

Chapter 14 - The Choice

Show Notes

Summary

An unholy alliance has been struck; the vampires are about to rain down hell upon the Inquisitorium. But at this eleventh hour, could Tortemus yet alter the deal? And if he does, what terrible price might the Web have to pay?

Links

Transcript:

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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: Aboard the Shadow, Tortemus prepares to attack

Does the scene begin as expected: no

Eight of Wands (reversed): Delay, frustration, blockage

The Lovers (reversed): Obsession, imbalance, misalignment

Tortemus uses this as leverage over Mara: she must become a vampire

“Oh, about time, Montisario. A fellow could die of boredom up here, if he wasn’t already dead. All hands, secure the ship, and brace for impact!”

Lord Tortemus, Lord of the Court of the Undying, consort and right hand to the Night Queen Lilandra, captain of the Third Guild’s Flagship the Night Queen’s Shadow, turns and smiles at Mara Vale, as he pockets the sending stone.

It is a smile with altogether too many fangs.

“And so here we have it, Miss Vale. The moment of truth. In such instants, destiny is forged. History is steered, in either one direction or the other. And we, Miss Vale, have our hands on the tiller. Which path shall we take?”

Mara Vale glares back at him. “What are you waiting for? We had an agreement, *My Lord*. Attack!”

The vampire spawn that crowd the deck and cling to the rigging of the sleek flying cutter stand ready, but do not move. All eyes are upon their master.

“Ah yes, our agreement. If you recall, I did mention there would be a price to pay for my assistance.”

Mara shakes her head in disbelief. “This is hardly the time, Tortemus! The team need us! Now! We can worry about prices later!”

Tortemus’ smile takes on a feral, wholly inhuman aspect. “Oh, my dear, this is precisely the time. The moment of greatest leverage. But, as you say, time is of the essence, so let me make it plain. Pay my price and my children and I will fall upon your foes with all the savagery my kind can bring to bear. Refuse it, and you and your friends are on their own.”

“Dammit, Tortemus, half the Chained world stands on the brink of an Unseen coup, and you’re grandstanding! What is your damned price? Name it!”

Tortemus blinks, as if surprised. “Why, I thought that would be obvious, my dear. It is simply this: I desire you, Mara Vale. I wish you to accept me as your sire.”

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, Tatters and the Spider successfully navigated a prison break in the heart of the Vox Imperialis, located their termination target and sprang an ambush upon them and their close protection team. Unfortunately that's where the good news ended. Their target, as well as the leader of the protection squad, proved far more capable than they had anticipated, leaving them in a desperate fight for their lives.

Behind The Curtain

Well, to coin a phrase, bugger.

I had plans to kick this episode off with dramatic descriptions of Tortemus captaining his ship into battle, with collisions and explosions and hordes of vampire spawn chewing faces off.

The scene start oracle, as so often, had other ideas.

You may remember a couple of episodes back I had Mara roll to persuade Tortemus to join the fight, applying her Soldier stat to appeal to Tortemus' sense of strategic military opportunity. This roll came up a mixed success, which meant that the vampire Lord was on board, but there would be a cost.

If you did remember that you did a better job than me, because I'd completely forgotten about it.

My oracle, however, had not. Your scene, it told me, does not start as expected.

And when I asked why not, it had this to say:

The Eight of Wands (reversed), represents Delay, frustration, or blockage.

And the Lovers (reversed), represents Obsession, imbalance, and misalignment.

The meaning of those two cards served both as a reminder of the forgotten consequence, and a pretty clear indication of what that consequence was.

It would seem that this sort of coercive, high-pressure negotiation tactic is what passes for courtship among vampire Lords and Ladies. Delightful. Is it any wonder the 3rd Guild are so feared and reviled. The way they treat you when they like you is almost as bad as when they don't.

Mara faces quite the quandry,

Which way she jumps is ultimately my choice as a player. She is my PC, and I get to decide what she would do in these circumstances.

