

THE DREAD GEAS OF DUKE VULKU

A game of fantastic horror by Epidiah Ravachol

Illustrated by Vlada Monakhova

Join us now for a game of horror and wonder for three to seven players to enjoy over the course of a few evening hours. One among you shall be the Host, taking on the role of Duke Vulku and the greater world. The rest shall take on the roles of Duke Vulku's most trusted and enthralled companions.

Most of this text is addressed to the Host. That which is for the eyes of the companions will be apparent. If it pleases you, read the following aloud to all players.

“Surrounded by frost-locked mountains and on the shores of a preternaturally warm and salty bay stagnates the immortal city of Telluun. Hoary alchemies from civilizations long dust sustain the seventeen sages whose insatiable appetites for knowledge and categorization must be fed just as the winter and the sea in turn must take their toll. For two score years their hand and shield has been the dour Duke Vulku and his army of skalds and half-scholars. The sages ask and Vulku seeks the answer through fire and blood.

“You have long since freely given yourselves over to the Duke's sorcerous sway. His needs are your needs. His safety is your every thought. His command is as your own desire. You are precious to him and he is more so to you.”

Have the other players choose among themselves who will play which companion based on their epithets alone: the Faithless, the Indebted, the Loathed, the Meticulous, the Subtle, and the Vainglorious. Discard the unclaimed companions.

You will also need a Spire to place upon your table. Any tumbling block game will work, but for the sake of brevity these rules assume you are using the Jenga brand. The Spire must tower 18 stories high with three blocks to a story.

THE SEEKERS OF ANSWERS

This, too, may be read aloud to all.

“The Seventeen Sages have consulted the sky and entrails: the tome-tomb of antiquity hypothesized by the late Countess of Ond exists. Its origins predate those of humankind. Unearthing its secrets has become their sole preoccupations. Duke Vulku and his loyal companions have been sent forth into the demon-haunted lands to find this trove of primordial knowledge.”

The game begins with questions. Each player should take some time answering the questions addressed to them in private. Once all have done so, the companion players should share their answers—but the Host's



answers should remain a secret for the time being. New questions may arise; ask and answer them as you see fit. Then take turns asking the other companions to answer the final questions.

THE HOST

Duke Vulku wears a heavy cape and an ornate bronze helmet, the back of which is shaped like a grotesque face with bejeweled eyes, a design meant to trick the spirits that hunt him into thinking he is traveling the other way.

- ◆ Who among the companions does Duke Vulku consider expendable and why?
- ◆ What does Duke Vulku know about that tomb that he has yet to let on about?
- ◆ Who among the companions will the Duke Vulku preserve at all costs and why?
- ◆ *Ask the others:* Which among you plots even now to usurp Duke Vulku and why are you uncertain of your secrecy?
- ◆ What have the sages promised Duke Vulku that compels him to seek out the answers they long for?

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THE FAITHLESS

- ◆ Though Duke Vulku disapproves of your heresy, why has he never commanded that you worship the gods?
- ◆ What is the one thing that you trust in this world of shifting wonders and horrors?
- ◆ Whenever you return to Telluun, with whom do you find comfort?
- ◆ What do you wear in public when you wish to hide the brand of your faithlessness?
- ◆ *Ask the others:* Which among you prays to moldy gods for my soul and why?

The Faithless Cache

Whenever you are offered a pull to ask a question, you may place a block from your cache atop the Spire instead of pulling.

If you wish to place someone else in harm's way, you may do so with but a pull. The Host may tempt you with a pull to do so unsuspected. You may add all pulls made for this cause to your cache.

THE INDEBTED

- ◆ Despite the rumors, you have never actually died, but when did you come the closest?
- ◆ You have two separate families who have moved on after one or another of your funerals. Why have you never tried to contact them?
- ◆ What grave goods have you dug up from each of your false graves to keep with you?
- ◆ How has your appearance changed over the years?
- ◆ *Ask the others:* Which among you slept with my spouse when last I was thought dead?

The Indebted Cache

When the consequences of abandoning a pull would leave you injured or ensnared, you may place a block from your cache atop the Spire to be left for dead instead.

You may add any block you pull to remain untouched, unharmed, or unscathed to your cache.

THE LOATHED

- ◆ Which of the seventeen sages is secretly sponsoring you and to what end?
- ◆ Who are the three entities who lay claim to your eternal soul?
- ◆ What oath have you sworn that now puts you at odds with Duke Vulku's geas?
- ◆ How are your unwholesome studies made obvious through your appearance?
- ◆ *Ask the others:* Which among you has been studying my books while I slumber?

