

## Brewer's Guide to GM Session Structure



I was watching an Unarmed Barbarian and a skilled Hunter/Ranger (both Lawful Good) fight with some town guards – soldiers that were following the orders a petty tyrant. Of course, by the time things wrapped up, the party had shown the townsfolk the depth of evil their current king. A new king - a better king - was put in charge. They even had an encounter with one of the townsfolk they met last time - back when they were exploring a monster-dwelt cavern.

... of course, that was when I was watching *Hercules, the Legendary Journeys*.

Why bring this up?

Look at the formula for an episode of a television series. A short-term plot is introduced. If the viewer needs information about what happened in prior episodes, it's handed to them (whether by flashback, by conversation, or by a "Last Time On..." summation.)

Through the episode, that short-term plot unfolds; after a few twists and turns, the episode peaks in a climactic moment. After that happens, all the short-term plot threads are tied off, and maybe a few nuggets of long-term plot are sprinkled in, things that will be relevant for many episodes to come.

Sound familiar? It's the sort of Pathfinder Session that pretty much everyone wants to play in.

What makes the TV Episode/Season = Pathfinder Session/Campaign analogy so useful? A lot of really smart people have spent a lot of time, effort, and money on one simple task: making television as engaging and interesting as possible. Entire legions of people are employed for the sole purpose of keeping people watching their show.

If you want to improve the structure of your sessions, the absolute best place to look at is television shows.

## Campaign Structure

When you're actually watching a TV show, how much care do you have about the long-term plot? During the actual show, what are you actually anticipating: how Captain Janeway is going to wrest the ship from the clutches of the enemy... or how this is going to play into the long-term relationship between two crewmen?

The short-term plot, of course! Who cares about some long-term issue in Eureka when Jack Carter needs to save the town right now before it blows up in a cataclysmic explosion!

Once the show is over or is winding down, when the immediacy is no longer part of the picture? That's when the long-term plot starts to dwell on the viewer's mind. Why did the Klingons attack? What effect is there going to be because of what happened between Sisko and the Changelings? And between the episodes, you might even be trying to predict what's going to happen next time on the show.

An episode of television is typically 95% short-term plot - stuff that will get resolved in the current episode. The leftover 5% is for those longer plot arcs that go across multiple episodes.

What happens when that mix is off?

**If there's no long-term plot**, two things happen. First, the show doesn't have a point - it's just a disparate patchwork of stuff happening. Second, and more importantly, people won't worry about missing an episode. There's no big loss if any individual show is missed.

**If there's too much long-term plot?** Then the show seems boring and seems to be hard to get into. This is actually one of the main ways television series get "bogged down" - the writers spend too much time worrying about the overarching threads going on, and not enough making an individual episode interesting on its own. Episodes have to be engaging when viewed individually.

The same is true for a Pathfinder session. Most of the things that happen should be designed to make the current session as enjoyable as possible. Only a small sprinkling - 5% or so - should be things meant to carry forward a larger overarching plot.





## The Beginning of a Session

Watch the beginning of a television episode, and you'll typically see three things:

**The Recap**

**The Hook**

**The Tenor.**

### The Recap

The most obvious of these is the "Previously in Eureka" or "Last Time on Voyager" flashback montage. But there's also regular Flashbacks, or even more subtly, by oblique reference in conversation. Regardless of how it's done, it's for a single purpose: handing the viewer information they need to digest the episode.

This is *not* the same as doing a recap of the previous show. In fact, if you look carefully at most clip flashbacks ("Previously on Warehouse 13...") you'll notice that a sizable portion of the clips occurred two or more episodes ago. And a lot of what happened in the last episode isn't even mentioned.

That's because you're not out to bring viewers up to speed on everything - just the things that are relevant to what they'll be seeing in *this* episode. It doesn't matter if Cylons blew up a ship right at the end of last episode - if it doesn't matter to the current episode, you don't refresh the viewer on it; it doesn't matter if the Cylons blowing up a specific ship happened *five months ago*, if it's important to the new episode's plot, you remind the viewer what happened.

