A NARRATIVE ADVENTURE

The Revenant's Road

A story of rot, roads, and the long way round to an apology

For 1-4 players · Characters of 3rd-5th level

Three to four sessions · Compatible with fifth-edition rules

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A NARRATIVE ADVENTURE FOR 1-4 PLAYERS

The kingdom's greatest hero sat up at his own wake.
He has twelve days, a great many loose parts,
and an apology to make. He can't remember to whom.

The Revenant's Road is a complete narrative adventure, and a road trip with a dead man. Sir Aldric Harrow, the Hero of Morrow Ford and the subject of fourteen extremely filthy ballads, opens his eyes on his funeral table in the middle of a very rude song and asks, politely, whether anyone has seen his left boot. Something is pulling him east. He hires the party to get him there, with his widow, an inquisitor, and a hopeless young bounty hunter on his heels, and a balladeer riding pillion who smells the sequel of the century.

It is bawdy, slapstick, and very, very funny. And every time a piece of Sir Aldric falls off, a memory comes back: a summer, a millpond, a girl with flour on her face, a promise, and the morning he ran. By the end of the road, the jokes are still funny. They just mean something else.

61	12	5	6	14	10
pages	scenes in three acts	structured conversations	set pieces	filthy ballads	body parts lost

What Makes It Different

The Rot

Sir Aldric loses ten pieces of himself on the road, in a fixed order. Each one comes with a joke and a memory: the table laughs, then he goes quiet, then the story moves on. Laugh, remember, keep going.

Conversation as play

Five structured scenes, each a game: a balladeer's liar's contest, a supper of things a husband and wife never knew, a list of last requests, a roast and a eulogy for a man still in the room, and a song the players write together.

Nothing is wasted

Every running joke lands somewhere. A one-page map traces each one from the first laugh to the moment it turns around and breaks your heart.

Comedy over a broken heart

Every character's surface is funny and every one is hiding something. The cruder the legend, the sweeter the truth underneath it.

A bawdiness dial

Written at tavern level: ribald songs, innuendo, a bathhouse farce, never explicit. Guidance to turn it down to parlour or up to barracks for your table.

Any table

Companions scale the story from one player to four: a dead knight, a balladeer, a horse that bites, and a bounty hunter who doesn't. Six open backstory Threads let players write themselves in.

Moments Your Table Will Carry Home

- *A dead knight sitting up at his own wake, in the middle of the chorus.*
- *A horse that eats her rider's ear and looks very pleased with herself.*
- *A bathhouse raid conducted entirely in towels.*
- *A statue unveiled at exactly the wrong moment.*
- *A list of last requests, the last one underlined twice.*
- *A wake held for a man who is still in the room.*

In This Preview

The opening chapter, the rules for story-first play (including the Rot and the Bawdiness Dial), the backstory Threads, the King's Road with two of the Ballads of Sir Aldric in full, and all of Act One. Every page carries its page number from the full edition. At the end are three short glimpses of later scenes, chosen to show where the road goes without giving away where it ends.

PREVIEW EDITION

The Revenant's Road

A story of rot, roads, and the long way round to an apology

❧

For 1-4 players · Characters of 3rd-5th level
Three to four sessions · Compatible with fifth-edition rules

"Is that... is that your ear?"
"It was. Do keep it, if you like. I find I've less use for it than I thought."

— Sir Aldric Harrow, on the second day of being dead

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Contents

● in this preview ○ a short excerpt in this preview greyed full edition only

● Before You Begin 1

The Story in Brief 3
the true story of Morrow Ford, and a timeline

● How This Adventure Plays 6
including the Rot and the Bawdiness Dial

● Threads: Backstory for Your Players 10

The Cast 12
the knight, the miller, the balladeer, the widow, the inquisitor, the bounty hunter, a horse, a crow, and twelve ghosts

● The King's Road 17
stops along the way, and the Ballads of Sir Aldric

Act One: Dead Man Walking 21

● 1 · The Wake at the Merry Widow 21
set piece: The Wake Breaks

● 2 · Terms of Employment 24
conversation: The Liar's Ballad

● 3 · Pinchbeck's Baths 26
set piece: Towels

Act Two: The King's Road 30

4 · Saint Swithold's Bridge 30
set piece: Every Way Is Blocked

5 · Gallowsby Fair 32
conversation: The Widow's Supper

6 · The Greywood 34
set piece: The Worst Ambush in the Greywood

○ 7 · Last Requests 36
conversation: Last Requests

○ 8 · The Wake for a Man Who Isn't Dead Yet 38
conversation: a roast and a eulogy

Act Three: Millbrook 40

○ 9 · Morrow Ford 40
set piece: The Ford Holds

10 · The Mill 43

11 · The Siege at First Light 45
set piece: Hold the Mill

12 · The Millpond 47

Epilogue: The Last Verse 50

By the Pond 50
conversation: The Last Verse

Alternate Endings 52
three other roads

Appendix A: Creatures & Companions 54

Appendix B: Handouts 57
four handouts, including the true ballad

Appendix C: Quick Reference 61
including the Kindling: every running joke and where it lands

61 pages · 12 scenes · 5 structured conversations · 6 set pieces · 4 handouts

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Before You Begin

The Revenant's Road begins at a funeral, when the guest of honor sits up. Sir Aldric Harrow, the Hero of Morrow Ford, the most celebrated knight in the kingdom and the subject of more filthy ballads than any man alive, has been dead for three weeks. He is lying in state on a trestle table in the back room of a coaching inn, surrounded by weeping mourners and drunk minstrels, when he opens his eyes, coughs up a beetle, and asks, very politely, whether anyone has seen his left boot.

He has twelve days before his body gives out. He has to get to a village four days' ride past the end of the King's Road, and apologize to someone. He doesn't remember who. He doesn't remember what for. He only knows that it is the most important thing he has ever had to do, and that he is falling apart, one piece at a time.

He hires the player characters to get him there.

