

PLAYING ONE-ON-ONE



KOBOLD
Press

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CHAPTER 1: HOW TO PLAY ONE-ON-ONE

To play the world's most popular RPG one-on-one, all you need is another person and a free block of time. And it's an amazing way to introduce a partner, friend, or family member to the game!

BEFORE PLAY

Advice for GMs. Before you play, talk to your game partner about their favorite parts of a game session. Do they gravitate toward roleplay (or RP), or do they prefer dangerous puzzles, creative combat, political intrigue, or dungeon crawls?

As much as possible, tweak the session to emphasize their favorite parts of play while making sure to leave in your preferences too.

During session prep, leave things as open for the PC to drive the narrative forward as possible. That doesn't mean that you need to prep for every potential turn of events! Instead, try to create space for the player to add to the narrative and move the story forward. Don't be afraid to present them with a problem you don't have an iron-clad solution for—the two of you can figure it out together!

At the end of the day, your most important task as GM is for the player to trust you. They need to know that you're rooting for them and for their character. This will lay the foundation for both of you to have a truly amazing one-on-one session together.

Advice for Players. As a player, your primary job, besides having fun, is to know your character and to be vocal about what they want. The emphasis here is on the second part, communicating your character's desires to your GM, so they can help you make them a reality.

To do this, your character doesn't have to be demanding or dramatic, but they should have some kind of goal they're working to achieve, and you can tell your GM that goal, preferably in character, without being afraid that they're going to use it to trick or trap you or your PC.

Your GM does a lot of work before the session starts, setting up possible narrative paths for your PC. What this leaves for you then is getting to know the PC really well. Here are a few questions to ask yourself before you play to help you dig deeper into your character:

- What's going on beneath the surface? How does that contrast with what they're presenting to others?
- What's consciously motivating them? What are their subconscious fears and desires?

DURING PLAY: BEST PRACTICES

GMPCs Are Your Friend. Especially if you're planning on playing something longer than a one-shot, consider bringing in a GMPC (a PC run by the GM) of some kind. One of the best ways to inspire character growth is through interactions with other characters, and the PC developing a close relationship with someone they know and trust is incredibly powerful.

From a practical standpoint, it's a lot more engaging for the PC to travel from place to place or try to solve a problem when they have someone else to talk to! Your GMPC is an amazing resource here as they can promote character growth and support the PC during combat while also keeping the two of you immersed in the world of the game.

Everyone Wears Two Hats. One of the best things about one-on-one play is that both the GM and player can experience a melding of their two roles. Players, you are providing the momentum that drives the story forward. Make sure you're meeting your GM halfway; there isn't really any downtime or waiting for the narrative waves to wash over you. Remember, you're holding the oars!

GMs, you've already set up the framework, so now you get to enjoy the stage you've set and interact with your player. In these sessions, you might have opportunities for more involved RP, which will naturally lead to more fleshed-out NPCs. Plus, there's lots of room for surprise!


As long as you both trust each other, you'll be well prepared to collaboratively build a world during the session—that's really what makes it a duet!

Giving Weight to PC Choices. Often when people discuss this type of play, GMs worry that their GMPC is going to overshadow the PC. The sentiment in these cases is lovely, but it's slightly misplaced. Instead, make sure that you don't overshadow your *player*. Is the person across the table from you getting to make choices that have real stakes? Do they have a say in where the story's going? Can they help determine the pacing of the game, spending more time on what they enjoy while the two of you handwave parts that neither of you find very exciting?

There is a second caveat here: especially at lower levels, depending on the character class the player has chosen, it's possible for a PC and GMPC to deal very different amounts of damage in a single round.

The simplest solution is for the player to run both the GMPC and the PC during combat and for the GM to run the GMPC during RP. This way, the player can roll the Divine Smite damage *and* chase away those pesky orcs with a *moonbeam*.





Combat Considerations. We could dig into the nitty gritty of scaling combat for one-on-one play based on character class and creature type, but instead, to keep things simple, it all comes back to one question. Ask yourself, “What would be the most fun option here?”

During combat, you’ll want to keep an eye on action economy as one PC (and perhaps a GMPC) can easily be overwhelmed by three or four combatants even if they’re low level. Instead, use waves of enemies to give the combat a sense of momentum without your PC getting overwhelmed.

Finally, opt for cascading failure states for skill checks instead of absolute failures that might bring play to a screeching halt. Instead of a failed Stealth check to avoid detection, sending the PC into life and death combat, they should instead attract some attention.

CHAPTER 2: ADAPTING PCS

Once you’ve covered the basics of running one-on-one, you’re ready to move on to step two, adapting your game’s PC for this smaller-party play style. In terms of mechanics, one-on-one works best when you make sure the PC is flexible in both melee and ranged combat. Below are a few different options for making these adjustments to the core classes.

Even with a more flexible PC, we still suggest adjusting the number of combatants to make sure that 1) action economy doesn’t get too imbalanced and 2) the PC has someone to talk to on their adventures. Ensuring that the small party isn’t drastically outnumbered will go a long way toward keeping combat engaging instead of overwhelming, and having a fellow traveler, whether animal or person, will allow them to engage in RP throughout and provide them with additional support in social encounters and exploration.

ADAPTATION #1: BOOST SPELLS AND ATTACKS

It’s always fun to receive a present perfectly selected for you. Crafting magical items unique to the PC—their personality, class, and subclass—will have precisely that effect for your player.

As you’re just trying to please one person, you don’t have to worry so much about making sure the items are balanced across the characters at the table, though you may want to craft an item that can grow with the PC. They don’t need a legendary artifact at 3rd level.

So what types of items might help increase the PC’s flexibility without sending them over the OP edge? Let’s look at the three base types of PCs separately and extrapolate from there.

Full Casters. In general, casters in duet-style play might struggle to deal enough damage before their enemy does them in, especially if they’re in a melee situation or have had several combats in one day. You certainly want to challenge them to make creative use of their spells and other abilities—playing in a duet is amazing for encouraging creative problem-solving—but sometimes they’ll need a boost.

At the earliest levels, help give them a small bump to AC and some healing potions, and they should be alright. Once they hit 3rd level, go through their spell list and see if there’s a cool spell that they might need in a pinch that they don’t want to keep prepared at all times like *revivify*, *sending*, *detect magic*, *speak with plants*, or *counterspell*. You can even ask the player for their thoughts on what their PC would like!

After you’ve selected the spell(s), play out the PC embedding the enchantment into an item over time or coming across a *+1 weapon* that would also let them cast the spell once per day without using a spell slot. These items also make great rewards from mentor characters at the end of a narrative arc, especially if you want them to have access to a spell that characters inside their class normally wouldn’t have.

Non-Casters. For our fighting friends, you can go a couple different directions while keeping flexibility in mind. Do you want to make it easier for them to use their current skills and abilities, or do you want to give them access to magic they might not otherwise have?

One of the places where non-casters will tend to be weaker is in area of effect. Again, get your player involved here. Do they want to design traps so that they can infiltrate larger spaces with multiple combatants? You could use *fog cloud* as inspiration for the functionality of their smoke machine-esque device that they set up before sneaking around the cultists’ lair, and then they burst out of the fog or use it to hide in, slashing in whichever signature style they prefer.

Alternatively, a magical weapon with a small boost is everyone’s best friend. Perhaps their dagger can cast *entangle* once per day, or as in one of our favorite magical items we’ve ever used, you might give them a *ring of returning* which will boomerang their thrown weapons back to them.

