

Chapter 12 - By Victories Undone

Show Notes

Summary

Crater and Trace are hot on the heels of an Unseen agent. Their mission: assassination. But things, as things have a wont to do, don't go quite according to plan...

Links

Transcript:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1qBXonhHxCIPyt3VBXNFiz0BDPSVHS8NOXFYXQPqgCVs/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 Chained World RPG:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/18t7AXS1_fYI9nDrlW5reQHDVVuW4_QAYt1wvqY69uCI/edit?usp=sharing

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

Teaser

Envisaged scene: Crater and Trace face off against the Imperial Guard

Does the scene begin as expected: Yes

4 Guards (Monster Overhaul Mercenary p24)

1 Unseen Agent (Monster Overhaul Doppelganger p299)

Crater: attacks Unseen

- +Soldier: Miss: Take Something Away (Unseen)

Trace: Shoots at guards

- +Soldier: Crit 10hp (1 guard dead)

Crater doesn't have time to think.

Not that he would, even if he had the time. It's time for fighting, now, and thinking just gets in the way. He's seen his target, and that's all that matters.

He's off and running before anyone else recovers, sprinting through fallen masonry towards the wide-eyed admiral. A feral grin spreads across his face and he lets out a roar as he surrenders to the bloodlust.

The admiral, for his part, recovers quickly. Recognising that waiting around for 280 pounds of angry Dockside streetfighter is likely not in his best interest, the Unseen agent ducks out of sight behind what remains of a wall, and into the maze of ruins.

Her target lost, Trace spits out a curse and loses her arrow at the first of the approaching guards instead. It takes him straight through the throat, striking with such impact that he is hurled off his feet and pinned back up against the carriage door. The others scatter for cover.

That big dumb ape, Trace curses to herself. If Crater had just taken half a second to think it through he'd have turned around and gone for the guards. That way the Unseen would be the one with the arrow through him, and likely enough the guards would be off and running. But oh no, not Crater. Why think when you can just go charging blindly in, and screw everything up?

Even as she nocks another arrow to her bow, her back pressed against a heap of fallen stone, she knows deep down that her blame is misplaced. She'd had a clean shot back there, and she'd squandered it. Let her curiosity blind her to what really mattered.

And now here they are. Outnumbered, no eyes on the target, and Crater blundering about like a bull in a china shop. He'll be lucky to get out of here without a wall falling on him.

Crater, for his part, rounds the corner and finds his quarry gone. He hadn't quite appreciated what a rabbit warren this place is, a jumbled mess of collapsed roof and walls. It gradually begins to dawn on him that they have lost the initiative, and that this terrain favours the opposition.

He shakes these concerns away.

He is hunting, and the prospect of finding that shapeshifting bastard, and beating it savagely to death, is all the motivation to continue he requires.

Cautiously, he creeps deeper into the ruins.

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 Lone Adventurer RPG 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, Mina and the Avatar in the body of Barbican attempted to infiltrate the Inquisitorium in an attempt to assassinate the Lord High Inquisitor, another member of the Unseen cell that has compromised positions of highest authority in Kyras.

Things quickly went awry. A mana-bane field led to Barbican shutting down, only to awake in a torture chamber. The Inquisitor, it transpired, had captured Digby, Valerian and Sallow, and meant to torture them to death in order to break Mina.

What he had not anticipated was Mina calling in a vampiric airstrike.

Behind The Curtain

With the assault on the Inquisitorium on a bit of a cliffhanger, it should come as little surprise that the focus has shifted away from Mina and co for this episode.

Crater and Trace were on a bit of a cliffhanger themselves, so I'm keen to see how they get on.

The Lone Adventurer RPG contains very little in the way of bad guys, with the entirety of the Monsters section reading as follows:

- Human scale: 4hp, 1d6+1 damage
- Elites, warriors, magical beasts: 2d6 damage
- Major magic: 3d6 damage

Pretty much any enemy from Basic D&D and Dungeon World works.

