AUSTIN: Welcome to Tips at the Table, an RPG podcast focused on critical questions, hopefully-smart answers, and fun interaction between good friends. I am your host, Austin Walker. Joining me today, Ali Acampora.

ALI: Um, hi! That's me. You can find me @ali_west on Twitter.

AUSTIN: Andrew Lee Swan.

DRE: Hey, you can find me on Twitter @swandre3000.

AUSTIN: And Janine Hawkins.

JANINE: You can find me on Twitter @bleatingheart.

AUSTIN: You can find me on Twitter @austin_walker, the show at @Friends_Table, and you can support the show or continue to support the show, friendsatthetable.cash. If you're already supporting the show, and if you're listening to this, you probably are: thank you so much for your support. It lets us do fun podcasts like this one. Let's just jump right in to it. Sound good?

ALI: Yeah.

JANINE: Yeah, that's exactly what we've already done.

AUSTIN: Yeah! All right, so. [ALI laughs quietly] This one comes in from Nat, who says, "I've got a player in my group who is fairly new to tabletop gaming, and she tends to rely a bit on other people to suggest when she can do something. We've recently started a game with a system none of us have used, and I've noticed she seems to be struggling a bit with other people encouraging her to use moves or a strict turn order. I am a first-time GM, so running a game is kind of overwhelming. I was wondering if you have any words of wisdom on how I can help her join in more actively." Um. So my big question is for you, Janine, because I know you recently started running the Dragon Age: Inquis—or not Inquisition, you know, the Dragon Age game, and you had a similar situation, right?

JANINE: Yeah. Um, I think [sighs] uh, 'cause we're not deep into that game, so my GM advice is always gonna be very limited. But you know we've had a few sessions of that. We had a few sessions of Fall of Magic, and I think my biggest advice is honestly to do something like Fall of Magic that doesn't have moves.

AUSTIN: Mm.

JANINE: Because I feel like, um [sighs]—I just feel like in general I've had less shyness at the table than I would have if we had just leapt in with the Dragon Age…tabletop thing because I from the beginning was like, the thing we're doing is we're telling a story together, and everyone's authorship in that story is pretty much equal. And that's the thing I wanna do. And if you have an idea, say the idea. If you have an idea you're not sure about, say the idea and we can find a so—we cant find a version of that idea that you are sure about. Um. And I think that's really helpful. The player who has ended up being shy in the Dragon Age group wasn't there for that part of it, the…that sort of getting-to-know-each-other phase, and I think that is part of where the shyness comes in.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JANINE: So, yeah, my big advice would be to try and find something like that where moves aren't even really…you know, 'cause it could be a lack of familiarity with the moves. That's a place I've been in as a player. It could be shyness at the table in general. It could be a fear of stepping on other people's toes [AUSTIN: Right.] which again is something that I've also really seriously felt.

AUSTIN: Well, especially since as Nat points out this is a game without a strict turn order.

JANINE: Mm-hm.

AUSTIN: And it might be worth you as the GM, Nat—and like I understand completely that you're saying you're a first time GM and so there's a lot of things happening. It can be very overwhelming. But making it priority to impose a sort of soft turn order—you know, if you listen to our show, none of the systems we have used have turn order. You know, no one's rolling for initiative pretty much ever. But we do go around the table. And it's one of my jobs to make sure—there's kind of two jobs! One is, make sure everybody gets to be involved in a scene—or, you know, within a thirty-minute period, make sure that like we're not—you know, sometimes groups split up, and you will stay with a single group for a little longer than that, but to make sure that we're going—you know, especially if there's like a big sequence with everybody involved—going, all right: Janine, what do you do? You know, Ali, then what do you do? And then Dre, what do you do? And then going back to Janine.

The other thing that makes it hard is to make sure to stay with something when it makes sense to, and it might be worth staying with this player a little bit longer to kind of make sure that she has the chance to get her brain going and coming up with ideas of her own. And sometimes what I'll do when I can tell a player isn't quite sure what they wanna do in a sequence is I will—or another player will suggest something, and that's a great starting point, but then if you let it linger, or if you ask questions about letting that player put their touch on it, they will slowly take that sequence over. Because they might not know if they wanna swing the big hammer or hack into the computer or whatever, but you know, once someone suggests something that you can tell that they're excited by, ask them what it looks like. Ask them what makes it special for

them to do it. You know, give them three options of—you know, inside of—did you do like a big overhead, you know, swing with your hammer, or are you doing like a cool push. And then once they start to kinda get into it, that has, in my history, been the sort of like thing that opens the door just a little bit for them to start illustrating their own sequence, and then start to kind of understand what type of moves they wanna make. I, um, not moves in the capital-M sense,

[ALI laughs]

but moves in the, 'hey this is a thing I wanna do.' Ali and Dre, how bout you? I know you have run stuff, Dre, but even just as players—do either of you have feelings about how to overcome this sort of feeling of 'I don't know what to do?'

DRE: Um. I mean, I like what you just said about like not saying capital-M moves but just like, what do you wanna do? Not like [AUSTIN: Yeah.]—one of the things that I really try to encourage in the group that I'm running right now is like, don't tell me you wanna roll x, it's like, tell me just what you want to happen. Like.

AUSTIN: Right.

DRE: Do you wanna punch that fool in the face? Okay. [AUSTIN laughs] Like, don't tell me you wanna roll your Strength stat. Tell me you want to, you know, punch somebody, or you want to pick this lock or whatever. And then we'll have that conversation about okay, that sounds cool, how can we make this happen that's true to the fiction and [AUSTIN: Mm-hm.] everything. And I think that helps getting some people going, 'cause I mean I just started playing D&D 5e and I haven't played D&D in…years.