But there's a small part of me that feels I don't have the right to make that choice for her. That my fictional creation has somehow attained her own autonomy, and gained the right to decide her own fate. That's quite a strange feeling, and I'm not entirely sure what to do with it. It doesn't feel right to offer the choice to the dice either, so in the absence of better options, I will ultimately have to put this feeling aside, I suppose, and make a choice, based on everything I know about Mara Vale.

What an unusual mental space to find myself in. Is the arrival at this sensation something that could have been reached in any other medium? Might a novelist feel this? Or is this

unique to the decision-making space that sits between the solo RPGer's player and GM personas?

Answers on a postcard, please.

Scene 1

Envisaged scene: Vampires Attack!

Does the scene begin as expected: Yes, and

The attack is very successful

Is Mina freed? No, and (guards arrive and whisk the the LHI away)

For the longest time, nothing happens. The Lord High Inquisitor, or at least the unseen agent impersonating him, scrutinises the automaton's inscrutable features for what seems like an eternity.

"A nice try, Miss Montisario" he sneers at last. "But no-one is coming to save you. A final, feeble trick, as doomed to failure as all the others. You are quite alone, and quite at my mercy. As are your friends." He shuffles over to one of the racks of gleaming steel instruments, and strokes his wispy white beard. "Now then, choices choices. Where to begin?"

There is a deafening explosion, which rocks the very foundations of the building. The Inquisitor has to grab for Mina's metal table to keep his feet.

"If I were you," says the steel figure strapped to the table, "I'd begin by running."

"Guards!" the Inquisitor screams, recognising the truth in her words. "Guards, to me, at once!"

The door opens, and two Enlightenment enforcers step swiftly inside. They move with calm authority, utterly certain in their purpose and in their skills. They are the product of years of gruelling training, the absolute elite of the warrior cadre of the Seekers of Dhrame.

It will prove nowhere near enough.

To their credit, they do not falter as the screaming begins. They, and the four compatriots who join them are faultless in the execution of their duties as they escort the Lord High Inquisitor from the room and towards safety.

But there is precious little safety to be found.

Vampire spawn have swarmed into the Inquisitorium, pouring through the gaping hole in the roof, blasted open by several kegs of Infernal Powder, and now occupied by the sleek, midnight blue hull of the Night Queen's Shadow.

Within mere moments the Inquisitorium is being overrun. The most highly skilled warriors the Inquisition has to offer are simply being torn limb from limb, as creatures from the depths of nightmare rampage through the building, their hunger insatiable, their ferocity unparalleled.

And yet it is not the horde of undead killers that instill the greatest terror. That honour is reserved for those that lead them.

The Lord Tortemus himself leads the charge, flanked to his left by Susan, transformed from flatulent lapdog into a sleek muscled killing machine, and to his right by a grim-faced Mara Vale.

That eternal servitude and damnation should be the price she must pay to free her allies and defeat her enemies feels a particularly bitter pill. She has spent a lifetime in chains, in one form or another. But she had finally escaped them, back in Hammerhold. Her life was, for the first time since childhood, her own. She and her sister Lynn were finally free.

That brief taste of freedom was not to last. First, she lost her sister, throwing any sense of victory to the winds. And now finds herself locked once more into a devil's bargain, a fresh set of chains far darker and more permanent than any she has worn before.

She fights with a singular fury and abandon. The abandon of one who truly has nothing left to lose.

Behind The Curtain

I found myself with a bit of conundrum with this last section. And I think, on reflection, it was one of my own creation.

I started with an envisaged scene of vampires attack, which my scene oracle responded to with a yes and.

Rather than turn to the deep oracle, I assumed this meant the attack was very successful. Vampires swarmed through the Inquisitor headquarters sweeping all before them.

Then I asked the oracle whether this assault led to Mina getting freed. The answer to this was no and, which I interpreted as meaning Enlightenment guards showed up to scoot their boss off to safety.

And here, I think, is where I realised I had taken a misstep.

On the one hand I had leaned heavily on the virtual GM, asking whether things had happened in a certain way or not. And then I had taken ownership of the interpretation of the answers to those questions.

