

# RUNNING THE CAMPAIGN – DRAGON HEIST: A PARTY AT SHIPWRIGHTS’ HALL

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[by Justin Alexander – March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2019](#)



Back in 2015, I shared [Game Structure: Party Planning](#). This is an incredibly flexible scenario structure that GMs can use to design and run large, dynamic social events without being overwhelmed by their complexity.

In getting ready to run one of these social events — whether it’s a bounty hunter trade conference, a political fundraiser, the Ilvermorny debutante ball, or a pleasure cruise to the center of a Hollow Earth on a flying ship — a GM can certainly pour a lot of prep into them. And the scenario structure is a powerful one which will reward that prep.

But I also included a quick ‘n dirty version of the structure that GMs can use with about 5 minutes of prep when they don’t have a lot of time to pour into it: If a big social soirée crops up in the middle of a session, you can call for a quick break and rapidly get your social event set up.

That’s the situation I found myself in while running [Dragon Heist](#) last weekend, and I thought it might be illuminating to walk through how it played out at the table.

(This post will contain copious spoilers for *Dragon Heist*. I will do my best to make it comprehensible to those not familiar with the campaign, but check out the [Alexandrian Remix](#) if you’re feeling lost. Part 1 alone should give you enough context to fully grok the proceedings.)

## PROLOGUE TO THE OMEN COMING ON

Before we dive in, let’s take a moment to briefly establish the given circumstances of the situation.

The PCs — Kittisoth, Pashar, Kora, Edana, and Theren — had aggressively pursued their investigations into the nimblewrights which were being sold throughout Waterdeep. As such, they had (a) identified Captain Zord, the leader of a small fleet of carnival vessels based out of Luskan, as the person selling

them and (b) discovered that Zord, or the Luskans he was working for, had implanted *clairvoyant crystals* into the nimblewrights and were using them to spy on various noble families and organizations throughout the city. They'd also made contact with a young dragon, Zellifarn, who had also been spying on Captain Zord, and could tell them that the *crystal ball* the *clairvoyant crystals* were bound to was located in a submersible underneath Zord's flagship.

The group had also recently become invested as agents of the Harpers, and therefore felt honor bound to shut down Zord's operation. As such, they began planning a heist to seize the *crystal ball* from Zord.

Largely by chance, the night they chose for their operation was Ches 25th. As noted [here](#), this is also the night of the Shipwrights' Ball, an event that was once a guild celebration, but which has now turned into one of the biggest social events of the Fleetswake festival season.

This is important because, elsewhere in the campaign, Kittisothe had been relentlessly flirting with Renaer Neverember (the young noble that the PCs had saved several weeks earlier). And I had decided that Renaer was going to ask Kittisothe to attend the Shipwrights' Ball with him.

This was [a great complication for the planning of their heist](#), so I fully embraced it.

All of which leads us up to the current situation:

Theren and Edana, using a stockpile of *invisibility* and *waterbreathing* potions that the group had used all their resources to acquire, would infiltrate Captain Zord's ship and steal the *crystal ball*.

Pashar and Kora would provide what support they could from the shore (and be ready to step in if the shit hit the fan).

Kittisothe would simultaneously go on a date with Renaer to the Shipwrights' Ball.

Only problem? At least in part because I was running the campaign in big, marathon sessions, all of this had developed over the course of a single session. I didn't have the Shipwrights' Ball fully prepped, and I knew that — particularly with it playing out simultaneously with the *Eyecatcher* heist — I needed a strong structure for everything to play out to best effect.

So that's when I called a 10 minute break, grabbed a sheet of paper, and quickly sketched out the Shipwrights' Ball.

## SET UP

The quick 'n dirty version of party planning looks like this:

- Make a list of 3-5 places people can congregate
- Make a list of 10 characters
- Make a list of 5 events
- Make a list of 5 topics of conversation
- And I basically ran straight down this list.

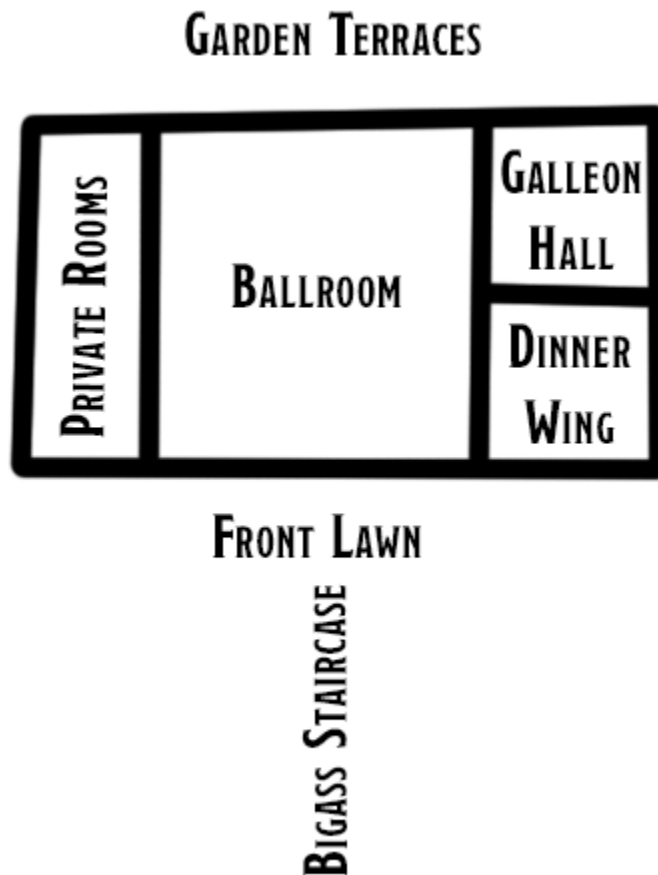
**LOCATIONS:** The Shipwrights' Ball takes place at Shipwrights' House. I took a few minutes to dig through the existing lore for the Shipwrights' House hoping there would be some material to pilfer, but there wasn't much. The House had been briefly described, a century earlier, in the [City of Splendors](#) boxed set as:

