

RUNNING THE CAMPAIGN – DRAGON HEIST: CREATING THE CHARACTERS

[by Justin Alexander – September 23rd, 2020](#)



This has been a highly requested series from [my patrons](#): a closer look at the player characters in my *Dragon Heist* campaign and how I (or, more accurately, *we*) integrated them into the game. I've resisted writing it, however, because I wasn't entirely sure how to make it high-value.

The key thing is that I already wrote a couple posts about creating characters for long-term campaigns – [Running the Campaign: Designing Character Backgrounds](#). The short summary is:

1. Establish the **campaign concept**.
2. Have the players pitch their **character concepts**.
3. Collaborate on a **public integration**, with the GM using their expertise in the setting to take generic archetypes of the character concept (e.g., northern barbarian) and make them specific (e.g., a member of the Tribe of the Red Elk).
4. Have the GM do a **private integration** of the character, tying them into the larger structure of the campaign (e.g., Is there a major villain? Make it the long-lost brother of one of the PCs).
5. **Bring the party together**. At least 95 times out of 100, you'll want to explain why the PCs are all going to generally hang out and do things together – specifically, the usually crazy things the campaign concept is predicated on – before you start your first session. 4 times out of the

remaining 5, you'll probably want to have things pre-arranged so that they all fall in together within the first few scenes.

There are other ways to handle character creation, but this was essentially the same procedure I'd followed for *Dragon Heist*. It didn't feel like there was really new territory to explore.

I've had a number of recent conversations, however, suggesting that people would like to see more practical examples of what some of this theoretical material actually looks like in actual play. So that's our primary goal here.

I'd also commissioned some really fantastic art depicting the characters from [@BroadfootLenny](#), so if nothing else you'll be able to "oooo" and "aaahh" over some pretty pictures!

THE BASELINE

Let's start by establishing a baseline understanding of how character creation (and the campaign in general) were set up. You might want to start by reading through those two earlier posts for a more detailed discussion of the general procedure, but it's probably not strictly necessary.

GAME SESSIONS

We should briefly discuss how we were actually playing the campaign because it has an impact on how character creation played out.

As I've discussed previously, we mostly played *Dragon Heist* in weekend intensives: We would play four hours on Friday night, then 10-12 hours on Saturday, and then another 8-10 hours on Sunday.

We also went from talking about doing this to *actually doing it* very quickly. This meant that, for our first weekend, we would be creating characters Friday night and then starting the campaign the next day at 10 AM.

This was unusual for me: For a dedicated campaign like this, I'm usually chatting about characters and swapping e-mails weeks ahead of time. There's often a Session 0 with one or two weeks before we actually start play, allowing further development and refinement of the characters before we get going. In this case, all of this was truncated and there would be very little time (particularly very little *awake* time) between creating our characters and launching into a long-term campaign with them.

CAMPAIGN CONCEPT

My pitch for the campaign was pretty straightforward: "Would you like to play the new *Dragon Heist* campaign from Wizards of the Coast? I've been remixing it for my website."

Although brief, this carried with it some key information:

- We were playing D&D 5th Edition. (Just saying "D&D", as I've noted in those previous essays, carries a lot of weight when it comes to campaign concept, in a way that isn't necessarily true for other RPGs.)
- The campaign would in some way involve a "heist."

To this, if I recall correctly, I basically added only one additional piece of information:

- The campaign will be taking place in Waterdeep, which is located in the Forgotten Realms.

I had maps of Waterdeep and Faerûn hung on the walls of our game room for handy reference. For players who were not familiar with the source material, I also briefly introduced them to the various sourcebooks we'd be using, including:

- *Sword Coast Adventurer's Guide*
- 3rd Edition *Forgotten Realms Campaign Setting*
- 1st Edition *Forgotten Realms* boxed set
- 2nd Edition *Forgotten Realms: City System* boxed set

This meant literally holding them up and saying, “These exist, feel free to flip through them if you’re looking for inspiration.” We also identified the people at the table who *were* familiar with the Realms and could serve as sources of expertise. Besides myself, this was Chris and Peter, both of whom were probably more well-versed in Realms lore than I was.

We also talked about our group’s familiarity with D&D, which ranged considerably. Some of us had been playing since the ‘80s. Another had played virtually no D&D whatsoever, but had just started playing in another 5th Edition campaign a couple months earlier. Another had played one session of 2nd Edition in 1997, one session of 3rd Edition in 2003, and a dozen or so sessions of my OD&D open table. Personally my own experience with 5th Edition was limited – I’d played a couple of sessions in a heavily homebrewed game and hadn’t run it at all yet.

BRINGING THE PARTY TOGETHER

The last thing I said before starting character was that:

- The first scene of the campaign would be the five of them walking through the doors of the Yawning Portal to meet a contact who was offering them a job.
- In creating their characters, they needed to figure out how they had ended up there.

[Dragon Heist Remix – Addendum: First Impressions](#) discusses how I handled the opening scene of the campaign in more detail, but I basically knew that this moment at the door of the Yawning Portal would bookend character creation: By immediately establishing what I needed them from them, I knew aiming at that specific moment would be hanging in the back of their brains throughout the entire process, ready to opportunistically shape any and all decisions along the way.

Then, at the end, we would return to this beat. I would show them the “Friendly Faces” handout from p. 223 of *Dragon Heist* and ask them to pick the picture of the NPC they were coming to meet. I knew that combining *why* they were walking through that door looking for a job together with *who* they were meeting on the other side of the door to get the job from would provide a final act of creative closure that would shape and personalize the opening of the campaign.