A lot of GMs do a "Last Session" recap (or make their players give one.) They're on the right track, but they're still not accomplishing quite what they need to. Reminding the players what happened last session is only important for the things they need to keep in mind for the current session. It doesn't matter if they fought an ogre last session, if that battle doesn't mean anything for this session. Still, why not aim higher?

This can be harder to do in roleplaying than on television. First off, Flashbacks aren't exactly something you can easily do. Plus, gamers tend to be more prickly than television viewers about upcoming plot stuff being spoiled. Still, here are some sample ways to handle it:

**In Narrative.** At the start of the session, when you introduce the element in question, just go ahead and add whatever relevant past-history into the narrative.

*"An ugly odor washes over you - a smell that's unfortunately all too familiar. You turn and see Squash, the half-ogre monstrosity, walking up to your table. Between the time you nearly killed each other outside of Halerth and the time he 'accidentally' caused a rock-slide that nearly killed Gael, it's safe to say that little love is lost between you. He grins crookedly at you and says, 'Squash have quest for you. Squash need you find a sword.'"*

**Out of Character.** Before people start gearing up for session, just mention a relevant point. It doesn't need to be anything blatant or overbearing. Just a simple, *"Do you guys remember that avalanche battle?"*

**Teaser Recap.** Go ahead and straight-up tease what the session is going to be about.

*"Two weeks ago, you had your first encounter with a half-ogre named Squash - an occasion which saw everyone nearly killing each other; one week ago, Squash 'accidentally' caused a landslide while you were trying to fight a dragon on the slopes of a mountain. And, as fate would have it, your party was quickly approaching the third encounter with the goliath."*

... and then just break into whatever the start of the session actually is - walking through the countryside, going to the inn, whatever. It doesn't matter if Squash doesn't make an appearance until a third of the way through the session, you've done your job: the players all remember the past dealings with Squash. Actually, you've provided another thing, too...

## The Hook

The first few minutes of a television show are the most critical. At that point, a lot of people watching it are doing so just because it happens to follow the previous program. Those first few minutes have to draw someone in, to engage them, and to convince them that, yes, they should watch the rest of the episode.

A good TV Show's first few minutes are a promise: *you will enjoy watching the rest of me*. Generally, there are two ways of making this happen: by having something interesting happen, or having something happen to someone interesting.

*"But that's not important to Pathfinder! The player's aren't going anywhere - it's not like they can flip channels."*

... you're right. Instead, they can pull out their smart phone and check facebook. Or they can spin D12's to see how long they can keep one going. Or they can just zone out and sit like a zombie. Besides, isn't the point of being a GM to create an engaging world for your players?

Examine how your session starts. Read it aloud, timing yourself - and if after a single minute, you can't say to yourself, "I want to pay attention to this" then you should rethink your approach.

*"But what if I want a slow buildup, not something that starts out with a bang?"*

Great! But starting out gradually is *not* the same thing as starting out boring. Let's take an example session plot. A cleric of Erastil has gone a bit loopy and is currently in the woods giving ministry to the animals. Now, maybe the session culminates in an odd pack of woodland animals with all sorts of combat buffs trying to rampage through the town, but you want to slowly build towards it.

But if your approach is to have "Life as usual" for the first 20 minutes, you're doing it wrong. Until the plot begins unfolding in earnest, your players will be bored silly. How about either of these?

*"As you arrive at Stonecreek, you nod hello to the guards only to notice they're not exactly paying attention to you. Instead, they seem to be looking over your shoulder at something directly behind you. You turn around to see a horse slowly trudging towards town. And though you can recall seeing a number of stray animals during your journeys, you can't ever recall one wearing the ceremonial headdress of a priest of Erastil. One of the guards snorts and says jokingly, 'Sorry, adventurers, I'm supposed to admit holy pilgrims through the gates before adventurers.'"*

... and ...