**D19 Guild Hall: Shipwright's House**  
2-story Class B building  
HQ: Order of Master Shipwrights

As a Class B building, it's a "larger, more successful and elaborate building," and most likely freestanding. Briefly looking into the Order of Master Shipwrights, I discovered that in the 14th century they had been rivals with the Master Mariners' Guild. I decided that, at some point in the last century, the Master Mariners' Guild had been wiped out, and the Order of Master Shipwrights had grown rich indeed with a near-monopoly of shipbuilding in Waterdeep.

I stuck some [Post-It flags](#) to mark the appropriate pages in case I needed to reference this scant reference material and moved on.

On my single prep sheet, I quickly sketched out a "map" that basically looked like this:



Except, of course, sketched in pencil and with my sloppy handwriting scrawled across it.

I knew that the **Bigass Staircase** went down to Dock Street near Asteril's Way (based on the 2nd Edition and 3rd Edition maps), which it turned out was surprisingly near to where I had placed the *Eyecatcher* (Zord's flagship) in the previous session.



The **Ballroom** and **Dinner Wing** kind of speak for themselves. (The latter were a “wing” because I knew there would be lots of small, private dining areas and bars jutting off from the main dining hall, just in case that would be useful.) **Galleon Hall** was so called because it had about a half-dozen full-sized ships inside it as installation pieces. (You know that scene in [Moana](#) with all the ships in the cave? That was my visual touchstone. Except in a giant room of marble-encrusted wealth instead of a cave.) **Private Rooms** off to one side of the ballroom because it would give me smaller spaces for conversations to move into as necessary. And the **Garden Terraces** were 4-5 huge terraces jutting off the back of the building with winding paths leading through them; bioluminescent plants would give the terraces a “Pandora from [Avatar](#)” kind of feel, and the whole complex would be hemmed in from the rest of the city by a “wall” of huge, dark, old-growth pine trees.

I didn’t write any of that down: Too time-consuming. A quick sketch-map for reference and the rough images that had been conjured up in my head were all that I needed. I had the 3-5 locations.

**CHARACTERS:** As I mentioned in *Party Planning*, “If the social event is growing organically out of game play, then you’ve probably already got the NPCs...” And that was definitely true here. Basically I just flipped through *Dragon Heist* and wrote down this list:

- Rubino Caswell - Guildmaster
- Renaer
- Laeral (207)
- Vajra (216)
- Jalester Silvermane (20)
- Obaya Uday (20)
- Cassalanter
- Mirt (211)
- Remalia Haventree (215)

The numbers in parentheses were page references to their write-ups. Several of these characters had already appeared in the campaign (Renaer, Jalester, Mirt) and several others I had already planned on introducing in the near future (Vajra, the Cassalanters). The only new character was the guildmaster.

As the party progressed, I would simply place a check mark next to each name as Kittisoth had an interaction with them. (It's not that she wouldn't be able to continue having additional interactions with them, but this helped me keep an eye on which characters I hadn't used yet so that I could make sure that everyone got brought "onstage" at some point during the evening.)

**EVENTS:** At this point in the campaign, I knew that the Cassalanters needed to make contact with the PCs and invite them to a meeting at their villa. I decided this was as good a time as any for that to happen, and I quickly included that in a list that largely consisted of the Ball's social agenda:

- Grand Promenade
- Rubino's Speech
- Cassalanter's Approach
- Zero-G Dancing (Vajra & Laeral)
- Dinner

I'd indicated Vajra & Laeral in parentheses because I had an image of those characters being introduced to Kittisoth while she was dancing with Renaer. (The zero-g dancing is exactly what it sounded like: A cool magical effect where everyone could literally dance their partners off their feet.) As it turned out, this is NOT how Kittisoth ended up meeting Vajra the Blackstaff and Laeral the Open Lord of Waterdeep.

Now, honest to god, while I was planning all of this, I *completely forgot* that Captain Zord's carnival [was scheduled to perform a parade from their ships to the Shipwrights' Ball!](#) It was only after returning to the table and beginning to review my notes for the *heist* portion of the evening that I realized that the two events were going to feature this dramatic and unexpected crossover event.

This is one of those incredible moments of serendipity that can only really happen when you have a truly robust scenario prepared and you're actively playing it hard for all its worth. You keep setting things in motion, and the billiard balls inevitably start colliding in amazing patterns that you never anticipated and had no way of planning.

In any case, I reached back over to my list and added "Sea Maidens Faire Parade" as the first entry.

