

Chapter 3 - Blood on the Sand

Show Notes

Summary

Mara and the Spider have a mission of their own; to track down the demon Setarra, save Tatters if possible, and destroy the demon if not.

No pressure.

Links

Transcript:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1I9jPmLdwoxORzIsHCpPDjOwc6l5V99LCxPTIdv7Kulg/edit?usp=sharing>

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

Email TheLoneAdv@gmail.com

BlueSky: [@theloneadventurer.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/theloneadventurer.bsky.social)

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

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

The Great Machine:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1m7fObixXE7z_-9MXVSkLZGa8VcoEQt83j3f6gFw2vgI/edit?usp=sharing

The Deep Oracle Online: <https://perchance.org/tla-deep-oracle>

Setarra on the Loose

- Spider
- Mara

Who is the Spider's contact?

- Three of Wands: Foresight, planning, Progression
- The High Priestess (reversed): Irrationality, denial, secrets

Heart of Snow, the Doomsinger (three of Wands).

Session start:

- 2 Hope for each PC
- 2 Fear for GM

Does the scene begin as expected? Rendezvous with Heart of Snow: No, but

- Six of Swords (reversed): Resistance, reluctance, turmoil
- Wheel of Fortune (reversed): Destiny, bad luck, a turning point

He does not attend in person. He is wary of helping: this path is dangerous, it entails bad fate.

Teaser

"Are you sure this contact of yours is going to show?"

Mara Vale rubs her hands against the late autumnal chill, and sweeps the darkened square with a practiced eye for the umpteenth time that evening. Still no-one. Save for the fountain, the occasional Bluecoat patrol enforcing an ill-observed curfew, and the odd mangy alley-cat out chancing its luck, there is precious little to be seen on the streets at this time of night.

Except for those engaged in nefarious purposes, of course.

The Spider sighs. This was always going to be a long shot, and if she's honest, she's not wholly certain it's a long shot that she wants to pay off.

But if they want to track Tatters down, or rather, the demonic abomination that has co-opted her body, certain sacrifices must be made. She can think of no-one else to turn to for aid in a matter like this, even if the price of that aid is likely to be high.

"Honestly, I have no idea, Mara. And even if they do show, I have no idea if we can trust them. The last two encounters we've had have proved... challenging."

"Is that any way to speak of an old friend, little spider?"

The pair spin around in shock. The words, deep and resonant, have come from directly behind them, but when they turn there is nothing there, save the steady stream of water flowing from the old stone fountain.

The Spider narrows her eyes. There, partially visible in the curtain of water, rough features can be made out, formed from the water itself. A smiling face she recognises all too well.

“Heart of Snow. Delighted you could join us.”

Intro

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 Daggerheart 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...

acting on intel provided by Digby, Valerian and Mina teleported into the House of Whispers. There, they hoped to discover insights into the Unseen conspiracy, which they felt certain lay within Alexis' safe.

But they have reckoned without the House's countermeasures.

The desk animates and turns into a death machine. The picture covering the safe grows laser eyes. Sergeant Sturn bursts in with a squad of vengeful guards. And Mina, despite inhabiting Barbican's steel form, goes down under a hail of blows.

Behind The Curtain

Did I say we'd learn of Mina and Valerian's fate this episode? Well, it turns out I'm a filthy rotten liar. This should come as no great surprise to long time listeners, I do have plenty of form, after all.

Instead of lancing the tension on that narrative boil, I'm going to leave their narrative thread to lie fallow for a little while longer, and turn instead to the quest for Tatters.

When building the Spider as a Daggerheart character, I decided to create her as a Syndicate rogue. That gave her a subclass ability of having a contact in the city with useful information, which seemed fitting.

I asked my Deep Oracle who that contact was, and got

- Three of Wands: Foresight, planning, Progression
- The High Priestess (reversed): Irrationality, denial, secrets

It was that word foresight that got me. Working to the principle of leaning into the established fiction, my thoughts leaped at once to my favourite finagler of fate, the doyen of Doom himself, Heart of Snow.

As an NPC with plenty of prior history with The Spider, as well as a proven wielder of powers arcane, this seemed like a logical candidate for demon-dominated Tatters tracking.