Half-Casters. We’re all thinking it, so let’s just say it: in many ways, these classes already have the best of both worlds for one-on-one play. By definition, they’re flexible and well-balanced, but this can bring its own problems, especially in boss fight situations.

Depending on the build, your half-caster is probably going to lean more toward melee or ranged fighting, and they might also struggle with area of effect as we saw with the non-casters.

An additional struggle arises, depending on the PC's class and that of their companion(s), when they're facing creatures resistant or immune to nonmagical attacks. These encounters will be a lot more difficult and could even be impossible if your half-caster doesn't have a magical weapon. If they're fighting werewolves with a standard, non-silvered longsword for example, they're in for a really frustrating fight.

Other Ideas. There are additional creative tweaks you might make, such as expanding a character's range for their attacks without imposing disadvantage or making adjustments like having advantage on Stealth checks when they're in shadow.

ADAPTATION #2:

BORROW FROM OTHER SUBCLASSES

Consider allowing a PC to select features from more than one subclass when they level up. This is a tweak you'll want to be careful with as not all subclasses are created equal in terms of their combined power in a single character. Generally, you should aim for abilities that would give characters an either/or type of bonus and avoid stacking advantages.

If we look at bards for instance, some subclasses allow them to have enhanced spellcasting options while others increase their fighting prowess, particularly in melee. They won't be able to use both of these abilities at once and will need to choose if they want their action to be used toward spellcasting or a melee attack. PCs in large groups don't need this increased flexibility, but it can open up in-combat choices and options for both players and GMs in one-on-one play.

ADAPTATION #3:

GIVE COMPANIONS AN UPGRADE

One of the functions of the PC's adventuring companion is to help balance them out. If your PC is clanging around in full plate, maybe their companion gains proficiency in Stealth. You don't need to go overboard here.

Some of the boosts will depend on if it's the GM or the player running the companion during combat and how fun the player will find these additional mechanics and strategies.

You can combine any and all of these adaptations to equip your one-on-one campaign's hero to take on monsters and villains in all of their guises. Don't be afraid to tinker and adjust as you go. Empower your PC, and they'll surprise you with ingenious solutions to the nefarious hijinks you place along their path.





CHAPTER 3: CREATING THE GMPC

In the last chapter, we talked about how one-on-one play works best when the PC is flexible in both melee and ranged combat. Now we are going to round out the party by talking about how you can provide the PC with a worthy and supportive adventuring companion. In this chapter, you'll find three primary considerations as you build a GMPC for your duet game: complementary class, roleplay, and character motivation.

In some circles, the phrase "GMPC" elicits shudders and horrified cries—"Railroad conductor!" However, when done well, the GMPC can serve a vital role in one-on-one.

The GMPC should complement the PC's strengths and shore up their weaknesses. They also give the PC an essential social sounding board and roleplaying partner. And the GMPC opens up compelling narrative possibilities and opportunities for character development. Read on to find out how to explore these three areas at your table.

CONSIDERATION #1: CHOOSING A COMPLEMENTARY CLASS

Your first consideration as the GM of a one-on-one game needs to be the player. As you create your GMPC, ask yourself, which class have they chosen, and how can our GMPC augment and support their chosen class?

As the GM in a duet game, your preferred class matters less than the player's because, well, you are the GM and get to play all kinds of different characters while your player is focused on the one.

There are some naturally complementary classes that immediately spring to mind. If your player has rolled a wizard, then a tanky barbarian can hold the front line while they sling spells from a safe distance (or vice-versa). Clearly dichotomous pairings like this work really well... until someone needs some healing.

We like picking classes for our GMPCs that can fill multiple roles. Some classes lend themselves particularly well to this kind of flexibility. Paladins are terrific tanks and damage dealers that can still heal and support the PC.

Clerics can get in goblin's faces or righteously injure foes from afar in addition to their strong healing and support spells. And druids are notoriously flexible, having access to healing or other aids as well as being adept at controlling the battlefield.

CONSIDERATION #2: ROLEPLAY

Having a GMPC for your one-on-one games supports another crucial element of play: social interaction.

When we first started out, we were so concerned about the GMPC stealing the show that the character didn't really talk to the PC. He was the strong, stoic (boring, non-communicative) type. So our player wasn't as emotionally invested as they wanted to be, and their character wasn't really developing.

Characters in 5th Edition, just like people, work best when they are not in a vacuum. Our characters need others to bounce ideas off of, reveal backstories to, and butt heads with. Your GMPC should offer a social counterpoint to your player's character. It was the GMPC opening up and talking with the PC that saved our early duet game.

For this reason, as you make your GMPC, you need to consider a complementary class but also complementary (or contrasting for added spiciness) personality traits. If the PC is bubbly and chaotic, perhaps your GMPC is more grounded and lawful. On the other hand, if your PC tends to believe everything anyone tells them, your GMPC could be more of a skeptic. Or maybe your PC is socially awkward, and you could try making the GMPC a silver-tongued smooth talker.

A word of caution in developing personality traits, subtlety wins every time. Allow the contrasts between the PC and GMPC to emerge slowly for a greater payoff. This gives both you and the player the opportunity to enhance your character building and to dive into intricate, internal issues that manifest over time. Plus, the two characters will shape themselves around one another as their bond grows.

CONSIDERATION #3: MOTIVATION

Finally, your GMPC needs to have a strong reason to adventure with your PC. As with bringing any adventuring party together, you want to intertwine their motivations and point them in the direction of your overarching plot and goals.

For one-on-one, you might also give your GMPC reasons to defer to the primary character. For example, maybe the PC has a noble background while the GMPC springs from more humble origins. Or maybe it is as easy as the GMPC functioning as an underling or hired muscle for the PC. The PC needs to remain the narrative character of focus, and the player should be the one calling the shots and making the tough calls.

That being said, we do like for our GMPCs to have enough personality and backstory that their problems or interests offer another avenue or “B plot” to the PC’s main story. Ideally, any adventures related to the GMPC will still factor heavily into the aims and goals of the PC even if it is simply the chance for the main character to assist their important ally.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

One of the biggest advantages of playing one-on-one is that you only have two player’s tastes, preferences, and schedules to contend with. You get to play a hyper-focused game, privileging the pillars of play that appeal the most to your table for two.

While the pair of you are co-creating the world of your game, make sure that your player gets to lean into their character. Give them a GMPC to fight alongside, socialize with, and grow closer to as they adventure together.

CHAPTER 4: SCALING COMBAT

Effectively running combat for one-on-one play is a major area of concern for many GMs. After all, the monster challenge ratings, player options, and adventure and encounter design guidelines all assume parties of at least four adventurers.

When you play one-on-one, those assumptions don’t necessarily work. So how can GMs build encounters that are challenging for the party without being more deadly than planned? How do we adapt and balance creatures and combat to keep the stakes fun and interesting? Below, we cover three tips for scaling combat for one-on-one: understanding action economy, tweaking stat blocks, and incorporating allies.

THE ALMIGHTY ACTION ECONOMY

Action economy refers to how many actions opposing forces are able to take in a round. The more actions that one side has, the more things they can do and the more powerful that group is.

Thinking about action economy in this way helps us remember to not just consider the number of combatants in an encounter: we also need to factor in the number of actions those combatants have available.


