

Chapter 7 Show Notes

SUMMARY

Valerian's team have penetrated into the very heart of their enemy's stronghold. Now they must enter the Great Machine itself, if they are to discover the secret of the infernal powder. But what horrors will they face, and what sacrifices will they be prepared to make in return for knowledge?

Links

Transcript:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1FeFJ8Fem1tHy0eHYBoSNWvTdoMN8vudAti7oESamfD8/edit?usp=sharing>

All music is royalty-free, and courtesy of Pixabay: <https://pixabay.com/music/>

Twitter @TheLoneAdv

Email TheLoneAdv@gmail.com

Podbean <https://theloneadventurer.podbean.com/>

Blog <https://carlillustration.wordpress.com/>

Blades in the Dark: <https://www.evilhat.com/home/blades-in-the-dark/>

Alone in the Dark:

<https://www.drivethrurpg.com/product/282013/Alone-in-the-Dark-Solo-Rules-for-Blades-in-the-Dark>

Solo Oracles:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1J_GVM_dVe3YMYAQaP-KIqOC91vFk56y9HOPKMybY_sk/edit?usp=sharing

Faction clocks:

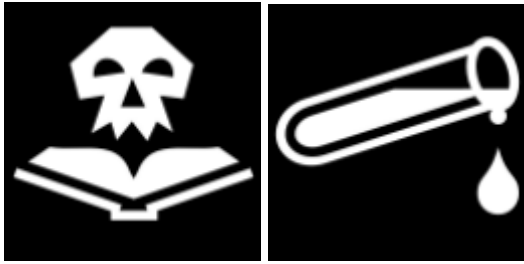
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1KWuAPc4iv7hEIXLepV0XTqVP9IRAdNsdqwD1wSDyAys/edit?usp=sharing>

Mechanics

Bravo Team

CLOCK: Uncover the source of the Powder 8/12

GM ORACLE: Give or take a resource or an opportunity: 361. 141 (Skull reading book, dripping test tube)



Flint studying Sacred Machine Oil in the Lever's sacred book

SIMPLE Q: Does he learn anything useful? Unlikely: 6 Yes, and...

COMPLEX Q: What does he learn? 524, 441 (Bleeding egg, 2 arrow bow)

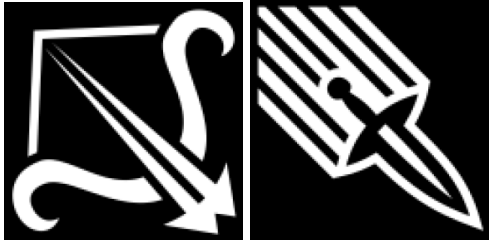


The cultists believe the machine is alive, and that the oil is like it's blood. Those that can survive ingesting it can become living weapons, part of the machine.

ACTION: Trace Hunt (Risky) explore the Machine, Flint Assist (1 Stress), reduced Effect: 2d+1d: 6,1,6 Crit!

CLOCK: Uncover the source of the Powder 10/12

COMPLEX Q: What do they find? 441, 416 (2 arrow bow, flying dagger)

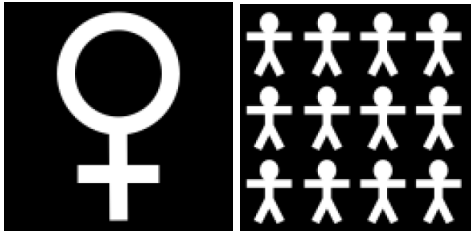


Killing Grounds (kills some rats but not others)

ACTION: Trace Prowl (Risky) bypass the killing field, Push (2 Stress), Flint Assist (1 Stress), reduced Effect: 2d+1d+1d: 4,5,6,4: Success

CLOCK: Uncover the source of the Powder 11/12

COMPLEX Q: What does she find? 642, 523 (female symbol, many people)



The Priestesses of the Cult (only women can pass the killing grounds)

ACTION: Trace Survey (Desperate), Push (2 Stress) locate the fracture: 1d+1d: 4,4 Success & consequence: Lose Something Important:

CLOCK: Uncover the source of the Powder 12/12

Rupture to the Demon Dimensions: demons emerge, and are blasted to dust by the priestess' ritual.