What follows is a road trip. There are coaching inns and bathhouses, a fair, a bridge chase, a forest ambush, a dead man trying to eat a peach, a horse that refuses to accept that her rider is dead, a balladeer who wants the story, a widow who wants the body, an inquisitor who wants it burned, and a young bounty hunter who wants the reward and is extremely bad at threatening people. There are a great many jokes about which part of Sir Aldric is going to fall off next.

And underneath every one of those jokes, there is a man remembering, piece by piece, that he is not the hero of his own story. The kingdom sings that he held Morrow Ford alone against an army. He didn't. He ran. Twelve villagers held the ford and died there, and he came back afterward and let the songs give him their names. Somewhere at the end of this road is the woman whose father and brothers died in his place, the woman he promised to come back for and never did. He is not going home to be forgiven. He is going to give her the chance to refuse.

The humor is the surface. The redemption is underneath it. Play the surface for every laugh it's worth. The players should be howling in the first session. The last session should leave them quiet. The book is built so that the same jokes do both.

What You Need

Fifth-edition rules, dice, and a jar of copper coins or tokens to use as **Pennies**, the adventure's narrative currency (named for the coins placed on a dead man's eyes). It helps enormously to have a bad singing voice and no shame. There are ballads in this book. They are meant to be sung.

Content and Care

A Note on Tone and Difficult Themes

This adventure is **bawdy**. It has ribald songs, innuendo, a bathhouse farce, jokes about bodies and what they get up to, and a running gag about a particular part of a dead knight that everyone is worried about. The humor stays at the level of a raucous tavern: suggestive, never explicit. A sidebar on page 6 explains how to turn the bawdiness up or down to suit your table.

It also includes **comic body horror** (Sir Aldric is decomposing, and it is played for laughs), **cowardice and its consequences**, **abandonment and its long shadow**, and **war dead**. It ends with a death, but not a sacrifice: a dead man finally being allowed to rest.

The heaviest scenes are marked with ◆. Talk to your table before you start, about both the jokes and the grief.

NOT IN THIS PREVIEW

Pages 3–5

The Story in Brief

Twenty-three years of secret history, told in full for the Game Master: a summer at a mill, a promise at a gate, what really happened at Morrow Ford, who called Sir Aldric back, and why. With a timeline.

How This Adventure Plays

This is the third in a series of story-first adventures. If you have run *What the Sea Keeps* or *The Paper Birds of Vellanoor*, you know the core tools. This book adds two new ones: **The Rot**, which ties the comedy of a falling-apart knight to the return of his memory, and a dial for **bawdiness**.

The Three Promises

1. **Talking is playing.** A roast around a campfire is not a break from the adventure. It is the adventure.
2. **The camera follows you.** Describe what you do so the table can see it. The story bends toward a good description, and a good joke.
3. **Failing is not losing.** A bad roll makes things more complicated, more expensive, or funnier. Usually funnier.

Pennies

Pennies are the narrative currency, named for the coins laid on a dead man's eyes to pay the ferryman. Each player starts with **one Penny** and can hold **three**. Use real copper coins if you have them.

Earning Pennies

- **Paint the shot.** Describe an action so the table can see it.
- **Get a laugh.** A genuine laugh from the table, in or out of character. This adventure lives on them.
- **Tell a true thing.** Answer a conversation prompt honestly, at some cost.
- **Hear the subtext.** Name what an NPC is really saying under the joke.
- **Pull a Thread.** Bring your backstory Thread into a scene in a way that matters.
- **Let it hurt.** Choose a complication or humiliation because it's better for the story.

Spending Pennies

- **Lean in.** Advantage, declared before rolling.
- **Try again.** Reroll and take the new result.
- **Flourish.** Add a cinematic effect to a success.
- **Not today.** Turn a hit on an ally into a near miss, and describe the save.
- **Flashback.** Show how you prepared for this moment.
- **Pay the ferryman.** *New.* Spend a Penny to have Sir Aldric lose a body part *right now*, at the most useful or funniest possible moment: a hand left behind to grab a pursuer's ankle, a dropped eye that rolls under a door to see the room beyond. The GM decides which part. Sir Aldric is mortified every time.

Cinematic Rolls

When a roll matters, the player describes the intent, the GM names the stakes, the player rolls, and the result falls into one of four tiers:

Result	What Happens	Who Narrates
Triumph Beat the DC by 5+, or a natural 20	Better than hoped. Add a bonus effect or gain a Penny.	The player, fully.
Success Meet or beat the DC	You do what you set out to do.	The player; the GM may add a detail.
Success at a Cost Miss by 1–3	It works, but something breaks, slips, or is seen by entirely the wrong person.	The GM narrates the cost.
Fail Forward Miss by 4+	It doesn't work, and the story lurches somewhere new, often somewhere embarrassing.	The GM; the player describes the reaction.

When a player drops an enemy, ask: ***"How do you want to do this?"***

The Rot

Sir Aldric is decomposing. The Calling holds him together, but not well, and not for long. The adventure tracks this with **the Rot**: a fixed sequence of ten losses, found in Sir Aldric's entry in the Cast (page 12). Each entry gives you three things:

- **The Part:** what falls off, slips, or gives out.
- **The Joke:** when and how it happens, at the worst possible moment.
- **The Memory:** what comes back to Sir Aldric as he loses it.

Use roughly one entry per scene, in order. Each scene in this book suggests which. The Joke comes first and should be played for every laugh in it. The Memory comes a beat later, quietly, often in the middle of the laughter, and Sir Aldric goes still, and the table goes quiet with him, and then someone makes another joke, and the scene moves on. That rhythm is the whole adventure in miniature: **laugh, then remember, then keep going.**

The memories arrive in the order of the story: first a gentle childhood, then a summer, then a girl, then a promise, then war horns, then running. The last one, her name, comes at Morrow Ford.