[laughter]

And like. looking at that sheet is like intimidating for me 'cause there's just so much more stuff going on in D&D than like [AUSTIN: Yeah.] a lot of the games that we play here. And so yeah, I'm thankful that I have a GM running that game right now where it's I don't have to say all right, I'm gonna run this skill check, because [AUSTIN laughs] there's like 20 skill checks that I have to keep track of!

AUSTIN: Right. Totally. Ali, how bout you? Any feelings here of [ALI sighs and laughs] being a player who… We've jumped from a billion systems. You know, we've gone across so many things, I think we've all had that feeling like, aah, what am I doin?

ALI: Yeah! It's tough. I think that like…[sighs] I've said this before on this show, but like I think that like reference sheets for like the big like group actions or the things that everybody can do are…

AUSTIN: Mm.

ALI: Super helpful? Becase it like, it's easier to remember the things that only I can do, [AUSTIN: Right.] and then as a group we kind of talk about what the bigger things are.

AUSTIN: We do that a lot with Bluff. [ALI: Yeah.] And Live, where it's like all right, I'm just gonna make the screen [ALI laughs silently] the common playbook—or the common moves for everybody? That way we all have that common reference and the only thing in your sheet is the special stuff. you know?

ALI: Yeah.

JANINE: Mm-hm.

AUSTIN: That's a good—that's a really good one—yeah! I mean, that's the other thing you can think about at the table, depending on—I don't know what game Nat is running, but like, is there a way for you to highlight the moves for this player that they should really care about? Whether that means the ones that their character is really good at, or the ones that they're just interested in. having a conversation with them, or with her, you know, away from the table and saying like what are the type of things you're interested in doing here? Let's find like—like here's like an index card with the three most important moves for you, or the four most important moves for you.

And that would—I can imagine that, like I think that's something D&D 4th edition, where it's such an easy game to get people into 'cause they just have the cards in front of them, and it's like oh, I can now do—I can now cast Magic Missile. Like this makes perfect sense. Obviously D&D is a much more straightforward—especially 4th—like combat puzzle game, but it can still—I could still see that working if it's the sort of player who needs that sort of reference sheet material made very clear for them.

All right! let's move on, unless someone has something else to say here!

So, this one comes in from Hal, who says, "I am writing a PbtA game, a Powered by the Apocalypse game, partially inspired by Dogs in the Vineyard and the more religious elements of Seasons of Hieron and Twilight Mirage. Players would design a fictional religion and play as church officials working through some kind of crisis."

Along the way—uh, sorry. "Along with levelling characters up, players will also level up their church, growing its following, building temples to expand physical territory, et cetera. I'm making my second pass of edits and tightening things up before showing the draft to other people, and I was wondering what appeals to you all in an RPG book in terms of writing style and voice. Aside from making things clear and understandable, what about a manual makes you want to dive right in and play? Any tips for making it fun to read and encourage storytelling? Thanks so much, Hal."

Any thoughts here? Anything jump out to mind? I mean like again, we've s—we look at a billion books, and so maybe a good place to start is just, what are some of the ones that, as soon as we looked at it, we were like, oh, I can't wait to play this.

DRE: So I went and grabbed my copy of Blades in the Dark, because I think one of the sen—the very last sentence on the first page of the Blades book is "You're in a haunted Victorian-era city trapped inside a wall of lightning powered by demon blood." And God damn if that's not a good sentence [cross] that makes me wanna play that game!

AUSTIN: [cross] Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Zoom in on like the big picture—like the thing that makes this game super unique, right? That's a super good first one, for sure. How bout you, Ali, and Janine?

ALI: Um. I don't know, it's tough because I—we've played so many games and I mean [AUSTIN: We have.] I've only played the games that we've played for this?

AUSTIN: Yeah.

ALI: Um. Um?

AUSTIN: I think about—the thing that jumps to mind for me is like there are definitely moments when we start sharing moves, that are just like "wow, look at how cool this is." [ALI laughs] Like, this is a cool thing. Ver—okay, so like, here's a contrast for me, is… I think about something like the Golden Sky Stories book, which was a book of a certain style of RPG manual, where there's lots of asides almost in character from various, like, voices? There's multiple voices in the book, and that can work to its benefit, tht can work against it sometimes. Like Burning Wheel does this also, where there's like—ah—there will be an aside with a little troll voice, and it's like "I'm the one who's—pretend I'm the player who's gonna ruin your day!" and there's a little imp with like a—what do you call it, like…mortarboard like academic hat thing on, that's like "I'm the one who understands the rules and I'm gonna dive deep into mechanics!" and that stuff can work for me, but it often doesn't.

The other thing that happened with Golden Sky Stories was just the core mechanic stuff, the stuff that was important to know, was just buried in flavor, and so I couldn't appreciate some of the flavor, because I had to dig through so much of it, to find like how it actually worked. And so I can contrast that with something like the Veil, which, you know, is a game that we played a lot of in the last year, but that made all of its most interesting mechanical and fictional things blend together to where, you know, I spent a week just, like, look at this cool class! Look at this cool playbook!

[ALI laughs]

Look at how states work in this game. And just like c—you know, doing screengrabs of the PDF and just like sharing them with the group. And so I think there is something in the—almost jus tin the formatting and in the presentation that isn't just about clarity, but it's about like clippability? It's almost like the difference between a good essay and a good paragraph or a good line. I think great RPGs—ones that make me super excited—are the ones that are filled with great paragraphs and great lines, not just the ones that I can read 400 pages and be like, I think this a good game, which is like [ALI laughs] Burning Wheel is like that—Burning Wheel is like not a game that when I first read that book, I was excited to play. It wasn't until someone showed me how it actually ran that I was like "Ohh, this game is cool," but the book does not convince you of that, because it's just you have to absorb so much of it. [cross] That's my feeling.