SIMPLE Q: Is the something lost Flint? 5,2: Yes, but

COMPLEX Q: What do you mean, But? 442, 562 (spooky man, poisonous mushroom)



He's not dead. Flint drinks Machine oil, and is transformed

CHAPTER 7 A Handful of Dust

TEASER

The crew have been wandering the inner workings of the Great Machine for what seems like hours, clambering over ducts and pipes, squeezing through ventilation gaps, evading the mechanical maintenance and repair units that scramble, spider-like through the heart of the vast construction. The crew are tiring, and tempers are wearing thin. Trace and Valerian, true to form, have been bickering pretty much non-stop since they entered.

Not that this has bothered Flint. Taking up the rear, he has been reading as he has been walking, absorbed in the thick book that had been chained around the waist of Lever 42. This volume, the Codex Mechanicus, is now chained around his waist, and it makes for fascinating reading. According to the book, the entirety of the Great Machine is in some way alive, linked to the constructs that scuttle around and within it, and through their ministrations constantly growing and changing, all for some impenetrably mysterious purpose.

The machine oil that they had encountered earlier is particularly fascinating. This highly toxic fluid really does appear to function like the very life essence of the machine, constantly pumping through its endless cables and conduits like blood pumping through veins. And what's more, those fanatics at the security checkpoint had not been entirely wrong; the book describes how some rare individuals can actually survive ingesting the oil, and how, in so doing, they become living, weaponized extensions of the machine, somehow connected to it, and empowered by it.

He looks up, considering sharing what he has learned with his companions. Up ahead, Trace has finally had enough. "Valerian, you have absolutely no clue where you are going. You're leading us in circles, you halfwit!"

Valerian bristles. "Halfwit, is it? Better half a wit than none at all! You've done nothing but carp and moan since we started this mission! I'd like to see you navigate this labyrinth!"

"If I had the slightest faith you'd listen to anything other than the sound of your own voice, I'd do so with pleasure!"

Flint sighs, and returns to his reading.

INTRO MUSIC/ VOICEOVER

Hello and welcome to The Lone Adventurer, an actual play solo RPG podcast with me, Carl White. I will be your narrator, your Game Master and your guide as we follow our heroes on their journey into the unknown. For this game I will be using the Blades in the Dark ruleset, as well as a variety of other systems, tools and tables, as they take my fancy.

A word of warning; the following scenes may contain mature themes and disturbing imagery. Listener discretion is advised.

The adventure continues.

RECAP

Last time, on the Lone Adventurer, Alpha team's extraction mission went south, quite literally. With the Mustang Casino in freefall, everyone on board intent on killing everyone else in an attempt to get off the falling vessel, and vampires feasting on the ensuing carnage, the crew found themselves face to face with Lord Tortemus. In a bid to escape with their targets they blew a hole in the side of the casino and leaped out, urging the Vale Sisters to follow. But Tortemus and his pet confounded their plans. Although the crew were able to escape on their airship, they had failed to capture the sisters, and earned a powerful enemy.

They can only pray Valerian and his team have better luck.

BEHIND THE CURTAIN

Needless to say, the final roll of the last session did not go according to plan. I only needed a 4+ on any of the 4 dice I rolled for my final move, and I managed nothing better than a 2. Mission failed.

Although no-one fully maxed out on Stress and was lost during that score, everyone ended up within one Stress mark of that point; there was nothing left in the tank by the end. It went right down to the wire, and in the end they just couldn't quite pull it off.

Not that I'm overly upset by that; part of the fun of playing any RPG, solo included, is that constant risk of death or disaster, as well as the possibility of triumph. And from a narrative perspective, things have moved forward plenty. Although the lead into the Unseen is a bust we have plenty of new developments to keep the story moving forwards. Not least, a new plot thread regarding the origin of the pathogen that killed the Whisperer, and a couple of dangerous new foes.

I'm glad Lord Tortemus came into the endgame. When I introduced him at the start of the score, as a result of a random roll, I had no idea what part he would play, or why he was there. The answers to those questions emerged naturally from the gameplay, and built to a satisfying natural conclusion. Chekhov's vampire paid off.

You're probably familiar with the concept of Chekhov's gun. This is how the TV Tropes website describes it.