The One Part That Never Falls Off

From the very first scene, everyone at the table will be wondering about one particular part of Sir Aldric's anatomy, and so will he. Mags will write a song about it. The party will take bets. It is the adventure's longest-running joke, and it is never on the Rot list. It stays exactly where it is, all the way to Millbrook, where it is given its payoff in a single line in Act Three. Do not resolve it early, no matter how hard the players push.

The Bawdiness Dial

The humor in this book is written at **Tavern** level: double meanings, ribald songs, cheeky farce, the kind of jokes you'd hear in a crowded inn after the third round. Nothing is explicit; everything is implied. You know your table. Adjust freely:

Parlour (gentler): keep the ballads' tunes but use only their choruses; let the bathhouse be a laundry; let the running gag be about Sir Aldric's nose.

Tavern (as written): the songs, the bathhouse, the bets, the innuendo.

Barracks (rowdier): let Mags improvise new verses with the players; let Old Nell tell the whole story of the broken bed. Keep it consensual, keep it affectionate, and keep the jokes on the characters, never on the players.

Whatever the setting, the rule is the same: the bawdiness is a mask Sir Aldric's legend wears. Under it is a man who loved one woman his whole life and never had the courage to say so. The cruder the legend, the sweeter the truth.

Set Pieces and Conversations

Every fight is a **set piece** with a **Stage**, **Stakes**, **Beats**, and a way of **Ending It**. Several of them are chases or farces rather than battles, and most can be won without killing anyone. Every act also contains at least one **structured conversation**: a small game with prompts and the NPCs' layered answers. In this adventure, most of them are funny on the surface. Let them be. The true thing comes out on the third or fourth answer, when everyone is laughing and no one is braced for it.

Running for One to Four Players

Four companions can travel with the party. Sir Aldric is the center of everything but is a poor fighter (things keep falling off). The others hold the line, cause trouble, and take the hits.

- **Sir Aldric Harrow**, the revenant knight, from the first scene. Brave now, in the way only a man with nothing left to lose can be.
- **Mags Underhill**, the balladeer, from Act One. Fights with a lute and an extraordinary vocabulary.
- **Duchess**, Sir Aldric's twenty-six-year-old warhorse, who bites.
- **Tam Fenn**, the bounty hunter, from Act Two. Better with a crossbow than with words.

Players	Companions in Fights	Enemy Numbers	Notes
1	Mags and Tam fight; Duchess bites	Use the "1–2 players" numbers	Start with 2 Pennies. Companions act after the player.
2	One companion fights; Duchess bites	Use the "1–2 players" numbers	Each player may call a companion once per round.
3	Duchess bites	Use the "3–4 players" numbers	Companions take their own turns.

Players	Companions in Fights	Enemy Numbers	Notes
4	Companions mostly narrate	Use the "3–4 players" numbers	Companions handle side threats in narration.

Pacing

Three or four sessions of three to four hours. Act One in the first; Act Two across the second and possibly third; Act Three and the Epilogue in the last. The road is twelve days long. You don't need to count every day, but let the players feel the Rot advancing. By Act Three, Sir Aldric should be visibly, comically, heartbreakingly held together with string.

Threads: Backstory for Your Players

A **Thread** is a loose end in a character's past that the road can pick up and pull. Offer these before the first session. Each player may choose one, invent one, or choose none, and fills in the details. Award a Penny whenever a player brings their Thread into a scene in a way that matters.

The Coward's Thread

Once, when it mattered, you ran.

A battle, a fire, a friend in trouble, a promise you couldn't keep. Nobody knows, or everybody knows and nobody mentions it. Decide which is worse.

The question: Does it count for anything, coming back late?
Where it surfaces: *withheld in the preview*

The Legend Thread

There is a story about you that isn't true.

A heroic one, a scandalous one, a ridiculous one. It follows you into every tavern. Decide whether you've ever corrected it, and why not.

The question: Would you rather be remembered as the legend, or as yourself?
Where it surfaces: *withheld in the preview*

The Unknown Parent Thread

You never knew one of your parents.

Dead, gone, never named. You have a story about them that you were told, or one you made up. Decide whether you've ever gone looking.

The question: If they turned up now, what would you want them to say?
Where it surfaces: *withheld in the preview*

The Promise Thread

You said you'd come back for someone.

A lover, a sibling, a friend, a town. You haven't yet. You might still. Decide how long it's been, and whether they're still waiting.

The question: How late is too late?
Where it surfaces: *withheld in the preview*

The Last Request Thread

There is one thing you want to do before you die.

Something small and specific, or something enormous. You've never told anyone. Sir Aldric will ask.

The question: What are you waiting for?

Where it surfaces: *withheld in the preview*

The Widow's Thread

You loved someone who loved someone else.

Perhaps you married them anyway. Perhaps you never said. Perhaps it was a long time ago and you're over it, mostly, except on certain nights.

The question: Can you be glad they were loved, even if it wasn't by you?

Where it surfaces: *withheld in the preview*

NOT IN THIS PREVIEW

Pages 12-16

The Cast

Sir Aldric Harrow, with the full table of the Rot. Mags Underhill, balladeer. Lady Rosamund, the widow. Brother Anselm, who knows every verse. A hopeless young bounty hunter. A miller at the end of the road. Duchess, who bites. A crow with one word. And twelve men still holding a ford.

The King's Road

The King's Road runs east from the battlefields of the western march, through market towns and river crossings and the dark of the Greywood, to the old border country where the hills begin. Past its end, a cart track runs four more days to the river Morrow, and the ford, and the village of Millbrook, where the map gives up. The road is busy in late summer: pilgrims, drovers, tinkers, soldiers coming home from the war, and in every inn along it, someone singing about Sir Aldric Harrow.

Stops Along the Way

The Merry Widow

A sprawling, cheerful coaching inn near the battlefield of Hob's Field, famous for its cider and its landlady, Bet Crumbie, who has buried three husbands and is "open to offers." Sir Aldric's body has been laid out in its back parlor for a vigil before the journey to Gallowsby.

Tullingford

A spa town on a hot spring, with a famous bathhouse, Pinchbeck's, that has been many things over the years, not all of them respectable. Two days east.