The Loathed Cache

When you pull to remain undisturbed by the horrific or preternatural, you may place blocks from your cache atop the Spire in lieu of pulling.

When you call upon an imp, a devil, or the dead to aid you, pull a block and ask the Host what price must be paid. You will pay the price, but if you wish, you may add this block you pulled to initiate the deal to your cache.

THE METICULOUS

- ◆ Who awaits your safe return to Telluun?
- ◆ What did Duke Vulku promise you years ago when you first submitted yourself to his geas?
- ◆ What happened the last time your sword betrayed your command?
- ◆ How do you maintain your appearance?
- ◆ *Ask the others:* Which among you do I see as a wastrel and unworthy?

The Meticulous Cache

When the Host tempts you with a pull to avoid wasteful action, you may place a block from your cache atop the Spire in lieu of pulling.

When a wound festers or an injury threatens a life, you may pull to properly see to it. The Host may tempt you with additional pulls to save limbs or reduce fevers. You may add any blocks you pull in this manner to your cache.

THE SUBTLE

- ◆ How is it that you are still able to engage in thievery after having both your hands forcibly amputated years ago?
- ◆ What is the loophole in Duke Vulku's geas over you that you are aware of but afraid to use?
- ◆ Whose arms do you reluctantly return to after every quest?
- ◆ How do you blend in?
- ◆ *Ask the others:* Which among you has been secretly tallying my thefts?

The Subtle Cache

When the Host tempts you with a pull to go unnoticed or unremarked, you may place a block from your cache atop the Spire in lieu of pulling.

When you see something that you covet, you may pull to make it yours even as someone is about to use it. You may add any blocks pulled for this cause to your cache.

THE VAINGLORIOUS

- ◆ What is the one thing you love more than yourself and what vile act have you committed to preserve it?
- ◆ Who is the only person to never fall sway to the beauty of your voice?
- ◆ What ward has protected you six times before and why do you fear it may not work a seventh?
- ◆ How do you make an entrance?
- ◆ *Ask the others:* Which among you do I fear is equal to my beauty or grace?

The Vainglorious Cache

When the Host tempts you with a pull to add grace or beauty to your actions, you may place a block from your cache atop the Spire in lieu of pulling.

When you wish to slight or humiliate someone in the eyes of Duke Vulku, you have only to make a pull. You may add any blocks pulled for this cause to your cache.

THE CRUMBLING SPIRES OF SAGACITY

Assemble your Spire according to the rules that came with your specific brand. Once assembled, the companions should each pull a set number of blocks based on the number of companions in the game. Have each companion tuck the blocks they pulled into their own personal cache for use later.

- ◆ If there is a single companion, they must pull 6 blocks.
- ◆ If there are two companions, they must pull 3 blocks each.
- ◆ If there are more than two companions, they must pull 2 blocks each.

For this initial pull, the Spire is not live and the only consequence to be suffered should it tumble is the time it takes to build it back up and start anew. After these pulls, the Spire becomes live evermore.

The Spire of Life & Death

Throughout the game the companions will be asked to pull from the Spire many times. The Host never pulls from the Spire. Each pull must follow these rules.

- ◆ To make a pull, choose a block from any layer beneath the topmost complete layer, remove that block and then place it atop the Spire.
- ◆ As you place blocks in the topmost layer, they must be placed perpendicular to the layer directly beneath and you must complete the topmost layer before starting a new one.
- ◆ You may never touch a block with more than one hand at a time.
- ◆ You may feel about and explore the Spire before pulling a block.
- ◆ You may change which block you intend to pull at any time.
- ◆ You may abandon a pull at any time.

When a pull is abandoned, the Host will tell the companions the consequences they suffer. But know

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"I WOULD HUNT
THE WOLF,
SEE THE TERROR
IN HIS EYES..."

"...AND DRIVE HIS
PACK INTO
THE EARTH."

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this: whatever the consequences of abandoning a pull, they cannot remove a companion from the game. Cowardice is its own reward.

Should the Spire fall, for whatever reason, the player responsible is removed from the game and their companion suffers their ultimate doom. In most cases, it is the Host's duty to relate how and why this ill-fate befell them. Rebuild the Spire as before, but all players, even those of companions who have died, retain their caches. Then the players of the surviving companions pull the number of blocks dictated by how many of them remain, adding these new blocks to their existing cache. All are imperiled by this. The Spire is live and should it fall again during the rebuilding process, another player and companion will suffer their doom according to the whim of the Host.