*"As you arrive at Stonecreek, something doesn't quite seem right. As you approach the guard at the gates into town, you finally place it: the wildlife. The sounds of nature have all but disappeared. Five ravens sit on the city walls and all seem to stare at you with some strange comprehension; it might be your imagination, but one of them almost seems to be smiling coldly at you. You shake it off, eager to finally get some rest from your travels."*

Now, compare that to a typical vanilla intro:

*"As you arrive at Stonecreek, you find yourself looking forward to a soft bed and a warm meal. The guard at the gate meets your eye and nods before opening the gate into town. 'Enjoy your time in Stonecreek.'"*

Meh. Okay, the party's at Stonecreek; so what? *Why am I paying attention to this?*

Those first two examples? They give me a hook, they give me a reason to actually care about what's going on. Somethings weird with those animals – and I want to know what's going on.

Of course, those first two examples differ in one huge area...

## Tenor

The first few minutes of a television show serve one last important purpose: setting a tenor for the episode. Sometimes this might be the general tenor as the rest of the show, but not necessarily. A good example of this is Deep Space Nine. For the most part, it's a serious show, especially during the darker periods when a large chunk of the galaxy is at war. But they sprinkle a few "tension relief" episodes in (such as one where the crew get together to try to play the old earth past-time of Baseball.)

Well, imagine trying to do that episode of "We're going to play baseball!", but without cluing the viewer in that they're about to see a less-than-serious episode? The episode starts out with a threat from a mysterious figure, followed by the engines threatening to blow up... and then everyone starts playing games? Or worse - the starting few minutes are comedy, and then suddenly halfway through the episode gets dark with death and tragedy? Both are easy ways of confusing and alienating viewers.

If you read the previous GM Guide I wrote, you'll know how important tenor is. It's what the players use as a template for everything you describe in the game. If you start the players off in a bleak, depressing environment, an encounter with gnoll bandits is going to feel (and be imagined) quite differently than if you start out by describing sunny days and brave knights.

Television series can have episodes that go against their typical grain – a lighthearted episode of Dark Zone, a pessimistic Eureka, a morose How I Met Your Mother, etc. But if an episode starts dark, it's not going to shift to turn into sunny comedy halfway through.

You want to watch out for this when it comes to starting your session. If you want a serious, darker gaming night, don't start the evening out with a battle with Limmerick-Spouting Gnomes in high heels. Your players won't make the gear shift when you try to change the tenor.





## During the Session: Pacing

Television shows, once you're watching them, have only a single goal: to keep you watching them. If, midway through an episode, it means that you've bitten into the hook and are interested in what's going on. They need to keep you interested, and the most important part of that is the pacing:

**Never have a slack pace**

**Build the pace into a break**

**Restart the pace after a break**

**Calm the pace down at the end**

### Never Have a Slack Pace.

When a person is interested in a television show and the pace is active enough, they simply won't turn the channel. Why would they?

If someone is in the middle of the show and they zone out, it's often a problem with the show's pacing. Not enough is happening to keep them engaged, so they find something else to focus their attention on.

As a GM, this is the absolute easiest problem to solve, to the point where if you don't do it, you deserve inattentive players. All it takes to solve this problem is to watch for inattentive players, and if it happens, ***make something happen***. It doesn't matter what - just do *something* to draw them back into the game.

This doesn't just apply to plot. You can sometimes achieve the same thing just by changing the manner you GM.

Imagine you're RP'ing a benign market encounter. One player is into it, but the others are getting a bit bored. So far, you've been speaking for the NPC, saying whatever it is that they're saying.

Well? Shift to descriptions of their actions instead of what they're saying; switch the focus of your description to include some other vendors around.

But, by and large, your best friend is the rule: **If they're bored, throw a battle at them.** Think of some relevant fight they could have that advances the session's plot. Are they trying to clear their names after a duplicitous court bard framed them for stealing? Have some hired assassins working for the bard try to kill them.



