

A WARM AND PLEASANT HUM

A TROPHY DARK INCURSION



BY MICHAEL VAN VLEET



A Warm And Pleasant Hum © 2020 Michael Van Vleet

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A WARM AND PLEASANT HUM

The human world has room for many monarchs, but The Humming Woods has only one Queen. This six-legged Mother of Millions dines exclusively on an elixir said to cure any ill, or even extend one's life... a royal jelly of matchless quality. Few dare attempt to steal any jelly away, protected as it is by the swarms that live in Her remote hive, The Six-Form Heart.

But what if one had grander dreams than of a waxed sack of purloined jelly?

If one can claim the Queen, one can control her enormous six-legged family and the wealth their industry represents. But the denizens of the Six-Form Heart have a loyalty that is pheromone-fueled and absolute, and the venomous means to protect their home and monarch.

THEME
BEES



CREATING YOUR TREASURE HUNTER

To create your treasure hunter, choose your **Name**, **Occupation**, and **Background**.

Your **Occupation** is the role you serve in the party now, and the place where you focus your attention and skills. Your **Background** is what you used to do. Often, there is a reason you no longer do it. When you choose your Background, think about what made you leave that profession and why you can't ever go back to it.

Next, choose your **Drive**. Your Drive is the reason you took up this task and you must complete the task to fulfill it.

Next, choose your **Rituals**, if any. Rituals are dangerous spells you can cast to perform miraculous feats. All villagers can learn and use rituals, regardless of Background or Occupation. You can start with up to 3 rituals, but you must increase your starting Ruin by 1 for each Ritual you know.

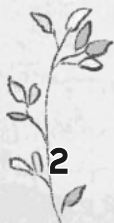
Finally, set your starting **Ruin**: your Ruin starts at 1 and increases by 1 for each Ritual you know.

NAMES

- | | | |
|----------|----------|----------|
| ◇ Alina | ◇ Fion | ◇ Orlen |
| ◇ Baso | ◇ Kasien | ◇ Sibil |
| ◇ Daian | ◇ Mahera | ◇ Teodan |
| ◇ Elisio | ◇ Nima | ◇ Vero |

OCCUPATIONS

- ◇ Antiquarian (*skilled in artifacts, myths, obfuscation*)
- ◇ Hedge (*skilled in curses, improvisation, spirits*)
- ◇ Ox (*skilled in destruction, persistence, strength*)
- ◇ Ranger (*skilled in beasts, hunting, traps*)
- ◇ Sellsword (*skilled in athletics, defense, weapons*)
- ◇ Smuggler (*skilled in dexterity, spontaneity, stealth*)



BACKGROUNDS

- ◇ Disinherited Noble (*skilled in appraisal*)
- ◇ Emboldened Ratcatcher (*skilled in lairs*)
- ◇ Hapless Peddler (*skilled in trading*)
- ◇ Liberated Prisoner (*skilled in deals*)
- ◇ Reformed Thug (*skilled in intimidation*)
- ◇ Uninspired Artisan (*skilled in craft*)

DRIVES

- ◇ Arm the resistance against Lord Haffir's Tyranny
- ◇ Break the geas placed by the Witch of Nevask
- ◇ Establish an estate in the Levasti countryside
- ◇ Pay the toll of the Emerald Bridge
- ◇ Rebuild Hisham's Fountain
- ◇ Seize control of the Free Borough of Khamal

RITUALS

- ◇ *Army. Create three illusory copies of yourself that mimic your actions exactly.*
- ◇ *Germinate. Compel plants to furious growth.*
- ◇ *Guide. Conjure a golden thread to follow.*
- ◇ *Scent. Use your olfactory sense to navigate in complete darkness.*
- ◇ *Swarm. Trade favors with a colony of vermin.*
- ◇ *Ward. Stay concentrating to protect a small area.*

RUIN

This number shows how much the world has dug its claws into you, including the physical and mental harm you've suffered.

It starts at 1, but is increased for each Ritual you know at the start of the game.