**TOPICS OF CONVERSATION:** "If the social event is growing organically out of game play, then you've probably already got the NPCs *and the topics of conversation...*" This was also basically true. I quickly jotted down:

- Embezzlement [meaning Lord Dagult's embezzlement of 500,000 dragons]
- Explosion [meaning the *fireball* that the PCs were investigating]
- Black Viper robberies [this had not yet come up in the campaign, but was [part of my prep](#)]

This wasn't quite enough, though. You really want to have a range of topics that you can cycle through to keep a party alive. Also, it would be more interesting to have more topics that the PCs weren't already aware of. AND it would be good to have some topics that weren't directly related to the plot of the campaign. So I added two more kind of out of left field:

- Misra Tesper eloped to Daggerford (with a half-orc) [this whole thing, including Misra Tesper, was made up out of whole cloth; I pulled her last name from a list of Waterdeep noble families and I pulled her first name from [the list of fantasy names](#) that I keep on hand as a GM tool]



- Black Gold in Moonshae (extrusion of the Feydark) [meaning that a new Black Gold rush had begun in the Moonshae Isles; I'd previously pulled this really obscure reference to *MOON1-3: Black Gold*, a 4th Edition Living Forgotten Realms scenario, as an explanation for why a house was abandoned in [Part 2: Gralhund Villa](#), and here I was simply flipping through the binder containing my prep notes for inspiration, saw the reference and decided to foreshadow the later development if it ever came up... which it probably wouldn't, but it doesn't really matter]

And that was it. I now had everything I needed to run the Shipwrights' Ball on a single sheet of paper. As I mentioned, the whole thing took me less than 10 minutes. In fact, I've spent far more time explaining the whole process here than I did actually jotting down my lists at the time.

# RUNNING THE SHIPWRIGHT'S BALL

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[by Justin Alexander - April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2019](#)



Edana, Theren, Kora, and Pashar leave Trollskull Manor – the inn that they own – and head down to the Docks to get into position for their heist to steal Captain Zord’s *crystal ball* from the submersible attached to the bottom of the *Eyecatcher*.

They leave behind Kittisoth Ka’iter, the winged tiefling pirate who has been asked by Renaer Neverember to accompany him to the Shipwrights’ Ball. Renaer arrives in a personal carriage, dressed in practical finery and with his scarlet hair pulled back in a long plait down his back.

As Kitti steps up into the carriage, the rest of the group arrives dockside. Their plan is for Edan and Theren – one an elf of the city; the other an elf of the wilds – to go under the waves and infiltrate the *Eyecatcher* while Kora and Pashar provide whatever oversight they can from Dock Street.

As they’re making their final preparations, off to their right they can see there’s a lot of activity around the pier where the Sea Maidens Faire has set up. They see the carnival’s griffon take flight, signaling the start of a parade which marches off the end the pier. They’re worried for a moment that the parade will turn towards them, but instead it heads straight into the city towards Fish Street.

The dragon Zellifarn arrives, thrusting his head up out of the dock waters and plopping it down on top of the Dock Street retaining wall. “Are you ready?”

Swallowing their potions of *invisibility* and *water breathing*, Edana and Theren leapt down and grabbed on the wing-joints of the dragon. As they disappeared into the dark waters –

CUT TO: Renaer and Kitti's carriage pulling up in front of Shipwright's House.

Splitting the party is great. Swapping back and forth between simultaneous scenes is the easy mode for effective RPG pacing. This technique is described in more detail in [The Art of Pacing](#), but generally speaking I'm looking to cut frequently from one set of action to the other.

You may see people express ideas similar to this as trying to "avoid players become bored" or something like that. If you've got a good game going, though, that generally won't be true: The really good tables are entertaining not merely in participation but ALSO in the role of audience. In other words, if things are going well, players enjoy watching what happens in the game regardless of whether or not they're in the current scene.

A good cut, in fact, is often about targeting that audience stance: The appeal of the cut for players not in the current scene is not primarily about them getting to act again; it's in the suspense of wondering *what happens next*. When you've got a group firing on all cylinders and you pull it off right, you can get players wanting their scene to end because they *have to know* what happens next in the other scene.

And when it *really* works, you can get everyone at the table feeling that way *all the time* – not only engaged in their current scene, but driving the action forward and constantly looking forward to the next.

You can get that effect without cutting between simultaneous scenes, too. But, like I say, doing it with simultaneous scenes is the easy mode.

The carriage pulls up. Kitti looks up the long stairs toward's Shipwright's House: The stairs cut between the buildings facing Dock Street, leading up to the strange opulence of Shipwrights' House where it's nestled between the more typical dockside businesses and tenements.

Renaer took her arm and, as they began walking up the stairs, Kittisoth saw the griffon in the air off to her left. She reflected on her own encounter with one of the city's griffon-riders a few days earlier.

The griffon is a **crossover**. As noted in *The Art of Pacing*, you want to enrich the experience of simultaneous scenes by including elements from one scene into the other. This is a very simple crossover: The PCs in Group A see the griffon leave the Docks. The PC in Group B sees the griffon flying into the city.