(Spoilers: It did.)

I think the big thing to note here is how simple this all was. I’ve talked about it at length, but it boils down:

- Four or five sentences pitching the campaign concept.
- A one sentence improv prompt for them to build their group dynamic around.
- And, later, pointing at a picture and asking a simple question.

It *can* be more complicated than that, but it doesn’t *need* to be.

In any case, that’s basically the whole set up. So now we’re going to look at the specific character backgrounds that we worked up and discuss how the procedure got us to that point.

EDANA

(Created by Sarah Holmberg)

Her father died (at least that is the story her mother told her) when she was still an infant. Her mother fell in with the Shadow Thieves as a way to make best use of her skills to support her young family. When things went south, Edana was sent to stay with family friends while her mother worked on making plans for them to leave safely and secretly, but her mother never came back. She was told that her mother died, though she still hears rumors that make her suspect her mother is alive.

It's part of the reason Edana tries to stay connected to, but not part of, the underworld in Waterdeep. Keeping enough distance to not make herself a target when the inevitable drumming out occurs again, but close enough to hear about her mother's return. Though by this point, she doesn't expect it to happen, it's more out of habit and making best use of the skills that she picks up the occasional job from her underworld connections.

When she's flush, she creates new personas and lives for years as them, spending her time reading, creating art, carousing, practicing her card tricks and forgery skills. When she's skint, she sheds those personas and returns to her true self, takes what work she can and builds up enough funds to start a new life for a while.

DESCRIPTION

Edana is a high elf with golden skin and golden hair. High, delicate cheekbones, with usually a faintly amused expression on her face. Her everyday look is hair braided back in two braids around the crown of her head, with hair loose in back. When she's staying at the tavern she wears deceptively simple looking dresses that in blues and greens that have a lot of detail work in them. When leaving the tavern she wears breaches and a belted tunic. Her cloak has a lot of secret pockets in it.



She's also very skilled in disguising herself. She can style her hair to cover her ears, apply makeup to make her skin look merely tanned instead of golden. She's quick to adjust her clothing to either blend in or stand out, as needed. Even when she's at her most broke she retains one set of very fine clothes.

WHAT EDANA KNOWS: THE ZHENTARIM

- Zhentarim are a shadow organization of thieves, spies, assassins, and wizards that trades mercenaries and goods (including weapons) for profit.
- Their original base of power was among the Zhent people in the Moonsea region, primarily a place called Zhentil Keep.
- Long sought to gain political influence in Waterdeep, but the strength of the city's Masked Lords, nobility, and professional guilds makes that difficult.
- In the late 14th century (about 100 years ago), the founder of the Zhentarim (Manshoon) was killed and Zhentil Keep was razed. Zhentarim power was shattered, with the organization breaking down into many internecine factions.
- Recently the local Zhentarim in Waterdeep were rallied around a mercenary group known as the Doom Raiders. They'd been rising in power. Recently, however, there's been a schism in the Zhentarim: A second locus of power seems to have risen within the group and is peeling support

off from the Doom Raiders. You aren't sure exactly who this second locus belongs to, but you do know that:

- They keep an interrogation house in Brindul Alley in the Trade Ward. It was most recently being run by a woman never Avareen Windrivver.
- Members of the new faction have taken up residence at Yellowspire, a tower in the Castle Ward.
- This schism is not widely known, because the Zhentarim are simultaneously fighting a gang war with the Xanathar Crime League.

WHAT EDANA KNOWS: THE XANATHAR CRIME LEAGUE

- Xanathar is a beholder. He's hundreds of years old and has held court over the Waterdhavian underworld for centuries. He stepped into the power vacuum left behind
- The location of his headquarters is a closely kept secret, but definitely lies somewhere under Waterdeep. Possibly in the vicinity of the underground city of Skullport.

CREATING EDANA

Sarah's core concept was an elf with criminal connections who had been coasting for a *long* time. She was already playing a very young elf in another campaign, and here she really wanted to lean into elven longevity. A central image was the endless carousel of identities; each picked up, enjoyed, and then casually discarded.

In play, I think she discovered that the "safety" of Edana's serial identities was less about comfort and more about *fear*. This became very interesting to explore as the events of the campaign kept pushing her to put down meaningful roots.

PUBLIC INTEGRATION: The main thing here was pulling the lore of the Shadow Thieves. Connecting the disappearance of Edana's mother to the height of the Shadow Thieves' power in Waterdeep (centuries earlier) helped cement just how long Edana had been coasting through her disposable identities.

PRIVATE INTEGRATION: Usually the GM's private integration is, well, private... at least for a time. In this case, though, I immediately handed Sarah these short cheat sheets of what Edana knew about the Zhentarim and Xanathar's gang. I framed this as being what she knew about the local criminal scene in Waterdeep, but obviously I knew both of these organizations would be featuring in the campaign. Breaking down exactly what she knew accomplished two things:

First, it let me think very carefully about what information the PCs would just know and what information would need to be discovered through play.

Second, when these topics inevitably came up during play, having the info sheet meant that Sarah could just act as an expert, using the knowledge that Edana had to brief in the other PCs. Instead of asking me what her character knew and then having the information come from the GM, she could just confidently roleplay through the moment.

It also meant that, for example, I could drop some off-hand reference to "Brindul Alley," and then the player — just like the character — could go, "Wait a minute! I know what that means!" Which is infinitely better than me dropping an off-hand reference to "Brindul Alley" and then calling for an Intelligence check to continue telling them information. (Similar to the [Matryoshka search technique](#).)