Saint Swithold's Bridge

A long, narrow, much-repaired stone bridge over the river Swale, crowded with market traffic, livestock, and a shrine to a saint nobody remembers. The only crossing for twenty miles.

Gallowsby

Lady Rosamund's market town and Sir Aldric's seat, where a bronze-and-stone statue of the Hero of Morrow Ford is to be unveiled at the Lammas Fair. Five days east.

The Greywood

A great old forest where the road narrows and the outlaws are famous. Seven days east.

The Border Country

Past the road's end. Moors, sheep, stone walls, and wind. Nine days east.

Morrow Ford

A shallow stony crossing of the river Morrow below a steep valley. A cairn on the near bank with a bronze plaque: *HERE SIR ALDRIC HARROW HELD THE FORD.* Eleven days east.

Millbrook

A village of thirty houses and one mill, half a mile past the ford, where a great many more women than men live, and the mill wheel turns day and night. Twelve days east.

Small Things on the Road

Whenever the party travels, choose or roll something small to describe. The road should feel alive, and Sir Aldric's legend should be everywhere.

d12	Something on the Road
1	A pub sign showing Sir Aldric on a rearing horse, holding a lance at a very suggestive angle. The pub is called *The Long Lance*.
2	A pilgrim wagon, painted with saints. Every passenger crosses themselves as Sir Aldric goes by. One small child waves. He waves back. His wave is a bit short a finger.
3	Washerwomen at a stream singing *The Abbess of Ware*, loudly, with actions.
4	A milestone. Someone has carved beneath the mileage: *ALDRIC HARROW WAS HERE* and, beneath that, in a different hand, *SO WAS MY SISTER*.
5	Flies. A great many flies. They follow the party for a mile, until Duchess eats several.
6	A crow on a signpost, watching. It says, "Hurry."
7	A soldier coming home from the war, on crutches, who stops dead, stares at Sir Aldric, and says, "You. You charged the line at Hob's Field. I saw you go down." Sir Aldric says, "Yes. I'm awfully sorry about that."
8	A peddler selling "Genuine Locks of Sir Aldric's Hair" from a tray. Sir Aldric examines one. "That's a horse."
9	A wedding procession. The bride throws flowers; one lands on Sir Aldric. He looks at it for a long time. It's a cornflower.
10	Rain. Sir Aldric stands in it with his face up and says it's the first thing he's been able to feel in days.
11	A broadside nailed to an inn door: *WANTED, THE WALKING CORPSE OF SIR ALDRIC HARROW. 100 CROWNS. ENQUIRE ORDER OF THE LAST RITE.* Under it, scrawled: *Will he sign it?*
12	Children playing "Hold the Ford" in a stream. One is Sir Aldric. The others are the enemy. There is no one playing the village men. No one ever does.

The Ballads of Sir Aldric

Mags Underhill has written fourteen of them. Everyone on the King's Road knows at least three. They should be sung, badly, often, by Mags, by drunks, by washerwomen, and by Brother Anselm when he thinks no one is listening. Here are two in full, and the titles of the rest.

The Stand at Morrow Ford

When the Duke came down from the eastern hills
with ten thousand spears and his banners high,
Sir Aldric stood where the river spills
and he swore by the stag that none would pass by.

So hold the ford, Sir Aldric, hold,
though the water runs red and the night runs cold,
and the ballad will ring and the bells will toll
for the knight who held the ford alone.

From the dawn to the dusk he stood his ground
with his silver sword and his silver shield,
and the Duke's men fell at the river's sound
till the Duke turned back and the east was sealed.

(Chorus)

The song the kingdom knows. It is a lie in every line but one: the water did run red. Notice what the chorus doesn't mention. Notice that it says alone.

Sir Aldric and the Abbess of Ware

Sir Aldric rode to the Abbey of Ware
where the nuns kept their vows and the Abbess her hair.
Said she, "Sir Knight, our gate's barred tight,
no man's been through it since Michaelmas night!"

Said he, "Good Mother, I've ridden all day,
and my lance is so weary, I've come here to pray."
She looked at his lance and she looked at the sky,
and she said, "Well. The Lord helps them that try."

With a hey and a ho and a lance held low,
there's no gate in the kingdom Sir Aldric can't go!

By matins the bell had been rung thirty times,
by lauds the whole convent was making up rhymes,
and the Abbess was heard, as the cockerel crowed,
to say, "Sister, fetch more of that holy ointment. And a chair."

Mags swears that last line scans if you sing it fast enough. It does not. Sir Aldric has never been to Ware. He has never met an abbess. He goes the color of a boiled ham every time it's sung.

The Rest of the Fourteen: *The Knight Who Lanced Lady Lyle · Sir Aldric's Long Night in Lowbury · Three Duchesses and a Dragon · The Milkmaid's Lament (She Couldn't Walk for a Week) · The Siege of the Countess's Tower · Sir Aldric and the Twin Sisters of Seale · What the Ferryman Saw · The Widow's Mite, or, The Knight Who Gave Generously · A Gentleman of Great Endurance · The Bishop's Niece · Seven Nights at the Sign of the Swan · Ballad of the Very Long Joust.*

ACT ONE

Dead Man Walking

In which the guest of honor sits up at his own wake, the party changes employers, a balladeer smells a sequel, and there is a regrettable incident in a bathhouse.

Act One at a Glance

Purpose: Laughter. Establish Sir Aldric as lovable, the road as lively, the legend as ridiculous, and the chase as on. Plant the first memories so lightly that nobody notices them.

Scenes: 1. The Wake at the Merry Widow · 2. Terms of Employment · 3. Pinchbeck's Baths

Rot: 1 (finger), 2 (ear), 3 (toe).

Key plants: The pull east. The cornflower he keeps reaching for. Mags's songs, and Sir Aldric's mortification. Duchess. Mister Pettigrew. "Hurry." Old Nell's story about the miller's girl.