For this encounter I've decided to use my favourite book of antagonists, the Monster Overhaul, a practical bestiary by Skerples. This collection of 200 or so monsters emphasises things like behaviours, motivations, quirks, habitats and story hooks over mechanics. It's packed with so many random tables and sources of GM inspiration that you could quite easily build entire adventures from its countless prompts. And above all, it's an incredibly fun read. Regardless of the RPG system you play, you are bound to find treasure within.

I've taken the Mercenary and Doppelganger from that book, to use as my bad guys.

The way we left things last time, Crater and the Unseen had spotted one another, and so had Trace and the Guards.

I decided to kick off with Crater, but despite his strong combat stats, he rolled a straight miss. That prompted a Hard Move roll, which came up as Take Something Away.

The most obvious thing to take away was Crater's target; the last thing a sneaky infiltrating shapeshifter wants is to be caught out in open combat by a massive tattooed slab of a man with fists you could knock down walls with. Better for him by far to escape, or set hisd enemies up for ambush.

That left Trace without a target, so she took a shot at one of the guards, rolled a crit, and killed him outright.

Normally you make a GM move in response to a PC miss or partial success, but the section on GM moves in the rules states : "Make a move appropriate to the fiction."

In this case that meant two things.

First, it seemed appropriate to have the guards scatter and find cover. I guess you could probably call that the Change the Environment soft move.

Second, with the maze-like nature of the ruined opera house established, it seemed sensible to make the hard move, separate them. Crater and Trace each have a different set of enemies to deal with, and in this terrain, that means that, at least for now, they can't support one another.

Let's see how all this plays out...

Scene 1

Crater tries to track the Unseen: Scoundrel: 7 Partial Success

GM Move (soft): Reveal an Unwelcome Truth: The Unseen is Trace, who tries to throw him off the scent.

Crater: Scholar to realise he's being duped: 6 (fail)

GM Move (hard): Escalate the situation

* Strength: Courage, humility, grace

* The High Priestess: Mysticism, intuition, perception

The hunter becomes the hunted

GM Move: Hurt Them

* Garotte: 2d6: 8 (ignores armour)

Frustration is creeping in.

The thrill of the hunt is all well and good, Crater reflects, but it all goes to ratshit if your quarry doesn't have the good grace to let themselves be found. Where the hell has that sneaky bastard got to? In hindsight, it might have made more sense for him to go after the guards, and leave the Unseen to Trace. He has a sinking feeling that if they get out of this, Trace is going of that opinion also. Although probably with a good amount more vitriol.

He tenses as he sees movement, but it's only Trace, peering around the shattered remains of what once was once probably a cloakroom. She gestures to him urgently, pointing him back the way he came, then ducks back out of sight.

He turns, scowling, and retraces his steps. Bloody Trace! She can hardly blame him for losing their quarry, can she? Anyway, wasn't it her job to put the creepy fuck down? So why is he the one who is guaranteed the tongue-lashing when this is all over?

He spies her, up ahead, pinned down and doing her best to fend off a unit of three approaching guards with her bow. His scowl deepens. If she was going to deal with the guards herself, what was the point of sending him back this way?

In the time it takes him to realise the monumental scale of his blunder, the skinshifter strikes from behind. Crater's hands fly to his throat and his eyes bulge wide as the Unseen's garotte whips around his neck and bites deep.

"Well Isn't this just perfect," his assailant hisses in his ear, inexorably tightening its grip. It is no longer wearing the form of Trace; he can feel the admiral's moustache tickling his neck. "You get to watch her die, and she you. Did you really think you had a chance against the Unseen Syndicate? A pair of gutter rats like you?"

He tries desperately to draw breath, but his airways are blocked. He can see black spots against his vision already.

Crater's eyes meet Trace's, and he can see the panic there.

They're going to die.

Trace is in deep shit, and she knows it. These three men know their business, and with her momentary advantage of surprise gone, they are working as a team. The one with the bow is preventing her from breaking cover, while the other two circle her position, swords drawn, moving into flanking positions. She doesn't have long...

She feels a thrill of relief as Crater rounds the corner. Perfect timing.

Then her gut knots tight as she sees the admiral step out behind him, and pull the garotte taut. Even with all his strength, there's nothing the big dumb ape can do if he can't breathe.