MAKING THE PARTY: Edana's background obviously positioned her as a fixer, and very early on the group decided that she was probably the one who was connecting them with the contact at the Yawning Portal.

In principle, this was pretty straightforward, although it became considerably more convoluted as the other PCs became involved.

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: One last thing I'll note here is how important I think it is for players to think about the physical description of their characters. I think it's collectively essential for the whole group (and me!) to be able to picture what's happening in the game world. I also think that

The advice I'll give for this is often very similar to that found in the [Universal NPC Roleplaying Template](#).

PASHAR

(Created by Peter Heeringa)

Mamoon Pashar Al-Eiraf Um-Hafayah (Moonborn Pashar, the Diviner of Hafayah) was born in Qadib (known as the city of sages or city of wands*) in the free cities of Zakhara in 1392. His father, a traveling gem-running sea-merchant from Hafayah* (city of secrets), and his mother a wizard of the noble class. Though they married in secret, their love was improper for their stations and Pashar was, as a result, cloistered away by his mother to be brought up by the very nurse (his "Marbia") who had raised his mother - a now ancient elf with the gift of reading the scrolls of fate upon the faces of those that stood before her. Pashar heard her provide readings to many and they always came to pass, but she always flat refused to provide a reading for Pashar.

During Pashar's childhood, his father returned to see his mother every three years while he struggled to make money and prestige enough to make himself a suitable match for Pashar's mother. These rare times with his father brought strange gifts from afar, the opportunity to travel about the city, visit the docks, gardens, and more. He was always sad to see his father go, and would be quick to inquire with his mother when their next meeting would occur. Outside of these bright moments much of his time was spent hidden away.

As a boy Pashar learned much about the histories of the world, learned to read the common tongue, elvish, and proceeded to be trained in the elemental languages of the Djinn. There was a routine and rigidity to his upbringing, but he listened well and learned much. All the same, when the moon was full he would sneak out from his confines and observe the stars, listen in on the talk of traders, and attempt to find playmates in the streets. It wasn't until he had a strange vision during a bout of sickness that his mother and Marbia decided it was time to test the boy for the gift.



ADOLESCENCE

In his 50th year, Pashar proved he had the capability and aptitude to learn magic. Delighted, his mother became a far more active part in his life as she provided training and testing in the magical arts. His was not an isolated apprenticeship, however. In addition to tutelage from his mother, he received regular training from his Marbia as well as a select number of arcane associates of his mother. An entire world opened up for Pashar as he was introduced to the fantastical and strange. During this time his father took his first great journey north to his ancestral home in Calimshan. He would return only twice in the next 40 years. After his father's first return Pashar questioned Marbia when his father would take Pashar and his mother. She remarked on his fate for the first and only time, "Once you are a great wizard you will have already been united." Pashar's spirits sank.

These years, while filled with exposure to knowledge from the best libraries within Qadib, dragged on as if they hovered in time. It wasn't until the last decade that Pashar's life would suddenly lurch forward to catch up for the stalled time.

FLIGHT FROM ZAKHARA

In his 90th year, Pashar's mother agreed to apprentice Pashar to a fellow wizard, Khorraveh. During this apprenticeship, Pashar found himself secreting his way past the wards and traps guarding the treasure hoard of his master Khorraveh. He sought to find something to show to his father, who was to arrive the next morning; something that could prove his capability as a wizard. In his exploration he inadvertently released a Djinn of great power from a strange crystal (where it had been imprisoned by Khorraveh). In a mock blessing/curse the Djinn wiped clean all that was written in Pashar's fate calling out as it departed, "I cast you upon the sea of fate to chart your own course, young wizard."

Khorraveh was furious at the loss of his prize and set to magically imprison Pashar for his transgression. Pashar's fate would have been sealed, but Marbia mysteriously arrived to save Pashar from the terrible end. In the ensuing battle there was terrible destruction within the city. Upon learning what transgressed, Pashar's mother secreted them away in the night. They were able to intercept his father before he arrived. The three were finally to be together, though without the luxury of the life to which Pashar was accustomed.

WRITINGS OF THE PRESENT

The next decade involved travelling north to Faerun, visiting strange and wonderful sites as the now united family made their way to Calimshan. The sea life grew on the trio, and while they spent several months in Calimshan, their time there was brought to a close early. Wanderlust and the lure of lucrative trade routes enticed the family to spur the crew of the merchant vessel onward.

During this time Pashar studied regularly with his mother, assisted his father with trade deals in port, played the zither, or helped keep lookout. In addition to these more mundane activities, his visions began to return and, in turn, intensify. He spoke once of his father's impending death - *blame upon the son*. Another time of a demon descending upon the ship in the night. This talk caused a rift between him and the crew, and Pashar found himself alone more and more frequently.

One ill-fated evening Pashar, with a bright mood, was on lookout. Beset by a terrible vision and rendered unconscious, Pashar was unable to warn of an advancing pirate ship until they were already upon the merchant vessel. In the chaos, his father and most of the crew were slain. Pashar was taken prisoner by a vicious tiefling pirate. While his mother caused irreparable harm to the pirate vessel, in the end she surrendered to save Pashar's life. The pirates gathered what they could from their vessel, scuttled it, and set off in the merchant vessel.

During their captivity, Pashar turned 100, the age of adulthood for elves. Pashar befriended Kittisothe, the very tiefling who had captured him upon the ship. Kitti eventually convinced her captain that Pashar should be allowed to earn or buy his freedom.