In doing so, the balance had shifted into a place that left me in a bit of a narrative cul de sac.

This may or may not be apparent to you as the listener. But to me as the player and writer, it felt as if I had stepped into glue.

For anyone who has played a solo RPG, this is surely a familiar place. It is easy to get carried away with the story you are exploring, only to realise you have written yourself into a corner. And usually, at least in my experience, that tends to happen because you lose sight of what you are doing.

This ridiculous, wondrous, baffling endeavour of mine is not simply a creative writing exercise. It is a game. A thing of structure and rules. But equally, it is not a product of raw mechanics. Rather, when it is at its best, it is the preservation of a delicate balance between those two ends of the spectrum.

And when things go wrong in this fragile system, it is usually because I have strayed too far in one direction or the other.

In this case, I think I understand the nature of the transgression. I have paid lip service to rules, while allowing myself to drift into prompted writing mode. And in the process, I have thrown things out of equilibrium, and got myself stuck.

What is the solution? Well, in theory that is simplicity itself. To move things back towards the game, of course. To move things back to my PCs trying to achieve things, and then dealing with the resultant consequences.

There is a fly in the ointment, however. Most of my PCs, namely Mina, Valerian and Sallow, are strapped to torture tables. Valerian, who might otherwise have a chance of talking them out of trouble, is gagged. Their ability to achieve things have been severely curtailed by the narrative circumstances.

This situation has certainly contributed to my sense of stuckness, and once again, is a problem of my own making. I have committed the sin of removing my PCs options.

How will I dig myself out of this hole?

Why don't we find out?

Scene 2

Envisaged scene: Sallow tries to free the party

Does the scene begin as expected: yes, and: the party are alone in the room

Pick lock (ADV from Tinker): Crit

GM Soft Move: Reveal an Unwelcome Truth

- The Hermit (reversed): Isolation, withdrawal, loneliness
- Knight of Pentacles (reversed): Boredom, perfectionism, stuckness

Tortemus sires Mara

Is the Unseen dead? No

Captured? Yes, but: Mara's first meal

"Mara, our target is on the move."

The sending stone in Minacan's head crackles into life once more, and, once more, it is not Mara who answers.

"Really, Montisario, must I do everything? What, pray, have you been up to all this time?"

If she had teeth to grind, they would be grinding now. Instead she has to make do with "We find ourselves a little indisposed at present. So if it's not too much trouble, *My Lord*, your assistance would be greatly appreciated."

She kills the comms before he can respond, turning instead to her companions. Unbidden, the Spider's parting words to her come back to her.

"Is everyone OK?"

Ignoring Digby's frantic head-shaking, she is about to continue when Sallow sits up, rubbing his freed wrists and removing his gag.

"Fine, thank you. Though those manacles chaffed a bit." He leans down, and with seemingly effortless ease, springs the locks on his ankle bindings with a palmed pick. He looks up to see everyone staring at him.

"What?"

It takes very little time to free the others, though loosening Mina's remaining bolts proves a bit more of a challenge. By the time the four of them make their way out of the torture chamber, much of the fighting is done. Desecrated bodies of Inquisitors litter the corridors, the walls painted in their arterial spray, the tiled floor sticky with congealing blood.

The group follow along behind Barbican, Digby pale-faced with horror at the back.

It is Valerian who breaks the uneasy silence.

"Listen, please don't take this the wrong way, I appreciate not being horribly tortured to death as much as the next man. But surely I can't be the only one that is feeling somewhat... conflicted about us hopping into bed with these... things?"

He steps gingerly over the unspooled entrails of a man literally torn in two, trying unsuccessfully to keep from getting blood on his calfskin boots.

"I mean, vampires? Really? How sure are we that when they're done eviscerating Inquisitors and Unseen, they're not going to make a start on us?"

It is the avatar rather than Mina that answers him.

"A reasonable extrapolation. Strategically this was a necessary course of action, but one with attached risk. That risk was deemed acceptable in light of the potential reward."

"Really?" Valerian mutters, sulkily. "And who's choice was that, exactly? I can't help but notice there's only one of us around here who's not made out of nice and juicy flesh."