Trace's eyes meet Crater's and she can see the panic there.

They're going to die.

Behind The Curtain

We kicked things off with Crater trying to track his Unseen quarry.

I could have started with a new scene roll, but decided not to for two reasons.

One, this isn't really a new scene, more a direct continuation of the previous one.

And two, we have enough going on already. A roll to see if the scene develops as envisaged introduces the risk that it doesn't. At this point in the story I didn't feel like introducing that risk, and so, because I am sole and final arbiter of all things to do with my tale, I didn't.

This is an example of how the rules of a solo game are there to be picked up or put down as the player wishes. The rules are not there to be slavishly followed, but to serve as useful tools, when required, to make the game more fun. And when I think about it, that is equally true in group games, at least it is in the group games I enjoy running or playing in.

Anyhow, Crater rolled with Scoundrel to track the Unseen, and got a 7. A partial success. I ruled that he did successfully track his target, but that his target was now impersonating Trace. That, as a GM Move, could be said to be revealing an unwelcome truth, only in this case I was introducing it to me as a player, rather than to my PC.

I gave Crater a Scholar roll to realise what was going on, and true to character, he stuffed it up completely. A straight failure meant it was time to break out a Hard GM Move, and for this one I made a roll on my GM Moves table. Escalate the Situation was the outcome, but nothing immediately sprang to mind as to how.

And so I turned to my Deep Oracle, which informed me, via the medium of my own subconscious interpreting abstract concepts, that the hunter had become the hunted.

This left Crater with not a lot to do but bemoan his fate. And while that is always gratifying to me as a player of this PC, it also felt that this left narrative control in the hands of the GM.

Time for another GM move.

And this time, we cut straight to the chase. The move was Hurt Them.

The Doppelganger, as described in the Monster Overhaul, a 2d6 strangle attack. That, with the minor addition of a garotte, seemed right on point for this sneaky backstabbing snake in the grass. And exactly the sort of weapon that would negate Crater's exceptional brawling skills. In the monster Overhaul, a doppelganger's attack is described as automatically hitting if made with surprise, but we're playing a powered by the Apocalypse game. There are no hit roles here. Instead I followed the fiction, and ruled that armour would have no effect against this attack.

There was nothing mechanical behind the setup for Trace. I just went with what felt natural, given where we'd left off with her, and given who she was facing off against.

So it would appear that both of our protagonists are neck-deep in shit.

Let's see if they can shovel their way out.

Scene 2

Trace Soldier v Unseen: 10: Success! 8 damage (10/18)

Does the Unseen let go? (Likely) Yes

Crater Soldier v guard: 12: Crit! 13 damage (dead), human shield v archer

Trace Soldier v Unseen: 3 Miss. Hurt Them. Foreshadow a Danger.

Trace: Soldier v Guard 11 9 HP dead

Crater Soldier v Guard: 10 11 HP dead

They're going to die, if they keep making the same dumb plays. It's time to change things up.

Almost without thinking, Trace brings her great bow up, draws and fires. Crater's eyes bulge wider than ever as the arrow whistles past him, close enough to trim several hairs from his close-cropped beard, and punches deep into the Unseen's exposed shoulder. Fleet Admiral Konig, or at least his simulacrum, lets out an anguished howl, and the garotte goes slack.

That's all the opportunity Crater needs. Sucking in great, blessed lungfuls of air, the big man shrugs his way free from his assailant's grasp and lumbers into a dead sprint towards the startled guardsmen. The bowman tries to get a shot off, but Crater knows his business. He is able to angle his run so that one of the sword wielders, the malcontent known as Kravitz, is kept in the line of fire, preventing the archer from getting off a shot.

Crater crashes into Kravitz with the force of a charging bull, clotheslining the gawking guard with sufficient force to cleanly snap the man's neck. Crater grabs the suddenly limp sack of meat that had been Guardsman Kravitz, and uses him as a human shield as he charges the remaining yards towards the bowman. An arrow thunks ineffectually into the dead man's back, before Crater, bellowing with fury and exultation, is upon the hapless archer.