Down a suitable warship due to his mother's actions, the pirates seemed to think it fitting to ransom the pair of them for the cost of a new one. They named ransom at a price of 600 harbor moons (which sadly got a little lost in the translation). Pashar set off with his Kittisothe, his newfound ally, to seek these "six hundred coins."

ZAKHARAN CULTURAL NOTES

*Zakharan society is patriarchal and the father's hometown would be prescribed to Pashar, but it would be expected he would be raised by his mother.

Zakharan society pillars: honor, family, purity, hospitality, and piety

The Bond of Salt is an ancient tradition to link guest and host. When a guest accepts salt from a host, the host is guaranteeing the safety of the guest for three days, the believed time that the salt remains in the system. The guest, for their part, agrees to not harm the host or the host's family for the duration as well. To do so would do incredible damage to one's honor and station.

DESCRIPTION

Pashar's golden skin, silver hair, and emerald eyes cause him to stand out despite his thin frame and short stature typical of sun elves. Not much over 5 feet tall, he doesn't gain any height from his typical footwear of Zakharan slippers and other garb. He wears his hair long and loose behind his ears; or pulled up into a bun under a fez.

CREATING PASHAR

Peter was probably the most knowledgeable player at the table when it came to the lore of the Forgotten Realms. His character concept was also almost fully developed right from the beginning: Not just the general conceit of a cloistered, scholastic elf now eager with wanderlust while fairly naïve about anything not found in a history book, but all the rich, specific detail of Zakharan life.

One thing to note here, in fact, is the section of his character background dedicated to miscellaneous cultural notes. Peter pulled these details on his own, but it's also a technique that I like to use: I'll pull — or, more often, create (one thing I love about character creation is that it almost always prompts me to develop parts of my worlds that I had never thought about before) — specific cultural details relevant to a PC's background.

You don't need a lot of these. (And, in fact, an encyclopedia article can often be counterproductive.) But 4-8 really evocative, specific details — what they think, what they eat, what their clothing looks like, what their popular slang words are, etc. — can give the player a touchstone for both ground and developing their character.

(If you get really lucky, you'll get a player who takes your handful of evocative details and develop them into a richly detailed encyclopedia article that you can tuck into your own notes for future reference.)

BRING THE PARTY TOGETHER: So my first question for Peter was, "What brings Pashar to Waterdeep?"

Peter's original concept was that he and his parents had come to Waterdeep on their travels, and then his parents had gotten into some sort of legal trouble and gotten arrested. He was now stuck in the city and was trying to figure out how to pay off a debt of some sort to get them freed.

You can see how this basic concept, but also shifted and evolved. This was primarily in response to Heather's development of Kittisoth (which we'll dive into next), but the short version is that she was creating a tiefling pirate. Since Kitti and Pashar both had maritime elements in their backgrounds, Heather and Peter thought it made sense for the two of them to have crossed paths at some point.

As the three of us tossed ideas around, it was a pretty short leap to the idea that Pashar's parents had been taken by pirates (instead of being arrested in Waterdeep) and then an even shorter leap to Kitti actually being one of the pirates who had done it. (Pashar's dad also got killed in there somewhere along the way.)

Why Waterdeep? Well, Pashar thought it was the city he knew best in the North. (Because he'd read a number of histories about it. Same thing as being streetwise, right?)

PRIVATE INTEGRATION: As a fish out of water in Waterdeep, I didn't do a lot to privately integrate Pashar into the campaign. (To some extent, "the outsider who has to learn the city" is the hook.)

But the one thing I *did* do was set the ransom for his mother at 30,000 gold pieces. The players all thought his was an insane amount — "a king's ransom" as one put it and "oh-shit-money" as another suggested. But I, of course, knew that the central conceit of the whole campaign was a horde of half a million gold pieces. Pashar would be *highly motivated* once the stakes of Neverember's Enigma became clear.

At this point, Erik — another player — jumped in and jokingly suggested that Pashar, in his naivete, had actually set the ransom. "Right, right," Peter said. "They asked me how much money I thought I could get for my mother. And I was like, 'Thirty thousand gold pieces? How much could thirty thousand be, right?'"

This joke actually evolved into the idea that Pashar had been confused by the size of the ransom: The pirates, hearing he was going to Waterdeep for the money, told him that they wanted 600 harbor moons (a rare currency used only in Waterdeep that was worth 50gp per coin). Pashar heard that as "600 coins," more or less assumed they meant 600 gold pieces, and thought it was a very reasonable request.

Surprisingly, in addition to becoming a very funny running joke at the beginning of the campaign, this misunderstanding also became a minor lynchpin in the backgrounds of the other characters. So we'll be coming back to it.

KITTISOOTH KA'ITER

(Created by Heather Burmeister)

My mother was the wife of a fisherman on the main Pirate Isle. She became worried when he hadn't come home as expected from what was supposed to be a routine trip out to sea. She tried to make a pact with a devil in the hopes that it would ensure his safe return, but it went horribly wrong. The end result was her giving birth to me.

She tried to raise me the best that she could, I guess, but most of what I remember is her desperately trying to make me look like a normal child by hiding my leathery bat-wings or crying. It wasn't long before she disappeared entirely, leaving me to fend for myself.

The Pirate Isles are rife with underling children who have lost parents – either on great pirate raids or to great leviathans of the deep or simply to sad, lonely circumstance. I fell in with a group of street urchin kids who took care of each other and learned how to defend my odd looks with brute force. My group of kids would make a little cash here and there by running errands or little missions for the pirate gangs when they'd dock.