We learned this lesson the hard way early on in our game with an encounter that, in terms of challenge rating, should have been difficult but fine for our party of two. However, the PC and GMPC quickly became overwhelmed by facing eight combatants, even though the combatants’ CR was very low.

In their action economy, the party was outnumbered 4:1—that’s a lot of potential damage to take each round!

In 5th Edition, even a powerful adventurer is going to have a hard time if they find themselves alone and greatly outnumbered. These considerations compound when we consider the type of creature the character is fighting and any special abilities it might have. For instance, features like multiattack or pack tactics, spells like *hold person* or *slow*, and maneuvers like grapple and restrain are all going to have an impact on the action economy and can quickly tilt combat for (or against) your party.

Reducing the number of enemies your party is fighting can help combat flow more quickly while also making it weightier. For example, as the GM, you can emphasize the mighty crunching terror of one careening ogre as opposed to a group of goblins. A fight with Gorgulax the Hope Gnasher is more exciting than fending off unnamed goblins any day.





So the next time you're building an encounter for your one-on-one game, don't stop with the number of foes your party will face—double-check how many actions those foes have in comparison with your party.

This may not work out perfectly each time, but don't worry! You can always add in enemies or allies as needed if a combat is turning differently than planned, especially if the party is in trouble and isn't in a good spot to run away. The enemy combatants might have other foes in the region, or a secret ally who's been following the party could leap down from the trees, ready to turn the tide in their favor.

TWEAK THE STATS

In addition to the special abilities listed earlier, higher-level creatures have access to legendary actions that shift the action economy in their favor. In effect, this makes one combatant (such as an adult green dragon) that much more formidable.

If you mix in the lair actions as well, you have one creature that might have five or more actions in a round. Should we just throw those out when playing one-on-one, or are there more creative solutions?

What if, in this scenario, the party had a chance to prepare before their combat with the green dragon, and they receive a blessing from a powerful ally or guide? You could then grant the PC a few extra actions for this combat (we'll call them heroic actions), which would significantly increase their versatility in an encounter.

Ideally, these heroic actions would be themed around your PC's other abilities or simply allow them to use those abilities more frequently.

This would make for a special and memorable combat where your player would feel all the more powerful and awesome as they take on challenges that they would otherwise have never dreamed of besting. Combat is all about choices: by granting your player additional actions, you are increasing the number of choices they get to make!

We can find other solutions if we dive into the creature's abilities—what else makes them powerful? A *potion of heroism* could help with saving throws against being frightened, and a *potion of resistance* (*poison*) would help against the dragon's poison breath, which does a significant amount of damage (16d6!) whether a creature makes its Constitution save or not.

You might also consider taking away abilities like legendary resistances that would negate the limited resources of one PC and their party.

DON'T FIGHT ALONE

You can run a great game with just one PC and one GM without the player needing to run a handful of characters all on their own. Juggling several characters can be cumbersome for the player, and it might get in the way of them developing a thoughtful, fleshed-out character, which is part of what many people deeply love about playing one-on-one!

We hope that the guidelines above have helped empower you to tweak statblocks as needed for your individual gaming table, but we have one additional way to tip the action scales in the PC's favor—give them someone to fight alongside!

Adventuring with a GMPC and/or a companion character opens up possibilities in combat encounters that are harder to manage with just one character. Characters can work together and develop more robust schemes to solve the various problems they face on their adventures, be it sneaking into a vault or removing enemy combatants from the initiative order.

For companion characters, look at giving the player either a statblock or a simplified character sheet. They'll still have everything they need to run the character, but they can save their most intriguing ideas for their PC and stay immersed in the combat without getting overwhelmed.

We covered special considerations for GMPCs in the previous chapter. The ideas covered there also apply to add-on characters that you give to your player.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Your primary consideration when running combat for your one-on-one game is to have fun! If things are turning into a slog or you and your player are not having a good time, switch it up, make a change, or take a break.

Combats can be taxing, so pay attention to your collective energy levels. Once the dramatic question has been answered (can the players survive, catch the bad guy, protect the prince, and so on), then is it necessary to play out each subsequent round, or can you step back from the initiative order and let the player summarize what they'd like to do to close out the fight?

Since a one-on-one game only has a pair of people involved, the two of you get to make all the decisions—make the ones that are the most fun!

CHAPTER 5: CRAFTING A CAMPAIGN ARC

One of the biggest shifts you'll need to make for your one-on-one game is from campaign arcs built to include many PCs to arcs crafted for a single PC. This is actually one of the changes that many people wind up preferring to group games, but it can feel strange or intimidating at first.

It's important to keep in mind that the GM is not alone in changing their story approach.

The player needs to take ownership of being the story protagonist as well, which entails knowing your character and what they want alongside actively communicating that to the NPCs in the game.

In what follows, we share some ideas for both players and GMs to consider as you start crafting campaign arcs for single PCs, who we'll be calling the protagonist or main character. The ideas and guidelines below overlap, and responsibilities will also shift based on the personalities and preferences of the two people at the table.

So as you read, we ask that you consider the adjustments for both the GM and the player, regardless of which side of the table you're on, especially as playing in a one-on-one game is a collaborative, co-creative exchange.

For GMs, especially if you're using a GMPC, you may find some of your prep being more character-focused, like it would be if you were a player. And for players, as we'll see shortly, you'll need to know your character well enough to help determine the direction of the narrative and co-create the world.

By campaign arc, we're referring to a set of sessions or adventures that tie together, most likely through location, theme, BBEG (villain), or a combination of the three. Basically, a campaign arc is like a season of a show—it works on its own and has recurring themes and conflicts, but it also connects to some of the larger plot issues and opportunities for character growth.

Now we just need to look at how to structure those conflicts around a single character instead of an adventuring group. Think Katniss Everdeen and Jyn Erso instead of Frodo and the fellowship. Yes, they all work in pairs or groups, but it's really Katniss and Jyn's stories whereas Frodo has to share.

PLAYERS FIRST

Let's start with considerations for the player. In this case, you're responsible for the story's protagonist, which entails a secondary task for you at the table that's key to making this pivot: protagonists drive the plot forward.

We don't want that role to make you feel limited in the type of character you can play though. There are plenty of ways to advance the narrative. At the end of the day, your duet game should allow both you and your GM to play the characters you most want to play.

So as the protagonist, does that mean that you *have* to be a gregarious, take-charge character? Do you need to speak for the whole party? You certainly can play an outgoing, outspoken character if that's what you would like, but a more hesitant, reserved character will work here too. It can still be your story. Let's look at two protagonist archetypes: reactive/reluctant protagonists and proactive protagonists.

Keep in mind that these will actually function more as a spectrum than a singular role that your character occupies. And if you get really stuck and need some help with the direction, pop out of the narrative for a moment or two, and let your GM know.


Reactive (or Reluctant) Protagonists. Reluctant protagonists start off in a reactive position, responding to the events around them. *Rogue One* is a good example of this. Through most of the movie, Jyn Erso reacts to events, taking action after something else has already happened. Oftentimes, this means she's operating with a more limited set of options because the opposing forces—which are much larger and more powerful than she is—are controlling most of the story board. To clarify, her subsequent (re)actions do serve to drive the plot forward, but it's not until the latter portion of the movie that we see her truly taking charge and initiating actions.

Perhaps your PC is hesitant, shy, neutral, or caught between two large and opposing forces. Or maybe they're a studious, methodical person who's even-tempered and not in a hurry to start a fight, pillage a dungeon, or hunt for monsters.