Trace, meanwhile, has drawn and loosed again, at a phenomenal rate of fire. It has taken less than a second between the first and the second arrow, but in that time the Unseen has somehow managed to duck behind cover. Trace spits a curse, then pivots and looses again, this time at the remaining sword-wielding guard, who is coming up fast behind Crater, blade raised high.

The arrow punches in through the back of his neck, just below the rim of his helmet, and emerges grotesquely from his mouth. The guard squints down momentarily in cross-eyed confusion, before collapsing scant feet away from Crater's exposed back.

Crater, meanwhile, has tossed the bloody carcass of Kravitz at his panicking foe, whose attempt at flight is brought to an abrupt halt. The man goes down, thrashing beneath the dead weight of his comrade, before Crater is upon him and setting to his bloody work. The guardsman's horrified screams are cut mercifully short.

The pair, panting from the exertion and the adrenaline, make brief eye contact. Both know how close their deaths had been. Both know that their instinctive response to save the other had been all that had saved them.

And both know, with unspoken certainty, that the hunt nears its end. Their quarry is wounded, alone, and on the run.

Each experiences a deep, visceral thrill. There is nothing to make you feel more alive than narrowly escaping death. Add to that the thrill of the hunt, and the sense of anticipation of what might lie beyond it, and you have quite the heady brew.

Savage grins pass between them, and they set to their task.

Behind the Curtain

It's fair to say that things had been looking a little dicey there for a moment.

Crater was on half hit points, and in a tight spot. If he hadn't freed himself on his turn, he was at risk of going down, permanently.

And Trace, facing two melee targets, and pinned down by an archer, was no better off.

But the old "swap targets" trick really did the job. See what happens when you work as a team?

High risk, certainly, but high reward.

It didn't hurt of course, that with the exception of one miss by Trace against the Unseen, which allowed him to flee, the other four rolls in that combat were either straight hits or crits.

Or, to put it another way, I got lucky.

This scene could so easily have gone the other way. Crater garrotted to death, and Trace killed, or perhaps captured, to be tortured for information on the Web's plans. That outcome was just a couple of bad dice rolls away.

It is sobering to think that it is on such fine margins, that the difference between triumph and tragedy lies. We can stack the deck in our favour as much as we are able, but ultimately it comes down to simple chance. We succeed or we fail, we live or we die, on the fickle whims of fate.

And yet that is a lesson that we, as humans, are incapable of truly learning. We can recognise the truth of it, cognitively, but we can never really hold on to it. The illusion of our own immortality is just too strong, too biologically hard-wired into us, to allow us to dwell on the intrinsic fragility of our existence for long. After a short while that truth is lost in the stories we tell ourselves about our journeys, our importance, our higher purpose. We matter, we tell ourselves, in a way that is simply incompatible with a belief in a cold, uncaring and deadly universe.

Now, what was I talking about?

Ah yes, my party have kicked ass, overcome terrible odds, and now all that remains is the final kill, and the mopping up. So to speak. They are a pair of mighty badasses, and no mistake. Bring it on.

I'm sure there was something else I was supposed to remember, but for the life of me I can't think quite what. Ah well, it can't have been that important, can it.

Let's see what further glories lie in store...

Scene 3:

Envisaged scene: Crater and Trace catch the Unseen

Does the scene begin as expected: Yes

Are they able to take him down? Likely: No, but

Page of Swords: Curiosity, spontaneity, communication

Seven of Cups: Opportunity, choice, illusion

Does the Unseen try to trick them into revealing information? Yes, but

“Not so fucking cocky now, are we?” Crater asks as he lands another precisely aimed boot in the Unseen’s ribs.

“Go easy, Crater”, Trace admonishes. “We want information from this slippery shit, and we’re not going to get it if you kick him to death.”

“I’ll talk! I’ll talk! The Unseen wheedles to the pair looming over it. Pale grey blood soaks its right shoulder, and its skin is sallow and sheened with sweat. “I’m beaten, there’s no need for further violence! What do you want to know?”

Crater blinks in surprise. “Huh. That was easier than I expected. Pity.”

Trace squats down on her haunches, at eye level with their prisoner, a long dagger in one fist. “This grand plan of yours, the subjugation of the Dominion. I heard you say it was you who was due to order the armada to attack. What happens if you don’t?”