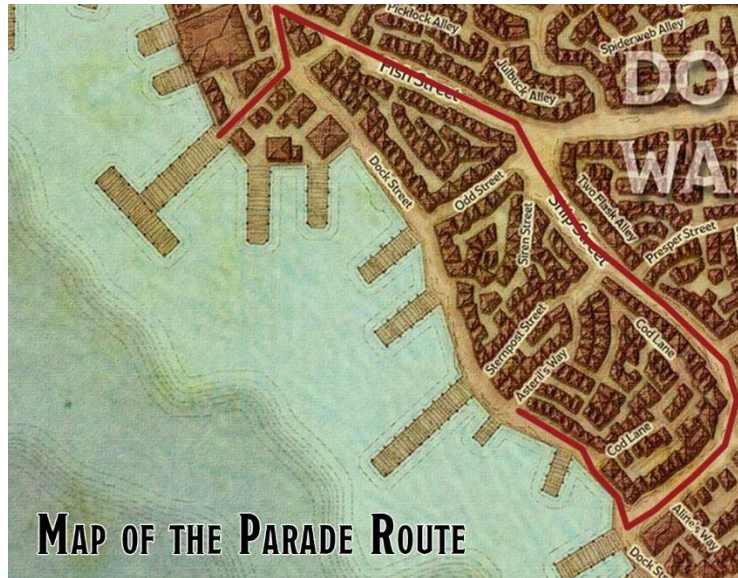
At this point I'm also triggering the **Arrival**. This is kind of a universal first beat in the party planning structure: It's a chance to establish the geography of the event so that the players can orient themselves for the action that follows. I'll often have the Arrival marked by some sort of big event or announcement, but in this case I don't. This gives Kittisoth and Renaer a chance to chat with each other as they head up the stairs. Which they do, dropping a number of references to past events and in-jokes. And then...

Kittisoth had been watching the flight of the griffon. It seemed to have almost circled Shipwrights' House and was now off to her right. "What's with that griffon?"

Renaer looked up. "I think it's part of the parade."

And we CUT BACK TO Edana and Theren.





This was an effective place to cut because the players had earlier, out of character, joked that the Sea Maidens Faire parade might be going to Shipwrights' House. So when Renaer announced that the griffon (which the group, although not Kittisoht, knew was part of the Sea Maidens Faire) was "part of the parade," the entire group immediately realized that the crossover wasn't just incidental; the two scenes that they had thought were going to be wholly separate affairs were, in fact, on a much more significant collision course.

So we move away from that revelation and give the audience/players a chance to really process the implications.

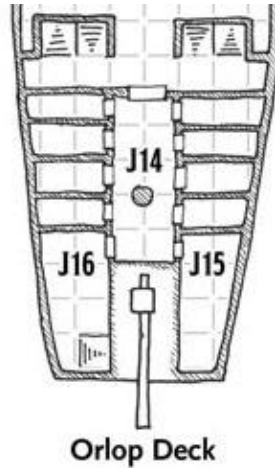
Meanwhile, under the *Eyecatcher*, Edana and Theren could now see the submersible that Zellifarn had told them about. Unfortunately, they couldn't see any direct means of access, so they were going to have to figure out some way to infiltrate the submersible from the *Eyecatcher*.

Following a suggestion that Kittisoht had made, they decided to climb the anchor chain and enter the chain house. Invisible as they were, this was easily accomplished. The chain house had no immediately obvious egress, but a little exploration quickly revealed a concealed access hatch that let them out into a narrow passageway on the lower deck.

If you look at the maps of the *Eyecatcher*, there is no chain house. But there should be, right?

I already knew going into *Dragon Heist* that I was going to have to improvise around certain shortcomings from the maps. (They don't include any windows. Windows are very important to a heist.) I had not thought about this particular absence, but this is just good advice in any case: The map is not necessarily the territory. If your players ask where the privy is, you didn't put one on the map, but logically a privy should exist... figure out where the privy goes!

This is somewhat similar to what I discussed in ["Whoops, Forgot the Wolf,"](#) but the gist is that you'll want to figure out how to integrate your errant chain house seamlessly. In this case I saw the compartment included for the whipstaff steerage and decided that the chain house would basically piggyback in that space.



As you can see, there's no door there. Easy enough to add one (as it wouldn't contradict any previous onscreen continuity), but as easy to hypothesize that it's actually a concealed access panel since this compartment would rarely need to be accessed.

Meanwhile, upon Dock Street, Pashar had also been watching the griffon circle towards Shipwrights' House. He got a very bad premonition that something terrible was going to happen at the Ball, and there was little he could truly do to help here if anything went wrong on the *Eyecatcher* in any case. So he and Archimedes, his owl familiar, peeled off and headed towards the party to put eyes on Kitti's date.

The other thing about cutting between scenes is that your players will often start playing through moments that don't require your attention as the GM: While I was running the scouting and infiltration of the *Eyecatcher* with Edana and Theren, Pashar and Kora, who were sitting at the far end of the table, played through a detailed discussion of Pashar's fears regarding the party and his decision to leave Kora alone.

Once again, this is great for pacing and also opens up opportunities for interactions that I, as the GM, might have otherwise skipped over. Great stuff.

The Further Adventures of Pashar and Archimedes won't enter into the chunk of the campaign I'm discussing here, but this did put them in position for some very funny play-by-play commentary on Kittisothe's date with Renaer later on.

Back at Shipwrights' House, Kitti and Renaer had circled off to one side of the large lawn that lay in front of the mansion. As they continued discussing Kitti's recent history with griffons, a Chultan woman approached them. Renaer introduced her as Obaya Uday.



At this point, I'm letting the party begin to play itself. As I describe in [Party Planning](#), most of this process boils down to:

- Which NPCs are talking to each other? (Consult your guest list.)
- Who might come over and join a conversation that the PCs are having? (Again, guest list.)
- What are they talking about? (Look at your topics of conversation.)

In this case I'm just looking at the **guest list** and pulling Obaya Uday out more or less at random. I put a checkmark next to her name, and then I look at her character write-up:

*Obaya, a priest of Waukeen, has traveled from Chult to sponsor expeditions into Undermountain, with the goal of bringing its magical treasures back to her employer, the merchant prince Wakanga O'tamu of Port Nyanzaru.*

(Normally I'd use the [Universal NPC Roleplaying Template](#), but in this case I was running the party on-the-fly and so I'm just using Obaya's write-up from the *Dragon Heist* book.)