Anton Chekhov, master of the short story, gave this advice: If something is not essential, don't include it in the story. So an insignificant object that appears should later turn out to be important. For example, a character may find a mysterious necklace that turns out to be the power source to the Doomsday Device, but at the time of finding the object, it doesn't seem important. The necklace was essential to the story, but its introduction downplayed its importance. Chekhov's advice wasn't necessarily to conceal importance, but to just not spend time on things that aren't important.

A lot of people consider the phrase "Chekhov's gun" synonymous with foreshadowing, and both terms are related. A gun that goes off in the third act but hasn't been in the play at all before, is going to feel less satisfying.

Of course, that can be tricky in a solo RPG, where a lot of the content that crops up is entirely random, the results of prompts from oracles. It can be difficult not to end up with a thousand random loose ends everywhere, with none of them paying off. That's why it's so important, when looking at new oracle prompts, for the soloist to try and work out ways that this new prompt might tie into existing threads, because when the stars align, and the threads merge into one, it feels immensely satisfying.

The TV Tropes site, by the way, is always a fabulous destination if you're in the market for some internet rabbit-holing, and you have an hour or six to kill.

So with Alpha team's score a bust, it's all down to Bravo team. Can Valerian's well-oiled unit of highly skilled professionals succeed where Alpha Team failed?

It's not looking too promising so far.

SCENE

"You see, what did I tell you?"

From their vantage point, atop some throbbing engine of untold purpose, the trio peer down over what, at first glance, appears to be a scene of stillness and calm. A perfectly circular brass plateau, perhaps two hundred feet in diameter, surrounded by a series of elaborate-fashioned steel pillars. It is scarred here and there with scorch marks, and sits within a vast domed space, a tangle of esoteric machinery lining the circumference of the chamber. At the very center of the brass table, they can make out a spiralling stairwell, twisting down into darkness beneath a shining steel cage-like dome.

Valerian pushes up his mask. He does not look impressed. "I have no idea, I was too busy enjoying the sound of my own inner monologue. Remind me, Trace, what did you tell me, and how does it relate to this...whatever it is?"

Trace sighs, and speaks as she would to a small, ignorant child. Which is to say, rudely, and with the ever-present threat of a smart cuff round the ear if they don't buck their ideas up. "I told you that by following the core conduits we would find the Heart of the machine. You know? The place the Lever told us about?"

She ignores Valerian's non-committal shrug, and continues; "This is it; below the brass plateau lies the heart itself, and the point of fracture. The source, if that fat fool was to be believed, of the powder. So put that mask back on before someone sees you, and get a move on!"

Flint nods, pointing to the corroborating page in the Codex. "Fine," Valerian sighs, starting to clamber down. "Though this damn mask itches like hell. Lead on, dear Trace, what's the worst that could happen?"

As if on cue, a pair of rats emerges from beneath a set of copper coils, and scuttle at speed out and onto the brass plate. There is a low hum, then a sparking of arcanicity that leaps from pillar to pillar. The hum pitch-shifts into a whine, and the bright arcing light lances out, converging from multiple pillars onto one of the rats. There's a blinding flash, and when their eyes clear, there is just one rat left on the plate. It sniffs curiously at the blackened scorching beside it, then hurries off, as the hum from the pillars subsides.

"And... that's the worst that could happen. Delightful as your plan is, Trace, I think I'm going to have to pass. Any other brilliant ideas? Perhaps you could just stab me repeatedly, or push me off the edge, to fall to my doom. That at least would take the guesswork out of it."

Trace snarls. "Don't think I'm not tempted, Valerian. But you saw yourself, only one of the rats was destroyed. That means there's a chance of getting across..."

“A 50/50 chance!” Valerian splutters. “Even assuming it works the same on people as it works on rats! I think I’d prefer to take my chances with that damned machine oil! I tell you what, Trace, if you think this is such a great idea, please, be my guest. Ladies first, and all that.”

“Fine!” Trace barks. “At this point, even getting blasted into oblivion would be preferable to listening to any more of your incessant whining!”

