri; a fratricidal guerilla conflict which was going strong years before the American Civil War even formally broke out. After half a decade of visiting murder and destruction upon the homesteads of Union sympathizers along the Kansas border, they find themselves isolated and surrounded in the smoldering ruins of their Confederate dream. Chased ceaselessly across Missouri into the brambles and bayous of a then notoriously dangerous Cedar County, they are desperately in need of food, ammunition, liquor, and fresh horses. They must acquire all four of these precious commodities if they hope to make it out of a final deathtrap of swamp, pinewood, and bramble, and into the seemingly endless open planes of the Nebraska Territory, where they can begin a new life free of the taint of their misdeeds.

The players have to guide their characters through a series of encounters with the unnatural beings who inhabit Dreadwood, ranging from the necromantic to the demonic. These entities, victims of a previous Confederate attack, are eager for revenge not only against the living but most especially against the *Southern* living – a category into which the player characters most emphatically fall. Players should be properly motivated to “get into” their historical characters, if in only a stereotypical sort of way. For example, suggest that they speak with outrageous and outdated “Foghorn Leghorn” accents, make pseudo-Clint Eastwood comments, act ridiculously gun-happy and/or drunk, and so forth. They should be encouraged to actualize their “inner redneck” during the course of the adventure. A few pertinent “yee-haws” should be strongly encouraged, especially during battle scenes.

The GM should take several period-specific technical matters into account when running this game. The bullet was a relatively new and expensive technology during the Civil War (the revolver had only been invented a few scant decades before). The characters all have fairly primitive “cap-and-ball” weapons which were loaded by hand using a time-consuming four-step process that *cannot* be replicated during combat. Each of them only has a few rounds left when the adventure begins, and that’s all they get until they discover more in town. You should also note that a majority of the characters have only loaded five of the six cylinders in their revolvers. This was commonly done for safety reasons; as the old “cap-and-ball” black powder weapons were quite volatile, it was considered best to leave the hammer on an empty chamber. The only character who is crazy enough to break this basic safety rule is Jesse James – known to his friends as “Dang” after an amusing incident in which he shot off the end of one of his fingers. Roll a 1d6 anytime Jesse’s player opens his mouth. If one of his guns is holstered and you rolled a one, he has shot himself by accident.

Battleforge

by W. Jason Allen

Background/History: Jake Sullivan’s hands glowed red with power as he focused his will into the long sword he had recently taken hot from the forge. The glow spread from his hands to the blade, suffusing the sword from pommel to point, then slowly fading to nothing. Grinning, Jake hefted the blade, and it burst into flame. Satisfied, he placed it carefully on a rack, next to other items he had recently empowered. Soon he would be ready to seek his vengeance.

As he cleaned the forge-soot from his face, Jake recalled how he grew up in a small town deep in the Midwest, hating every moment. The only joy he found was in blacksmithing, working for a local historical museum. His parents disapproved of his learning such a “useless” skill; they wanted him to be an engineer, or something useful and profitable. Jake just enjoyed making things with his own two hands. Working the forge made him feel complete somehow.

One day, as Jake tended the forge by himself, a large, well-built man with a thick black beard entered the shop. He remembered it as though it were yesterday: “You, lad. Who runs this establishment?”

Jake frowned. The man’s speech marked him as a foreigner, probably a Scot, though he couldn’t quite place the accent. He didn’t like the way the man called him “lad.” Jake was nineteen, a man grown! “My manager does, sir. But he’s old at a meeting right now. Something I can do for you?” Jake just wanted him to leave.

“Can ye forge shoes?”

“Shoes?” Jake blinked in confusion.

“Horseshoes, lad. M’ horse threw a shoe and I couldna find the thing. I need ye ta make me a new one, if’n yer master’s nae here ta do it.”

“Well, yeah, I can make horseshoes. You just caught me by surprise, that’s all. Most people who need them mail order their horseshoes. It’s cheaper.”

The man chuckled. “Well, I’m not most people, lad. Come check m’ horse, then get to makin’ that shoe. I have things ta be about, and standing here is’na gettin’ ’em done.”

Jake got to work making the horseshoe. He ended up making a whole set, as the shoes that hadn’t been thrown needed to be replaced. They were severely worn, as if they hadn’t been made to withstand being ridden on pavement. Before he realized it, the set was done and on the horse’s hooves.

“Lad, ye have the knack of forging. What’s yer name?”

“Jake, sir. Jake Sullivan.”

The man smiled. “And yer polite, even when ye’d rather a stranger like me be off and away. Dinna be offended, lad. Yer thoughts were plain

on yer face. Here, take ye this.” He handed Jake a small leather pouch that jingled when he took it.

“What is it?”

“Payment fer a job well done. Dinna open it now; ye’ll know when. And get used ta making things for others, young Jake. Yer good at it, and it’s a terrible skill ta waste.” The bearded man was gone before Jake thought to ask his name.

That night, Jake couldn’t sleep. Restless, he finally got out of bed and went outside. He sat on a stump in the backyard, staring out into the night, when he realized the leather pouch was there on the stump next to him. Jake didn’t remember bringing it out with him, yet there it was. Jake picked it up and opened it without thinking, pulling out the gold coins within.

“Good evening, young Jake.”

Jake yelped in fright, the coins flying everywhere. It was the bearded man, sitting on his horse, suddenly there with no sound of approach.

“Who – who are you?”

“I have been known by many names, Jake. Ye may call me Wayland.”

“What do you want from me?”

Wayland smiled. “I want nothing from ye, lad. Rather, I wish to give ye something. The forging of the horseshoes was but a test. While ye worked, I observed. Ye have a rare talent for making things. Ye put yourself into whatever it is yer makin’, and that’s rare in this day. The smiths of old could make things of power by doing as ye did. Alas, that talent is all but lost now.” He eyed Jake carefully, as though measuring him somehow.

“Will ye learn from me, lad? I can teach ye to imbue magic inta everythin’ ye make. Only a handful in this age have the talent fer it, and yours is the strongest I’ve yet seen. What do ye say lad? Will ye become a true smith?”

“I’d like that. All my parents can talk about is how I should go to college and learn some real skills I can make money with. I don’t care much about making money, really. I just enjoy making things. But I can’t just disappear. What will happen to them if I leave?”

“Well, they’ll miss ye, lad, as all parents do when their sons leave home. They want what’s best for ye, and in this day, that means being wealthy. Once I’ve taught ye, yer talents will be much sought after. Wealth will likely be yours whether ye want it or no.”

Jake grinned, realizing the potential of showing his parents that his own dreams could be of value, despite what they thought. “All right, Wayland. I’ll go with you.

BATTLEFORGE PLOT SEEDS

The largest museum in town is featuring a new exhibit – rare gems from around the world. Security will be extra tight, but Battleforge is confident he and a few friends can get the goods. Will the PCs arrive in time to stop him?

A PC pauses his patrol when someone yells for help from a nearby alleyway. Three street thugs threaten a terrified citizen! When he moves to aid the hapless victim, one of the thugs points a dagger at him – and the dagger shoots a bolt of lightning, knocking the hero through a wall. Where did they get such a dangerous weapon? Has Battleforge lowered his prices? Or is a more dire plot about to unfold?

Battleforge returns home one night to find his items of power missing. He’s been robbed! Respecting the PCs despite their clashes in the past, he goes to them for help in reclaiming his property. Will they help him, or seize the chance to bring Battleforge to justice? Who raided his forge, and what all did they get?