JANINE: [cross] Yeah. Kind of to that end, I think… So the Dragon Age tabletop game is probably the most like traditional tabletop game that I've played.

AUSTIN: Mm-hm.

JANINE: Um. And that rulebook is not fun to go through?

AUSTIN: Mm-hm!

JANINE: Even as someone who really likes that series, and like that rulebook has…

AUSTIN: Right.

JANINE: It gives you information you don't get elsewhere, and that is fun. You know, stuff about like what the breadbask—where's the breadbasket of Ferelden, what do they grow there, how does that crop work, whatever. Nerd shit.

AUSTIN: Mm-hm! Mm-hm.

[DRE laughs quietly]

JANINE: But! That book is really painful to go through, it is like 400+ pages of a very traditional system and I'm not a person who finds a lot of appeal in those kinds of systems. But. [AUSTIN: Mm.] What it does right is it comes with a quick-start guide.

AUSTIN: Right.

JANINE: And that quick-start guide is half a sort of adventure, like a series of little vignettes, and half of it, like 11 pages, is just a very very pared-down version of how the game works.

AUSTIN: Right.

JANINE: So all you have to do is get through those 11 pages and you have a fundamental understanding of how this game looks in play.

AUSTIN: Right.

JANINE: And how it looks in play is nowhere near as dull and cumbersome as the book would have you believe, based on the millions and millions of charts [AUSTIN: Mm-hm. Mm-hm. inside of that book!

[DRE laughs]

Um. And like that quick-start guide is designed very so that people can just like show up and play it almost sight-unseen.

AUSTIN: Right.

JANINE: And for a system like that, that does have, you know, more complexities you can get into about like possession if you cast spells bad and all that stuff. Having that quick-start—having that just like in a nutshell this game is about tests. This game is about rolling one number against this [AUSTIN: Mm-hm.] other number, coming up with those on the fly, and you know, dealing with social consequences more than other kinds of consequences. And getting that home in like the span of 10 or 11 pages is the best thing that book could have done.

AUSTIN: Totally.

[ALI laughs]

There's like something—and Ali, do you have something?

ALI: Yeah, I was just gonna add that like some books do like—

[15:00]

—the conversation thing better than others?

AUSTIN: Mm-hm.

ALI: I remember the one thing that I actually really liked is that sometimes—I think the Veil did this, and Scum and Villainy did it a little bit, where they like kind of include include touchstones which each of the like player classes or like [AUSTIN: Yes.] with of the [JANINE: Mm-hm.] mechanics, which I get that that can be tiresome to do, but like just to be like, oh, this player class is kind of like a Han Solo type, or like this sort of movie, or whatever else, is like kind of enough just to get the gears going a little bit? [AUSTIN: Yeah.] And then I think also with Scum

and Villainy there were like suggested… At least for the Mystic class, there were like if you wanna play as like this kind of person. these are [AUSTIN: Ohhh.] the sort of things that you should think of?

AUSTIN: Yes! They were literally were starting builds. [ALI: Yeah.] Right? Where it was like…here's the ability to take if you want to be the like the badass Mystic combat person, versus being the Jedi Consular, who's about libraries.

ALI: Yeah. Um. The other thing was I've tweeted—we've spoken about this and I've tweeted about it before, but like all of the like here are you basic principles and like tips to playing games that Blades has, [AUSTIN: Mm-hm] was like night and day for me in terms of like liking that book.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

ALI: Um.

AUSTIN: Blades does that super well. Scum and Villainy does it really well, and it was like one of those things that was like, I didn't read full Blades until after I read full Scum and Villainy, because of how Marielda worked. Marielda we were still using the playtest of Blades.

ALI: Oh, right.

AUSTIN: And so I'd only gone back recently and reread that, but the other thing that those games—that Forged in the Dark's games like Blades and Scum and Villainy do, or at least those two…two things. One, there are incredible sections on what each class or what each playbook is, and like, how—not just like, oh, here is what your moves are, but like here is how this stuff kind of comes together in some interesting way. And the second thing is, there are some really useful sections on each indiviual like skill? Like so for instance, there is—for every skill bascially there's two pages. There's a one-page thing that's like, when you Doctor, you attend to the needs of another, blah blah blah. And then it has this whole section on like GM questions, like how do you attend to the patient in care? What tools might be required? What do you want the tretment to do? What information are you hoping to discover as a doctor? What tools can you apply?

And then there's a second page, and that second page is so good, that is like, all right. Here are three example rolls. In this first one, your player wants to find out where their bounty has gone, and there are bootprints. Can I do a soil sample on them? And here's like, what happens if they roll a mixed—you know, a mixed success or a reduced effect success. Here's what happens if they fail and they take harm. And i'ts just like—maybe this is my number one request, is real play samples, is like actual [ALI: Yeah.] examples in the text of how this stuff fuckin works. Um. Sometimes that can be, you know, one section at the end of a—you know, it'll be like, okay, everybody's, you know, selecting all of their classes, and then here's the first scene, and it's like

they walk you through basic dice mechanics, and that's super useful. But even more useful is like, all right, here is a sec—[coughs] excuse me—a section just on ship combat. And then here is a play example of ship combat. [coughs] Instead of it just being one huge play thing, which some games do, it's like, bit by bit, very piecemeal, very like…which stage of the meal are we in. And I think Blades and Scum and Villainy do that super well. Masks, which I've been reading recently, also does it pretty well.