Flint places a hand on Trace’s shoulder, and points to a page in the Codex. Trace scans the text, then straightens and glowers at Valerian. “It seems you’re off the hook, Valerian, and so am I. If Flint’s book is to be believed, where I’m going, you can’t follow. Try not to drive Flint as crazy as you’ve been driving me for the last three hours.”

And with that, she’s off.

BEHIND THE CURTAIN

One of the benefits of playing the game component first, and then coming back to fill in the narrative, is that later events or oracle prompts can then inform earlier elements of the gameplay.

This scene was a case in point. I rolled a few actions that moved me closer to the mission conclusion, but also a few complex questions that provided me with fairly ambiguous results. Enough to have a loose sense of the story’s direction, but not enough to really make a lot of sense.

That was, until I rolled for events in the next scene. That provided me with a picture prompt that suddenly clarified what was happening in this part of the story. That left me to fill in the How, based on what I knew so far, and what I could imagine or extrapolate. I’m not going to go into it now, but I’ll revisit this in the next break, and hopefully make some sense of all this elliptical explanation that doesn’t actually explain anything.

What I will provide a bit more information on, is where Trace’s book came from.

I mentioned this a while back, but to keep the unpredictability level up, I’ve taken to rolling for scene alterations at the start of each major new scene. I did so for Bravo team for this session, and the scene was indeed altered; the GM Oracle informed me that I was to give or take the crew a resource or opportunity. I then rolled a couple of images, and got a skull reading a book, and a test tube. I figured the skull looked a bit like a cultist mask, and the rest just sort of fell into place. Trace now had a high priest’s Bible of the Great Machine. A couple more rolls informed me that the book was not just a collection of random deranged ravings, but that it was in fact quite useful, and was able to provide insights into their enemy and their environment.

This book has then become a narrative thread I’ve been able to reference several times subsequently in the scene. It has served twice to explain how Twist has assisted his allies with their own rolls, for example.

The party are really close to completing their mission now. 11 out of 12 clock segments marked, with only one more required to discover the source of the Infernal Powder. Surely they are not going to completely blow it at the very end, like their unfortunate colleagues in Alpha Team?

Let's find out.

SCENE

Trace cautiously descends the spiral staircase, circling a central steel pillar, her heart beating heavy against her ribs. For all her vitriol and bravado, she would much, much rather she wasn't alone in the dark right now, descending into the belly of the beast. But she is where she is, and carping about it isn't going to make it any easier. They have a perfectly serviceable Valerian for that sort of thing. She allows herself a wicked smirk at the idea of Valerian in her position right now. The smug arrogant prick would no doubt have wet himself by this point. Some people just have no professionalism. And frankly she has no idea how Flint would react. He's an odd one, is Flint. No, she's the best suited for this, even if it wasn't for the pillars. Best she just gets the job done, and gets out without getting herself killed.

The stairs seem to descend forever, but at last she sees a dim light below. The light grows brighter as moves carefully down the steps, doing her utmost to keep her footfalls cushioned and silent. A faint sound reaches her ears; metal on metal, and voices too, but repetitive, a pattern she can't quite make out.

The stairs terminate at a central landing, overlooking a hexagonal chamber. The pillar extends some 15 feet further, protruding from the base of the platform. Gantries lead off left and right to the chamber walls, with twin sets of stairs spiralling around to it's base. An eerie light, somehow sickly and disconcerting, waxes and wanes, from the center of the chamber floor, though Trace finds it hard to look upon. It feels wrong, somehow, something not meant to be seen. Instead she looks at the group that surround the lightsource, a ring of Cultists, arms upraised, dancing and chanting strange machinist liturgies.

No, she realises, not just any Cultists. Most Machine Cultists, ashamed of their human flesh, hide their bodies beneath featureless masks, gloves, boots and heavy robes, occasionally attaching clumsy approximations of mechanical limbs. It is impossible to deduce their sex.

These supplicants are different. They are maskless, clad in flowing, loose silks, patterned with symbols of the machine, that reveal far more flesh than is usual for Machine Cultists. Necklaces and bracelets of bolts and washers swing about them as they dance, and their bodies, faces and hair are painted silver, and they are all, unmistakable, female.