And because I'd drawn a Wands card that aligned nicely with an NPC, I assigned the Three of Wands to Heart of Snow. If ever I draw that card again, if it makes sense in the fiction, it will link in some way to this NPC.

I've done the same for each of my 4 story threads: PCs, NPCs, themes and perils. Future draws of the cards linked to those threads will call upon them, in addition to their own specific card meaning.

But enough of my solo RPG rules. If you want a better view of those, the links in the shownotes are your friends, and will provide you with all the crunchy mechanical under the hood detail your nerdy heart could desire.

Instead, it's time to return to our tale, and to learn just exactly how the ever-mercurial Heart of Snow intends to make things more complicated for our party.

Because let's face facts, he's never going to make them easier, is he?

Scene 1

Spider: Presence check: target 20 (reluctant). I know Someone who does +2, ADV on rolls to persuade: Crit! +1 Hope

What is the price of his aid?

GM Move: spend a Fear (1): The price will be a favour: PC Marks a Stress

GM Fear: 1

“So, you seek my counsel. You would have me reveal the tangled strands of fate, and illuminate the path you are to tread, is that it, Little Spider?”

The Spider sighs. Things were ever thus with the Doomsinger. A dance that only he knows the steps to, and one which he delights in keeping utterly opaque.

“I have no doubt you know it to be so, Heart of Snow. You see a great deal, and in this case I suspect you have insight I need. I seek the whereabouts of my granddaughter, or at least that of the creature which now wears her flesh.”

The grin on the face in the fountain falters momentarily.

“This is no small thing you ask, Little Spider. No small matter, a demon walking loose in the mortal realm. Such steps twist the fabric, stretching it out of true. To touch such a thing is to invite disaster. Consequences shall ensue, of that you should be in no doubt.”

“Enough words!” Mara snaps, her nerves and patience stretched to breaking point. Talking faces in fountains are a good distance outside her comfort zone. “Will you help us or not?”

The Spider makes a small gesture, requesting Mara’s silence, which is grudgingly granted.

“I ask for your help in this matter, Heart of Snow. I recognise the danger, and would know the price of your aid.”

There is a long pause, during which neither Mara nor the Spider can be sure they still see the Doomsinger’s features.

Mara is on the verge of another outburst when Heart of Snow speaks again.

“I can help you, though it comes at considerable personal risk. And no price shall be asked, at least not yet. You shall, however, owe me a favour, Little Spider, to be collected when it best suits my purposes. And if this price is too steep to you, then let that be an end to our exchange of words.”

The Spider takes a slow, steadying breath. In a way, this is the worst of all possible outcomes. An uncertain cost, to be paid at an uncertain time. In agreeing to this, she is, in effect, accepting any price the Doomsinger cares to impose.

And yet... Tatiana.

How can she refuse?

"I accept" she whispers, and the smile in the fountain grows broader still.

"Very well, Little Spider. Our bargain is struck. Once more, fate's web tightens about you. How its strands bind us.

Now, listen closely..."

Behind The Curtain

As usual, I asked a question of the GM when this scene began.

Does the scene begin as expected, I asked, expecting this to be a straight up meeting with the Doomsinger.

The oracle response was No, but, indicating that there was a positive aspect to this not playing out exactly as expected.

A clarifying Deep Oracle roll gave me some insight into what was changed: there was resistance or reluctance indicated by a reversed six of swords, and suggestions of bad luck or destiny from a reversed wheel of fortune.

That, I decided, meant Heart of Snow was wary of helping. This path was dangerous, and he was not willing to attend the meeting in person.

That meant that when it came time for The Spider to make a Presence check, the target number was high: she needed a 20 to persuade him to help.

Thankfully, she rolled a Crit, so she gained a Hope, and his aid along with it. I figured there should be at least some consequence though, given all that buildup, so I paid a Fear to make a soft GM move, rolled for it, and got PC marks a Stress. That seemed about right.

Once again, my two PCs for the upcoming mission are a mix between more socially focussed and more martial. This time I've tried to build them both so that they each have something useful to do in either type of encounter, but we'll have to wait and see if my rebalancing work has done the trick.

While I feel pretty invested in each of the plot strands in play, I think this one has the greatest hold on me at the moment. Some of the others are about big, world-altering events, but this one is much more personal in scale. It's about trying to save a member of my party, and a member I have grown pretty attached to, particularly after playing so much of her in the last season.