## Build The Pace Into A Break

Aka, the rule that GMs break the most frequently. How often does your group take a break right after a battle is done?

That's probably the worst time to take a break. Think about it: how often does a TV show go to commercial right after something resolves? No! It goes to commercial towards the peak of drama - because that way you'll be excited to start watching again. They want you eager enough to last through the commercials.

This is *not* to say that you should break right before a battle (though that's better than doing it afterward.) Instead, you should break before the crest of non-combat drama. Imagine this:

*You quickly start trekking to the Monastery of Saint Mont, knowing that tonight the final rituals will begin. The monastery looks forboding in the moonlight, but you actually find yourself relieved. It looks like you made it here early enough that the practioners of the ritual have yet to arrive.*

*Or at least almost all of them. A single tall figure stands at the altar, back towards you, with a black silk robe trailing to the floor. 'I knew you would come,' the man says with a voice maddeningly familiar. 'I knew you would try to stop this.' With that, the man turns around and you see who has been orchestrating all of this madness.*

... followed by dismissal into a break. Yeah, the players will complain the first time you do this, but ask yourself this: are they going to want to resume the game? Everyone gets annoyed when television shows do this (the action is about to have a dramatic reveal, right before it cuts to commerical) - but the key is, people *keep watching*. It works.

## Restart The Pace After A Break

The moment has come. Johnny McSuperSpy is off in some other room while his love interest Duex Entrendre is being held at gunpoint by Malicio. He makes a diabolical threat, the music builds, and then the show goes to commerical.

... okay, now, when the show comes back on, what happens?

Malicio doesn't immediately shoot her. Johnny McSuperSpy doesn't immediately appear from nowhere and shoot Malicio. Instead, they whip out some more dialogue. Malicio makes some more diabolical statements, Deux says that he'll never get away with it - whatever. No important action actually happens *immediately*.

See, the buildup before the commercial is promising you: just stick around through these advertisements, and we'll get right back to the thick of things... but once those commercials are done a few minutes later, the writers know they need to get you back into the tense mindset. They can't just have the action happen a few seconds into the show resuming - they need to let you get back into things. So, they add some dialogue, score some tense music - and *then* the action begins in interest.

That's why breaking before a battle isn't necessarily the best place (though it's still preferable to after a battle.) Instead, you want to break right before an important and tense bit of dialogue.

The heroes are going to encounter the big bad end villain in his lair. Great! Have them get to the lair, do a buildup of drama and a one-line ominous statement from the antagonist, *and then cut for break*.

The players are excited - they're just about to tackle the final boss! Then, when they get back, start out by having the villain say another line of dialogue, ideally something that will draw a verbal response from the players. Basically, you're giving everyone a little time to get back into the mindset of the game, to get hooked on it again before you get into the meat of the battle. It might only take a few lines, but the players will really appreciate it (even if it's not a conscious appreciation.)

## Calm The Pace Down At The End

You're watching television and the plot has finally finished resolving. Shawn and Gus have just revealed who killed the astronomer and the reason behind the murder. But the episode doesn't immediately roll to credits right afterward. Instead, loose threads are tied up and longer-term issues are reemphasized.

There's a reason those long-term plot points usually get introduced (or at least reinforced) at the end, when the pace is finally being slowed down. It's because human memory and recall aren't good under stress and excitement. If we're sucked into the story and under a gripping bit of drama - we're simply not good at remembering what happened in the series two weeks ago: we're too worried about what's going on *right now*.

During the final few minutes, the audience finally has the state of mind to think, "Oh yeah!..." - that's when larger plots are put into their minds, how things might tie together with what else has been happening.