SCENE 1

The Wake at the Merry Widow

Mood: Boozy, mournful, then pandemonium · **Type:** Opening and set piece

The party is at the Merry Widow for one of these reasons, or one of your own:

- **Lady Rosamund has hired them** to escort her husband's body to Gallowsby for the state funeral, five days east, at a generous rate. *"He's to arrive intact, on time, and smelling as little as can reasonably be managed."* This is the best hook: it gives the party an employer to betray.
- They are travelers stopping for the night, and the vigil is the only entertainment.
- A character with the **Legend Thread** has been invited to sing, or to speak, or to be compared unfavorably.

> *The back parlor of the Merry Widow is packed to the beams and hot as an oven. Candles everywhere. Black crepe on the windows. Somebody has decorated the room with every flower in the county and it hasn't helped. On a trestle table at the far end, under a velvet pall embroidered with a silver stag, lies the Hero of Morrow Ford, in full armor, his hands folded on his sword, two copper pennies on his eyes.*

> *The mourners have been mourning since noon. They have reached the stage of mourning that involves cider. A plump, rosy woman in a feathered hat is standing on a bench with a lute, leading the whole room in a song about an abbess, and the whole room knows the words. In a corner, a tall woman in full black, veil down, sits perfectly still with her hands in her lap, radiating the kind of silence that makes people walk around her. By the trestle, a gaunt man in black robes with a silver bell at his belt is praying loudly over the body, and trying not to mouth along with the chorus.*
>
> "With a hey and a ho and a lance held low—"

Let the party mingle. This is a chance to meet the cast at their most absurd before anything goes wrong:

- **Mags Underhill** is on the bench, singing, delighted to talk about "my Aldric" to anyone. She knew him, she says. Intimately. (She met him twice.)
- **Lady Rosamund** is in the corner. If approached, she says, *"If you've come to tell me what a great man he was, the queue is behind you."*
- **Brother Anselm** is holding the vigil, as the Order requires for the bodies of great men. If asked about the song, he says it is an abomination, and then corrects the second verse.
- **Bet Crumbie**, the landlady, keeps everyone's cups full and tells the party, in confidence, that she once had Sir Aldric in that very room, "on that very table, as it happens." (He ate a pie on it. That's all.)
- **A young man in a too-big leather coat** stands at the back, watching the body, looking out of place. If anyone talks to him, he growls, "Paying my respects," and leaves soon after. (This is Tam. Don't name him yet.)

The Corpse Sits Up

When the moment is right (at the height of the song, ideally), read this:

> *The song reaches the last chorus. Mags is on the table now, beside the body, one boot either side of the dead man's sword, lute raised, belting it out, and the whole room is roaring along—*
>
> "—there's no gate in the kingdom Sir Aldric can't—"
>
> *And the two copper pennies slide off the dead man's eyes and clink on the floor.*
>
> *His eyes are open. They are clouded, and kind, and very confused. He looks up at Mags, standing over him. He looks down at himself. He coughs, and something small and black with legs comes out of his mouth and scuttles away down the table.*
>
> *And Sir Aldric Harrow sits up, slowly, with a creak of armor and a smell like a cellar full of old cabbages, and says, in a gentle, rusty, terribly polite voice:*
>
> *"I do beg your pardon. Has anyone seen my left boot?"*

The room is silent for exactly one second. Then Mags screams, and falls off the table, and her tankard goes flying, and a small grey object drops into it from the corpse's left hand. (**Rot 1:** his little finger.) She drinks the rest of the cider on reflex before she notices.

Then everything happens at once.

⚔ Set Piece: The Wake Breaks

The Stage: A packed, hot, candlelit back parlor and the inn beyond it. **The trestle table**, which can be flipped, ridden, or used as a ram. **A great bowl of cider punch**, which can be thrown, or slipped in. **Candles** everywhere, and a great deal of very flammable black crepe. **The coffin**, waiting by the door for the morning, which slides beautifully on a beer-wet floor. **The stairs** up to the gallery. **Fifty drunk mourners**, half trying to get out and half trying to get closer. Out in the yard, **the stables**, where something very large is kicking its door to pieces.

The Stakes: Sir Aldric. Brother Anselm has drawn his hammer and is determined to "lay him to rest" on the spot. Lady Rosamund's four household knights are determined to put him back on the table and keep him there for the funeral. Sir Aldric himself only wants to leave. He turns to the nearest player character, very calmly, and says: *"Forgive me. I've no right to ask. But I have somewhere I must be, and very little time to get there. Would you help me?"*

The Enemies: Brother Anselm (Appendix A), who is formidable, and Lady Rosamund's household knights (**2** for 1–2 players, **4** for 3–4 players), who are under orders not to damage the body and are therefore at a great disadvantage. Nobody here should die. This is a brawl, not a battle.

Beats

- **Round 1:** Brother Anselm's bell rings by itself. He raises his hammer and declares, at the top of his voice, "Abomination! Stand still, that I may lay you!" The room goes silent. Somebody laughs. Anselm, crimson, adds: "To *rest*. Lay you to *rest*." Everyone who laughed out loud at the table earns a Penny.
- **Round 2:** Lady Rosamund stands, flips up her veil, looks her dead husband in the face for the first time, and says, very coldly: "Aldric. Lie down." He very nearly does, out of twenty years' habit. Her knights advance.
- **Round 3:** The stable door gives way with a crash, and an enormous grey warhorse thunders in through the inn's front room, through the kitchen, and into the parlor, scattering mourners like skittles. This is **Duchess**. She stops in front of Sir Aldric and shoves her nose into his chest and whickers, and bites the nearest knight on the shoulder. Sir Aldric can now ride. So can anyone brave enough to get on behind him.
- **Round 4:** Somebody knocks over a candle. The crepe catches. The party has one round to get out, or put it out, before this becomes a much bigger problem.
- **Throughout:** Mags Underhill, having recovered, follows Sir Aldric everywhere, lute in hand, shouting questions. "What's it like being dead? Did you see the Abbess? Is it true about the lance?"