And I guess that's the last thing is, I absolutely know that—you know. There's a huge range of budgets for making tabletop roleplaying games. But a lot can be done with aesthetics. A lot can be done with color, with font choice, even before—even if you don't have the budget to do the sort of bright, colorful, or highly detailed art of something like Masks, you can do something where the basic, like, feel of the game comes through based on kerning and font choice and, you know, how you're using white space and stuff like that. And so just kind of be thoughtful with that, and think about that as you're going into layout, is what I'll say.

JANINE: Is it weird that I really like when—just to go back to the idea of play examples—I really like when they all feel like they're from the same campaign with the same group of people [cross] and even the same session? Because I love that.

AUSTIN: [cross] Oh, no, that's perfect. That's ideal.

DRE: Yeah, I love that.

AUSTIN: Yeah. I want to know the end of their story by the end of a book. [ALI laughs] You know what I mean? I want it to be a secret second book I've read.

[DRE laughs]

JANINE: And I want it to be like, oh, right, that's why Miranda did that. She's that kind of character. like that's…

AUSTIN: [amused] Right. Right. Totally. Absolutely. Um, any other thoughts here, before we move on? Okay. Um, this one comes in from Tim H, and I think it's a trick. [DRE snorts] Tim says, "Dear friendly podcasters, did you know there are mice that sleep in tulips? [cross] Sincerely, Tim H."

DRE: [cross] Hey, what?

JANINE: [cross] Yeah.

ALI: Yeah.

AUSTIN: So I didn't know this, [ALI: Oh.] and so [cross] I wanna—

JANINE: [cross] This was like a—this went like viral, like a month or so ago. Everyone was like talkin about these tulip mice.

AUSTIN: *Look* at these tulip mice.

DRE: Oh, these are [JANINE: [casual] Yeah.] adorable!

AUSTIN: *Look* at these *Tulip. Mice.*

[ALI laughs]

JANINE: I like the ones where they're like [AUSTIN: [amazed] Look at this one!] pulling a petal to one side like a little curtain.

AUSTIN: Look at this one that's all pollen all over your face! Buddy!

ALI: Aw…

AUSTIN: Look at these tulip mice.

ALI: [laughs] Did you know that frogs sleep in roses? Have you seen that?

AUSTIN: No. What? [ALI laughs] Frogs sleep in roses??

[DRE laughs]

Where—where?

ALI: I've only seen—wait. I think like…[AUSTIN sighs] Rose posted a picture. [cross] Yeah, yeah, they did.

AUSTIN: [cross] Oh, wait, that was it. That was it! [cough-laugh] I found some. [cross] Let me blow these up.

ALI: [cross] [laughing] They're here! You—you just gotta google.

AUSTIN: Aw, look at that frog. I think these are real. This could be CG. Who could say.

ALI: Just looked at this guy tucked in. Hold on.

AUSTIN: Please tuck in this frog, in a rose.

[DRE laughs]

These are just regular flowers, but. Aw, look at this one, [cross] that one's good right there!

ALI : [cross] Patreon benefit. That one. Just—

AUSTIN: Aw, look at that one! [JANINE and ALI laugh] Hold up!

[laughter]

[cross] Bring you over to Pinterest.

JANINE: [cross] That's credible, that's a credible one. I'd say.

AUSTIN: Yeah, that feels real. Open Image in New Tab, thank you very much.

[ALI and DRE laugh]

Look at that. F—look at that little frog tucked in there, between the rose petals! Thank you. Thank you, uh, Tim H, for bringing this very important information to our attention.

Um. [laughs quietly] Moving on. [ALI: We can do that.] [DRE laughs loudly] Unless someone has more to say about the mice in tulips or frogs in roses. Would you rather be a mouse in a tulip or a frog in a rose.

ALI: Mm.

DRE: [sighs] Probably a [cross] mouse in a tulip.

JANINE: [cross] I think a mouse, 'cause…

ALI: Frog in a rose.

JANINE: Frogs need to be wetter, so the frog can't stay there a long time, right? [cross] Like the frog needs to go do stuff.

AUSTIN: [cross] Like the morning dewwww…

ALI: [cross] [high pitched noise] Yeah, see [laughs]

AUSTIN: No…

JANINE: Eh.

AUSTIN: [cross] It's like a, you go, [relieved sigh] ahhhh.

ALI: [cross] Roses you got all the petals.

AUSTIN: Yeah, you got all the petals. [cross] They all have—

ALI: [cross] You got choice there, you know.

AUSTIN: Yeah, a lotta choices. You're not just like "I'm in the tulip." [ALI laughs] See, I'm gonna find the right like petal bed.

JANINE: I guess also like bugs are gonna come there so that's actually a pretty advantageous [cross] spot for a frog.

DRE: [cross] Mm-hm.

ALI: [cross] See?

[cross] See?

AUSTIN: [cross] Yeah.

That's true! [cross] Have a little morning snack.

JANINE: [cross] That's like hanging out at a restaurant all day.

AUSTIN: Yeah!

[ALI and DRE laugh loudly]

That's like settin up—that's why I live in—if I—it has to be, that's it! I have to do that, 'cause like, I love diners.

[JANINE laughs]

ALI: Right!

AUSTIN: And rose petals are basically diners for frogs.

ALI: Mm-hm.

DRE: Yep.

ALI: Mm-hm.

AUSTIN: So. Love it. All right. [snorts] Moving on.