Never end a session right after a battle. Instead, force the players to do something – ask them what their chars are doing, or give them a bit of description that sends the message: *"We're not quite done here yet..."*

## Overriding Pace

You can't really plan Pace on paper. If you design three encounters, you don't know for sure how quickly or slowly they're going to try to approach them. For all you know, your expected climactic ramp-up gets side-lined by them RP'ing at the campsite after the second fight.

Just know that you can override the pace. You've got a few tools to work with.

**The Hand-Wave.** This is not used often enough by GMs. If you're in a situation and you see people getting bored, just hand-wave the results. If Bolin the Bard is spending too much time chatting with the innkeeper and everyone is losing interest, just say something like:

*"As Bolin chats the ear off the lovely innkeeper, and his compatriots finish selling off their excess loot, the sun begins to set on the quaint fishing village of Boonescoast. When the sun awakens, all of you find yourself in an inn-room that seems to be quite a bit nicer than the typical adventurer receives."*

You just fast-forwarded, much to the relief of the other players (and as a bonus, Bolin's player is probably going to be cool with it, simply because his efforts have done some benefit - a room upgrade, thanks to his excellent people skills.)

**The Forced Slowdown.** If the players are going too fast, just have an NPC introduce themselves. Your players are not GM - they can't simply Hand-Wave past your NPC. Or you can create an obstacle that they need to overcome. Heck, you can even give them a side-quest.





## End of Session

At the end of every television show is one very important thing: a reason why you need to watch next week. Even if a show doesn't tie into the following week at all (there's no cliffhanger, no plot connecting them, etc) there will still be a "Tune in next week when..." snippet.

The reason is simple: they want the viewers to tune in next week as well! If the person watching isn't eager to see another episode after this one, they *probably won't*.

Of course, that never happens in the Pathfinder world. Players never skip sessions, right?

Sometimes absences are for legitimate scheduling reasons, but I've seen just as many that are caused by the players simply being apathetic.

There are two easy ways of getting them eager for next session to arrive.

## Cliffhanger

First, and the most blatant, is to simply throw a Cliffhanger at them. Ramp up the pace and intensity... and then leave them hanging at some tense moment.

You have to be very careful about this. First off, if you do this too often, it'll simply lose effectiveness and will annoy your players for no reason. But second, it has the same problem as breaking during sessions: you need to amp the tension leading up to the cliffhanger... but still be able to give the players time to get into the proper mindset when they return. In fact, you need to give them a lot more time - it's easier to get back into the game after a 5 minute break than a 7 day one.

## The Reveal

The second method is through a Reveal. Basically, you're out to clue the players in (though in-game methods) as to what they'll be doing next week. Are they going to be battling a Ranger that's gone dark and has taken to the sport of hunting men down? Have one of his victims stagger up to them at the end of the session. Are they going to be battling a necromancer? Have a skeleton walk up with a note which reads, "Thank you for killing the only beast that could stop my plans. My undead army will overrun this city in mere days! - Mallus"



## A Sample Session

You're about a third of the way into a campaign. The larger overarching plot is two-fold. First, the mages of the land are trying to shut down every planar portal to the Elemental Plane of Air, because an enterprising Balor has set up a series of passages from the Abyss to the Plane of Air, which they can then use to funnel demons in the Material Realm. Second, the King has been growing unpopular, and as a way of trying to regain the hearts of the people, has been organizing a massive gladiator combat organization - which not only involves recruiting combatants and finding exotic beasts to fight, but involves the construction of the arenas and finding administrators to actually run the thing.

The current session is going to be a straight-forward dungeon crawl; the King will request their services to clean out an infestation of demons in the undercity beneath an arena that's currently being built. The party didn't do anything relevant plot-wise last session, but two sessions ago they met one of the Balor's lieutenants, a Marilith named Mazek - who skirmished with them a few rounds before teleporting away.

### Beginning the Session.

We've got three goals here. Goal #1 is to bait the hook and get the players interested. Goal #2 is to refresh their memories on Mazek. And Goal #3 is to set the tenor for the session (let's say it's a serious, semi-dark one.)