What would Obaya talk about? Expeditions to Undermountain. Who's present? Renaer. So **contextualize** the topic she'll talk about to the characters who are present and...

"Have you given any thought to my proposal?" Obaya asked.

"I have," Renaer said. "But I don't think an expedition to Undermountain is something that my current schedule will allow for."

And then **relate it to the PCs**, bringing them into the conversation (if they haven't already injected themselves):

"You know who you should talk to?" Renaer added. "My friend here. She and her companions rescued me from Zhentarim, and they could do very well in Undermountain."

Kitti blushed at the compliment.

Now I look at my guest list again and plan my next move while continuing to play through the current conversation. This sets me up to introduce the next element *before the conversation ends*. You don't always have to do this, but it's often more effective in a party to add a new element to an interaction rather than allowing the conversation to run its course to awkward silence.

(By the same token, you don't want to *never* have a social interaction end so that the entire party just happens in one big conversation. Have NPCs excuse themselves. Give the PCs prompts to leave and engage action somewhere else. Cut away and, when you cut back, simply move past the end of the conversation and ask who they want to talk to next. But I digress.)

As Kitti and Obaya began discussing the details of Obaya's proposal, Mirt the Moneylender circled in. Kittisothe's friend Kora had recruited all of them into the ranks of the Harpers, and she had met Mirt as a Harper agent. It was partly on his behalf that they were attempting to shut down Captain Zord's nimblewright operation.

Since there was no way that Kittisothe should know any of that, she wisely acted as if she had no idea who this lecherous man was and allowed herself to be introduced to him.

"I am so glad, Renaer," Mirt declared, "that you've stopped chasing those thing waifs and found yourself a woman with... wings."

Before anyone could respond to that, a trumpet sounded. Turning, Kitti saw that Captain Zord had just ridden up onto the lawn atop a polar bear. The griffon circled above. The Sea Maidens Faire had arrived.

Kitti pulled Renaer urgently off to one side and whispered fiercely. "That's the guy with the automatons!"

CUT TO: Edana and Theren making their way through the *Eyecatcher*.

This is both a dramatically appropriate cliffhanger (everyone wants to know what will happen next), but also a great moment to cut away because I, as the GM, need a moment to figure out what Renaer's response to this information is going to be.

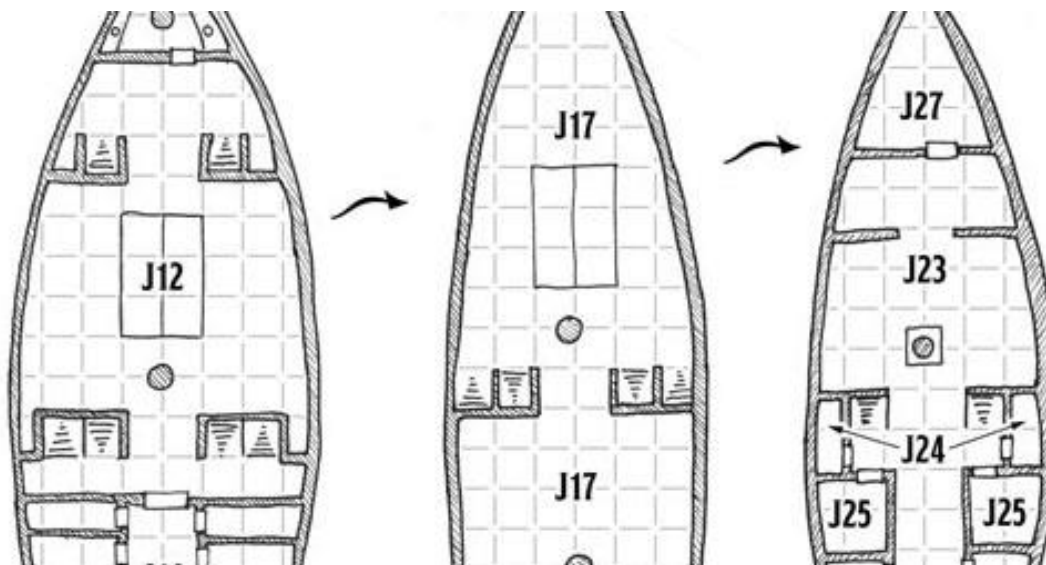
I had, in no way, anticipated that this might be Kittisothe's reaction to Captain Zord's arrival. And I had no way of imagining what was about to happen as a result.

I love roleplaying games so much.

# RUNNING THE SHIPWRIGHT'S BALL – PART 2

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by Justin Alexander - April 12<sup>th</sup>, 2019



Edana and Theren took the stairs down from the orlop deck to the upper hold of the *Eyecatcher*. As they rounded the corner to head down to the lower hold where they knew Captain Zord's quarters were, however, a giant spider dropped down from the ceiling and landed directly on top of Theren's invisible back.

I didn't see this one coming, either. Running the *Eyecatcher* from an [adversary roster](#), I saw that there were four giant spiders in Area J17. Flipping open the *Monster Manual* to the giant spider stat block, I was surprised to discover that 5<sup>th</sup> Edition had replaced the spider's tremorsense from previous editions with blindsight.

Cutting here, with the spider on Theren and their stealthy infiltration of the *Eyecatcher* at risk, is a solid cliffhanger cut. But it also gives me a chance to regroup slightly and quickly review some rules while multitasking the other scene.