[DRE laughs]

Um, this one comes in from Emon [???] [22:52], who says, "I've been a GM for multiple groups for quite a while now, and I've noticed throughout my games that PCs always seem to be dealing with extremely high-stakes situations very quickly, no matter where they start. For example, investigating a strange noise at the bottom of a boat leads to fighting hordes of continent-destroying monsters that hide within language. This usually means that campaigns have to reset vey often to try and avoid the Dragonball Z problem, but without raising the stakes, I'm worried my players will become disinterested. Any advice for how to keep a campaign grounded without making the players feel powerless?"

My big-picture thing there is the stakes should—my biggest big big big-picture thing is like, consider playing some games that put the focus on character stakes instead of plot stakes, instead of, like, world stakes? Obviously, the kind of subtext to that is me saying [clears throat] yes, you could keep playing the game that you're trying to play now, the games that you've been playing, and do you best to just kind of like scale it back on your own, but my guess is that a lot of the games you play encourage that sort of growth, or that sort of like power curve growth? Because, you have to be pretty fuckin powerful in a game to be able to kill or deal with [amused] continent-destroying monsters that hide within language.

ALI: Yeah, I uh, I'm reading this question, I'm like, who put those monsters on that boat? [laughs]

AUSTIN: Oh yeah.

[DRE laughs]

[JANINE laughs]

ALI: [cross] I mean—

AUSTIN: [cross] Yeah. Um, to be clear, I think that there's a—I think that this is like a—[over ALI continuing to laugh] step one, they're investigating a strange noise at the bottom of a boat. Step two, question mark. Maybe they find a book. Maybe they find a cultist. And then step three, oh no, continent-destroying monsters that hide wihtin language. Um. But yeah. But honestly, like, I mean that is the thing I'm trying to—the thing—I think like the gut response is like, hey Emon this is on you, but. I think here's the difference—think about something like Masks, right, which—again, I'm reading it right now—that's a game that—you could be the top level of

anything and you could still be kind of brought to your knees through interpersonal conflict. And the game systematizes that, and makes those sorts of interactions based around charactre influence, based around what your character's kind of emotional conditions are, and it—and on the other hand, you can start the game by trying to fight continent-destroying monsters, and the core stakes of the game are still tied to character interaction, are still tied to personal stakes. As someone in the chat—as Ian in the chat says, "make it personal" is a thing that shows up in a lot of GM principle lists, and that's I think a big reason why. Um. Any other thoughts here?

JANINE: Um. It is such a thing of like [sighs] that example of the noise at the bottom of the boat—[ALI struggles not to laugh again] like, there are obviously steps in between there, but I keep thinking like, you can add more degrees of separation. [amused] Like, I think…

AUSTIN: Mm-hm.

JANINE: No, I'm serious—I'm thinking about like—so I literally—I…I'm not even gonna say—okay.

AUSTIN: Uh-huh!

JANINE: I—[laughs] [DRE laughs]

AUSTIN: Yeah, what's up?

JANINE: I'm thinking [laughs] I'm thinking of a game that I've been playing recently and…[sighs] a thing that really stands out to me about that game and has always stood out to me about that game is that it is not—you are not on a set—you are not on a straightforward path. You are not starting on a path that is like, this weird thing happened, and as I get stronger, I'm going to learn more about this specific weird thing. [cross] It is more like—

AUSTIN: [cross] Right, you're fleeing from Ferelden because of the… [ALI and JANINE start laughing] Uh-huh! Yeah. I gotcha. [DRE starts laughing] Yeah, with your family, and then you wind up in Kirkwall. I know! Yeah.

[cross] Dragon Age 2 is a perfectly good video game.

JANINE: [cross] I'm so outed. That's—yeah. Um.

[cross] But instead of that, it's—but—

AUSTIN: [cross] But I mean, okay—but that game does end with some Dragonball Z shit.

JANINE: Yeah.

DRE: Yeah.

JANINE: But even then, it's so much of like, the thing that leads you there is not one straight road. [AUSTIN: Mm--hm.] [ALI: Right.] The thing that leads you [AUSTIN: Yes.] there is, you help this one person because their brother got sent to the Templar Order and then they st—and stopped sending them letters, and you're like, what's up with that? And like the end of that—the end of that quest isn't you punching Meredith in the face. [ALI laughs] Isn't you punching the leading of that group in the—it's just like, this is weird, I guess we resolved this, [AUSTIN: Right.] and then you move on to somehintg differnet for a little while. And then at the end all of those thr—[AUSTIN huffs] it's like a…it's a tree but it's not a tree in the way that we want to think of a tree where it's like you do one thing and it leads to the other, leads to the other. It's like, there are all these little threads that get gathered up into something really [AUSTIN: Mm-hm.] big and consequential at the end, when you're ready for it…

AUSTIN: Right.

JANINE: But until that point, you are doing smaller things that are still important, there are still definitely stakes there.

AUSTIN: Mm-hm.

JANINE: But it's not big world-ending stakes, it's character stakes, you know?

AUSTIN: Yeah.

ALI: Yeah, I mean, our first mission we found Samot at the [laughs] top of the [AUSTIN: Totally!] whatever, right? Like.

AUSTIN: Right. Right.

ALI: And there were like—there was a point B, there was some other—you know. Other points there, so like, I don't know…[clicks tongue] it's tough not knowing what system this is, 'cause it's like, I don't know [DRE: Yeah.] if like it's a player problem, where it's like, oh, what's at the bottom of the boat? Someone else can say, [AUSTIN: Right. Sure.] there's a bunch of zombies in there. Then you just like should talk to those people. Um. [slight laugh] But it this is a thing where it's like, I feel like I have to keep restarting this because I feel like I keep needing to up the ante, like, no. Like, have them—have a winter storm, and like, they're [AUSTIN: Uh-huh.] stuck in a weird hotel, and have to like [slight laugh] figure out what's [cross] going on, right? Like, yeah.