Wait, is that actually silver paint? Trace, hidden in the shadows, peers closer, and her stomach tightens. The priestesses' bodies are made up of multiple overlapping segments, with fine joints visible between them. The same with the faces. Even the hair, though flowing, is too thick, it moves wrongly. What she had taken for flesh is in fact living, flexible metal. Whatever these priestesses are, they are not human. At least, not any more.

She forces herself to look away, to drag her reluctant gaze to the lurid rent in reality at the heart of the chamber. Though it sickens her to look at it, and though her mind conspires to slide her gaze away, she grits her teeth and holds on.

Which means she is staring directly at the portal when the Machine Priestesses' chanting rises in intensity. The fissure grows, begins to pulse obscenely in time to their rhythm, and then, as the chanting reaches a crescendo, it spasms, vomiting forth a form that causes Trace to bite down on her own arm hard enough to draw blood, in a desperate attempt to avoid screaming or losing her mind.

The thing is easily twelve feet tall, it's body broad and heavily muscled. She struggles to make sense of its physiology; there are too many arms, and the form seems horribly twisted and distended. Its mottled red skin is wrinkled, cracked and seeping. The unspeakable thing lifts its head and roars, the mouth filled with far too many needle-like teeth.

Even over that ear-splitting roar, a sound that writhes in her guts and fills her mind with maggots, there's a penetrating hum, one that rises in pitch until it feels as though Trace's head is going to split. Every hair on her head stands on end, and her teeth seem to rattle in her jaw. Then, with a discharge that momentarily blinds and deafens her, a raw bolt of focussed arcanicity blasts downwards from the central steel column. No, not a column, Trace realises dimly. A conduit, channelling the power of the pillars and the brass plate up above down into this summoning chamber.

The monstrous thing is caught in the blast, its piercing shriek cutting off suddenly as the creature is blasted utterly apart. In the total silence that follows, a fine red sand rains down over the chamber floor, dusting the entire space scarlet. The portal has shrunk to a mere crack. In its mournful light, hatches open around the chamber and six mechanisms emerge, scuttling on spider-like steel limbs, with multiple hinged appendages, sucking the dust up and into slowly inflating sacks attached to their carapaces. Eventually, their task complete, they vanish back within the hatches once more.

The priestesses, who have remained kneeling and motionless in the gloom, now rise as one. Their chant begins again, softly at first, and the ritual begins anew.

BEHIND THE SCENES

So it turns that an assumption I had long held, and an assumption that Mina had made also, was entirely incorrect.

Mina had asked Ouma Jukti, way back in series 1 chapter 12, where the old woman had found the Infernal Powder that she was supplying to the Machine Cult. Jukti dodged the question naturally, but now we know the real reason she was so evasive; she and the Piperunners were never in fact the source of the powder. The cult themselves were.

The realisation of that fact began for me during Chapter 5 of this series, while Valerian and crew were searching for clues in the hall of the Great Machine. Valerian sweet-talked the priest, Lever 42, hoping to gain some insight into where the cult were getting the powder from. The answer was a shattered pane of glass, and a heart surrounded by electricity. That told me that the powder was not coming from outside the cult, but within the heart of the machine itself. The shattered glass, considered in that context, clearly indicated a planar fracture or portal.

The mecha-priestesses summoning demons emerged from a few inputs. Firstly, before rolling for Trace's final Survey action, I asked what she found, and got an image of multiple people, and a female symbol. That suggested priestesses of the cult. I combined that with the information Flint had learned in the teaser of this episode, to turn them into priestesses made of living metal. I also knew from the established fiction of my game that Infernal Powder was called that because of its source; it was the powdered remains of actual demons. As Doctor Kropp explained back in Chapter 20 of Series 1:

"The clue is in the name. Infernal Powder is not just a fanciful moniker; the stuff really is infernal in origin. Goodness only knows where it's being sourced from. The manufacturing process must really be quite something..."

I said we'd come back to the point about a later prompt informing earlier events in the narrative; and this is what I was referring to. The female symbol was the key; this part of the machine had been constructed (or perhaps had constructed itself, who knows?), to destroy anything male. So a female rat, and Trace, and the priestesses could pass the charging area and reach the summoning chamber, but a male rat, and more to the point, a summoned male demon, would be obliterated. That meant that Trace was on her own for this one, but thankfully her Action roll, even without any assists, did not result in the ignominious failure that Alpha team suffered.