How she might be saved, and whether that is even possible, remains entirely up in the air at the moment, which provides some wonderful tension for me as a player of this emerging tale.

I'm fascinated to hear what resonates most for you, as a listener. Is it the big, plot-heavy stuff? The small, intimate moments? The battles? The unforeseen twists? The ever-present risk of utter catastrophe?

I haven't mentioned it much over the past few seasons, but I think this is something worth saying; nothing creative thrives in a void.

From time to time, folks have reached out with kind words, supportive comments and constructive criticism. To those of you that have, thank you, sincerely. That sort of feedback is like oxygen to me. I know this is supposed to be a solo endeavour, but without those occasional reminders that there are people out there consuming what I'm creating, it can get a bit lonely, and the creative juices can dry up.

If you'd like to let me know what you think of the podcast, or just say hi and keep going, I'd greatly welcome your feedback. I include some options for getting in touch at the end of each episode, so if you'd like to get in touch, please do. I'll do my best to respond to every message I get.

One other thing to mention. This is not the only solo RPG podcast, by a long shot.

In recent episodes I've been including adverts for the Solo RPG Podcasters Network, a group that I'm delighted to be part of. Folks, being part of your community is more valuable to me than I can express. Thank you, folks.

If you haven't had a chance to check out the work of my fellow creatives from the network, please check out the ad at the end of the episode. These are some seriously talented people, providing stories to suit every taste.

OK. Enough of extolling the virtues of community.

Let's get back to things going spectacularly south.

Scene 2

Where does the Doomsinger send them?

- Five of Wands (reversed): Inner conflict, avoidance, release
- The Hanged Man: Sacrifice, submission, acceptance

Blood Pits

Is Setarra the new Pit Master? V likely: yes, but (something negative)

- The Empress (reversed): Dependence, imbalance, neglect
- Page of Pentacles: Manifestation, opportunity, development

Setarra as ring-master. The crowd are bent to his will, their blood-lust fueling his power, and he controls them.

GM Fear: 1

The roar of the crowd is a visceral, living thing.

It is the primal howl of a being possessed of a sentience and blood-lust all its own, entirely distinct from those of its component parts, those streams of thrill-seekers and vicarious glory-hunters who turn up in their thousands to attend the weekly gladiatorial battles at the Kyras Blood Pits.

En masse, they have become something else, something more. The baying for blood, the need for slaughter, is palpable, a glorious, infectious rage that holds everyone present in its sway. Even out here, away from the arenas themselves, a savage, gleeful fury has gripped the mob, at the prospect of seeing blood on the sand.

Pushing back against the press of the crowd, the Spider turns to Mara, deeply shocked. "Is... is it normally like this? So... wild?"

Mara shakes her head. She has been here before, of course. Many times, in the course of her employment. "It's normally pretty brutal, but nothing like this. The place has gone mad. The crowds, the mood. Everything has intensified, somehow..."

A fellow member of the crush turns to them, his eyes glazed with febrile elation, grinning wildly. "Amazing, right? Everyone thought this place was going to the dogs after Antiope did a runner, and Pit Master Glugark was found with his head blown off. But man, you should have been here last week! That new Pit Master, first night in charge, mind, he took this place back to the glory days! I've never seen nothin' like it! I tell you what, tonight's going to be fucking epic!"

Mara, her gut sinking, knows the answer before she asks the question, but feels compelled to ask it anyway.

“This new Pit Master, his name wouldn’t be...”

“Setarra!” the enthusiastic fight fan roars over the din of the crowd, and at once the chant is taken up.

“Setarra!
Setarra!
Setarra!”

The crowd is forced through a narrow choke point, and then spills out, cheering, into the ranked seating that surrounds the central sunken arena.

And there, on the far side of the stadium, in a gilded private box that wouldn’t seem incongruous if it were packed with royalty, sits the demon. It waves magnanimous at the crowd, basking in their adoration, taking occasional sips from a long tube that snakes up

Its unspeakable true form has been altered, morphed into something far more palatable for the human gaze. Its features are now almost inhumanly attractive, its body still huge, but now aesthetically sculpted. The cut of its clothes, the easy posture in that great golden chair, all speak of effortless power and control. But beneath all that artifice, the true nature of this monstrous creature cannot be hidden from those who have seen his underlying form.