AUSTIN: [cross] Solve a—right, exactly. Yeah. Yeah.

ALI: Um.

JANINE: Don't be so scared of the mundane, I guess.

ALI: [cross] Mm.

AUSTIN: [cross] Yeah.

JANINE: Like.

DRE: Mm.

JANINE: A lot of games do not concern themselves with that stuff, but like that doesn't mean you can't make adjustments, and like—if you make that interesting, if you make the stakes in that relevant to characters, well then it should be fine, right? Like.

AUSTIN: The other thing that I'll say here—and that feels like a thing we haven't said yet is—or we've hinted at it—and the Dragon Age 2 comparison is actually really good—is, you can have multiple plots that are all important. This feels partially like—like, imagine if COUNTER/Weight was the story of the Chime going up against Rigour from day one.

ALI: Right. Well—

AUSTIN: We would [JANINE: Yeah.] get there. How many planets would be destroyed? Do you know what I mean? Because the stakes would immediately be there, but isntead, when you think about COUNTER/Weight, you have the stuff with Orth and the Iron Choir, and both of those become big deals. You have the stuff with Addax and Jace, you have the stuff with Ibex and the September Institute, you have the stuff with…the ex-Apostolosian group. You have the stuff with Tea Kenridge, you have the stuff with Jacqui and Jill. You have—like, that—it keeps going. Like, if I'm just looking at the list of all this…

[30:00]

Like—none of those are—all of those become the A-plot eventually. All of those eventually become a continent-destroying monster that's hidden within language, um, [ALI laughs] basically? Or like the kind of two—there's a continent-destroying monster in Rigour, and there's another thing that's hiding in language.

But! [ALI laughs again] You get there, but you don't get there because either of them are A-plot things that are showing up week to week to week. I wasn't building a bridge to that thing. Instead, I was telling a much more—trying to lead the team through episodic stories that had thematic connectivity and a cast of characters who could come back. Who you could like relate to because they'd shown up four or five episodes ago.

So like what if instead of there being a zombie at the bottom of the boat or whatever it was, it was like, a person who then could show up in a completely unrelated story—like, it's an expert in the occult, and then the next it's their—or like three—three, you know, three sessions from then, maybe they know that they can go talk to that person about a completely different case [JANINE: Yeah] because they know that they know someone who's an expert in the occult. And so you're kind of building a web of characters and places and things, and then you as the GM will find the A-plot somewhere along the way.

And…a thing I'll say that's the opposite of a lot of—or that maybe will encourage you in the wrong direction, is to not be afraid to move forward when you think it's time to move forward, which is like…one of the most…degenerative GM techniques I used for years was to know what the final three like episode—or not episodes, sessions were going to be. Okay, well, they're going to face down Kokujin the monk, the evil, corrupted monk in Legend of the Five Rings, and that's gonna be this big fight. And then you spend half the campaign being like, okay, well, how do I get them in front of Kokujin? How do I give them the info they need to get in front of Kokujin? How is it that I can—they're nowhere near Kokujin! They're way over here near this weird zombie wall! How the fuck do I get them back to the capital where Kokujin is? And so you end up escalating. You end up like, putting more money in the pot, so to speak, and being like, well, okay, well then, Kokujin's thing can't just be small. It has to be big! It has—okay, it's tied to everything! You have to—all—he's everywhere! And it ends up escalating—that ends up escalating things really really in a big way, and so instead, what if they fought Kokujin like in the third session, instead of thinking that you wanted them to have that fight thirty sessions in? Like, be willing to kind of look the crosshairs, as a lot of these games say, at your own ideas and pull the trigger on them, and then see where you go from there, instead of saying like "this is how I want my whole campaign to end" and trying to build towards that, because it will snowball in a way that you did not expect.

Dre, did you have anything to add here? I would have felt—I felt you—I felt you like, tip of your tongue, type stuff.

DRE: No, I think—I guess the only thing I would add was that like—and I think this also goes back to that we don't know like what system you're running, because some games are more about this than others, but like, I do think there's also times where it's like, sometimes you have to show the player the consequence and be like, okay! [AUSTIN: Mm.] This is gonna happen! And then pull that trigger when they give you the opportunity to.

AUSTIN: Right.

ALI: Yeah. One thing that just stood out to me is that the question is how to keep my campaign grounded without making the players feel powerless, and like [AUSTIN: Yeah.] you kinda want your players to feel powerless a little bit. [laughs] Like! If they're getting [AUSTIN: Well!] really good at one thing—well, not powerless, but I think that we came to [JANINE: Yeah.] a point

where like—if you look at Twilight Mirage, where like the skill level of all of the characters at this point like, we were just doing combats. You know? But like.

AUSTIN: Right.

ALI: If you start thinking of powers other ways, which is like how do they help someone who's defenseless or like…

AUSTIN: Right.

ALI: Other sort of conflicts.

AUSTIN: How are things bigger—like, again, [stammers] thinking about… Hieron is a great example of this, where like, in the world, you are The Thief, you are The Fighter, you are The Ranger. And that doesn't mean shit in the face of the Heat and the Dark. And that doesn't mean shit in the face of like, your friend who has a weird relationship with their family, and like you can't just like, Ranger your way into smoothing that over? Like, I don't care how many arrows you can nock at once, like, it's not going to undo the trauma of the destruction of a historical site that was important to the world? Um.

DRE: I feel very targeted right now.

AUSTIN: I'm just going—[DRE: I know. [laughs loudly]] I'm just zooming in. I'm just trying to use [cross] specific examples.