Players of companions who have died should consult the After All section.

Sacrifice

Foolhardy companions may turn to face their fate head-on and deliberately knock over the Spire. If they do so in an obvious way so that there is no confusion about their intent, it is their privilege, not the Host's, to relate to us how they gloriously gave their own lives. Then the sacrificial player may ask the Host one or more of the following questions.

- ◆ How will this preserve my companions?
- ◆ How will this spite Duke Vulku?
- ◆ How will this be remembered?

And then ask of their fellow companions, "Which among you will sing of this?"

Approaching the Spire

When it comes time to face the Spire, players should tally all the pulls before them. There may be pulls they volunteer for, pulls requested by the Host, and pulls the Host has tempted them with.

The players may decide what a pull is for after the pull is made. However, if the abandoning of one pull would render another pull impossible, that pull must be made first. You must, for example, pull to overcome your revulsion before pulling to impress the Fleshless Queen with your manners. But if you attempt to secret away a knife from her banquet table, you may choose to attribute that to a pull you made before or after either of the other two.

Players make the pulls they wish to make and abandon the ones they do not. The Host will note the abandoned pulls and tailor their consequences appropriately as described in the Being a Gracious and Graceful Host section.

Being a True & Loyal Companion

Duke Vulku is loved by all the companions and his geas is rooted deep within their consciousness. It is sinister and disgraceful to go against his will. When a companion seeks to do so, their player must make all disobedient pulls with their off-hand, should they have one. Additionally, for each transgression, they must also first pull or become overwhelmed by shame and befuddlement.

If Duke Vulku calls upon a companion and they disobey through inaction, they must make a pull with their off-hand or plummet into a torpor of remorse. Each time Duke Vulku calls upon them in this manner, they must pull again. After the third call, all that they do will be considered disloyal until Duke Vulku forgives them.

Should Duke Vulku perish, the companions' consciousness will escort his soul to the realm beyond for seven nights as their mindless bodies wander the mortal world. Upon their return, they will be lost and weak from hunger and thirst.

Experience Belongs to the Bold & Fortunate

When the Spire collapses, a companion is lost, but one will learn from the experience. Note which of

the surviving companions pulled from the Spire most recently before the fall. They will receive a boon from this tragedy should they survive the rebuilding of the Spire. They may now choose one of the lost or unchosen companions and add those abilities to feed and use a cache to their own.

EXPLORATIONS & INVESTIGATIONS

Under a live Spire, you explore the world. The Host describes the world and the people in it. The companion players ask questions about what their companions experience and describe what their companions do. As this conversation unfolds, you will find yourself at certain crossroads. You may attempt to do something the Host does not think you can do without endangering yourself. The Host may present you with a chance to do something more skillfully or with more aplomb. You may fight amongst yourselves. Or you may be presented with something beyond the ken of even Duke Vulku's companions. When this happens, any player at the table may demand that one of the following companion moves may be used.

Rote Work

When you wish to do something you are well-versed in, you need not pull to do so, but the Host may tempt you with pulls to do it with grace, unharmed, without waste, or unnoticed.

Taking from the World

When you are denied something, tell the Host how you plan to seize it. The Host may request a pull to do so and may tempt you with additional pulls do so with grace, unharmed, without waste, or unnoticed.

Imposing Your Will

When the Host describes unintended consequences that result from your actions, speak out. Tell the Host of the outcome you desire. If the Host denies you that outcome, make a pull and ask again before adding the

block to the top of the Spire. If the Host denies you again, make a second pull and once more ask before adding either of the blocks to the top of the Spire. If the Host denies you a third time, you may not control the consequences of your actions, but you may add these blocks to your cache. If you abandon before finishing the second pull or if the Host acquiesces to your desires, place these blocks atop the Spire before continuing.

Keeping Your Wits

Whenever you wish to know more about something that has you in peril or presented you with opportunity, the Host must answer one of the following truthfully for every pull you make.

- ◆ What is most dangerous about this?
- ◆ Where am I most safe?
- ◆ What is most valuable about this?
- ◆ Who can I make vulnerable?
- ◆ What would be hidden from me were I not so attentive?

If you do not pull, the Host may demonstrate the answer to one of these questions for you.

Leading to Safety

When you wish to remove your companions from danger, make a pull for each of the following you wish to occur.

- ◆ None of the other companions are harmed.
- ◆ Duke Vulku is unharmed.
- ◆ You are unharmed.
- ◆ Your way is not impeded.