So, why not do something like:

*It's never a good omen to be summoned by the king before sunrise. You arrive in the chambers to see the ruler of the land with an extremely dark and agitated look on his face. "There's something you need to see."*

*At those words, a stretcher is hauled to your feet. A bloodied body lies upon it, mangled so violently that you can't even tell the gender. In almost sick contrast to the perversity, a delicate envelope rests upon the remains of the body's chest. "Open it," commands the king. When you do, you find a letter:*

*Oh, my precious heroes. I am so disappointed that our last... rendezvous... was cut short. But do not fret, prey, our glorious reunion is drawing close. I will be awaiting for you, and to make sure you don't jilt me, I've arranged for your dear king to force your hand. You see, I've made my new home underneath the site that was to be your grace's lovely new arena.*

*With love, Mazek*

*PS: Do you like my messenger? He didn't seem to enjoy my ministrations.*

... okay. So, what happened?

**We sunk the hook in:** they get to look forward to finally dispatching a demon that's toying with them.

**We fed them the info they need.** We need the players to remember who Mazek is for them to get the most out of this session. Well, with how we started the session, they now know what the score is – that Mazek is a demoness that they fought before... but escaped before the battle could be disguised.

**We set the tenor;** after having a mangled corpse hauled before them and a dark taunting note read to them, they're not going to be picturing sunshine and puppies.

From here, we keep the pace, making sure that things don't slow down. If the party starts getting bogged down, heck - throw a demon at them, or have a messenger from the king demand why they're not clearing out his arena. Or, heck, have the Marilith use magic to communicate with them, taunting them further (and providing info to get past a stumbling block.) There's no reason we need to ever have the pace get boring.



## Our Sample Break

A few hours in, the heroes are making good headway inside the dungeon. However, the players aren't doing so well – they look like they could really use a break.

So when the party opens a door leading to a pair of Hezrou, it's time to shift to a heavier pace. This isn't just two humdrum demons that you could flatten without issue. No, this is a time for drama.

We need to escalate:

*"... as you open the stone door leading onward into the dungeon, you hear an ear-splitting scream coming from ahead. When you venture forward, you see a pair of Hezrou in the center of a circular room. Dangling from the ceiling is a woman in a desperate panic - and it's clear the demons aren't the only reason why. In the center of the room is a small pit with steadily churning blades, greased with a thick layer of blood. You've clearly interrupted a long drawn-out torture and mutilation ceremony the demons were conducting."*

*"Quick as a flash, one of the Hezrou raises one of its claws to the chain links suspending the woman from the blades below. 'Don't move, human', it growls with amused malice. 'Or else this woman dies.'"*

... and *then* take the break.

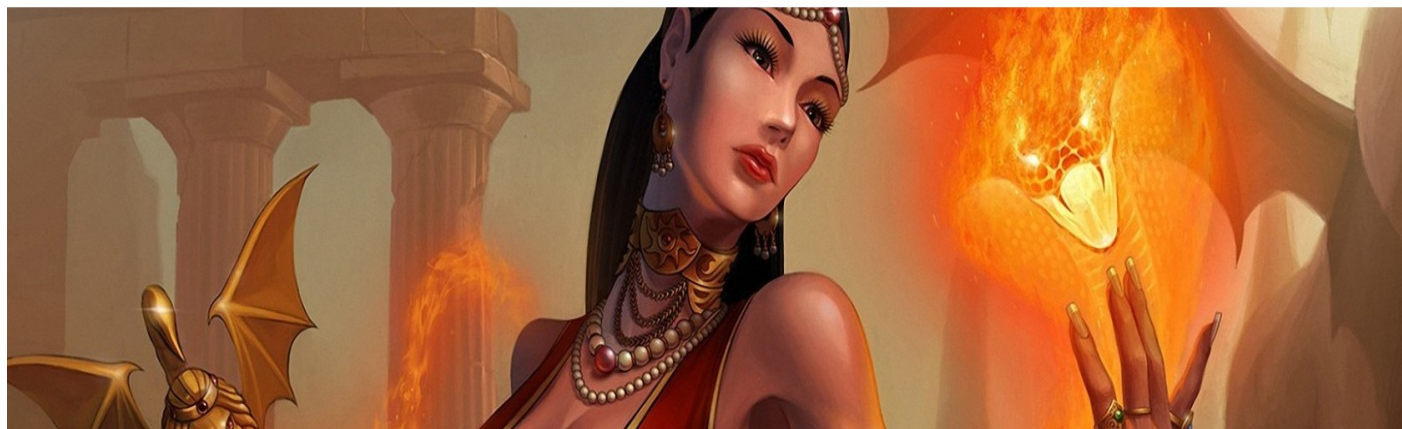
Your players have something they're excited to come back to. That simple Hezrou encounter is now something tense – and even if they know that they could steamroll those enemies... can they do it while saving the woman?