Ending It

The scene ends when the party and Sir Aldric get out into the night: on Duchess, on foot, in the coffin sliding down the inn yard on a wet slope, however they manage it. Brother Anselm is left shaking his fist in the yard. Lady Rosamund is left standing in the doorway of the burning, or nearly burning, parlor, saying nothing at all. Mags is somehow already on the back of Duchess.

If the party chooses *not* to help Sir Aldric, he goes anyway, alone, on Duchess. Let them catch up with him on the road at dawn, sitting by a milestone, waiting. *"I thought you might come. I hoped you might. I'm sorry to have been a bother."*

SCENE 2

Terms of Employment

Mood: Dawn, dew, absurdity, a first flicker of something underneath · **Type:** Negotiation and conversation · **Rot:** 2

> *Dawn on the King's Road, a few miles east of the Merry Widow. Mist on the fields. Larks. A dead knight in dented silver armor sitting on a milestone, one boot on and one boot off, with an enormous grey horse grazing beside him, and a plump woman in a feathered hat sitting on the verge with a lute in her lap, staring at him with an expression of naked professional greed.*
>
> *Sir Aldric clears his throat, which takes a while.*
>
> *"I think," he says, "we should probably discuss terms."*

What Sir Aldric knows, and says:

- **He is dead.** *"I gather I died at Hob's Field. Charged a line of pikes, apparently. Very brave, everyone says. I don't remember it. I'm told it was quite stupid."*
- **Something is pulling him east.** He can feel it like a hook behind his breastbone, where the faint glow is. *"East. A long way east. Past the end of the road, I think."*
- **He owes someone an apology.** He doesn't know who. He doesn't know what for. *"I only know it's the most important thing I've ever had to do. I know it the way you know you've left the fire burning. Something terrible, and urgent, and mine."*
- **He doesn't have long.** *"Whatever's holding me together, it isn't holding well. I'd guess a fortnight. Less, if I'm careless."* A finger is already missing. He apologizes for it.
- **Payment:** He was buried in his best. Gold spurs, a signet ring with a ruby the size of a thumbnail, a sword called *Mercy* with a hilt full of garnets. *"Take it all. I shan't need it. I'd only ask that the sword stays with me until we get there. I'd like to arrive looking... like someone."*

If the party was hired by Lady Rosamund, Sir Aldric understands entirely if they feel obligated to take him back. *"She paid you. She's a very fair woman. You should probably take me back."* A long pause. *"I would very much rather you didn't."*

Duchess

During the negotiation, Duchess finishes grazing and comes to stand beside her rider, and lowers her great grey head, and nuzzles him. Lovingly. Thoroughly. For a full minute. Sir Aldric pats her nose and murmurs to her. When she lifts her head, she is chewing contentedly. His left ear is gone. **(Rot 2.)**

Everyone stares. Sir Aldric touches the side of his head. *"Ah,"* he says. Then: *"Well. It was the one I didn't use as much."*

And then, a beat later, he goes still, and his clouded eyes go somewhere far away. *"Do you hear that?"* There is nothing to hear. *"Water. Over a weir. And a wheel turning. Very slowly."* He shakes his head. *"I'm sorry. I don't know where that came from."*

Mags

Mags Underhill is not leaving. She will follow on foot if she has to. She will pay her own way. She will sing for her supper. *"My ducks, I've written fourteen songs about this man. Fourteen! And now he's gone and **died** and come **back**. Do you know what that is? That's a **sequel**. That's the sequel of the century. I'm coming. Try and stop me."* Sir Aldric looks at her with the expression of a man who has heard all fourteen and would very much like to discuss some of them.

Mister Pettigrew

As the party sets off, a large black crow lands on the milestone where Sir Aldric was sitting. It looks at the party. It looks east. It says, hoarsely, clearly: *"Hurry."* Then it flies ahead of them down the road. It will be there, on some signpost or chimney or gatepost, every day of the journey.

Conversation: The Liar's Ballad

When: The first night on the road, around a campfire in a hedge-sheltered field, with Duchess grazing and Sir Aldric sitting slightly downwind, at everyone's polite request.

The game: Mags proposes it, of course. *"Balladeer's game. I sing a verse about someone at this fire. Then that someone tells us what **really** happened. Then everybody votes whether the song or the truth was better. Loser drinks."* She has, it turns out, already composed verses about each of the player characters, based on a day's acquaintance. They are wildly flattering, extremely bawdy, and entirely false.

How to run it: Improvise a short, ridiculous verse about each player character, in Mags's voice, built from whatever they did at the wake. (If your table is shy, give them the rhyme scheme and let the *other* players write the verse.) Then each player tells the "true" story, and the table votes. Award Pennies for laughs and for anything true that slips out. Then it's Sir Aldric's turn.

Mags Sings Sir Aldric

Mags gives him a verse from *The Knight Who Lanced Lady Lyle*. It involves a balcony, a rope ladder, a jealous earl, and a great deal of lancing. Sir Aldric listens to all of it with his eyes closed, and his remaining ear going slowly pink.

Sir Aldric's truth: *"I did meet Lady Lyle. Once. At a banquet. She asked me to pass the salt. I passed it. She said thank you."* A pause. *"I may have knocked over a jug."*

Mags insists on another. *Three Duchesses and a Dragon. "There was no dragon. There was one duchess. She was eighty and she wanted me to look at her roof."* Another. *The Abbess of Ware. "I have never been to Ware. I don't know where Ware is."* "It's near Lowbury." *"I have never been to Lowbury either."*

The game should collapse into hysterics here. Let it. Then Mags, wiping her eyes, asks: *"Go on then, my duck. There must have been one. Fourteen songs, there must be one that's true. One girl, at least."*

And Sir Aldric goes quiet. And he reaches, without seeming to know he's doing it, for the empty pouch at his belt.