His ruminations are cut short as they round a corner into a secluded courtyard, and come to a dead stop.

Tortemus, blood drenching his shirt and chin, is seated upon a mound of Inquisitor bodies, a strange smile playing over his lips. The Unseen, now in its natural form, is sprawled at his feet, feebly struggling but held firmly in place by a pair of vampire spawn.

Mara Vale stands at Tortemu's side. Her skin is deathly pale, and she seems unsteady on her feet. Twin beads of blood trickle from puncture wounds in her throat.

Tortemus raises his bare wrist to his mouth, and with a razor-sharp fang, opens a long, clean wound in it. He offers his arm to Mara, who reaches for it with trembling hands. With the reverence one might employ taking holy communion.

Her head bows.

It is only then, with her lips inches from the dripping wound, that she turns to see her companions in the Web, frozen in horror.

Their eyes meet.

Behind the Curtain

You remember I mentioned I'd been feeling stuck? And that in part it was due to all my PCs being restrained?

Well, that was on me. My fault entirely. Because I'd failed examine the character sheets at my disposal, and the treasures they contained.

To wit, on Sallow's sheet, there was the following ability.

Tinker: When you pick locks or disable traps, roll at Advantage. You can do so quickly and unnoticed while in plain sight.

How on earth did I miss that?

Anyway, with this get out of jail free card discovered I made a roll, and got a crit. Spectacular. Everybody was free to leave the cell, and engaged in some much deserved role playing, or as I like to call it, bitching about stuff.

Valerian is my go to guy for this sort of thing, so I had him make the perfectly valid point that trusting vampires is not a typical route to longevity.

Followed by the equally valid point that the Mina-Avatar-Barbican hybrid has made an extremely high-risk decision, in secret, that has the potential to impact others far more than them. It. Whatever.

That exploration of a theme hit a natural lull, and with that lull came the perfect opportunity to make a GM move.

I mentioned earlier about the natural to and fro of moving from narrative to game mechanics and back, and from PC control to GM; well this is a good example of that process in action. The PCs had taken narrative control for a while, freeing themselves from their bonds with a good roll and engaging in some intra-party banter. With that coming to a natural conclusion, it was time to hand control back to the virtual GM.

I rolled a Soft Move, and got Reveal an Unwelcome Truth. I wasn't sure what that was in this context, but a couple of draws from the Deep Oracle, combined with the context Valerian had just provided, left me in no doubt.

The party had walked in on the siring of Mara Vale.

Poor Mara, she's had it pretty rough.

And perhaps the roughest thing at this point is that no-one that knows her or cares for her is present at this, her lowest point. Lynn is dead, and perhaps the only people who might be said to have a real connection with her, Tatters and the Spider, are elsewhere.

Quite aside for what this may mean for Mara, I wonder also what it might mean for the fragile relationship between Tortemus and the Web. How will they react? Will they let this stand?

Shall we find out?

Scene 3:

Envisaged scene: Mara makes her choice

Does the scene begin as expected: Yes, but

- Death (reversed): Delay, intransigence, stagnation
- Six of Swords (reversed): Resistance, reluctance, turmoil

Delay, turmoil

Mara's tear-smudged eyes convey multitudes.

There is fear there, and shame too. Desperation and self-loathing, certainly.

More obvious still is the profound grief that she has carried since the death of her sister.

But there is something else there too, something more feral and primal, beneath all the rest. A hunger, deep and raw, that aches to be sated. A burning need to feed, to lose herself, to surrender, finally, to the red.

Deep sobs begin to wrack her body. Still, she does not relinquish her grip on the vampire lord's wrist. If anything, it grows tighter. Tears stream down her face.

Valerian opens his mouth to speak, but to everyone's surprise, Sallow steps forward, and approaches slowly. He maintains eye contact with Mara, studiously avoiding the amused gaze of Lord Tortemus.

"Whatever he's promised you, it isn't worth it, Mara. He lies.