HOW TO PLAY A WARM AND PLEASANT HUM

If you are already familiar with the rules of *Trophy Dark* by Jesse Ross, you already know how to play this game and can skip right to playing. If not, the basic rules are presented here for your convenience.

Play To Lose. Your treasure-hunter is doomed. This trip into The Six-Form Heart is not going to go well. If they survive to reach their goal, they will be unavoidably changed by this experience, probably in a really horrible way. As you adventure, try to make the story of your failure an interesting story.

RISK ROLL

When your character attempts a risky task, say what you hope will happen and ask the GM and the other players what could possibly go wrong. Then gather 6-sided dice.

Take one light-colored die if the task is something your character would be able to do because of one of their Skills.

Take another light die for accepting a Devil's Bargain from another player or the GM. Devil's Bargains are described in the following section.

Add a dark-colored die if you are willing to risk your character's mind or body in order to succeed. You must include this die whenever your character performs a Ritual.

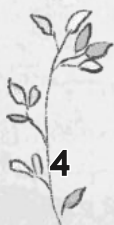
Roll the dice. If your highest die is a:

- ◇ 1 - 3: Your character fails, and things get worse. The GM describes how. The GM may also allow your character to succeed, but things will get worse in some other way.
- ◇ 4 - 5: Your character succeeds, but there's some kind of complication. The GM describes the complication, then you describe how your character succeeds.
- ◇ 6: Your character succeeds. Describe how.

If you included a dark die and it rolled equal to or higher than your highest light die, it counts as a Ruin Roll as described under Ruin Roll.

If you are unhappy with your roll, you may add an additional dark die to your dice and re-roll. You can keep adding more dark dice and re-rolling. You cannot re-roll when a dark die is the highest die in your roll.

If you use a Risk Roll to try to defeat a monster in hand-to-hand combat, you will die. Instead, roll to hide, roll to escape, or roll to use a Ritual against it. If you fight something that is not monstrous or if you fight a monster but not to defeat it (for example, to fight your way past it), be clear about what you want from the fight, then roll normally.



DEVIL'S BARGAINS

The GM or any other player can offer you a bonus light die if you accept a Devil's Bargain. Common Devil's Bargains include:

- ◇ Your character causes collateral damage or unintended harm.
- ◇ Your character gets lost or separated from their companions.
- ◇ Your character sacrifices an important item.
- ◇ Your character betrays a companion.
- ◇ Your character attracts unwanted attention.

The Devil's Bargain occurs regardless of the outcome of the roll. You make the deal, pay the price, and get the bonus die.

The Devil's Bargain is always a free choice. If you don't like one, just reject it (or suggest how to alter it so you might consider taking it). You can always just risk your character's mind or body and take a dark die instead.

Anyone may veto or suggest alterations to a proposed Devil's Bargain, especially if it would also impact their character.

RUIN ROLL

Your Ruin shows how much physical and mental harm your character has suffered. It starts at 1.

When your character witnesses or undergoes something disturbing, make a Ruin Roll by rolling one dark die. If you've made a Risk Roll which includes a dark die, and that die is equal to or higher than your highest light die in that roll, your dark die is automatically considered a Ruin Roll.

If your dark die rolled higher than your current Ruin, add 1 to your Ruin and work with the GM to describe the decline of your character's mind and body.

REDUCTION ROLL

When your Ruin reaches 5, you may now reduce it when your character attempts subtle acts of sabotage against their companions.

Each time your character does this, roll one light die. If you get less than your current Ruin, your character succeeds at their task and you decrease your Ruin by 1. You may continue reducing your Ruin in this way when your Ruin is below 5.

LOSING YOUR CHARACTER

When your Ruin reaches 6, your character is lost. This is an important moment: Everyone focuses on your character's last flashes of lucidity before they run away or turn against their companions. Hand your character over to the GM to control, and either create a new character or exit the game.

HOW TO RUN A WARM AND PLEASANT HUM

If you're familiar with *Trophy Dark* by Jesse Ross, you already know how to play this game. If not, the instructions are included here.