When I was around fifteen (I'm not one-hundred percent sure what my birthday is), one of the pirate gangs tasked my group with stealing a compass imbued with magical properties from a well-known captain named Iriqoth Ka'iter. It was supposed to be an easy job, but grace, stealth, and patience were never my strong points. I botched the mission by panicking when I couldn't get the lock on the chest open, trying to brute force said lock by kicking said chest over and over again, and trying to fight the crew when they inevitably found the source of the commotion. I was brought to Iriqoth by the crew so that he could decide what was to be done with me. Being devil-born himself, he took a shine to me immediately. He became my weird pirate captain dad, but insisted I work my way up from the bottom ranks if I was to take his place someday.



That day would never come.

After I'd been sailing for a few years and was just starting to take on the responsibilities of first mate, we were boarded in the middle of the night by a legendary pirate vessel, captained by none other than the Quiet Captain, Kip Braddock. Braddock and Iriqoth had long been at odds, but Iriqoth never took the threat seriously. Kip took the ship, killed my father, and took over the crew. Some day he'll pay for what he's done.

Shortly after, we came across a new piggy (that's what we called merchant ships sailing low in the waves). The merchant watchmen – who turned out to be Pashar – had fallen asleep on duty, so we were onboard before they knew what was happening. It looked like the easiest piggy we'd ever taken. But when Kip started killing the crew (including Pashar's father) so he could take the ship as a prize vessel, Pashar's mother started fighting back. We eventually managed to take her prisoner, but she'd heavily damaged our ship. So we set sail on the litty piggy ship.

Pashar, though completely impractical and ridiculous, is a wonder. He can tell me the names of very devil, and has been trying to help me find out what sort of devil-spawn I might be. He also doesn't seem to know when I'm making fun of him, which is a riot for me. He also has an indomitable good nature, which is rare on the high seas. We're an unlikely pair, but I think he's my first "friend" ... whatever that

means. I protected him and his mother from the rougher members of the crew and also offered to accompany him ashore when Kip came up with the idea of ransoming him and his mother for money for a new ship. I'm also hoping that the journey will give me time to plan my revenge.

CREATING KITTI

Heather's central concept was "tiefling pirate." Everything else more or less filled in around this central conceit. In [Part 2](#), we looked at how the decision to link her maritime background to Pashar's had a major effect on shaping the details of Pashar's background. As we wrapped up our character creation session, however, Kittisoth largely remained a cluster of large concepts. There were a few ideas floating around (like "devil-spawn pirate daddy"), but they hadn't really been nailed down. So Heather developed a lot of these details by writing her background between sessions.

You might also note that, unlike Edana and Pashar, Heather chose to write her character background in the first person. There was a brief period when I was a youngling when I wanted consistency in this sort of thing across the characters in a campaign, and an even longer period when I thought that this choice was somehow reflective of what a player valued or was focused on in their play.

These days I don't really think there's a meaningful distinction. There's obviously differences between first and third person and how they can be used, but I haven't found that it reflects much beyond the document itself if at all. (There might be a *slight* bias towards first person being better for developing the voice of your characters, but even that's not consistent: Talking at the table is very different from writing at your desk, and what you learn from one may or may not be applicable to the other. And, similarly third person *might* be slightly better at developing lore outside of your PC due to its objectivity, but not significantly so in the long run.)

With all that being said, one of the reasons I like having the characters actually write something up away from the table – even if it's just a few sentences – is that exploring character through written fiction *is* a different way of engaging with your character, and you *will* find stuff (and develop stuff) that you wouldn't necessarily find at the table. It's the most elementary form of [bluebooking](#), and also an excellent medium for thoughtful collaboration.

PUBLIC INTEGRATION: Heather was not the least knowledgeable player at the table when it came to the Forgotten Realms, but her exposure was limited to a handful of novels she had read when she was a teenager.

I'd made a point of putting a map of Faerûn on the wall and, when she suggested a pirate, I was able to point out the Pirate Isles. The Sea of Fallen Stars immediately captured her imagination and she was able to roll forward from that.



PRIVATE INTEGRATION: Much like her friend Pashar, Kittisothe was going to be a newcomer to Waterdeep, so there wasn't much to tie her into the extant elements of *Dragon Heist*. I did, actually, offer Luskan as an option if she was looking for a port that her pirates could be sailing out of (in which case there would have been some obvious hooks with Jarlaxle), but the Pirate Isles were just more interesting for her.

BRINGING THE PARTY TOGETHER: I've already described most of the initial work here, as it was done in collaboration with Peter/Pashar. Because of this connection, however, as Heather was writing up the details of Kittisothe's background, she also made a point of prepping a short cheat sheet of details that were also pertinent to Pashar's background. (This includes stuff like the name of the pirate captain who'd killed Pashar's father and ransoming his mother.)

This is obviously a good technique for making sure intersecting continuity gets sorted correctly, but it can also be a "sneaky" trick for getting players to collaborate not just with you, but also with their fellow players between sessions.

THEREN

(Created by Erik Malm)

I spent my youth exploring the forests of Evermeet and learning to hunt from my father.

Shortly after coming of age, word reached the wood elves of Evermeet that not only had the ruins of our old home in the Ardeep Forest been overrun by kobolds and other monsters, but a group of humans, led by Lord Nandar of Waterdeep, had begun invading and trying to lay claim to the forest.

When Rond Arrowhome set sail with an army of wood elves to take back and protect the forest, I volunteered to join them. I was trained as a ranger and soon became an expert at hunting both humans and kobolds.