Here's the key: when the session resumes, *we don't ask the players what they do*. What do you think would happen then? Likely something that would lead to an initiative roll being required... and then you're in combat before everyone is necessarily back into the game mentally.

Instead, we start the session back up with the Hezrou acting – and ideally doing something that will at least stall into a few lines of dialogue.

*"The Hezrou stands with a claw threatening to drop the woman to a grisly death. 'Before you die, human, tell us why you've disrupted our... fun...'"*

Basically, I'm banking on at least one player not being able to resist repartee with the demon. Even if they say something, the demon replies, and someone says, "I want to shoot it," we've accomplished our goal of drawing things out long enough to get everyone aboard. We have no problem with rolling for initiative at that point.



## Ending the Session

Now, another few hours later, the party is in the final confrontation. The battle is pitched, everyone is excited. Finally, the fighter delivers a beautiful crit and the Marilith goes down.

Time to start slowing down. Whatever overarching plot points you're working with should be either introduced or reinforced here. And whatever teasing about the next session should be readied as well.

Let's say there's a plot point we introduced a partway into the session, that the castle's lake looks strangely colored. And our plan for next session is to rescue an outlying village from a horde of flaming skeletons.

So we could end the session with something like this:

*"As Talmed delivers the final blow to the Marilith, a burst of fire erupts from her body, and after a final wail of screeching agony, the only things remaining are her five magical swords, a glowing amulet, and a scorch mark on the ground. Arcan is able to easily identify the amulet as an amulet of +6 Charisma."*

*"On the journey back to the castle, you once again notice the odd color of the lake; a sort of rusted-over brown seems to swirl around the far side, as though something has polluted the area. When you finally get back to the castle, the King gratefully summons you to the throne room."*

*"Heroes," he says with relief. "I wanted to personally thank you f..."*

*He doesn't get far before a messenger interrupts him. "M'lord, m'lord. I've received word from Illen that they're seeing fire-wreathed undead milling around the countryside, and they think the forces are gather."*

*The king shoots a quick glance in your direction as if in contemplation. He catches himself and merely says to the messenger, "Thank you for your report. You are dismissed."*

*He turns back to you. "Take your leave and enjoy your sleep, heroes. You've earned it. And I suspect you may be busy tomorrow as well."*

... there we go. We reinforced the plot point about the oddity in the lake, and gave the players something to look forward to in the next session (burning skeletons!)

## Other Guides by KBrewer:

*Note: You may have to download this PDF to be able to follow the hyperlinks; Google Docs doesn't present the links as clickable on some computers.*

[Brewer's Guide to Reach Clerics](#)

[Shadow Conjuration - Guide and Reference Manual](#)

[Shadow Evocation: More Than Just Blasts \(A Guide\)](#)

[Thus She Spoke: A Words of Power Sorceress Guide](#)

[Brewer's GM Guide to Campaign Design](#)

[Brewer's Guide to Undeath - A Necromancer's Handbook](#)