JANINE: [cross] He's just taking turns on each of us. [ALI laughs]

DRE: That's true! [laughs]

AUSTIN: Um. So yeah! [amused] You know. Sometimes the point of a GM is to zoom in on one scene when you know it needs to breathe. [quiet laughs] But yeah, so like, it can be about that powerless, or about saying, okay, well you're really powerful in this one way, but how—I think about Adaire in season—in Winter in Hieron also, in which that's a character who was very powerful not only in combat, which was eventually proved [amused] very clearly.

[ALI and JANINE laugh quietly]

But also was in a position of power by way of her aloofness, by way of her like, lack of investment in…non transactional relationships. Was that fair to say, do you think, Janine, that [JANINE: Yeah.] like—yeah. And so the times that I was like I'm gonna make Adaire feel powerless were when I said what is your lack, or [JANINE: Mm-hm.] when I said 'here's a non [stammers] transactional—here's a relationship you do want that's non transactional. Sorry.' It doesn't go—[JANINE laughs] it didn't go that way because of some—that's just not how it

works! Um. And so, find those ways in which to make that powerlessness feel dramatic, instead of it being—and make it feel like it's tied to actions and not just, you can't [JANINE: Yeah.] climb that wall 'cause you don't have a ladder. You know?

JANINE: That's what I was gonna say is I think the thing to—I think the thing as a player [sighs] or the thing to fear inducing as a GM isn't powerlessness but like a kind of—not inaction but like where there is no action. [AUSTIN: Right.] Like where a players feels not like what they will do won't have an effect but that they cn't really do anything, [AUSTIN: Mm-hm.] because like even—when you feel powerless, you can still do stuff.

AUSTIN: Right.

JANINE: There are still things you can do, you just take a roundabout way, like that's the whole point is, you are getting stronger, you are doing whatever. But the worst feeling as a player is when something happens and you just don't know…what to do, like you don't know what direction to go in, you don't know where you're meant to be going, you don't have that. So I think like making a character feel weak is really different that making a player feel weak.

AUSTIN: That's a really well—yeah, really well said. I think about like the…Contrition arc of Twilight Mirage as one in which y'all as players felt weak, because of a lack of communication of important details about the setting, on top of it being like the first full arc of the game, and just like, okay, this is really open-ended, but I can't—like, there aren't necessarily super clear objectives. And so the stakes weren't clear, and so like even though those stakes were, like…you know, important to the plot or something, if they're not being communicated to your players in ways that make them excited—and that can be high-level, you know, continent-destroying monsters, or it can be—or it can be, why should they go check out the noise at the bottom of a boat? Right?

[ALI laughs quietly]

Like. Think about—there's a moment early on in [cross] Twilight Mirage…

JANINE: [cross] Boats are noisy, I don't know!

AUSTIN: Right, boats are noisy! There's a moment early on in Twilight Mirage where I was like, trying to convince Grand to go into this Glass factory.

[ALI laughs quietly]

Do you remember this moment, [JANINE: Mm-hm!] where like, it's like, well the key is probably down in this hole where there's a skeleton, and Art was like, well, no. [JANINE and DRE laugh] All right! I guess I'm not getting in! And like, one—that ended up being a really great moment, [amused] in some ways, 'cause it was like, all right, I understand who Grand Magnificent is now.

Grand Magnificent is not going into the hole where there's a skeleton! Of the Qui-Err people! I'm not gonna do it! And so I'm just gonna not—have—like, there was actually a moment there where like I had to really scramble [laughs slightly], because it was like, all right, he—[sighs] he's supposed to go down there and see that there's a skeleton that has extra arm nubbins! And that's how they're gonna know that there was another species on this planet. Fuck, what do—oh, there's an AI on the door. The door has an AI [ALI laughs] and it has extra arm nubbins and it doesn't look like you. Okay. Phew. Um. [DRE laughs] And I think that's—I think that that is part of it is like, learn what your characters are interested in and find vectors to like, zero in on what makes them excited that isn't just…power. That isn't just, like, fight-y power, or like, solution-oriented power, and is interpersonal power, or is, like, narrative power, in some way, right, that's like about giving them the…ability to hold the camera in certain moments and describe something, because they've done the narrative work to show that their characters are, like, you know, in that domain. I think about like going into any virtual space and being like, all right, Tender, tell me about this place, because that's—this is what you do. I think that's like a sort of power that can keep someone excited even though, after they do that narration, I'm not like, all right, well now you're a god here, what do you wanna do. So.

[ALI laughs quietly]

Um. Any other thoughts, or should we keep on movin?

All right. …This one comes in from Dissonance, who says "You are a conscientious bunch, but in all the episodes of Friends at the Table I've never heard mention of safety mechanisms like the X Card or the Veil, outside of game rules that include them. Is this a thing behind the scenes for your games? If not, how do you make sure you're all having a good time exploring heavy or potentially triggering material?" I included this because [amused] we literally just had a conversation about this…

JANINE: Yeah.

DRE: Mm-hm.