Evil sits in plain sight, and it smiles.

Mara turns to her companion. “So it looks like finding the demon isn’t going to be the problem. What now?”

Behind the Curtain

What now indeed?

This latest development was delightful to experience in play, and gives me an opportunity to focus for a moment on the source of that enjoyment, my Deep Oracle.

This scene was the product of just two Deep Oracle questions.

First, I asked Where does the Doomsinger send my party to find Setarra.

My two card draws were the Five of Wands (reversed), and the Hanged Man. This suggested conflict, sacrifice and submission, and something about the combination of those words and the card images created an instant synaptic connection for me; I knew at once where the demon could be found.

We've seen the Blood Pits once before, back in Season 1, or at least the complex beneath them. On that occasion Mina killed the brutish ogre Grugark, the Pit Master, and given that this event probably only happened a month or so ago in game time, it didn't seem unreasonable for my next question to be Is Setarra the new Pit Master? And the answer was yes, but it's worse than that.

The nature of that something worse came from cards that spoke of Dependence, imbalance, Manifestation, opportunity, and development.

That suggested Setarra as some sort of demonic ring-master. The crowd were bent to his will, their blood-lust fueling his power.

It's probably worth giving a bit more of an explanation of how my Great Machine GM Emulator works.

It's effectively a set of modular components, the most central being the three oracles. The Simple Oracle, the Core Oracle and the Deep Oracle.

Alongside the oracles sit the Story lists: a list of PCs, NPCs, themes and Perils.

The Deep Oracle answers complex questions; the querant draws two tarot cards, and draws inspiration from the images they see, and associated keywords.

But In addition to the drawing of two cards, the Deep Oracle has a few other features.

Drawing doubles of a number card, for example two 8's, represent some sort of unexpected narrative twist.

If both cards come up from the same suit, that indicates a potential change to one of the story lists, and each story list has its associated suit. For example, two swords cards might

indicate a change to the Peril list, perhaps suggesting a new peril, or a change to an existing one.

So, what do the different suits represent?

Cups are the element of water; they're all about feelings, emotions, creativity, inspiration and relationships.

They are associated with the GM Character list. When a character is added to the list, a suitable Cups card is associated with them. Each subsequent time that card is drawn during a Deep Oracle query, it relates to that Great Machine Character, and the same is true for the other story lists.

Pentacles are the element of earth, the body, of being, making and objects, and they're associated with the Themes list.

Wands are the element of fire; the spirit, energy, motivation and passion, and are linked to the PC list.

And finally Swords are the element of air; the mind, thinking, movement, action and change, and they are associated with the Perils list.

No doubt we'll see how all that effects play soon enough.

But for now, it's time to learn the answer to Mara's question.

What now?

Scene 3:

Is there an opportunity here? 50/50: Yes, and

Disguise to get into the underworks: ADV (uncanny Disguise) v 14: 17

Encounter:

<https://freshcutgrass.app/encounter?data=eyJJuljoiVGhlIEJsb29klFBpdHMiLCJkljbeyJuljoiVGhlIEJsb29klFBpdHMiLCJhIjoid1V1ekZpcHIMWThjeTkzVkFBSEYRCIsInEiOjEsInUiOjAsImkiOlt7Im4iOm51bGx9XX0seyJuljoiRGVtb24gb2YgSHVicmlzliwiYSI6IiIsInEiOjEsInUiOjAsImkiOlt7Im4iOm51bGx9LHsibil6bnVsbH1dfSx7Im4iOiJKYWdnZWQgS25pZmUgU25pcGVyIiwYSl6iIsInEiOjEsInUiOjAsImkiOlt7Im4iOm51bGx9XX1dfQ%3D%3D>

Mara: A Soldiers Bond: 3 Hope each.

GM

Battle, if the brutal, whole scale savagery and slaughter playing out in the arena below can be graced with so lofty an appellation, is in full flow.

“Six possible approaches suggest themselves at first assessment.” The Spider muses, taking in her surroundings with a calculating eye.

It lingers the longest on the metal grilles set at regular intervals into the arena floor, down which the blood of the first of the fallen is already flowing.

“Three of those options I think we can discount out of hand; the chances of success are simply too low.”