The Host may tempt you with additional pulls to escape with grace, unnoticed, or without waste.

Feats Unheard Of

When you wish to do something no one has ever done, pull. For every pull you make, you may choose one of the following outcomes.

- ◆ It is possible.
- ◆ You are unharmed by the attempt.
- ◆ You do not imperil others in the attempt.

The Host may tempt you with any of the following.

- ◆ Pull a block to be lucky enough to accomplish this once and only once.
- ◆ Pull a block to learn what is needed to accomplish the task. Add this block to your cache.

Witnessing the Unknown

When you stare into the uncanny depths of the unknown and find within it awe and horror, pull once to choose from the following reactions, or pull a second time to ignore the list and react as you wish. Elsewise, the Host will choose for you.

- ◆ Blindly flee for safety should it be found.
- ◆ Unhinge your consciousness from your senses and fall backwards into the comforts of darkness.
- ◆ Bury your fear in a blood-pounding rage and lash out at ally and peril alike.
- ◆ Whisper regretful prayers to any unwholesome entity with a desire to hear them.

Overcoming Afflictions

When you must endure the pain of recent wounds or labor through illness, the Host may require a pull to deal with your suffering before you can see to the task ahead of you. If you wish, you may place a block from your cache atop the Spire in lieu of making this pull.

Working in Accord

When companions set their wills towards the same goal, ask the Host which pulls before you may be divvied up freely among the cooperating companions. Then ask the Host if Duke Vulku approves of this cooperation.

Delivering Death Upon the Wanting

When you apply your skills to toils of gore and mortality, commit yourself to violence and then ask the Host if what you do is just. If it is just, make a single pull to do one of the following actions.

- ◆ You slay many.
- ◆ You need only slay a few.
- ◆ You wound or injure a beast of preternatural might or sorcerous protections.
- ◆ You slay a beast of preternatural might or sorcerous protections that has been made vulnerable, as determined by the Host.

The Host may tempt you with additional pulls do so with grace, unharmed, without waste, or unnoticed.

If your violence is unjust, you may perform one of the above actions, but you may not pull blocks nor may you use blocks from your cache. Instead, you may only push blocks from the Spire and let them fall as they may. Leave them where they land. Do not place them atop the Spire and do not add them to your cache. They must lay there, screaming on the edge of consciousness, eagerly awaiting the death of one of the companions before they can be returned to the Spire.

Struggling Among the Companions

When you physically struggle with one or more of the companions, all companions involved should declare their intentions. These intentions may be anything physically obtainable were it not for the other companions' efforts, but they may not be anything that harms another companion in such a way that it would

effectively remove them from the game. Allow that companion's player to be the judge of that.

Starting with the initiator, each companion player involved takes turns pulling a single block from the Spire. Any player may place a block from their cache atop the Spire in lieu of pulling during a struggle.

When you abandon a pull, you may no longer attempt to pull during this struggle. After all but one of the companion players has abandon pulls, the remaining player's companion achieves their intent.

As is his privilege, Duke Vulku may disapprove of one or more of the companions' involvement, even if Duke Vulku is not present during the actual struggle. Any companions suffering from such disapproval must make all their pulls with their off-hand and may not use blocks from their cache.

AFTER ALL

When companions die, their players hold what is left of their cache and temporarily remove themselves from the game table to answer any two or three of the following questions in secret.

- ◆ With the geas lifted from your will, what sin have you committed in the service of Duke Vulku that now troubles your soul?
- ◆ As the veil is pulled from the unnatural world, what blasphemous secret is divulged to you?
- ◆ Now that the vitality has been stolen from your corporeal husk, what vanities do you still cling to, unseen and unheard in the shadow realms?
- ◆ As the comfort and warmth is cast from your home and hearth, what calls you back to Telluun even now that your task is finished?
- ◆ With the pain and weariness finally eased from your numb thews, what new tortures do you see before you in your eternal destiny?

When the player has answered the questions, they may return to the table. Unless called upon by necromancy, their companion may no longer communicate or interfere with the living, except in the fashion outlined below.

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The Inscrutable Goals of the Dead

When the spirit of a departed companion disapproves of a living companion's actions, attitude, or existence, they may imperil them with ill fortune. As you tally up the pulls a player must make, each dead companion's player may hand one of their cached blocks to the player making the pull and declare which of the pulls before them is imperiled. It must be a pull they have already offered to make or one the Host has already tempted them with. Instead of pulling a block from the Spire or placing a block from their own cache, the player making the pull must instead place the dead companion's block back in the Spire. They may put it anywhere in the Spire beneath the topmost complete level and must otherwise follow all the other instructions the pull would normally have. In the special case of unjust violence, the dead companion's block must be used to push out and replace the block that is to lay where it lands. To abandon the pull, hand the block back to the dead.