The “Win” condition is having fun.

The characters might hope to get home and be lauded as heroes, but you and the players know better: they are all going to die horrible deaths (probably).

But this is a good thing.

It lets you off the hook of having to play “smart”, and lets you focus on making things interesting.

You, the GM, have to be the biggest fan of the story. You have to give the players all the rope they need to tie their own characters into horrible, horrible knots. Fortunately, you aren't set on your own, adrift, with no help. *A Warm And Pleasant Hum* is written to give you a structure and the tools you need to make that possible.

THE RING STRUCTURE

A Warm and Pleasant Hum is a *Trophy Dark* incursion and uses the 5 ring structure of drawing closer and closer to the center. Putting the characters in the bullseye, as it were.

You will play through them in a linear order, and you should tell the players when they enter a new ring. If you need to take a break, in-between rings is where you want to do that. Each ring is its own set of

experiences that — while it is part of the whole adventure — also represents its own encapsulated portion.

Each ring is intended to evoke different types of pressure on the characters.

Ring 1 is about making the characters feel heroic by overcoming a fairly easy challenge, and beckon them deeper into the incursion.

Ring 2 is about the characters confronting an unfriendly landscape, to signify that the world itself is opposing them.

Ring 3 brings the characters back to their own drives, their own selfish desires, and sowing the seeds of distrust between characters.

Ring 4 confronts the characters with a horrific beast that they can do nothing but run from. However, it does push them into the conclusion of the adventure, basically cutting off any possibility of retreat.

Ring 5 is the ultimate end of the incursion where those who have survived can reach out and grab the treasure, but in order to do so, they have to sacrifice something important to themselves or, perhaps, their humanity itself.

When playing through them, first the characters will need to confront the terrors and overcome the difficulties they encounter, and then address the temptations.





ASK QUESTIONS AND BUILD UPON THE ANSWERS

The adventure doesn't lay out a lot of backstory or history. Ideally, it provides only what you absolutely require. The rest of the empty spaces in the story are intended to be filled in by you and the players as you play.

What do their backgrounds mean to them? Why does their drive push them so obsessively? Heck, ask them to fill in bits of the world, too. This invests them in a story that they are helping to construct. It also lets you embed that character's experiences into the world which you can then turn on them, or rip away from them.

USING MOMENTS

Moments aren't encounters in the way terrors and temptations are, they are small bits of set dressing you can pull into your descriptions as needed. They can also be useful for transitional moments, to give a sense of montage as the characters travel from one ring to another.

USING CONDITIONS

When characters fail risk or ruin rolls, you can give characters conditions and the adventure provides a list for you to use or take inspiration from. Each character is fairly likely to get a condition or two within the first couple of rings.

As characters fail further on, you might choose to give them a new condition, or you might think about how a condition they currently have can get worse.

Once a character has a condition, be sure to take it into consideration when describing or judging the fictional narrative around future actions. Conditions are less about "rules", and more about the fiction taking place, so be sure to use them and keep them in mind.

MOMENTS

- ◇ Despite the deep shadows, a pleasant warmth suffuses the forest, making outer layers of clothes and armor feel unnecessary, uncomfortable
- ◇ The discovery, half-rotted in a shallow pool, of a swollen body, its burned hands clutching a brazier
- ◇ A circle of six animal skulls arranged by some strange intelligence: large, small, large, small. Bear and rabbit, elk and squirrel... human and child
- ◇ Yellow and black striped mushrooms cling to tree trunks
- ◇ A forager's sack, dangling from a thin tree branch overhead, out of reach, full of yellow and black striped fingerling fungus
- ◇ A swarm of fuzzy bees the size of fists, crawling all over an armored forest creature, their stingers ineffective, burying the invader in a living ball, cooking it to death with their combined heat
- ◇ Carved into the amber sap of a tree, an arrow pointing back out of the woods