Now that the forest is once again safe, I prefer to spend my days alone with nature – exploring, observing, and experiencing the constant change and unpredictable events of the natural world. I especially love the power, beauty, and unpredictability of thunderstorms and have developed a connection to Aerdrie Faenya, though I am one of the few non-avariel who worship her.

I am always happy to help out lost travelers (who mean the forest no harm) or anyone else in need, though I remain distrustful of the wealthy elite like the Nandars of Waterdeep.

DESCRIPTION

Theren has copper-colored skin with a dark-brown/copper-colored hair (like dark, tarnished copper).

His clothes palette is standard dark forest colors; the sort of thing that would help with camouflage in Ardeep – deep greens, browns, dark grey/black. Theren's original clothing would be elvish and probably trend more towards just greens and browns, emphasizing dark versions of those colors instead of a true black. (That said, the longer he's in the city, the more likely he is to start wearing some greys that would match stonework, etc. Maybe fewer greens as well, or even normal Waterdhavian clothing of a fashionable sort, but with subdued colors.) It's ultimately all about camouflage; to blend into his environment.

Theren is 5'10". Green eyes.

Hair is straight and shoulder length. Normally he just keeps it tucked behind his ears, which tends to keep it in place fairly well due to elvish ears being tall and pointy. But if it's particularly windy (or similar conditions where his hair might obscure his vision), he'll either wear a headband or tie his hair back.

There's nothing particularly remarkable about Theren's facial features – typical elvish face with thinner and more angular features than the average human. Rather, what is remarkable is the way that his life and outlook affect his skin, underlying musculature, and how he carries himself:

Theren has spent much of his life outdoors – baking in the sun, holding night-long vigils in the deep of the forest, and facing unafraid the heavy winds and storms which he is particularly fond of as a ceraunophile and worshiper of Aerdrie Faenya. Consequently, I think of Theren as looking a little weatherworn (or, at least, weatherworn for a young elf). It's not that he necessarily looks particularly aged or beaten down by the elements, more like that subtle difference between how high quality



furniture kept on a patio looks ever so slightly different than the exact same furniture kept in a three-season porch at the end of summer. He looks just a little out of place indoors and looks like he's where he belongs when outdoors.

Similarly, his musculature looks just a little different than the average elf. He's not particularly muscular or anything, though he still has an athletic build, but his muscles are all incredibly dense - like a rock climber's, a farmer's, or anyone else who's primary form of exercise is one of intense and continuous use of their entire body. This also applies to the underlying musculature of his face, making him look a little extra solid/rugged/durable. I suppose it may look a little formidable in some cases, but Theren isn't really threatening, scary, or even particularly imposing, he just looks like someone you'd rather not pick a fight with or try to rob.

His demeanor, posture, and manners have also been affected by his relative solitude and preference for the wilds. Having spent much of his time alone when he doesn't need to worry about what others think about him, he displays his emotions a little more readily, he is a little more likely to speak his mind, his manners are a little more unchecked, and his posture and physical mannerism are a little more informal than a typical elf. To be clear, he's still an elf raised on Evermeet, and a non-elf probably wouldn't even notice anything at all, but to other elves he seems a little... wild/feral.

Finally, although his regular demeanor might be a bit more wild and relaxed, he also has a hunter mode that he shifts into when stalking prey or facing enemies. When he's in this mood, he appears more cold, calculating, and emotionless. Unlike the differences described above, which might not be noticed by a non-elf, this shift is significant enough that everyone except the most unobservant can tell he's hunting something or someone.

CREATING THEREN

The thing I always marvel at when revisiting Theren's background is the intense depth of the physical description. I've had other players create similarly detailed descriptions, but usually it's because EVERYTHING is lavishly detailed. The ratio between Theren's physical description and everything else in Theren's character background seems crazy at first glance.

But it works. And it's a valuable reminder that everyone will have different touchstones that are most effective for them. (This will often depend not only on the player, but also the specific character.)

Look at how much amazing, actionable detail Erik works into Theren's physical description! It's all about blending into his environment? He's a little bit uncomfortable inside? That's gold. Even simple, specific physical actions like when/how he tucks back his hair.

PUBLIC INTEGRATION: Erik was the least versed in the Forgotten Realms at the table. Ironically, we ended up doing the most digging into the weird, esoteric corners of Realms Lore with his character.

The origin point was a simple question: Where would an elf ranger be from?

Evermeet was an easy answer: Big elven kingdom. Just across the ocean from Waterdeep. (Maybe he could be somehow tied into the maritime adventures of Kitti and Pashar?)

On the other hand, where might a wood elf live near Waterdeep? That led us to Ardeep Forest. And that's where we really started digging in. I forget the exact path we followed, but I ended up not only pulling information from *Lost Empires of Faerûn*, but also tracking down an obscure article about the forest that was written by Ed Greenwood and published in *Dragon Magazine* #270.

There was also more recent lore, revolving around a conflict between Lord Nandar of Waterdeep and the elves of Ardeep in the 1470s. (The Waterdeep connection, however tenuous, made this appealing.) I was not particularly familiar with this era (and not at all familiar with these events), but they were intriguing.

PRIVATE INTEGRATION: The only thing of note here that I recall is that Volo was the “author” of the *Dragon Magazine* article. This didn’t really have anything to do with integrating the character into the campaign, but giving Erik a copy of the article was a nice way to subtly establish Volo’s existence for a player who otherwise wouldn’t be familiar with the name when it was dropped in the first session.