All of these are perfectly fine options! Your GM, in this scenario, will meet you part way and help to pull your PC into the story.

Proactive Protagonists. Proactive protagonists are more representative of how we're accustomed to thinking about main characters in a story, though of course there may be some hesitancy at the beginning. Many, though not all, superheroes fall into this category, as does Katniss in *The Hunger Games* or Starbuck in *Battlestar Galactica*.

For example, at the beginning of *The Hunger Games*, Katniss's sister Prim is selected as one of District 12's tributes. Katniss *immediately* snaps into gear, volunteering herself in her sister's stead. As the story continues, Katniss faces off against the entrenched structure of power and decisively aligns herself against it.



Finding a Pattern. As a quick note for GMs, consider how you might use the tension between neutral and warring factions as a tool to challenge the campaign's main character. Division between two groups might force a proactive protagonist to slow down and consider their loyalties, either because they've acted without fully understanding the sides and stakes involved or because they wish to avoid the sort of disaster that premature action might entail. On the flip side, an abuse of power could spur an otherwise reluctant PC into action.

If that doesn't resonate with you at this moment, that's fine! Use it as an example of the types of questions you'll be asking as you design a campaign.

NOW THE GMs

And speaking of GMs, let's transition to our storysmiths! There are many strategies for crafting narratives for a single PC, and the more story examples you think of, the more options you'll see. So instead of listing a bunch of strategies, we wanted to go in-depth on two strategies, so you can see several different ways of using them in your game alongside the sorts of shifts we've been asking *players* to make in how they think about the campaign.

Bringing in Backstory. A really exciting possibility for one-on-one gaming is the ability to write PC narratives forward and backward in time as you play. Players, this means that you can continue to develop your backstory as the campaign evolves because you'll get to know your PC better over time and so will your GM. This is one of the biggest areas where we see people getting stuck trying to get their one-on-one game started, because it feels like you need a fully fleshed-out world and PC, but remember, you're creating them together.

Similar to the guiding principle for players—that it's the protagonist's job to drive the plot forward—GMs, we have a guiding principle for you: whenever possible, tie the encounters and storylines to the PC's backstory *and/or* the overarching themes and conflicts of your campaign. Doing this will add a sense of cohesion to your game and help you weave various plot strands together across individual sessions and larger arcs, hence creating a connected story *that is directly tied to the protagonist*.

This step will also keep the player hyper-engaged and allow them to participate in driving the narrative forward without feeling like they're directing your carefully crafted narrative train off the rails. Bringing in the backstory can also include the backstory of your campaign.

Maybe one week you incorporate the PC's childhood fear of spiders with something hairy and horrible, and then, a few sessions later, you bring in a villain or creature with whom they had a close call or lost an NPC to in your game.

Character-Specific Catalysts. Another question GMs can ask when planning for a one-person campaign is, "What inspires this PC to action?"

For the sake of simplicity, let's say your player/PC is very empathetic and responds best to plot hooks that involve NPCs. Many of the conflicts you introduce then will be initiated by people they meet or even by their traveling companions, such as your GMPC. If we look at the examples above, the relationship that Jyn and Katniss have to other people is what catapults them into their narratives.

However, and this is the other key to keep in mind, they remain the main characters because *there's something special about them*—placement by fate, personality, relationship, and so on—that makes this particular conflict their moment to shine. No one else could have taken Prue's place as a tribute, only Katniss. No one else could have identified the stardust file, only Jyn.

It's that sense of singularity—destiny—that your campaign arc will seek to capture for the protagonist as you create a storyline just for them. Our guess is that it will make your player feel really special too.

CHAPTER 6: RUNNING A ONE-ON-ONE SESSION WITHIN A GROUP GAME

There are a few reasons why you might choose to run a one-on-one session (one player, one GM) as part of your group game, some of which we'll cover in depth in this chapter.

Maybe the other members of your group were unable to meet, but you still want to play. Or perhaps one of your players is new to tabletop RPGs, and you want to help them feel more comfortable.

One-on-one sessions are also great for character development—so much so that some GMs use them to help flesh out characters' backstories mid-campaign and play out exactly how certain events transpired.

Here, we're going to look at ways you can incorporate single-player sessions as part of your group game. For the most part, we aim this chapter at GMs; however, players, we would definitely encourage you to consider running a one-on-one campaign or session for your GM!

As a quick caveat before we dive in, GMs, depending on how you're planning to use the one-on-one sessions, we suggest discussing them with your players so that no one feels left out. If you are running a side quest from the main campaign, you might consider leaving out any additional treasure or resources that PC would have normally acquired to keep things equitable among the adventurers as well.

SESSION ZERO

One of the most common uses of one-on-one sessions that lead into group campaigns is a session zero. In general, GMs run a session zero before a campaign starts in order to help the player get better acquainted with their character and the setting as well as to introduce them to some of the larger themes of the campaign.

Session zeros can also provide buy-in for why a character would answer the call to action at the beginning of the campaign. And the "call to action" doesn't have to be as dramatic as it sounds!

Unless the character is already an adventurer, something needs to drive them to leave the normal rhythms of their life behind. Whatever this outside force of change is, the character responds to it by taking on the mantle of change themselves and therefore answers the call to action.

Running individual session zeros for the players in your campaign is a great way to let everyone come to the table with a strong sense of their character *and* to let the characters be a mystery to one another but not to you.

BONUS ONE-SHOT OR SIDE NARRATIVE

With so many options for one-shots and side narratives that branch off from your main campaign, we cover general best practices with a few more-specific ideas for you below.

Single-Character Side Quest. Whenever possible, a strong guiding principle for incorporating single character side quests is to tie the quest to the character and what they care about. For instance, if the PC in your one-on-one session is playing a ranger, this would be a great opportunity for the character to engage with their favored enemy instead of a randomly selected creature in the right CR range.

Alternatively, how could you make the stakes personal for the character? Does it involve their homeland or an NPC with whom they developed a special bond?

These side quests can also give the PC a chance to get to know an NPC or learn more about the campaign's GMPC.

You can also incorporate side quest sessions at important leveling-up moments in your campaign. If one of your players has expressed interest in having an animal companion, the bonus session would be a great chance for them to meet this particular creature and begin to form their special bond.

Developing Backstory. One of our favorite sessions involved winding back the clock and playing out a significant moment in the elven rogue's backstory. He was a side character in our campaign, so we hadn't picked out the particulars of this event.

This was also a case of a character being more powerful in their past, so it was our first Tier 4 (level 15+) session as well. That session was very memorable for me, and it helped make the character's backstory feel more real since it was something we'd played out at the table.

Single-character sessions—whether they're side narratives in your main campaign, part of a character's backstory, or something else—are a great way to make your players feel special and give them a chance to get to explore their character in more depth.

Returning to Life. As a more specific application, one-on-one sessions are a great way to help your party through PC death and resurrection. If you're like us, you want the stakes at your gaming table to be weighty but perhaps without taking it so far that PC death is permanent if your player doesn't want it to be. In this case, a one-on-one session can explore the PC's experience in the afterlife while the party is taking steps to bring them back.

Maybe they speak to their chosen deity or see a loved one who has passed on ahead of them. You can even run these sessions over email or online, asking the player to respond as their PC to whomever it is they've encountered after they died.

IN CLOSING

We hope this has given you a few ideas for incorporating single-player sessions into your group games!