CONDITIONS

- ◇ A compulsion to hum, but not a tune... just a tone
- ◇ Paranoia: The feeling of small legs on exposed skin, though there's nothing there
- ◇ Sneezing, teary eyes: an allergic reaction to the pollen from flowering plants
- ◇ Speaking feels inadequate unless accompanied by dance-like movement, especially when giving directions
- ◇ Sugar cravings
- ◇ Passivity: A conviction that a single violent act is always followed by personal destruction
- ◇ Sensitivity to strong scents
- ◇ Dazzle: a compulsion to draw dark horizontal stripes for camouflage
- ◇ Bee-stung and Allergic: A painful swelling in the joints. Constricted airways. Even with the use of antivenom, one feels depleted from the near-death experience.

RING 1

TERRORS

As the party approaches The Humming Woods, they see a group of people dressed as amateur apiarists, faces covered with mesh attached to brimmed hats, chasing a panicked horse, their supplies flung from the horse's saddle packs as it bucks. Around the horse's neck is a rough mesh mask of similar design to the apiarists', but it's askew. The horse's eyes are yellow and running, pierced with stingers, the creature mad with pain, envenomed.

The apiarist party is the same size as the player party; they beg for assistance, but their horse shortly plunges down a steep incline, unrecoverable. Whether the party helps or not, after the horse is lost, the apiarists view the party's supplies as a viable alternative and violence is threatened. However, the apiarists are exhausted, their hopes dashed, and they are easily discouraged if the party shows a united front and doesn't back down.

TEMPTATIONS

Among the supplies left on the ground from the apiarist's aborted mission: a shattered vial of anti-venom, a few drops at the bottom still salvageable if handled carefully. A crude map with three great circles where the hive could be and notes on scouting bees, their paths and schedules. On the back, a rough cartoon of a bee wearing a leash like a guide hound. A stinger the size of a human hand from some enormous & monstrous variety of bee.

The players should be asked whether it's a cure they desire, or power. How would their lives change if they could prove they could pierce the heart of The Humming Woods and return sticky-fingered in triumph? How will they succeed where others have failed?



RING 2

TERRORS

The forest opens to a floodplain where recent rains have formed a shallow inland sea. The entire plain is a riot of color due to flowering plants taking advantage of the precipitation, their stalks poking skyward well above the waterline. The average plant comes to just past head height, their roots forming a rough and uneven carpet invisible under the water. Footing is treacherous and progress is slow. The swaying petals make it easy to lose sight of your fellow travelers, especially with one's eyes on the ground to safely negotiate the terrain. Perfume fills the air, olfactory fireworks, as each bloom competes with its neighbors for the attention of pollinators. The effect on the travelers is to instill a languor, a desire to tarry, though there's entirely too much ground to cover to seriously consider lingering.

In a scented haze, the party drifts apart, their legs and arms brushing against exposed filaments projecting from the flowers' stamens, a sticky golden fuzz accumulating on their clothing. Puffballs of seeds float above on a soft breeze. For the least lucky, breathing turns labored and throats close as allergies awaken. A pitcher plant full of sticky rainwater tips on contact and drenches someone from the waist down.

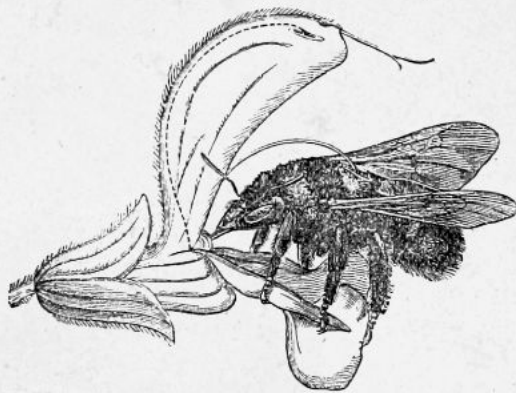
What important supply or item is dropped into the water, or rendered useless by contact with the sticky pollen? What creature rustles among the flower stalks, navigating with ease while the travelers founder?