“Without me, the plan is ruined,” the Unseen shrugs, dropping its gaze. “We are beaten. All is lost. How, though? How did you know where to find me? Who else is being targeted?”

That last question is the overreach. The moment the words leave its mouth, Trace knows she is being played, and the Unseen knows that she knows it.

“Well, shit,” it scowls. “Worth a try.”

Crater is still catching up. “What? What was worth a try? Trace?”

“This sneaky little fuck is trying to get information out of us. Which means...” Her eyes widen in sudden realisation. “Oh, shit...”

The Unseen, which has by now given up all pretence at humanity, grins as it spits hot grey blood into her eyes.

“It means your doom, you solid scum!” it hisses, as Trace reels back. Its fingers close on the dial of a concealed device attached to the back of its belt, a small brass object that begins to whine as the dial is turned.

“See you soon!”

Both Crater and Trace lash out with fist and blade, but it’s too late. Reality warps, and with a twist the Unseen is gone.

“Fuck!” Trace yells. She rises to her feet, head in her hands. “FUCK!”

Not once, but twice now, she has put off the kill, fallen prey to the lure of gathering more information about the threat they face, and both times she has paid the price. Only this time, there is no chance of recovery. None at all. They’ve failed.

Crater looks conflicted.

“Well, yeah, it’s not great, I grant you. But look on the bright side. With that bastard gone, the mission’s over, right?”

Trace glowers at him, sidelong. “Your point?”

The big man suddenly seems to find the toes of his boots of unaccustomed interest. “Well, er, you know... post mission perks? That sort o’ thing?”

Trace rolls her eyes. “Seven save me! You’re... you’re fucking incorrigable!”

But a slow grin is spreading across her face, even as she says it.

Behind the Curtain

Ah, well isn't that a happy ending?

Even if the mission is a bust, and the Unseen has got clean away, at least something good came of it.

Let's draw a gentle veil over the private endeavours of our happy couple, and instead turn our thoughts to more sobering matters, specifically, game mechanics.

The astute listener will have picked up on the fact that we jumped directly to an interrogation scene there, rather than play out a series of tracking and combat moves. What gives, Carl, you may well be asking, and so let us explore what was happening behind the scenes.

This, it seemed to me, was a new scene. We had shifted from combat, and moved instead to a new narrative beat. And as such it was time for a new envisaged scene, with the corresponding "does this scene begin as expected?" roll.

Now, I could easily have made this new scene all about the tracking and the fighting. But that, to me, didn't seem the most interesting thing to focus on.

And so instead I envisaged this scene as Crater and Trace having caught the Unseen. That was the thing I wanted to do as the storyteller, rather than further focus on the minutia of the chase. Of course, I needed to determine whether this scene started as expected. The random factor was required, and so I asked the Simple Oracle, which thankfully decided in my favour.

I then went one stage further.

Rather than play out this planned capture and interrogation as a series of character moves, I once again handed narrative control over to the more abstracted Simple Oracle. Are they able to take him down? I asked, and the answer this time was no, but. Interesting.

I then turned to the Deep Oracle, which responded with the Page of Swords and the Seven of Cups. Curiosity, spontaneity, communication, Opportunity, choice, and illusion.

This gave me the seeds of an idea, seeds which bloomed when I asked the Simple oracle one final question: Does the Unseen try to trick them into revealing information? And this time the answer was Yes, but.

Stringing all these responses together gave me the following.

The Unseen was going to get captured, but ultimately get away. The only way I could think of it doing that was with an EED.

Before it fled though, an interrogation was going to take place, in which the Unseen was going to try to pull a Black Widow special. Feign weakness and defeat, in order to learn more about the Web's plans and capabilities. Sneaky and on brand.

However, this plan was going to fail. No information gathered, the Unseen was going to overplay his hand.

And so there we have it. Crater and Trace's mission, which yo-yo'd back and forth between near catastrophe and near triumph between episode 9 and this one, has ultimately ended in failure.

Though failure with benefits.

Will the rest of the crew fare any better?

Let's 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.