Captain Zord rode his polar bear into the midst of the crowd. "The Sea Maiden Faire has arrived!" He twirled a baton high into the air and had the bear catch in his mouth. Behind him, a giant dragon float began a low swoop over the gathered crowd.

"The baton is a little much, don't you think?" Kittisoth said with scorn.

"What do you mean he's behind the automatons?" Renaer asked.

And then the whole story poured out: How Captain Zord was selling nimblewrights constructed by the technomancers of Luskan and that the nimblewrights had been outfitted with *clairvoyant crystals* which would

allow Zord to spy on anyone who owned a nimblewright using a specially attuned *crystal ball*.

Renaer grabbed her hand and began pulling her through the crowd. "Come on!"

Kittisoth grinned. "I'll bet you *knew* something like this would happen when you asked me here tonight."

"It's always exciting with you, my dear!"

Meanwhile, back on the *Eyecatcher*, Theren and Edana had managed to fight the spiders off long enough to run down the stairs and into Zord's cabin, slamming the door shut behind them. The heavy scent of lavender hung thick in the air as the spiders slammed into the door behind them.

The lavender here is a very clever bit of keyed foreshadowing that's built into *Dragon Heist*. You'll see how it pays off in a little bit, and it's one of the many places in the campaign where Perkins, Haeck, Introcaso, Lee, and Sernett show an excellent attention to detail that truly elevates the material.

Leaving the fair behind them (as Zord, with another wave of his baton, sent a volley of fireworks into the sky), Renaer led Kitti up to a staff-wielding woman in the crowd.

"Kitti, this is Vajra. Vajra, Kitti. Tell her what you told me."

And the story spilled out again.

This event is being driven from character action, but it's still taking place within the party planning structure: Vajra is on the guest list. A PC has had an interaction with her. So I put a checkmark next to her name.

As Kitti finished, Vajra furrowed her brow with thought. "If they're keyed to a *crystal ball*, do you know where the *crystal ball* is located?"

"On their ship."

At this point Edana's player says, "Dammit, Kitti."

"Well, I'm already this far in, right?" Kitti's player says.

When the other players at the table not only start commenting on the action, but having sharp emotional reactions to it, you know things are working well. It may not be immediately obvious, but this is also the payoff from establishing crossovers between the scenes: Edana's player can immediately see how this thing Kitti is doing is going to eventually snapback and impact her.

"And do you know who currently owns nimblewrights?"

"Oh," Kittisoth said. "So many people." And she began to list them: Nobles. Major guilds. Prominent citizens. Vajra's eyes narrowed.

But before they could continue, a man with greased-back hair that tufts up around his ears mounted the stairs of the mansion. As the final volley of fireworks died away, he threw up his hands and announced loudly, "The



carnival shall remain here throughout the evening! But for now, it is time for the Grand Promenade to begin!"

Once I'm again I'm actively playing the party structure: I'm looking at my **main event list** and triggering the next even in sequence.

How do I know the time has come for this to happen? Mostly it's just dramatic instinct. It felt like enough stuff had happened on the front lawn of the mansion and that it was time for a shift in scenery. From a practical standpoint, it also allowed Vajra to say:

"All right. I need to take my place in this. You get back on Renaer's arm –"  
"Renaer took Kitti's arm. "We'll meet up inside. I need to figure out the damage of... whatever this is."

Following rules of social etiquette that Kitti didn't understand, guests began going up the stairs and into the mansion in order of precedence. One of the first was a silver-haired elf in a scintillating blue dress that sparkled with living starlight. Kitti gave a low whistle.

"That's Laeral Silverhand," Renaer said. "Open Lord of Waterdeep."

"Why didn't you ask her?" Kitti asked.

"She intimidates me."

"Oh. I get that," Kitti said. "Yeah."

And then, surprisingly early in the proceedings, Renaer was pulling her forward, up the grand stairs, and into the cavernous grand ballroom beyond, where the Grand Promenade was circling like a whirlpool into an endless spiral.

At this point I already know what Vajra is going to do, so I'm taking the opportunity of the Grand Promenade to establish who Laeral Silverhand is. That lets the next beat land in the arc that Kittisothe has abruptly transcribed more effectively than if I had waited to introduce Laeral. You can actually see that a bit with the introduction of Vajra: The player doesn't know she's the Blackstaff, so her introduction by Renaer doesn't carry that weight of identity. But now I've set it up so that when Kitti actually meets Laeral, both player *and* character will get the full impact of it.

One thing to note here is that I have NOT put checkmarks next to Laeral's name. Although Kittisothe has seen her, she hasn't actually had a meaningful social interaction with her. So she's still on my To Do list.

While Theren moved a heavy dresser in front of the door to stop the spiders – and anyone else the spiders attracted – from getting in, Edana started looting Zord's cabin of its valuables.

As she transitioned to scooping up any paperwork that looked useful, Theren whipped back the fur rug on the floor and revealed a hatch they had suspected lay there. Ripping it open, they looked down a short airlock towards a second hatch.

They'd found their entrance to the submersible.

Back at Shipwright's House, the portly man with the greased hair had mounted a stage at the far end of the room. It turned out that he was Rubino Caswell, the guildmaster. He began giving an. Incredibly. Boring. Speech.

"You have to do this *every year*?" Kittisoth asked.

As Rubino spoke, however, an incredibly beautiful woman in a dress of yellow silk glided over to Kittisoth and leaned down to whisper in her ear. "Is this a good place to talk about an 'explosive' matter?"

