

Three Suggestions for...

Motivations for a character whose parents were killed by orcs

The most well-worn cliché in the world of fantasy roleplaying games is probably “My parents were killed by orcs.” In theory, it sounds like an interesting character background; In practice, it’s usually an excuse used by players who want to *ignore* any possible familial relations of their character and *erase* any connection to her past. Without a family or personal history, the character is seemingly free to do whatever she wants without any fear of the consequences, but this lack of connection usually just pushes her away from a lot of potentially interesting drama.

For those kind of players, and for others, here are three suggestions for motivations for a character who seems to lack a past. This is the reason she goes out adventuring, and a possible basis for later complications in her story.

There’s no need to actually use *orcs* as the village-destroyers. The following motivations can be used as an interesting dramatic basis for any character background that starts with “something big came and erased my history”.

Each new origin comes with a new Background Feature.

Note: the intent behind these motivations is to help players find a reason for their characters to go on adventures, or to provide them with an interesting personality to play. None of these are supposed to provide an excuse to people who’re trying to break party cohesion, or steal the GM’s attention. Be good players – give enough room for everyone’s stories.

Victim of Circumstances

The orcs raided the village, killed everyone, and only you survived. Why? Because. You never discovered a better reason. The village wasn’t even that important, destroyed in a minor raid as part of a much bigger orcish assault. The leader of the marauders wasn’t even someone important. Maybe the attack wasn’t even that impressive – many died, buildings were razed, but several dozens survived anyway, a group of pitiful refugees on their way to some other city, looking for a new home.

The village ended, and with it, your childhood, but in the history books, and even in the message the local Duke received, it was nothing but a side note at best. And you’re well aware of that. Here are a few things you might aspire to:

- **The Greatest:** You’ve been a nobody for your entire life, and you had enough. Maybe immediately after the village’s destruction, or maybe a few years later, you decided to pick yourself up and become the best you can possibly be. Maybe to prove something to others, maybe to prove to yourself that you can. Maybe you’re trying to live up to some impossibly high standards you’ve set to yourself, and you don’t care what others say, or maybe it’s really important that *everyone knows* what you can do. Either way, you won’t be a nobody, ever again. Instead, you’ll be the most you can be. The bravest, the most skilled, the most useful. You *will* leave a mark.
- **No One Notices the Dust:** You come from an unimportant village, destroyed in an unimportant event, and eventually you realized that anonymity can be an advantage. Without any blood ties, you’ve found some new ties – maybe in the thieves’ guild, but maybe in noble circles, after you managed to invite yourself into a court or pretended to be a minor noble. And why not? You’re no one, so you can be anyone. Maybe you created for yourself an entire fabricated life, and you’re trying hard to keep it – both for the influence you’ve gained, and because you’re afraid to become a nobody again. Or maybe you decided never to have a fixed identity, and you switch facades as needed, or maybe according to your whims, once every few months. You tell yourself you’re satisfied with your situation, and will never want to settle down. But who knows better than you that everything might change, suddenly, in a single day.

Feature: Simple Roots

Wherever you are, you can always find the place where the common people gather to drink and talk, and you easily strike a conversation with them. You're personable and approachable, and they're more than willing to unload their woes and tell you all about their daily problems, opinions on the rich, and juicy rumours and secrets.

A Personal Matter

When the orcs came, they came *for you*. Maybe you're the son of the king, or the daughter of the great priest, hidden in a village with your uncles, and you didn't even know it yourself. Or maybe your parents are the adventurers who killed the Great Dragon Zahyof, and his followers (in the name of his son!) have finally discovered the village your parents retired to. Or maybe you were born under the three moons, with the eldritch Sign of Endings on your skin, or maybe it was you who've found the Black Lantern in the caverns, thus drawing the attention of the orcs, who've been searching for it for years.

The rest of the village was just in the way – they wanted you, or your parents. Now they're all dead, but you survived. Some things to think about:

- **Release Me:** Although you survived, you were also *captured*. The next few years you've spent in torture or in slavery. Maybe the leader of the orcs, or the one who've sent them, tried to raise you under their dark guidance – to harness the mysterious power within you, or maybe simply to gain full control of your fate, completely obliterating your previous heritage.