"There was one," he says slowly. *"I think. I can't... I can't see her face."* He looks into the fire. *"None of yours were about her, though. I'm sure of that. You never wrote about her."*

> **Subtext:** Mags never wrote about her because she never knew she existed. Every ballad is a mask over the one true love of his life, and the masks have gotten cruder every year. A player who notices him reaching for the pouch, and asks what he's looking for, gets: *"I don't know. Something blue. I used to carry something blue."*

The Vote

Mags makes them vote on Sir Aldric's story. Song or truth? Whatever the table decides, Mags drinks anyway, and then, after a moment, she says something unexpected, half to herself: *"You know, I always did wonder. You never once came to hear them. Fourteen songs, and you never came to a single one."*

Ending the scene: Late. The fire's low. Sir Aldric doesn't sleep; he doesn't need to anymore. When the last player turns over in their blanket, they see him sitting with Duchess's head on his shoulder, looking east, very still, and they hear him humming, very softly, a tune nobody recognizes. It isn't one of Mags's. It sounds like something you'd sing while working a mill.

SCENE 3

Pinchbeck's Baths

Mood: Steam, farce, and one unexpected confession · **Type:** Social farce and set piece · **Rot:** 3

By the second day, the smell has become a problem. Inns won't serve them. Horses bolt (except Duchess). Flies are a constant companion. A farmer's dog follows them for a mile, howling. Someone suggests the hot springs at Tullingford. Sir Aldric is mortified and willing. *"I'm so terribly sorry. I can't smell it myself, you see. Is it very bad?"*

(It is.)

> *Pinchbeck's Baths sits over the hot spring at Tullingford like a fat old cat on a warm stone: a sprawl of steamy tiled halls, plunge pools, cubicles, and corridors, with a painted sign over the door showing a lady in a bath with suspiciously strategic bubbles. The air inside is thick with steam, lavender, and gossip. Towels everywhere. The proprietor sits at a high desk by the door: an enormous old woman in a turban, with rings on every finger and a laugh like a barrel rolling down stairs.*
>
> *She looks up as you come in. She looks at Sir Aldric. She looks for a long time.*
>
> *"Well," says Old Nell Pinchbeck. "Well, well, well. Twenty-three years, and you've still not paid me for the bed."*

Old Nell Pinchbeck knew Sir Aldric when he was a squire. She ran a rather different sort of establishment here, then. She is delighted to see him, dead or not, and is the single person on the road who is completely unbothered by the smell. ("I've smelled worse. I've *married* worse.") She gives them the best private pool, at a scandalous discount, and towels, and a great deal of lavender oil, and a bar of soap the size of a brick. Sir Aldric is scrubbed. It helps a little.

Old Nell's Story

While Sir Aldric soaks (in his small clothes, at his insistence), Old Nell tells the party the story of the bed. She tells it loudly, with relish, for the benefit of the whole bathhouse, and the whole bathhouse leans in. It begins as the bawdiest thing they will hear all adventure:

> *"Squire Harrow," says Old Nell, "twenty-one years old, legs like a newborn foal, comes in here one summer night with his first month's pay burning a hole in his purse. And he says, all red in the face, 'I'd like the whole night, please, missus. With your best girl.' So I give him Sukey. Sukey was a professional. Sukey could make a bishop sing hymns backwards. Off they go upstairs."*
>
> *She pauses, magnificently.*
>
> *"Middle of the night, there's a crash like the roof coming in. The bed's broke clean through. Whole house wakes up. I go storming up there with a candle."*
>
> *Everyone in the bathhouse is holding their breath.*
>
> *"And there's Sukey, fast asleep on the floor in the wreck of the bed, snoring. And there's our hero, sat on the windowsill, fully dressed, boots still on, crying his eyes out. Seems he'd been talking at her for four hours straight about some miller's girl he'd met out east, and Sukey'd got so bored she'd sat down on the bed too hard, and that was that."*
>
> *She looks at Sir Aldric in the pool, and her voice goes softer than you'd think it could. "Paid for the whole night and never took his boots off. Said he couldn't. Said he'd promised someone. Best night's sleep Sukey ever had."*

Sir Aldric, in the pool, has gone very still. *"A miller's girl,"* he says. *"Did I say her name?"* Old Nell frowns. *"Twenty-three years, love. You said it a thousand times that night. I didn't listen to one of them."*

Then Sir Aldric looks down into the water, and something he sees there makes him lose his breath, if he had any. Under the steam and the lavender, for a second, it isn't a bath. (**Rot 3:** the memory comes first this time: a warm night, a millpond, a girl laughing at him with flour still on her face.) And then a very large bather at the far end of the pool holds up something small and pale between finger and thumb and shrieks. It's a toe.

⚔ Set Piece: Towels

The Stage: Pinchbeck's at its busiest: a warren of steamy tiled halls, plunge pools hot and cold, wooden cubicles, a laundry full of hanging sheets, a steam room so thick you can't see your hand, and a back door onto the river. Every surface is wet. Most people are in towels. Some aren't.

The Stakes: Brother Anselm has tracked them here, with the town watch. (Old Nell is outraged. "This is a *respectable* house! Since Tuesday.") The party is in towels, or less. Their weapons and armor are in the changing rooms, at the far end of the building from the pools. Sir Aldric is in the bath. Duchess is in the stable yard. Mags is in the steam room, singing.

The Enemies: Brother Anselm and town watchmen (**3** for 1–2 players, **5** for 3–4 players). The watchmen are embarrassed and will retreat from anyone sufficiently undressed and sufficiently confident.

How it plays: This is farce. Every round, each player describes what they're doing and how much they're wearing while they do it. Fights are with towels (snap: 1d4, and the target must make a DC 11 Constitution save or yelp and lose their reaction), soap (thrown: target slips prone, DC 12 Dexterity save), and buckets. Use Old Nell's regulars freely: a magistrate who must not be seen here, a pair of very old twin sisters who are enjoying this enormously, a sailor who keeps getting in the way.