BRINGING THE PARTY TOGETHER: The key question which remained was how Theren would be pulled into Waterdeep. (Remember that every player needed to explain how their character ended up walking through the doors of the Yawning Portal at the beginning of the campaign.)

We looked at a few options, but what stuck was just aiming the Pashar-Kitti vector in the direction of Ardeep Forest: While passing through the forest on the way to Waterdeep, they would have met Theren. After helping him with some local trouble (or possibly being saved by him from local trouble, their mutual versions of the story had very different interpretations of those events), Theren was swayed by Pashar’s sob story and agreed to help him (them, really) raise the ransom money.

It was only six hundred gold pieces, right?

(He was in Waterdeep with them before he discovered that the *actual* ransom price was... uh... considerably more money than that. He hadn’t sworn an oath or anything... but good gods.)

KORA

(Created by Chris Malone)

Kora Marwood was born the youngest to an impoverished family living in Waterdeep. Her father, Hogar, was a member of the guard and occasional longshoreman, and her mother cared for her four siblings and kept house in a shabby apartment in the Dock Ward. In the autumn of 1471, Kora's mother, Samira, took a short-term field job with the Snobeedle Orchard and Meadery. In the midst of a work day, she unexpectedly gave birth to Kora in the middle of the field.

Life continued to be difficult for the Marwoods, and things finally fell apart for the family when Hogar died while working on a job on the docks, killed by a faulty bit of cargo netting and crushed to death by lumber imports from Chult. Samira, fearing for her inability to care for Kora and her siblings, brought them to the Temples for adoption.

Kora, only three years old at the time, remembers little of her mother and her family. While her siblings went to temples of Lathander and Ilmater, Kora was taken by the acolytes of Mystra. She was raised in the mysteries and teachings of Mystra, learning the histories of civilization, magic, and religion. While life was safe and predictable, it was also boring. Kora began sneaking out at night to spend time in the city, and soon found herself enamored with a young man named Aseir Kalid, from Calimshan.

Aseir was an artist, working during the day in his father's shop weaving and dyeing, and then working on his own projects when he had time. When he presented her with a small wooden painting of her one night, she decided that she was done with life in the temple and left shortly thereafter. She lived with him for six months, exploring the city with new eyes. It was in the Spring of 1486 that Aseir fell ill with the Weeping Plague, an illness that began with sores around the eyes and nose that wept a clear fluid, then quickly spread throughout the body, followed by a fever and, for many, death. Brought to Waterdeep from ports far away, the city responded quickly with quarantine. It was then that Kora was reunited with her brother Randal, who had become a priest of Ilmater. Despite his training and magical prowess, he was unable to save Aseir, and left Kora in quarantine to care for him until he passed.



Heartbroken, Kora returned to the temple, throwing herself at the feet of the Head Priest. She begged him to take her back, so that she could serve the temple as a lay healer. While Mystra is not inclined towards life and healing, magic serves all, and they taught her the healing arts. She took to it quickly, showing prowess and aptitude.

She was asked to accompany a pilgrimage to Myth Drannor as a healer and acolyte, and she attended to this. Along the way, she made the acquaintance of a dwarven ranger named Dain Balderk. Dain was initially standoffish with Kora, but after she had several opportunities to demonstrate her knowledge, diplomacy, and skill, he showed a grudging respect. Unfortunately, the arrival of the pilgrimage was preceded by destruction, as the city of the Netherese fell upon Myth Drannor, destroying it. Again.

The pilgrimage stayed at the Ruins of Myth Drannor for several months, caring for the wounded and exploring the wild magic of the disaster. It was during this time that Kora discovered that Balasha Asorio, one of the guides and foragers with the party, was actually an agent of the Zhentarim. Exposing the

traitor forced a hasty ambush that had been in the making for some time. The Zhent were repelled, but Balasha escaped and Dain received a grievous wound to his back that would never heal completely. On the return trip to Waterdeep, Dain revealed himself as a Harper, and indoctrinated Kora into the faction.

When the pilgrimage at last returned to the city, Kora swore herself to the service of Mystra and began her life as a cleric in full. She now lives at the House of Wonder as a healer, acolyte, and doing odd jobs when asked. She serves mostly as an informational asset for the Harpers, looking to find those who look to destroy personal freedom and otherwise act out of evil. She still meets with Dain regularly, who acts as a mentor (and handler).

DESCRIPTION

Kora stands about 5'6", tending towards a leaner frame; not scrawny, but more svelte. She has darker skin, that of a deep tan or of a more Mediterranean ethnicity, not quite brown, but not pale. Her hair is dark brown, to the point of appearing black unless under direct sunlight. Her face is more narrow than broad, with a rounded chin, high cheekbones, and green eyes.

When at home and not expecting trouble or a call to action, she wears a robe or a tunic with a simple shirt underneath and blue or black leggings. When out and about, she wears her armor with a tabbard or tunic over it, leather leggings/britches, a cloak, and her shield, mace, pack, and healer's kit at her side. She dresses in white, silver, and blue, with red elements in linings and trim to reflect Mystra's holy colors. Mystra's holy symbol is emblazoned on her shield.