One-on-one gaming is incredibly flexible, and bringing it into your larger-party campaign will allow you to run some really special, memorable sessions for your players.



CHAPTER 7: SUPPORTING CO-CREATION

We've written previously in this book about the importance of approaching a one-on-one game as a co-creative storytelling process. At the table, this looks like the player taking on some roles of the GM and vice-versa.

Now, we cover a few more ways GMs and players can work together in collaborative storytelling. Primarily, we'll cover three different strategies: using "yes, and" responses at the table, engaging character backstory, and incorporating cascading failure states.

"YES, AND . . ."

This is an approach we use often, tending to think about the collaborative process more as a series of building questions.

But first, what is it?

You may have played "yes, and . . ." in your high school theater class or seen it depicted on TV as an improv warm-up exercise. The basic idea is to take in what the other person is saying—"yes"—and then to add to it—"and."

So let's say you're fighting a fire elemental. The player rolls an attack that hits. At this point, the GM can ask what their attack looks like or describe the agony blazing across the creature's face as an *ice knife* explodes over its head.

But here's the important bit: whether the GM or the player is the first to describe the attack, the other person should feel free, encouraged even, to add to what their partner has already contributed. So if the GM lays out an initial description, players, go ahead and add your own specific effects to it that feel true to your character.

Does your PC cheer after making their attack? Are they surprised at the strength of their strike? Keep painting the scene!

You may find that one or the other of you is particularly great in a certain "yes, and" area of your game, such as adding creative additions for combats with dramatic results of attacks that help to flesh out the space you're imagining and creating together. Whether as the GM or the player, it's great to get help in describing those scenes.

In a group game, it can feel concerning to spend too long on any one effect or character, but remember, in a one-on-one game, you can take as much or as little time as you like in each phase of your narrative and play so long as you're both happy!

INCORPORATING CHARACTER BACKSTORY

This is one of our favorite ways of bringing in the other person's storytelling and narration ideas: ask the player to incorporate details from their character's backstory.

Let's look at how to do this with location. If the PC is visiting somewhere they've never been before, you might ask them what their home's impression of this particular place is—what is its reputation like? What does the PC expect to see there? Perhaps they've been somewhere similar and can discuss that experience and how it has set up their anticipation (or lack thereof) to explore this new location.

Maybe they always visit a bakery first thing when they get to a new city.

A quick word of warning—GMs, your player might feel nervous about this process at first. Especially when we started playing, I (the player) was worried about getting a detail "wrong," not yet understanding that the GM wanted to incorporate my ideas into the sketches of the world they'd already created.

If your player is feeling hesitant, try to ask them more specific questions while also reassuring them that it's fine if they're making something up on the fly.

This process is even easier and can be even more fun if you're returning to a location the PC has visited before. Players, this is on you—where does your PC want to go? Who do they want to see? Are they avoiding anyone? Are there any intriguing shops or sites nearby?

ENGAGING CASCADING FAILURE STATES

Last but not least, cascading failure states. By this, we refer to the GM tempering the effects of a skill check, so regardless of the roll, the narrative moves forward.

For instance, if the PC needs to jump over a river of lava and you ask for a DC 15 Dexterity (Acrobatics) roll, you would treat the PC rolling a 1, 10, or 25 differently. I'm going to assume you don't want them to fall into the lava, so maybe on a 1, they suffer a serious injury that reduces their movement or max hp until they take a long rest.

On a 10, perhaps they lose an item of some significance, like a *+1 crossbow*. Neither of these instances are make-or-break for the PC, which is most often what we're going for in a one-on-one game since the narrative revolves around the PC.

If they rolled incredibly high, you can add something small like have them do a flip over the lava that's very impressive or allow them to help one of their adventuring companions or the GMPC navigate the river of lava. The goal for any of these instances is to move the narrative forward.

Putting together “yes, and” and cascading failure states makes for great moments for the player to get involved in the storytelling. How would they narrate their natural 1 on a Dexterity (Stealth) check? With a low Wisdom (Perception) check, did they sneeze and miss the assassin sneaking past?

Overall, if you maintain a mindset of taking equal responsibility for the narrative, you’ll be well set for collaborating effectively in both building a world and filling it with vivid details, session by session.

CHAPTER 8: PLANNING AHEAD

One of the reasons we started writing about playing 5th Edition with just two people was that it brought us together and gave us something fun to do.

Playing in our duet is our go-to way to wind down from the stress and frustrations of the week while sharing some laughs and telling stories. But we also wanted to help GMs with some of the mechanical shifts and concerns involved in adapting what is traditionally a group game for one-on-one and small-party play.

This chapter covers several of the conceptual adjustments that GMs can make in order to adapt the rules and table dynamics to parties of two. We discuss the foundation for these shifts first—cooperation at the table between the player and the GM.

Then we dive into some of the most difficult situations to navigate—PC death and incapacitating effects. Of course, these adjustments will vary depending on your individual table’s preferences, but we think of these as best practices to consider for shoring up the bones of your campaign.

COOPERATION IS CRITICAL

Many of us have played at a table where it seemed that the GM was working out some sort of childhood injustice and the players were in the path of their wrath. Maybe we even enjoyed the challenge, relishing in the small wins against seemingly impossible odds and surviving deadly traps by the closest of rolls.

Grimdark, gritty, grueling games like these can be fun, but playing at a table where the GM-player dynamic turns adversarial rarely is. This is especially true for one-on-one play.

When running a two-person game, it is important for GMs to remember that even when presenting a fun challenge to the hero, you are still rooting for your baddies to eventually fall.

GMs should cultivate trust at the table and an understanding that as dire as things get both parties are on the same side (probably that of the PC and the overarching story).


Players, you maintain a critical role in this too! Being in charge of the PC at a table of two means you’ll need to be active and decisive. While your pre-session prep won’t look like flipping through books of monsters and lore, you will need to be prepared to take risks, make choices, and drive the plot forward. (GMs, this is where cooperation comes back around for you too.)

You can foster this decision-making and confidence in your player by encouraging and empowering them to play an active role in shaping the story of the campaign.)

DEATH IS ONLY THE BEGINNING

We frequently get asked, “What happens in your one-on-one game when the PC dies?” Is the game just... over? And now we have to hope there’s something good on TV? (There isn’t.)





One instinct might be to have the GM pull critical punches. Whether that looks like a devastating coup de grace that mysteriously misses the mark or the dastardly villain making crucial blunders in the execution of their world-endangering schemes, heroes (and the person playing them) don't feel heroic if they can see that the heinous abomination from beyond the realms of reality is in fact a kittycat in a trench coat. It's not satisfying, so it's not worth doing.

Instead, keep the stakes high but have contingency plans. Primary PC defeat could be a real problem in your one-on-one game if the GM hasn't planned for such an eventuality. We use the word *defeat* in the previous sentence intentionally to highlight the fact that not all combats that end in the player failing death saves actually have to end in their demise. The GM could have their villain shift to capturing instead of killing the hero. Now you have a cool dungeon escape session in the works! Or perhaps they get saved at the last moment by a heretofore unannounced celestial patron who chases off the bad guy?

Or maybe the PC dies. That's ok. Death in fantasy settings is way more exciting than a long sleep. GMs need only look to the Greek classics for inspiration involving treks away from death and back toward the land of the living. The afterlife can be an exciting setting for your PC to have some of their most consequential adventures yet!