Beats

- **Round 1:** The watch bursts in through the front. Old Nell blocks the corridor with her entire body and her entire vocabulary. That buys one round.
- **Round 2:** Brother Anselm, hammer raised, charges into the steam room after Mags and is lost in the fog. From inside, the sounds of a struggle, and then of two voices, Anselm's and Mags's, singing *The Abbess of Ware* together, in harmony, and then Anselm's voice stopping abruptly as he realizes what he's doing.
- **Round 3:** Someone must reach the changing room and get the gear, while being chased. Run it as a dash through the laundry, between hanging sheets, with a watchman always one sheet behind.
- **Round 4:** Sir Aldric, rising out of the bath like something from a ballad of a much darker kind, steaming, toe-less, with lavender oil running off him and a towel wrapped around his waist, says in a voice of terrible dignity, "Gentlemen. I am a knight of the realm, and I am *naked*." Every watchman in the room flees.

Ending It

Out the back door, into the river, downstream, with whatever clothes they grabbed. Duchess is waiting on the far bank, chewing someone's bath sheet. Old Nell waves from an upstairs window with a lace handkerchief. Anyone who looks back sees her blow a kiss and call: "You find that girl, Aldric Harrow! And bring back my

towels!”

Downstream, on a gravel bank, wrapped in a stolen bath sheet, dripping, Sir Aldric sits down suddenly, and puts his head in his hands, and says, quietly, to nobody: *“She had flour on her face. She was laughing at me. I can see the flour. I can’t see her.”*

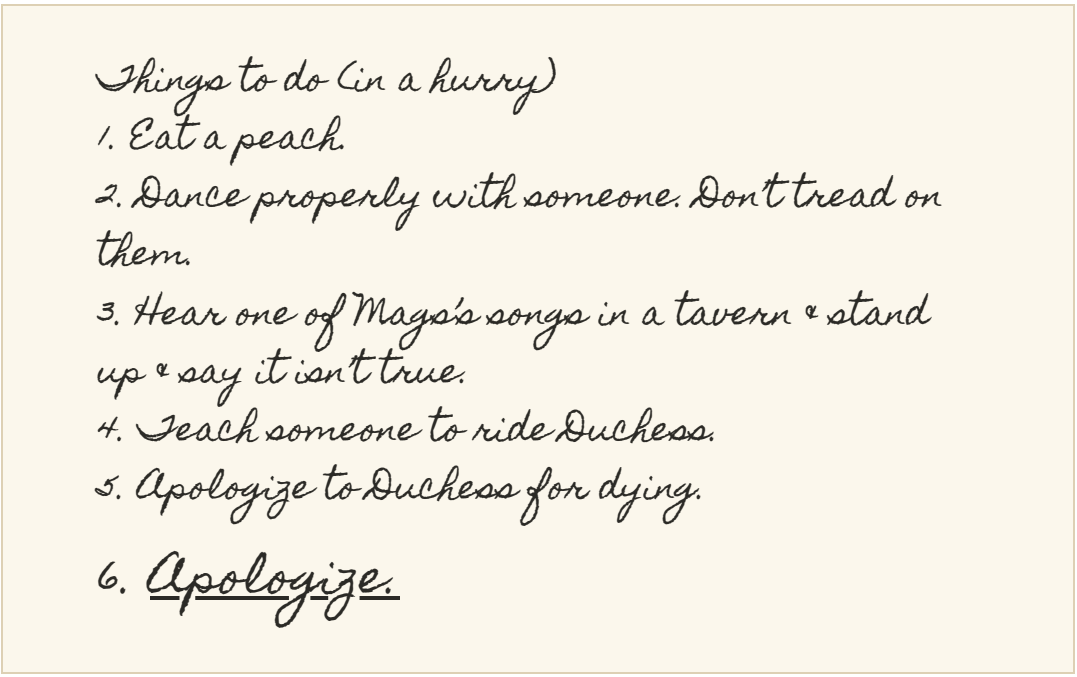
Above them, on a willow branch, the crow says: *“Hurry.”*

Glimpses of the Road Ahead

Here the preview stops: on a gravel bank below Tullingford, a dead knight wrapped in a stolen bath sheet, a crow on a willow branch saying the only word it knows. In the full edition, the road goes on for another 32 pages. Here are three short excerpts from further down it.

From Act Two · Scene 7 · Last Requests · page 36

Past the end of the King's Road, by a peat fire in a ruined shepherd's hut, Sir Aldric asks if anyone minds if he makes a list. Soldiers do it before a battle, he explains. *"I'm in rather a hurry with mine."*



The party finds him a peach. He has no front teeth and no sense of taste, and the bite falls straight back out onto his breastplate. He laughs until something in his chest creaks.

From Act Two · Scene 8 · The Wake for a Man Who Isn't Dead Yet · page 38

> *"I won't get a wake," says Sir Aldric. "Not a proper one. I had one, I suppose, at the Merry Widow, but I wasn't really present for it, and then I rather spoiled it by sitting up." He adjusts his bonnet. "Wherever I end up, after this, I don't think there'll be anyone singing. So I wondered. If it's not too strange. Whether you'd hold one for me tonight. While I'm still here to hear it."*

Everyone stands up in turn and says two things about him: the worst, most embarrassing thing first, a roast, and then the true thing, a eulogy. He has to sit and listen to both. He is not allowed to apologize. He tries anyway, and fines are levied in Pennies. It is the funniest scene in the book, right up until it isn't.

Then he walks down to the water and steps into the ford.

And the mist in the middle of the river thickens, and darkens, and stands up.

Twelve of them. Men in homespun and leather aprons and old dented helmets, with pitchforks and scythes and boar-spears and one old pike, standing in a line across the ford, knee-deep in the river, exactly where they stood twenty-two years ago. They are grey and translucent and the water runs through them.

"No," says the old man in the middle of the line. "Not you. You don't pass."

❧

"Well," she says, looking him up and down. "Bits missing."

Find out which bits, and what she says next, in the full edition.

The full edition is available from **Tide Moon Tales** at **tidemoontales.com**