So, with that final roll made, the source of the powder has been discovered, and everyone can pack up and go home, slapping themselves on the back and congratulating themselves for a job well done, right?

Well, sadly, no. Of course it's not that easy. You see, I did roll a success for that final Action, but it was a success with a Consequence, and set against a Desperate position. That means that the consequence, whatever it is, is going to sting.

Let's find out what the dice have in store.

SCENE

The climb back up the endless staircase is pure torture. Trace's legs are shaking, and not just from the considerable exertion.

Trace is a pragmatist, always has been. You take a job, you get it done, you get paid, and if there's dark shit to deal with on the way, well, that's just cost of doing business. And there is anything that really rattles her, well, that's a private matter between her and Fove, the Trickster. It's a philosophy that has seen her right her whole life.

But in her whole life she has never seen sights to shake her as deeply as what she has seen today. The Hall and the Great Machine were bad enough; she'd thought the Machine Cult merely a deranged gang of crackpots, nothing more, but the immensity, the majesty of this... thing, that sits unknown and unknowable beneath the city, beneath her city... that's a hard thing to fit in your mind. That alone has shaken her to her core.

But what puts her heart in her mouth, and sets her legs trembling beneath her like those of a newborn calf, is what she has seen down there. She has heard tales of demons, or course, of monsters and creatures of magic. If Tatters is to be believed, there is an entire world of the things, frantically trying to claw their way into our own.

But to hear a thing, and to see it with your own eyes, those are two very different matters. In the space of a few short minutes her whole world has been upended, her every belief in the way things are, utterly confounded. There are forces at work in the world far, far beyond her comprehension, and that stark realisation, that confrontation with the pitiable limits of her understanding, leave her feeling small, and very afraid. She feels like she's going to be sick, and has to take off her mask, but she presses on, reciting a prayer to Fove over and over in her mind.

Hail to You Ever-Changing One,
To all Your blessings known
To Wyrð that You have made with us
To Wyrð that will be wove

Perhaps it is the prayer, perhaps it is her own resilience, but at last she emerges onto the platform, and all but stumbles across it towards her companions.

She can sense something is wrong before she reaches them. Valerian is standing over a kneeling Flint, both with their backs to her, though it is plain from his body language he's in some distress. Both their masks lie discarded.

"What is it, Valerian? What's happened?" Trace asks, feeling an almost guilty relief at having something mundane to focus on.

Valerian is wringing his hands as he turns to her. "I tried to stop him, Trace, I really did! But he was raving about seeing the Truth, and kept saying that that damned book had shown him the way..."

Trace pushes Valerian aside and stands before Flint. Any relief she might have felt drains away, leaving her chilled. Flint is kneeling, a dagger in one hand, a severed tube in the other, from which tar-like black oil is leaking, pooling around his knees. He is utterly motionless, completely unresponsive. There is more of the oil smeared and dripping from his chin, and staining down the front of his tunic. All around him, wires and cables have sprouted from between the steel grating upon which he kneels, twisting around his limbs, insinuating themselves into gaps in his clothing, or puncturing straight through robes and into the body in multiple places.

His eyes are gone, and in their place two featureless steel orbs stare blankly. Trace's skin is flaking away in places, revealing gleaming metal beneath. Even as she watches, the flesh of his cheek desiccates, and sloughs away into dust.

"I don't know what to do!" Valerian has never looked so lost, so uncertain. "What do we do, Trace?"

Trace meets his eyes, and grips his hand. "Run, Valerian. We run."

OUTRO MUSIC

You have been listening to the Lone Adventurer, a solo RPG podcast, played, written and performed by me, Carl White.

If you've enjoyed this episode please consider telling your friends about it, or leaving a 5 star review wherever you get your podcasts. It really is a huge help.

You can find me on Twitter @TheLoneAdv, email me at TheLoneAdv@gmail.com, or follow my blog at carlillustration.wordpress.com/

You can find shownotes for this episode and all the others at the loneadventurer.podbean.com, where I include any links mentioned in the episode, as well as mechanics information. I also include a link to a full episode transcript. The story will continue in the next episode of the Lone Adventurer.

Thank you for listening.