Finally, death/defeat offers an exciting story beat that great GMs can leverage for narrative weight and fun. Some of our favorite sessions have been when the GM has the player change to a minor/supporting character for a session or two, leaving the fate of the PC ambiguous. This adds excitement and anticipation around the PC while simultaneously providing the chance to develop another character in your shared world.

THE BEST WAY TO SAVE AGAINST STUN

More times than I'd like to admit, even as a seasoned GM of one-on-one play, I'll excitedly roll out a new and terrifying monster only to have combat go sideways in the first round or so. The culprit is almost always the same: "save-or-stuck" spells and effects. It seems that many of the more unique or strange monsters have something like this in their arsenal. For instance, a creature might have an effect that emits a cone wherein all players must succeed on an Intelligence save or be stunned. The stun condition (and paralysis) can be especially tricky for one-on-one play, but there is one surefire way to make sure these abilities don't derail your combats.

To save against effects that render your PC totally helpless to whatever nefariousness they face, we recommend adjusting the mechanics for how those effects play out in-game. For instance, many of the save-or-stuck effects call for a saving throw at the end of a character's turn. Instead, consider allowing the PC to make the save at the beginning of their turn, so they can still be involved in the action. It's not fun to be totally helpless and just sitting there as the bad guys decimate your health. Involving the party members (such as a GMPC or adventuring companion) helps as well. Can they come to the rescue in time? But if you're adventuring alone or with only one ally, use caution when incorporating these effects as the likelihood is greater for them to create the not-fun scenario described above.

One place that we don't totally hate save-or-stuck effects is in BBEG monologues or roleplay. Even here though, we make sure that, if the bad guy has the party locked or stunned or something, they still get the occasional chances to break free from the effect and cut off the diatribe.

We hope that these ideas help prepare you for super successful one-on-one games in the future. Duet-style games work just fine without too many tweaks, but keeping these concepts in mind as you set up your duet campaign will ensure that you have the smoothest experience possible.

CHAPTER 9: ADVANTAGES

The previous chapters have covered several best practices for running and playing in one-on-one games. But how do you know if this style of play is right for you? What are some advantages of playing this way rather than in a group?

Though each one-on-one campaign will be unique to its player and GM, there are several benefits of this playing style for both player and GM, whether you're playing with a friend, child, or partner. In this chapter, we'll look at the advantages of playing the protagonist, increased options in character types, the joys of focused storytelling, deeper levels of character development, leaning into favorite types of play, and of course ease of scheduling!

PLAYER BENEFITS

First, let's focus on the player benefits.

Focused Attention. There's something really special about practicing being the hero of your own story. We love that 5th Edition gives us the chance to be brave and daring, to set risk aside and go after what we truly want, answering destiny's call.

A chief benefit for the player in a one-on-one game is that all of the focus is on you and your PC—you're the protagonist! Being the protagonist doesn't mean your character has to be outgoing or enjoy being the center of attention. However, it is a great way to practice being actively involved in gameplay and to dive deep into your character's head.

Additional Character Types. I've found that one-on-one play also opens up the types of characters you can play at the table. It works well for evil campaigns, if you'd like to try that out, but it also suits particular fantasy tropes that may not work as well in a group. For example, why is the rogue loner saddling themselves with a cleric and a barbarian when they'd rather do whatever they can to enrich themselves? For some, there's a simple answer to this question, and it makes sense for the roguish PC to join up with an adventuring party.

But other characters really would prefer to work alone or perhaps with one other person whom they trust absolutely. Playing one-on-one increases the variety of the types of stories—and whose stories—we can tell.

GM BENEFITS

Now, let's turn our attention to the GM.

Focused Storytelling. For storytellers, creativity flourishes within limitations. For instance, look at the ingenious workarounds that low-level characters manage as opposed to their higher-tier counterparts. Limited abilities restrict the power of their actions but spark creative solutions.

This same effect holds true in our story-crafting as GMs—some challenges are better suited to a single character (or small group) than they are to a larger adventuring party and vice versa. Lean into the PC's class, backstory, weaknesses, proclivities, and you'll uncover some truly unique story prompts, villains, story complications, and more.

The Plight of the Forever GM. If you're the person who is *always* the GM and never a PC, playing in a one-on-one game can be a great middle ground for you! The PC's companion character (or characters) needs to be well developed with motivations of their own. This helps the player to be more invested in their own character, the story world, and the campaign, but it also gives you unique access into the world as a *character*. Set aside your vast hoard of GM knowledge and escape into the mind of your GMPC.

One-on-one play also gives you the chance to switch GM and player roles—maybe your adventurers have a tiff and need to part ways for a short while. The player can run a special narrative arc just for your GMPC while you sit back and take a break from the rigors of the GM's chair.

FOR BOTH PLAYERS & GMS

And now for all involved.

Secondary Characters. One benefit we didn't expect at first was being able to pause our primary campaign and follow secondary narrative threads. In fact, one of our favorite campaign arcs came about through developing a side story for a secondary character! We were both intrigued by her fierce, adventurous spirit, but she wouldn't have fit as a long-term member of our main adventuring party. Instead, we crafted a side campaign for her between arcs in our primary storyline. The side narrative was darker than our other game and provided a refreshing change of pace while we explored a new area and characters.

Favorite Parts of Play. This is another shared benefit between players and GMs—since there are fewer people to appease at the table, you can spend more time on the parts of play you most enjoy. Do you want to play a game of courtly intrigue where the only stabbings that take place occur from the sharpness of a glare, a carefully crafted insult, or an assassin's untraceable blade? Alternatively, would you like to play out a long series of gladiatorial encounters unimpeded by the meticulous plod of a puzzle-laden dungeon or the bore of vapid conversations with bright-eyed villagers untouched by the glories of battle? So long as it makes you both happy, you can do exactly that.

Scheduling Ease. Last but not least, when you're playing in a one-on-one game, you only have two schedules to juggle instead of however many party members you have. The best practices from group play and scheduling apply here as well—carve out a regular time each week, or however often you plan to play, and do your best to stick to it.

We would also suggest having a conversation around when you want to talk about your one-on-one game away from the table. Is Monday morning at breakfast off limits? If you're like me and struggle to keep secrets from your player, perhaps you'll want to debrief with them after the session but not give hints about what's coming up in the next game.

One of our favorite parts about playing one-on-one is having a heap of wonderful memories and shared experiences with someone you care about. Like quoting lines from your favorite movie, your one-on-one campaign can create inside jokes and funny stories for you to recount together.

You'll just want to make sure not to transgress your playing partner's boundaries around the campaign out of game. "Real-life" adventures are important too!



CHAPTER 10: TURNING THE TABLES

A deeper, vested interest in the campaign, combined with the parity of responsibility for driving the story, often lead duet games to a wonderful, if a little scary, desire: to turn the table around and have the player take on the task of GM, while the GM plays a GMPC or other NPC from the campaign. Turning the table around gives everyone a new perspective on the shared world. The GM gets to move from a sort of third-person omniscient perspective to first person while the player experiences the reverse.

In the last chapter, we extolled the many benefits of playing with one player and one GM (also known as a “duet”) that make this option hyper-attractive and contribute to the growing numbers of dungeon-delvers. Some of these boons include the ease of finding time to play, the freedom to pursue your gameplay preferences, and the great fun of co-creation.