Kittisoth glanced at her. "No. I don't think so."

"Then come with your comrades — your *other* comrades — to our villa tomorrow morning for a more... discrete discussion."

And the woman glided away.

Renaer leaned in. "What was that all about?"

"She seems to know something about our investigation into the explosion that killed Dalakhar," Kitti said.

Renaer frowned. "Be careful around the Cassalanters," he warned her. That was useful. Kittisoth wouldn't have had a clue who the woman was otherwise.

This is somewhat unusual: With Rubino's Speech and the Cassalanters' Approach, I am very rapidly triggering events from the main event track. Must more rapidly than I normally would. (Generally speaking, you'll trigger an event and then let all kinds of social eddies and currents spin out from that before shaking up the status quo again with the next event.)

Why?

Because Kitti has initiated a sequence of actions here which I know is going to yank her completely off the main event track I had designed for the evening. I wasn't entirely certain how the next scene would end, but it was quite possible it would derail the party entirely. The Cassalanters' Approach was included as an essential hook that would come one way or another (even if Kitti had skipped the party entirely, the Cassalanters would have sought the group out through some other channel), so I wanted to drop that invitation now before the next scene took place.

Meanwhile, Theren and Edana clambered down through the airlock and into the submersible. Passing by the engine room carried them out to a main passageway: At the far end of it they could see that the front of the ship opened up into a sort of bulbous, multi-level control room. The walls of the control room were large, globular windows looking out into the blackwaters of Waterdeep Harbor.

CUT TO: Rubino was finally finishing his speech and the crowd was beginning to form little social clusters that either drifted through the ballroom or made their way back out towards the carnival displays that the Sea Maidens Faire had rapidly erected. Renaer and Kittisoth made their way through a bramble of social introductions, trying to figure out where Vajra had gotten to. They eventually spotted her opening the door to a small, private room off to one side of the ball room.

Nothing too fancy here: The same way that we've been looking at our guest list and main event list, I'm now looking at the **zones** I've sketched out on my location map and picking one for the next scene.

They rushed over to Vajra and through the door. Kitti was looking back over her shoulder, scanning the crowd as she entered. As Vajra shut the door behind them, she turned around and—



Standing right in front of her was Laeral Silverhand.

*Oh no.*

The, "Oh no," of course, was actually spoken out loud by Kitti's player at the table. A character's inner monologue becoming manifest through a player's meta-commentary on what's happening can be really great.

"All right," Laeral said. "What is this all about?"

And Kitti's player said, "I tell her the thing about the thing that I've been telling everybody all night with my big fucking mouth."

As she finished, Laeral said, "Bring me Captain Zord. *Right. Now.*" And her eyes sparked with tiny shards of blue lightning.

"Oh. Oh no," Kittisothe babbled. "I don't think that's such a good idea right now, is it?"

Laeral smiled as her guard hurried out of the room. "I promise you we will not make too much of a scene."

CUT TO: Theren and Edana cautiously made their way down the passageway and looked down into the lower level of the control room. Several gnome tinkerers were at work there, apparently overseen in their work by... a dark elf. That was no good. They cautiously backed up.

The motivation for the cut to Theren and Edana here is probably pretty obvious: The appearance of Laeral had cranked the stakes *way* up. Reading the room, it was clear that everyone was completely on tenterhooks waiting to see what would happen. So you cut away. You let them live in that moment for a bit.

Laeral took a seat on the far side of the room. "So who is this, Renaer?"

"I'm not really anybody," Kittisothe demurred.

"I doubt that's true," Laeral said with a smirk, looking at the way Renaer's hand was resting on Kitti's arm.

"I'm sorry," Kitti said. "I don't know what to say. You're very intimidating."

Laeral smiled and took Kitti's hand. "It's all right. Everything is going to be fine. We appreciate all the hard work you've been doing on behalf of Waterdeep. Please, step over here for just a moment." She reached out into midair and her hand disappeared into some sort of dimensional pocket; a moment later she drew back a decanter of brandy.

"What's our play here?" Vajra asked while Laeral poured.

"I like shock and awe," Laeral said. "We're going to talk to 'Captain Zord' and find out *exactly* what game he's playing here."

The handle turned and the door began to open-

CUT TO:

The table literally shrieked in frustration here. Yeah. That's when you're doing it right. You can't force this sort of thing and you don't want to overplay your hand, but when the anticipation is building sharp, quick cuts will heighten it even further, so that when the moment arrives it lands with even more power.

Faced with several doors, Theren and Edana picked one at random.

At this point I asked, "Exactly how do you open the door?" This prompted them to detail with great care and specificity exactly what precautions they were taking.

This was actually irrelevant for this particular door, but it *would* have been relevant for any other door they had picked in that passageway. (They got very lucky with their random pick. It would be the last luck they would have for awhile.) By asking them the question regardless I (a) remove metagame anticipation if I need to ask the question for future doors ("he already asked and it wasn't relevant, so we know this is just a routine question he asks") and (b) build a moment of suspense that pays off even if there isn't an ambush on the other side of the door.

As they very gently eased open the door... the scene of lavender washed over them.

And here's the lavender scent pay-off. The players take a great deal of satisfaction in the simple act of concluding that this room must *also* belong to Zord.

The *crystal ball* was sitting on a padded cushion of black velvet on a pedestal in the middle of the cabin. They scooped it up and dropped it into their sack.

CUT BACK TO: The door opened.

Captain Zord, flanked by the two watchmen, entered the room. The watchmen remained outside, closing the door behind him.