TEMPTATIONS

An enormous moose, eight feet tall, parades past the party on its way out of the woods, unafraid. Its broad rack of antlers is coated in honey, speckled with bees, some living and some dead. The beast's snout is sticky and slick. Its hoof prints are easy to trace in reverse even as the light begins to fade, a golden rind on each print catching the last rays of sun.

If examined, the gold layer on top of the soil is revealed to be a powdered layer of chitin: the remains of generations of bees, fallen to the forest floor. At night, the woods are nearly silent. All that can be heard are the sounds of the camp itself and a constant background hum.

The moose is proof that the journey is possible. It will, however, require that the party's combined might match or exceed that of this horned prince of the wood. What folk knowledge about the moose lends inspiration and courage to the group?



RING 3

TERRORS

Bee sightings become more frequent, from the smaller flying and scouting variety to intimidating wingless soldiers, large as hounds. Care must be taken to appear harmless, unworthy of attention. How are the players willing to debase themselves when the antennae of a striped guard flick their way? What do they visualize to remain still and calm as a curious bee's monstrous mandibles carefully prise away the pollen coating their limbs?

Someone discovers that their waxed canvas sack has a tear... no, the rent is too clean to have been torn. It was cut. When did this happen? Who in the party is most likely to have pursued sabotage,



even at this early stage? The sack won't hold any fluid now, royal jelly or otherwise.

One of the party members has so many bees buzzing about their head that it resembles a seething crown in motion. A humming halo, entirely different from the ragged swarm that bedevils everyone else. What could this strange coronation mean? Is it... some kind of anointment? Have they been chosen by the bees? Them? Why them? Hasn't everyone walked the same path, or similar enough?

This cannot stand.

TEMPTATIONS

The party camps for the night and the stars are out. The woods reverberate with a constant hum, sometimes ignorable, sometimes leading a listener to imagine hidden harmonies, echoes of lullabies from childhood.

What were the songs about, that lulled them to sleep as children? The rocking of babies? The sweetness of honey? The warmth of the hearth? How will those memories help them sleep here, so far from home, bee-stung and exhausted, sticky and in need of comfort?

The trees of the forest grow more crowded the closer one gets to its heart. Out here, constellations can still be identified through the zigzag of branches. Which shapes are known to the party, and how are they named? Which one will be a guide to help them find their way home once they've met with success?

RING 4

TERRORS

The morning is spent following the sound of the rising hum, noting the direction taken by outgoing bee scouts and workers that are winging away from the hidden hive on their daily patrols, and navigating in the opposite direction, presumably back to their source.

A tree, its profile warped by the presence of hexagon-shaped wax tiling. Not a hive, but some stand-alone structure. Where the trunk reaches the ground, a miserable human figure clings to life, embedded and immobile.

They wear the mesh mask of a beekeeper... another treasure seeker, near the end of their failed journey. They beg the party for water. Should any approach, they will notice a hum emanating from the dying person's chest, which has been converted into a nursery chamber by the bees. Their shirtfront is sticky with honey and beneath the cloth, their ribs shelter a comb of golden hexagons, tiny grubs writhing within, fed on honey and meat.

Disturbing this nursery triggers an attack by flying, stinging bees erupting from the exposed chest. This also attracts the attention of a pack of the dog-sized, ground-based soldier bees on their way back to the hive from a hunt, all of which chase the party deeper into the woods.

TEMPTATIONS

The bees know that there's an invader in the woods. Patrolling clusters of insects are sighted more frequently. The stench of sweat pouring off the treasure seekers marks them as outsiders to the pheromone-fluent population they're trying to infiltrate.

Something must be done to render them invisible. What if they manage to kill a few bees (somehow, without getting swarmed), dig through their ruptured exoskeletons, then correctly identify and pluck out the wet organ that exudes the hive's passkey scent?

The party comes across the remains of several deer who wandered too close to the hive and were stung to death for their trespass. The carcasses are mostly intact. A mix of deer blood and offal could help to disguise oneself as something dead and harmless.