Without the spotlight constantly shifting to focus on a different party member in large group games, both the GM and the player in a duet have a little more work to do. The GM must be ready for more to happen over the course of a session since the party won't waste half the game arguing about what to do next. But the player especially must be ready to provide some of the story beats that might traditionally rest in the GM's wheelhouse.

For this reason, duet players tend to be more committed and involved in the game, which leads to a depth and richness I've not seen in large group games. With two, everyone at the table has more stake in making sure that things are fun and interesting. This is why swapping roles at the table is worth the leap of faith.

TURNING THE TABLE

In a duet game, the lines between who oversees setting up and running the events of the world and who is running around in that world can get a little blurry. We've talked before about the wonders of co-creation and GMs who lead with “yes, and.” Turning the table around is taking the “yes, and” concept and pouring gasoline on it.

The player (as GM) gets to weave their own story in a world that they helped create while the GM (as a player) enjoys the sheer pleasure of running around and interacting with a story without the weight of the imagined world on their shoulders. Everyone wins.

Turning the table around might seem terrifying to some GMs. It does mean a potentially uncomfortable loss of direct control over the world and narrative.

Allowing someone to control a thing that has so much work put into it is an act of trust. Trust can be nerve-racking, but the benefits make the risk well worth it.

The mantle of responsibility for running the world is definitely scary for the player-turned-GM as well. Because players know the effort that went into the co-created story space, it can feel extra dangerous or like they are going to mess things up. Sitting at the helm, though, provides a magnificent opportunity for the player to more deeply explore an element of the world that interests them.

WHEN TO TURN THE TABLE

It will lead to some confusion if every time a duet sits down for a game there's a coin flip to see who is in charge. There are some opportunities, though, that lend themselves to a natural turn of the table. Duetts might consider switching things around, for instance, at the conclusion of a major story arc. Usually, parties have a bit of downtime in between while the next threads come together. Or for an ultra-low-stakes turn, a GM might allow a player to run a dream sequence that incorporates a GMPC or secondary NPC backstory and enriches their characterization.

That richness will carry over into the “normal” game and make that character all the more believable and interesting. On the opposite end of the “stakes spectrum,” the player could GM for a character navigating the afterlife and trying to return after a disastrous combat encounter in which the PC prevailed, but a beloved companion did not.

Essentially, whenever there is a break from the regular pace of your duet game, it is an opportunity to turn the table around. If one of these breaks pops up and everyone is into the idea, seize the moment.

HOW TO TURN THE TABLE

It is important to set up the switch for success. Have a conversation about expectations for the arrangement and about what elements of the world both parties might be interested in exploring. Consider what character the GM might be playing. Will it be a GMPC with which the player probably has an intimate familiarity? Or perhaps a tertiary character that has promise enough to enrich?

Depending on the length and scope of the switch, the GM may need to ask that a few elements of the world or important NPCs be off-limits if they already have plans. This comes with a small caveat, and we encourage GMs to be brave and to trust the player. Beyond just saying that they can do what they like with their session, communicate as much with equal measures of care, consistency, and enthusiasm.

It's the player's world as much as it is the GM's.

As ever, the key to a positive experience at the table is communication.

THE MORE THE MERRIER

One of the best things that GMs will have accomplished by turning the tables with the player is to have given them the experience of GMing. If you've been around TTRPGs for any length of time, you'll have noticed that it is rare to have too many people ready to run the game and not enough around to play. Making new GMs is always good. And the best GM yet might be the player sitting across the table from you.

CHAPTER 11: ADAPTING PUBLISHED CAMPAIGNS

We've covered several best practices for one-on-one play, and we hope that you've been able to put them to use at your own gaming table! But there's one topic we haven't yet covered: adapting published campaigns for one-on-one play.

And that's what this chapter is all about. First, we'll talk about some guiding principles for adapting a published campaign. How do we take adventures scaled for groups and suit them to a two-person table? Then we'll ask what story tweaks do we need to make in order to focus on a single PC instead of a whole party?

ADAPTATION PRINCIPLES

As we've already covered, one of the best things about one-on-one play is the focus on the player and the PC. They're the main character around whom the entire storyline revolves.

This is a double-edged sword when it comes to adapting a published campaign though. Both the narrative arc and encounter scale have been designed with a group in mind. Scale is the easier adjustment of the two (see also **Chapter 4**). But how do we go about shifting the story?

The easiest answer is that we return to basics: we lean on a GMPC, and we also set the player up with knowledge about the campaign, so they can make as fitting a PC as possible.

Joining Story and PC. In an ideal world for campaign adaptation, we would start with either the campaign and then assist the player in creating their PC or we would start with the PC and choose a fitting campaign for them.

So if you're starting with the campaign first, GMs, you'll want to share the important themes and setting with the player alongside a few clues about the overarching conflict.

Is there a lot of political intrigue? Will there be quite a bit of detective work? Might the PC want to have a hobby, so they can stay entertained during downtime activities? Or are we working with a classic adventure situation where we charge out and face all of the dragons as heroically as possible?

On the flip side, if you're starting with the PC, you'll want to think about the inner questions they're trying to answer—what drives this character? Are they on a quest to prove themselves? What do they most value? What does the character think they most need versus what do they actually need? (That last question is one of our favorites for character development. For instance, a character who *thinks* they need freedom but who actually needs community has a lot to learn over the course of their adventures in order to defeat the monsters inside and out.)

But what if the character-creation process and the campaign-adaptation process are occurring relatively simultaneously?

THE BIG QUESTION

When adapting the story of a published campaign to your table, and specifically to the PC, it really comes down to figuring out *why* the PC wants to go on *this* adventure and to helping foster that as best you can. The challenge for both the player and the GM in this scenario is to uncover the PC's motivations and then give them the space to explore those drives.

If the PC isn't sure what they really want, that's alright! You can try out a few different calls to adventure and see what seems to stick.


Experiment with different rewards, like friendship, acclaim, gold, and magic items (though not all at once but in differing combinations). What excites the PC the most?

There are two other drivers we can lean on here, and both are character related.

GMPCs for the Win. First, GMs, see if you can create a GMPC (see also **Chapter 3**) based on the existing characters in the campaign. It's pretty common for there to be NPCs already waiting to guide a party in the story world. Which of them (or some conglomeration of several) seems most likely to join this particular PC on their quest?

If you're okay with keeping things more open, you might put a few different characters in front of the PC and see who resonates with them the most.

Villainous Ends. Nothing sparks the sense of adventure quite like a powerful villain. If it seems like the story isn't gripping the PC as strongly as you would like, see if you can arrange an early appearance for the BBEG or one of their minions.



This doesn't need to be a devastating encounter for the PC, but it should be enough to spark whatever force called them to adventure in the first place.

You might even consider arranging a brief monologue for your villain, leaving the hero with a challenge and a thirst for a second conflict. But before they can face the villain again, the hero will need to prove themselves in a few smaller challenges. Perhaps the GMPC can even help show the way.

CHAPTER 12: ADAPTING TALES OF THE OLD MARGREVE

And now we're going to take theory and put it into practice with a favorite—*Tales of the Old Margreve*. This chapter will serve as guide for how to implement the advice from the last chapter, so you and your player can easily explore Midgard's most famous dark forest.

There were many reasons that we were excited when *Tales of the Old Margreve* came out. Firstly, the vast majority of our PCs have been druids, so we were immediately interested in something with a heavy emphasis on a mysterious and ancient forest. Secondly, this book features a series of adventures that can stand alone or be threaded together by a skillful GM. We love anthology-style books that do not rely heavily on the party taking a linear path through a predetermined series of events. Most often, we are running around far off the rails as it were, and books like *Margreve* make it easy to grab an adventure and slide it into our campaign or adapt the adventure to whatever we need.