Zord swept the hat from his head and bowed deep. "Milady Silverhand, how may I be of assistance to you?"

Laeral gave a silent hand signal to Vajra. Vajra pointed her staff at him. There was a brief purple pulse from the end of the staff and Zord's disguise spell melted away, revealing a dark elf.



At this point, my plan was to dramatically reveal Jarlaxle's picture. But I actually fumbled retrieving the picture and wasn't able to clearly display it.

That was all right, though, because the lore-steeped players at my table had gotten ahead of me and did the work for me: "It's Jarlaxle," says one of them. "Oh no!" cries another. A third has dim memories of the Drizzt novels she read in her youth stirred up at the name.

This is pure RPG as an audience: None of the characters know who Jarlaxle is, so this is all firewalled away. But as *players*, they are all on the edge of their seats and completely engaged and BAM one last amazing revelation has them amped up about as high as they can possibly go.

Laeral spoke. "Jarlaxle. *What do you think you're doing?*"

Jarlaxle's eyes widened in mock innocence. "Milady, whatever do you mean?"

"Crystal balls. Nimblewrights. Explain yourself."

"I see." Jarlaxle was taken aback. He clearly wasn't used to it. His eyes darted around the room, quickly taking in who was standing there. "Well... milady... as I have written to you often — and I am so glad that you have granted me an audience this evening! — my interests are simply to gain your support in seeing Luskan given its proper place in the Lords' Alliance."

“Do you really think that spying on me and –”

“Ah! I never spied on you! You did not receive an invitation to purchase a nimblewright, and I have taken special efforts to keep them away from you,” Jarlaxle said. “They were merely employed as an information-gathering service. And I can assure you that if any information I had obtained were to indicate a threat to Waterdeep, I would have surely –”

Laeral raised her hand to cut him off. “Jarlaxle, your tongue is as nimble and sweet as I remember. But I am not to be gulled.”

“I was attempting to gain blackmail material to further my cause the Lord of Luskan,” Jarlaxle said plainly. “As any Lord of a City-State of the Sword Coast has an obligation to do. You yourself, I believe, employed similar tactics with your husband Khelben Arunsun on many an occasion.”

Talking to yourself as the GM is really hard to do, but having distinct characters with clear, conflicting objectives helps a lot. And when you can pull it off well it’s worth it. This moment got an audible, “Ooooo...” from the table as Jarlaxle scored a palpable hit, which was a good indication that it was time to...

CUT TO: Theren and Edana weren’t certain they could make it back through the *Eyecatcher* and escape. There was no telling what sort of alarm had been raised by the giant spiders they’d left behind.

They decided that their best option was to disconnect the submersible from the *Eyecatcher* and then swim out of the airlock. They decided that they might as well try to sink the submersible, as well, having no idea what mischief Captain Zord and the Luskans meant to use it for.

But when they opened the hatches, they discovered there was an energy field preventing the ship from flooding. “The only way this is going to work,” Theren said, “is to disable this field from the control room.”

So they snuck back down the hall together. Edana used a *mage hand* to reach out, grasp the lever, and –

CUT TO:

“Do you know what we do with traitorous captains in the Pirate Isles?” Kittisoth asked the room.

“I don’t,” Laeral said. “What do you do in the Pirate Isles?”

“We tie ‘em to the main mast and wait for the vultures to feast,” Kitti said.

Jarlaxle glowered at her.

“There’s interesting,” Laersal said. “I think he owns a vulture.”

“He owns a lot of sad animals,” Kittisoth said. “Just like himself. I’m sorry. I’m just sharing information. I know you’ve got this well in hand, milady.”

“I like this one, Renaer,” Laeral said. “You should keep her.”

“You can’t call me a traitor!” Jarlaxle protested. “I am not a citizen of Waterdeep. I’m a Luskan patriot.”

"I'm sorry," Kittisothe said. "The women are talking."

Another cool thing about this kind of scene-juggling is that it doesn't just give you, as the GM, a chance to gather your thoughts: It also gives your *players* a chance to think about what their next course of action (or clever turn of phrase) will be.

Jarlaxle opened his mouth to respond, but then got a distracted look.  
"What are you doing, Laeral? My ships are under attack!"

Note here that Jarlaxle is basically anticipating something that hasn't actually happened yet to the other group: He's responding to the events that play out after Edana pulls that lever. This is a more advanced crossover technique, where you effectively foreshadow what's going to happen to the other scene before they actually see it for themselves.

Edana pulled the lever.

Water came gushing down the passage behind them. Edana and Theren both grabbed handholds on the walls. As the water ripped into them, Edana kept her grip, but Theren couldn't. The deluge swept him down the hall, over the railing, and slammed him down onto the deck of the control room, amidst the gnomes and the drow.

With the water still pouring down from above, Theren tried to swim out. But one of the gnomes either heard him or saw his invisible outline in the water. "Someone's here!"

The drow waved his hand and everything in the control room was suddenly limned with the dancing green flames of *faerie fire*... including Theren. He surged to his feet to make a run for it, but one of the gnomes lowered his hand and —

After rolling so well all evening, the dice really turned on Theren here. After failing multiple checks to not get gushed into the control room, he now rolled a natural 1 on his saving throw vs. the *burning hands* spell and then I rolled max damage on 3d6. He only had 16 hit points left and so —

— the flames washed over his chest, blasting him off his feet. Blackness gripped his vision as he splashed back into the water, unconscious and at the mercy of the drow.