The hive is so close. The humming is a constant tickle in the ears, a thrumming in the chest, as if the woods themselves were trying to take flight. Are the patrols hunting them? Or herding them? Have they really been so successful at avoiding notice as they think?



RING 5

TERRORS

Finally, we arrive at the Six-Form Heart, hive fortress of The Humming Woods. Comb structures engulf trees to their peaks forming an immense and irregular dome, surrounded by activity. The party gets lucky: in the face of the structure, a tall and deep gouge, left by an immense and hungry forest creature. The ragged opening yawns only wide enough for one treasure seeker at a time. Who goes first? Who decides?

Inside, pushing through yielding walls, wax under fingernails, the party will struggle to stay calm under the unwelcome attention of the hive hounds who run antennae over their feet, the guards' mandibles powerful enough to easily wrench one's limbs to the point of destruction. Trapped heat clings as the amber light dims, the hive growing darker and darker as they push



further in. Though coated in scent to stay invisible themselves, which seeker realizes how easy it would be to pierce the perfumed armor of another?

The hive walls heal behind the party, wax extruded and smoothed over. Light vanishing. If they reach The Mother of Millions, what then? In the heart of her domain, who can steal from her the power granted by the woods themselves, surrounded for leagues in every direction by her family of protectors? .

TEMPTATIONS

The only way out is blocked by the treasure seekers behind you. Single-file you entered, the passageway you carved closing behind you as bees worked to undo damage to the Six-Form Heart. The only sure way to get back out without getting lost is to attempt to retrace your steps, hoping against hope that the walls are yet too soft and new to effectively resist the knife... but how does one grab the royal jelly or the queen herself and then convince one's fellows to step aside and let one squeeze past? Limbs pinned by the tight space, parading your treasure past their hungry eyes?

Look: which of the others seems abuzz with the twitching energy of incipient betrayal? Weighing the Heart's treasure, and deciding it doesn't divide well at all? Imagining one swift act of violence, the pressing of cooling bodies into the soft wax floor, the claiming of their prize? Who else is having these thoughts, even though every surface bristles with the unblinking compound eyes of the enemy? When every panicked breath releases the scent of fear and meat to the queen's beloved guard?

The prize is here. The only way out is through.

The void can claim any who bar the way.



A WARM AND PLEASANT HUM

NAME

- ◇ _____
- ◇ Alina
- ◇ Baso
- ◇ Daian
- ◇ Elisio
- ◇ Fion
- ◇ Kasien
- ◇ Mahera
- ◇ Nima
- ◇ Orlen
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OCCUPATIONS

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BACKGROUNDS

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- ◇ Liberated Prisoner (*skilled in deals*)
- ◇ Reformed Thug (*skilled in intimidation*)
- ◇ Uninspired Artisan (*skilled in craft*)
- ◇ _____

RUIN

1

- ◇ Arm the resistance against Lord Haffir's Tyranny
- ◇ Break the geas placed by the Witch of Nevask
- ◇ Establish an estate in the Levasti countryside

2

- ◇ Pay the toll of the Emerald Bridge
- ◇ Rebuild Hisham's Fountain

3

- ◇ Seize control of the Free Borough of Khamal
- ◇ _____

4

- ◇ **RITUALS**
- ◇ Army. *Create three illusory copies of yourself that mimic your actions exactly.*
- ◇ Germinate. *Compel plants to furious growth.*

5

- ◇ Guide. *Conjure a golden thread to follow.*
- ◇ Scent. *Use your olfactory sense to navigate in complete darkness.*
- ◇ Swarm. *Trade favors with a colony of vermin.*

6

- ◇ Ward. *Stay concentrating to protect a small area.*
- ◇ _____

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IN THE WORLD OF
TROPHY DARK
THE TREASURE
YOU SEEK IS
SWEET AS HONEY



BUT DESIRE WILL **DESTROY YOU** IN THE END

A Warm and Pleasant Hum is a one-shot game of *Trophy Dark* (created by Jesse Ross). *A Warm and Pleasant Hum* is intended for 2-5 players and requires about 3 to 4 hours to play.

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