Below you'll find some suggested story tweaks to narrow the focus to one PC. Then we take a look at some of the compelling NPCs that might make natural GMPCs for your one-on-one game. And finally, we'll address how we take adventures scaled for groups and suit them to a two-person table.

NARRATIVE

Since *Tales of the Old Margreve* is an anthology-style string of adventures, one chapter or module doesn't immediately lead into the next. The book does, however, offer excellent suggestions and recommendations at various points that can assist the GM as they consider how to weave the material together. The anthology nature of the book means that we aren't provided with a clear narrative arc to stick the PC into and give the "main character" treatment.

Tales of the Old Margreve has a few different themes and vibes on offer, ranging from fairy tale to ancient cosmic horror. When considering narrative, cater

to the preferences of your player. A player more interested in themes of darkness and madness might really enjoy the idea of awakening the ancient Primal Tender and unleashing a new dawn of unfettered magic and darkness in the dark forest. Another kind of player more interested in lighter themes of whimsy and fey would more readily play through some adventure encounters more along the lines of a Brothers Grimm tale and save the forest from a growing evil. Below you'll find a pair of adventure sequences that could be appropriate for a "dark" campaign and a "light" campaign.

THE DARKNESS OF DERENDE

The PC is a student of the ancient cosmic forces that profoundly shaped Midgard before the rise of the mortal races. They have traveled to the Margreve after finding a reference to an enigmatic being simply referred to as the Primal Tender. I'll leave it to GMs and their PCs if the goal is to excise its influence or to harness its power. There are three adventures that directly relate to Derende while the others fill in the gaps and provide exposition for the journey and allies along the way.

- "Hollow" is an appropriately horrifying introduction to the Old Margreve. It gives the PC a chance to witness the tension between settlers and the forest. Additionally, the PC can acquire the help of a GMPC in the town of Levoca.
- "The Fingers of Derende" could allow the PC to learn more about their quest and begin to build the tools necessary for success.
- "The Vengeful Heart" deals in blood magic and contains a strong connection with the Shadow Fey which comes back around later in the campaign.
- "The Tongue of Derende" could allow the PC to communicate in any language enabling them to forge alliances with those that could help them on their journey.
- "Gall of the Spider Crone" is both horrifying and allows the PC to make some powerful acquaintances as they get ever closer to the crux of their Derende investigations.
- "Grandmother's Fire" follows the previous adventure as the PC must ally, or draw the ire of, the powerful Baba Yaga who reveals the last piece of the puzzle, the location and function of Derende's Heart.
- "The Heart of Derende" serves as the climax as the PC must either harness or prune the heart just as it beats once per year in the midst of a shadow fey celebration.

THE LIGHT IN THE WOOD

The PC has come to the Margreve in search of a special, powerful young girl. They have been visited with persistent dreams that reveal her importance to the well-being of the world, that she is in danger, and that the PC is the only one who can help.

- “The Honey Queen” kicks off the PC’s encounters with the fairy-tale aspects of time in the Old Margreve. The GM might heavily imply that Lyla is the girl from the PC’s dreams until they are face-to-face and realize their error.
- “Challenge of the Fang” offers the party another chance to save an important young girl, Czerwonya.
- “The Griffon Hatchling Heist” has the party making a powerful ally on the form of Lesharrkk.
- “Blood and Thorns” could kick off with a final dream warning of a new breed of vampire threatening to overrun the Margreve and conclude with Dame Valucka telling the party about magical triplets destined to become important crones of the Margreve: Czerwonya, Elena, and Vidanya.
- “Grandmother’s Fire” has the party encountering Elena, now a rusalka.
- “The Vengeful Dragon” concludes the campaign with an epic quest to save Vidanya and the Heart of the Legion Oak.

POTENTIAL GMPCS

Easily one of our favorite parts of *Tales of the Old Margreve* are the compelling NPCs that the party encounters. Many of these could be reimagined into GMPCs whose motivations align with the desires of the PC.

For instance, in “Hollow” we meet Brother Arkadi. As written, he is rather uninvolved in the preservation and running of Levoca. However, an individual wizened to the nature of the wood and steeped in its magic and ritual could be reimagined into an ally ready to provide powerful aid to the party. If we were going to make him a GMPC, I’d recommend the **priest** stat block.

Or what about Teresa Garlook in “The Honey Queen” as a woman of dubious moral standing? She definitely seems like someone who could wield a dagger from the shadows. Perhaps she has the **spy** stat block. Or Frauleene, the herbalist from the same adventure? She could be on the same vision quest as the PC and tag along using the **druid** stat block.

There are many natural allies in this book of adventures. Adrik from “Gall of the Spider Crone” or Lieutenant Hass from “The Tongue of Derende” would

additionally make interesting traveling companions or GMPCs. The thing is, potential GMPCs are represented in nearly every adventure in *Tales of the Old Margreve* because this book prioritizes compelling characters, and that’s what it takes to have a GMPC—a strong sense of character.

A MATTER OF SCALE

In *Tales of the Old Margreve*, the adventures have been designed with a traditional adventuring party in mind. That means that we are going to have to scale back encounters in terms of number of combatants and challenge rating. In our experience running these, the encounters even for a full party tend toward the more difficult. For that reason, we recommend building in a release valve of sorts for your encounters.

For example, the forest is very much a character in these adventures. So if the party finds themselves woefully outmatched but are on the side of the forest, perhaps the Margreve dramatically extends aid to the party in the form of healing, hampering enemy movement, or offering other such aid. Done well, these won’t feel so much like a *deus ex machina* but more that the forest is powerful and present.

Tales of the Old Margreve offers up a series of adventures that would make an excellent one-on-one campaign. We hope this roadmap will enable more people to experiment with playing duet-style 5th Edition.

Playing together with one other person has been a magical, transformative experience for us, and we hope it will be for you too.

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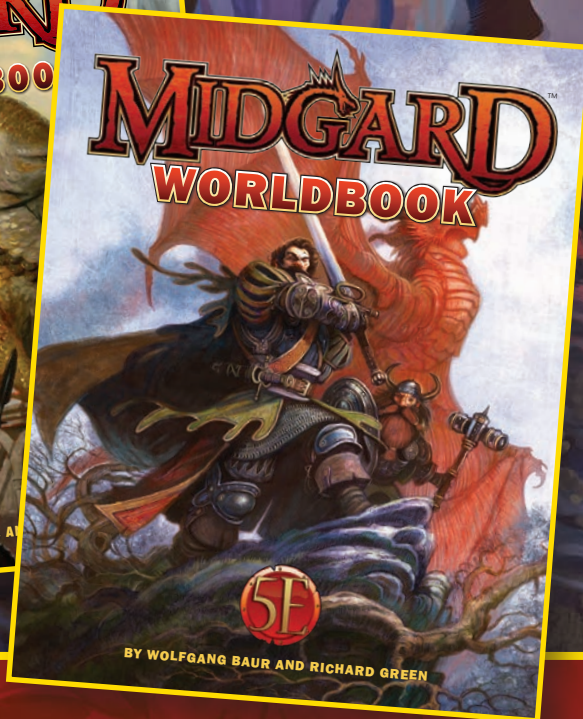
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