Eventually you escaped, maybe by yourself or with the help of others. You've been hardened by the experience, and maybe also gained great skills. It's true that you were shaped mainly by pain and suffering, but you were definitely *shaped*. You're *someone* – but not the someone you wanted to be. Why did it happen to you? Who must pay? And how can you ever find peace? These are the questions you're trying to answer.

- **You Killed My Father, Prepare to Die:** They killed your family and friends, and also raided your home, but why? *Why?* What can justify such cruelty? You must know. You're chasing every clue. This journey of discovery will lead you to very dangerous places – since apparently there are many who don't want these details to ever see the light of day.

Maybe you've already discovered the reason, but weren't satisfied, since new questions arose in the meanwhile. Say you've discovered you're the descendent of a long forgotten line of royals - should you try to claim the crown that is yours by right? Or say your parents hid a huge treasure they stole from the Grand Pirate, coveted by many – should you head out and get it yourself? In any case, you'll find yourself having to stick your nose into other people's business.

And what about the villain who destroyed the village? Will you dedicate your life to make them pay for the years they've taken from you, chasing them in search of revenge? Or do you see them as nothing more than another contender, one of many chasing the fabled legacy you deserve – and like the others, they probably gathered some information that can be useful to you.

Feature: Important Relic

Even though you've only now started seriously adventuring with a party, you've already gained some important object or piece of information, from the ones who've destroyed your village or someone related to them. For now, it's meaning or use is still cryptic or otherwise mysterious, but in time it will prove important not only to you, but to the entire party, at an opportune time. It might be an important clue that can help you at a desperate moment, or even a magical item whose properties are not yet revealed. Talk with your GM and decide on the general appearance and usability of the item; the GM will make it a part of the story when appropriate.

The Orcs Were Right

After they butchered your friends and razed your home in flames, you were so shocked you could barely breathe. But maybe not for the right reasons. Something in the orcs *called* to you. Something about them was *right* in a way you never imagined up to that day. Such ferocity, such strength! What limitless freedom!

As someone who never ventured more than 5 km away from your village during your childhood, and always did what your parents and village elders said, because that's *what you do*, and always made sure to pray to the gods *as you should*... Suddenly, for the first time, you realize things can be different. They'll *have* to be different. And in a way, you think you like it.

Here are a few points to consider:

- **Limitless Freedom:** The orcs - and later, similar barbarian creatures and cultures – became a symbol for you, representing a lifestyle that's not only admirable, it's also *correct*. You've become a follower of this philosophy, wishing not only to live your life this way, but also spread the word. You don't just want to be free, but also to make sure *everyone's* free. Show them the right way. Sometimes, in order to separate a person from their meaningless routine, you must put their house on fire. Metaphorically...! Most of the time.
- **Power for Power's Sake:** The orcs destroyed us because they were strong. We were destroyed because we were weak. That won't happen to you again. You'll get power – as much as you can – and you'll use it to protect yourself and the things and people who are dear to you, from orcs, and dragons, and despair. If you have more power than others, they can't harm you – and that's the only way to protect yourself.

Or maybe you want the power to be *like* the orcs – do whatever you want, whenever you want. You're not necessarily evil, maybe your intentions are good and righteous – you simply understand that power is the solution to any problem, the tool with which you can fulfil your desires.

Power isn't necessarily physical, of course. Magical know-how, cunning words, connections in the right places, or a silent knife in the right time and place – all of these are ways to power. Maybe you've already realized that, or maybe you're still so taken in by those orcs, that you find it hard to see power in anything but a huge axe held by a muscled arm.

Feature: Furious

You have such fury about you, a passion for life or an outward attitude, that you know how to engage hostile creatures in their own language, so to speak. By showing off an intimidating presence or manoeuvre – which might require an Intimidation check - you can gain enough respect from your would-be enemies to strike a conversation before commencing hostilities. Usually, that's merely enough to have a short question or declaration, before your influence wears off, and they're more than willing to prove to you they're superior.



Three Suggestions for motivations for a character whose parents were killed by orcs is by Eran Aviram. Eran is the writer for Up to Four Players; the Lead Hebrew Translator for D&D and other games; produces the weekly podcast On the Shoulders of Dwarves, the main RPG podcast in Hebrew; and used to own a gaming store, it was awesome.

Drawing of orcs trying to destroy you: Aviv Or (www.avivor.com)

Up to Four Players is a webcomic about tabletop gamers and games, by Aviv Or and Eran Aviram. Check it out: www.uptofourplayers.com

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