The spirits of the departed companions may only do this for as long as they have cached blocks.

BEING A GRACIOUS & GRACEFUL HOST

To prepare for the expedition, you must consult the disciple of the cartographer and plot your course to the tome-tomb. Before the game, as the Host, you should commit to paper an account of the areas of interest and the surrounding environs. You may create your own map, or use one already made. It should travel overland and feature at least three different environments.

Place upon opposite sides of the map the immortal city of Telluun and the tome-tomb. Draw a lie as the raven flies from Telluun to the tomb. This path is not possible without sorcery. But the entourage may return to it many times to keep their course true. Scatter along this path spectacles of awe and horror, drawn from your own imagination, or from the Miscellanies found in this or other issues of *Worlds Without Master*. As

Duke Vulku and his companions wend their course, they will encounter many of these spectacles, but not all.

As the entourage first sets out, begin by describing the gates of Telluun and the city itself, with specific regard for its decaying opulence. Tell the players their heading and the most prominent landmarks that lie in that direction.

During the journey, rely upon the following Host moves. They will keep you true.

Be Generous

When a pull is abandoned and the text offers no specific options, consider what the pull was for and then craft your own consequences for the companion's failure, which may include harming them, ensnaring them, imperilling them or others, separating the entourage, wasting precious resources, or disappointing Duke Vulku. You may not kill the companion, for this is solely the at the whim of the Spire.

Be Mindful

When it is a companion's turn to pull, remember the following protocols.

- ◆ Remind the companion of their injuries, illnesses, and suffering.
- ◆ Do *not* tempt a companion with grace, safety, thriftiness, or stealth unless you are prepared to exploit their negligence.

Be Courteous

When a companion is in peril of being harmed or killed, ask the player to pull to remain whole. You may tempt them with additional pulls to remain untouched, to flee to safety, and to protect their allies.

If they make no pulls, you may tear the companion asunder, incapacitate them, capture them, and imperil the others; as long as none of these fates removes the companion from the game.

Be Revelatory

When things get slow, ask the players to pull to drink in the world in through their senses and mark what is wrong or dangerous. Give the first to make a pull a single, sensual clue to the danger that awaits them. For each additional pull the companions make, you choose one of the following pieces of information.

- ◆ Tell them how they are vulnerable.
- ◆ Tell them what they should be wary of.
- ◆ Tell them where they may be safest or if there is no safe refuge.

If none of them pull, you may take them by surprise.

Be Judicious

When a companion appears proud or confident, have Duke Vulku praise an unworthy companion and remain indifferent to all others.

Be Sympathetic & Forgiving

When companions openly plot against Duke Vulku, have him steer them into danger.

When the whim seizes you, have Duke Vulku forgive a companion.

Be Forthcoming

When the world and the companions are quiet, you may reveal one of the answers to your Host questions, either through the actions or voice of Duke Vulku, or through other means. After your revelation, offer any present companions the chance to pull. If they refuse, the revelation hangs in the air unremarked upon. For every pull a companion makes, you choose one piece of information from the following list.

- ◆ Tell them how it endangers them.
- ◆ Tell them how they may profit from it.
- ◆ Tell them who they can safely tell about this.

Be Gregarious

When companions speak to anyone besides themselves or Duke Vulku, decide which of the following applies to the one to whom they are speaking.

- ◆ They will tell the companions whatever they wish to hear.
- ◆ They will hide their true desires from the companions.
- ◆ They will respond to inquiry with hostility and silence.

For every pull the companions make, choose one of the above that they obviate.

Be Helpful

When the task before the companions is too great for a single companion to can handle alone, allow two of them to work together by pulling together. Both players must be touching the block being pulled at the same time while it is being removed from the Spire, retrieved from a cache, or placed atop the Spire. Their companions share all glories and dooms that accompany the pull.

THE GEAS END

You may end the game under any of the following circumstances.

- ◆ All of the companions have perished.
- ◆ Duke Vulku has perished and none care to complete the task at hand.
- ◆ The Host has revealed all the answers to Duke Vulku's questions.
- ◆ The tomb-tome is unearthed.
- ◆ The story has reached a note unsettling, discordant, or satisfying enough upon which to end.