She neglects to add that the chances of success for the remaining three are hardly any better.

“Yes,” she continues, much as she might were she considering a seating plan, or an order of service. “On balance, I think a combination of approaches grants us our best opportunity. First things first, Mara. Here’s what we need to do...”

The guards, distracted by the mesmerising spectacle of the arena, wave the hooded head-hunter and her captive through into the underworks without a second glance. More grist for the mill, and at the rate the mill is churning through combatants, it’s very welcome grist at that.

The underworks of the Blood Pits are a maze of stone tunnels and barred cells, the dank corridors lit only by the occasional guttering oil lamp. The place stinks of stale sweat and despair, this place where the worst criminals that the city has to offer are rounded up, and then turned loose upon one another.

The Spider pushes back her hood and tugs the rope free that had apparently been binding Mara's wrists.

Mara grunts. "So, are you going to tell this plan of yours, however many parts of it there are? I have to say, I'm impressed with how you're taking all this. Because from my perspective, this has all the hallmarks of a no-win scenario. Our target is beyond lethal, heavily guarded, and surrounded by a fanatical mob who, I've no doubt, would willingly die for him. Or, at the very least, kill for him.

You have quite the reputation, Spider, and I hope it's well warranted. Because whatever this plan of yours is, it's going to have to be a damned good one."

The Spider permits herself a small smile. Mara is not wrong, of course. She has seen this creature plough through Crater as though he were nothing, and shug off artillery fire from a tank. Taken head-on, they have no chance. Thankfully, her speciality lies in the indirect approach.

"I appreciate your forbearance, Mara. And I don't disagree, the odds are heavily stacked against us.

But there is a chance. There is always a chance, with the right forethought.

You see, unless I miss my guess, the blood that flows down from the arena is being collected. And that is providing the demon with a considerable source of power. It may even be fuelling its glamour. To defeat Setarra we are going to need every possible advantage, and eliminating that power source has to be our first priority.

From there... well, let me explain...

Behind the Curtain

This scene has given me the opportunity to take my first foray into some minor Daggerheart customisation.

The system has a very novel approach to environments, using them almost like another adversary. It reminds me a little of the way environments are used in the super-hero RPG, Sentinels of the Multiverse.

So I built myself a custom environment, The Blood Pits, with its own passive ability, an action I can use as a GM, and a Fear-powered reaction I can call upon.

I did this using a really handy free web tool called Fresh Cut Grass, which allows you to build encounters from the existing collection of Daggerheart adversaries and environments, or to build your own. Of course, you don't need to use this tool, I could quite easily have scribbled my environment out on an index card. But the web tool is pretty handy.

With a potential encounter prepared, I had a think about how to approach that encounter.

Because as it stands, I think it's only right that Setarra should be way beyond my PCs ability to take on in a fight, even if he wasn't surrounded by his hordes of adoring fans.

So I asked the oracle if there was any sort of opportunity here, and got a yes and.

This time, rather than consult the deep oracle, I had a pretty good idea in mind already, and so I went with that. No need to roll or make a card draw if there's already an obvious solution that fits the fiction.

We've already seen the initial idea. The whole arena is one massive blood ritual, feeding power into the demon, so disrupting that ritual is step 1.

And for a change, I actually have a pretty good idea here of what the Spider has in mind in order to try and level the playing field in steps 2 and beyond.

But as she says, they need to stay alive past the first part of the plan before worrying about the second, so we'll come to that if we come to it. Because, as we all know, no plan survives beyond first contact with the enemy. Partly because the nature of this game is inherently unpredictable, and partly because I am well ware of my own ability, ably supported by my traitorous dice, to cock up spectacularly.

We'll just have to wait and see what happens.

I did manage to squeeze in one more small boost for my party into that scene.

Mara has an ability called A Soldiers Bond, which fitted this scene very neatly.

Once per long rest, when she compliments someone, or asks them about something they're good at, she can grant them both 3 Hope.

That means that, going into the next session, she is on 5 Hope, while The Spider is on the maximum of 6. And the GM is only on 1 measly Fear. That's a pretty positive setup.

Come on, with The Spider's mastermind brain, and Mara's lethal brawn, we've got this, right? What could possibly go wrong?

I hope you'll join me to find out.

Next time.

Outro

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 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.