WHAT KORA KNOWS: THE ZHENTARIM

- Zhentarim is a shadow organization of thieves, spies, assassins, and wizards that trades mercenaries and goods (including weapons) for profit.
- Their original base of power was among the Zhent people in the Moonsea region, primarily a place called Zhentil Keep.
- Long sought to gain political influence in Waterdeep, but the strength of the city's Masked Lords, nobility, and professional guilds makes that difficult.
- In the late 14th century (about 100 years ago), the founder of the Zhentarim (Manshoon) was killed and Zhentil Keep was razed. Zhentarim power was shattered, with the organization breaking down into many internecine factions.
- You've been trying to figure out details about the local Zhentarim for awhile, as their power and influence seems to be growing. Recently, however, there appears to have been a schism within the group.
- This schism is not widely known, because the Zhentarim are simultaneously fighting a gang war with the Xanathar Crime League, and that violence is capturing everyone's attention. You know that that this gang war is the result of some provocative action taken by the new splinter group of the Zhentarim.

CREATING KORA

I've run games for and played games with Chris for a number of years now. His approach to character creation tends to be a quiet one: He likes to thoughtfully develop them in great detail, often working ahead of the group even in unfamiliar systems. In this case he was quite familiar with 5th Edition and the Forgotten Realms, and so by the time we were getting some of the new players up on their feet, Kora was already a fully fledged character rich with details. In fact, virtually everything you see above was already basically in place by the time I tuned in on Kora for the first time.

PUBLIC INTEGRATION: There's an anecdote that's somewhere between gospel truth and urban legend that goes around both the movie and video game production circles. You have either a developer or a

writer or a director or maybe an SFX house who's giving a presentation to their producer or editor or investor. And so they very deliberately add one element to their presentation or edit or final render that they know is dumb: Like, maybe it's a noir drama but there's a shot of a guy holding a goose for no reason.

So their boss says, "Looks great, but I think you should lose the shot with the goose." And our creator-hero takes the note and deletes the goose... because, of course, they never *actually* wanted the goose in the first place. The point of the story is that everybody in a decision process feels a need to give notes; either because they psychologically want to feel that they've "contributed" to the final product or because they need to justify their paycheck. If they just say "that's good," it's not like they've actually *done* anything, right? The point of the dumb goose was to provide a lightning rod for the irrelevant-but-necessary comment they pathologically need to provide.

This is my long-winded way of saying: As a GM, don't be the executive in this story.

If you've got a value-add, go for it! That's the whole point of the "public integration" phase. In this case, Chris' expertise and clear vision meant that Kora was already fully integrated into the setting.

No need to look the gift horse in the mouth. Ride on.

PRIVATE INTEGRATION: Chris had chosen for Kora to be a fledgling Harper and had also set up a violent history with the Zhentarim, so that bit of integration with two of the major factions of the campaign was also more-or-less automatically done for me. I simply swapped out the scripted Harper contact (Mirt) for the character that Chris had created (although I eventually brought Mirt back in as Dain's boss; thus Kora's background gave additional depth to the Harpers rather than vice versa).

(I guess maybe it is worth pointing out that swapping out elements you had planned and replacing them with what the players created is not only just as valid as adding relevant stuff to the PCs' background, it's probably MORE valid.)

You'll note that, like Sarah, Chris got a "What You Know" handout for the Zhentarim. Some of the bullet points are duplicated (there's no reason to rewrite or reword stuff you don't have to), but others have unique information, slightly different information, or information with a different interpretation. The goal, of course, is for the two players to be able to actually swap information in-character. (If their handouts were perfect duplicates, the interaction is more likely to be one of them regurgitating everything know and the other player not getting any pay-off from their character's knowledge. The unique information solves that problem. The information that slightly overlaps - or even contradicts! - provokes actual discussion between the players.)

The Snobeedle Orchard appears on the map of Waterdeep:



I had a huge version of this map hanging on the wall and Chris simply grabbed it off the map when fleshing out the story of Kora's mother. This was a really cool opportunity, but I blew it: I completely missed the fact that Dasher Snobeedle, a member of the Snobeedle family, had become one of the wererats sent to harass the new owners of Trollskull Manor (i.e., the PCs). I eventually noticed my oversight towards the end of the campaign when I started doing some meaningful development on Kora's missing mother and was able to work it in. (You can read about that in more detail [over here](#).)

BRINGING THE PARTY TOGETHER: As I mentioned in [Part 1](#), Edana's position as a fixer made her a natural fit for being the character who would connect the rest of the party with their contact at the Yawning Portal. Kora's role as a Harper agent, however, *also* made sense for this role.

There were a few options we collectively considered, including:

- Kora somehow being undercover and up with Edana. (Chris wasn't really interested in playing Kora with a false identity, and this also suggested that Edana was currently involved in criminality, whereas Sarah was more interested in having her at the tail end of one of her respites.)
- Edana introducing half of the party to their contact and Kora introducing the other half. (The problem was that Kitti, Pashar, and Theren were already grouped up, so there was no "other half" for Kora to introduce.)

The final solution ended up being a somewhat convoluted web of connections: Upon arriving in Waterdeep, Kitti decided the best way she could help Pashar raise money was by joining the underground fight circuit. (I made a note to connect this to the underground fights that figure later in the campaign.) Asking around, they got pointed in the direction of Edana. When Edana realized how much money they *really* needed, told them to skip the fights and decided to take them to Kora, who had been putting the word around that she needed a crew.

"Mystra's got money," was Edana's rationale. But it turned out the job wasn't for the Temple of Mystra. Kora was freelancing. But the offer was better than nothing, so Kitti, Theren, and Pashar accepted. Edana decided to tag along for a little bit just to make sure everything was copacetic. (It seemed to her that young Kora was flying by the seat of her pants... She wasn't wrong.)

And that's when Kora took them all to the Yawning Portal to meet her contact.