I know you're damaged. You're broken, like me. But he gets inside your mind, and makes the bad feelings worse. He makes us do bad things. We're toys for him to play with, to hurt and break. And to use, to hurt and break our friends.

I felt him. Up on the Mustang. Bad Meat. And he felt me, got inside my head, and made me do b-bad things. Blew up a safe to make the Bluecoats chase us. Made me invite him into our home. Dropped Trace through a trapdoor."

"Don't forget the Spider's exploding buttons," Tortemus grins. "Quite the surprise she'll have if she uses those!"

Sallow shudders, but ignores him.

"If he said he'll give you something, it's for him, not for you. He's just old and bored, and he wants to play with you. Like a cat with a mouse. He lies, he always lies."

Tortemus mockingly places his free hand on his chest.

“Well now, that’s just hurtful! When have I ever lied to you, Mordecai?”

Sallow twitches at the use of his real name.

“You are quite right, you know. You were nothing more than my little mouse, and I made no bones about it. A simple plaything, in every way, to be toyed with and discarded when no longer amusing. Mara here is something else entirely.”

He turns to her, drawing her gaze, and his red eyes smoulder. “What I offer you, Mara Vale, I offer to very, very few. Immortality, power, and a place at my side, should you wish it.

I offer you the opportunity to transcend your fragile and fleeting mortal form. To be transformed from lamb to wolf. And, lest you forget, you have already accepted that offer. It was, after all, the price for my assistance with...” he gestures at the Unseen, prostrate at his feet. “This.”

Sallow opens his mouth to speak again, but Tortemus holds up a finger without even glancing his way, and the words die on his lips. The others stand frozen in place.

The vampire leans in closer to Mara, his gaze intensifying. “Heed not the bleating of livestock, Mara Vale. I have fed of you, now you may feed of me. When you do, you shall be reborn, and take your first steps into a wider world.”

Mara, lips parted as though awaiting a lover’s kiss, gazes enraptured into his eyes.

And then bends to drink.

Behind the Curtain

Well, I'd planned to kick things off with Mara making her choice, but as it turned out that whole scene was the result of my scene oracle.

I asked if the scene started as expected, and got a Yes, But.

The Deep Oracle clarification gave me Death (reversed):, which meant Delay, intransigence, and stagnation, and the Six of Swords (reversed) meaning Resistance, reluctance, and turmoil. That told me that this choice was going to be delayed.

And I'm glad that it was.

Forced to draw things out a bit, I was given the opportunity first to explore Mara's emotional state, and second to think about who might try to talk her down.

And up stepped Sallow.

That development caught me entirely by surprise. At first I planned to have Valerian do his usual fast talking schick, but when the moment came, it was Sallow who felt like the right choice.

In hindsight it was obvious; he'd been compromised by Tortemus, forced to betray his allies and grant the Vampire Lord and his minions access to the Opera House. He'd said at the time "I had no choice!", but we never really learned exactly why.

So this was a nice opportunity to fill in some blanks, and retcon some of those awful dice rolls Sallow made along the way. I joked several times about those rolls being so bad that perhaps Sallow was actively working against them; now it turns out that was true.

It was also a nice way to learn a little bit more about one of my PCs. He'd always just been the quirky, twitchy one, but I'd never really had the opportunity to get into his head. I still know next to nothing about his backstory, other than he was in the military, but at least now I have a better sense of what's been going on under the hood since the casino heist.

That little surprise as I was writing this scene is a useful reminder that it doesn't have to just be the mechanics of the game or the roll of the dice that deliver the unexpected twists and turns when playing a solo game. Sometimes simply following the nature or history of your characters, as they interact with the world and with one another, can catch you just as unawares.

And this scene, with its absence of mechanics save the scene check oracle, has achieved its intended purpose. Characters have been explored, a decision has been postponed, but now we come to the crux of it. Mara's choice.

Will she go through with it? Will we find out next time? Or will I pull my standard trick of cutting away to another story thread, leaving you and her dangling in a state of unresolved uncertainty?

I guess we'll just have to wait until next time to find out.

Outro

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

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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.