AUSTIN: Two—three days ago? Uh, like, when we did the character creation for Masks? It's something that we've done a couple of times. I think if you… I suspect if you go back and listen to Hieron… Right away, we do a way different—a way lighter version of it, where I just hadn't really internalized those rules, and if you listen to COUNTER/Weight Episode 0, we do vetoing, and I don't think we ever talk—like, the veto card is on the table, but we only end up vetoing things like, ray guns [ALI snorts] and like, [JANINE laughs] blue aliens? [DRE laughs]

Um. And I think that that was a mistake! Like, I don't think we ever—we didn't do—we didn't ever hit any material that was triggering to anyone at the table, um, and I think that's great, and I think it speaks to our success as, like, collaborators to be on the same wavelength, but it's also—was also negligent. Um, and I think probably I'd say in the last like three months, I've tried

to get a little bit better about it, when we run new stuff, um, but I don't do it at the beginning of every session, and I think that's largely because we kind of—have a sort of like, okay, this is the season's—here is what the season's…like palette looks like, and when I would bring it up is like hey, this specific session is going to shift that palette somewhat. Um, and in my experience playing with people like Adam, that's kind of how I learned—Adam Koebel, like that's sort of how I learned those mechanics, was like, bring it up at the top of a campaign to set a certain stage, and then—and that's in terms of things like—that's in terms of things like, setting up—you know, Lines and Veils and stuff like that. Whereas something like the X Card is something that is…you would pull out in the middle of a session, and I…definitely think we could do a better job of just like remembering we have it, but we just—I don't *think* we've hit any material—I don't know! I'm not a player. But I don't think we've hit any material where someone…was like, I wanna use the X Card. Um. But y'all [cross] could tell me—

JANINE: [cross] I think a big part of that is also that like…there are certain kinds of stories that we don't really truck in.

AUSTIN: Yes. Yeah.

JANINE: Like we're not going o ut of our way to do like really grimdark kind of stuff [AUSTIN: Yeah.] that would [sighs] that would cross into areas that would have aa higher chance? [AUSTIN: Yeah.] Of, you know. So I think that's also part of it. [AUSTIN: Yeah. Oh, the—] Like. The fact that we're not really, meh, you know.

AUSTIN: Pam in the chat notes that Twilight Mirage changed—we did change trauma to [JANINE: Mm. Yeah.] status.

DRE: Mm.

AUSTIN: Um, and also even before that, we changed giri to faith.

JANINE: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Which [DRE: Yeah, that's true.] has since also been changed into obligation, so we—there is like a degree of like editiorial control that we do, but I—I don't know! Ali, it sounds like you have a thought here.

ALI: Yeah, I feel like we do it at the top of every live, or at least, [AUSTIN: Yes.] every live that [DRE: Mm.] has it?

AUSTIN: Mm-hm.

ALI: And then I think that, you know, I mean, I guess since—well, even Hieron. There's like so much pre-collaboration before we start a [AUSTIN: Right.] season, and we kind of like…already knnow which ways we're leaning towards…

DRE: Yeah.

ALI: That…

AUSTIN: Yeah, I guess that's…

ALI: Yeah.

AUSTIN: The thing is like, a lot of sessions exist at the table. We have a Discord chat that's, you know, what is it—tw—too many channels for me to count right away. [DRE laughs] 'Cause they're all tied to various seasons and stuff, [ALI laughs] in which we build that tone out pretty clearly, which I don't think is a—thta's not me saying then do that inst—[coughs] excuse me. Instead of having the X Card or the Veil or Lines or Vetoes. [coughs] Um. But I do think that's a big part of being on the same page with regards to what those tones are. And I also just suspect that y'all trust that I'm not like—I;m not interested in like, surprise, this is a story about a really traumatic experience…

DRE: Yeah.

AUSTIN: That.

JANINE: Yeah.

AUSTIN: I'm gonna spring on you. Um. There are exceptions, like there was a recent Twilight Mirage epsiode that got into some suicidal ideation stuff, which we did put a content warning on the episode for. And I'm not saying that the stuff that doesn't cause—you know, that doesn't trigger us is somehow that means that no one should feel like—should respond [stammers] in a…you know, powerful way for them. Like, I'm not saying that that's the case either. I just feel like there is definitely a degree of like that pre-conversation mixed with…a kind of agreement that I'm not here to push those sorts of buttons.

DRE: Yeah.

AUSTIN: 'Cause I've been on the other side of it. And it sucked, so.

[45:00]

So yeah.

ALI: Um. I feel like we do it in smaller ways, like, when there is a, like, significant escalation in violence, or like, [AUSTIN: Yeah.] a consequence that you feel like we need to know. It's usually like, are you sure that you [slight laugh] [AUSTIN: Yeah.] wanna do this?

DRE: [cross] Mm-hm.

AUSTIN: [cross] Yeah.

ALI: Like, I think that we're pretty good about like laying that stuff out flat so it's not like oh, I roll to pull this trigger and then like…this thing that happened that I wasn't expecting to happen would happen, um.

AUSTIN: There have been times when I've done it, though. Like I think about—there's a character who gets hurt *really* badly towards the end of COUNTER/Weight. A door opens, and then they're on the ground. Um. And.. that felt in line with the Sprawl's, like, notion of smallness and of quick violence and of kind of the like irreparable nature of time, that sometimes clocks advance and doors open and people with guns show up. And—I think that's also a big part of it, is that we end up finding games that either explicitly or kind of indirectly set tonal and genre guidelines, and we don't pick games that—you know, we're not gonna play the game that has sexual assault in it, or that encourages that exploration—or if we are, we're going to do that in a *very* thoughtful and careful way, that is like—and we haven't done it yet, really, right? But is like, okay. We are going into a certain headspace here, and we need to talk very clearly about that—and, I mean, I'll say—here's the opposite side, is I can think of one situation in which we were not as clear as we could be about a mechanic and how it—could have played out around consent, and [ALI: Yeah.] we threw an episode out.

That was this [DRE: Yeah.] season, right? Um. Twilight Mirage had a different—there was—someone was playing a different character and that character was an empath, and that empath's abilities were all about, like, taking [amused] emotional states from people? And in play, based on the way that that class was—or that playbook was built, and based on the way it was played, like, lines of consent were crossed immediately, and that was a thing that we should have had a conversation about from the jump, and we assumed that we were all on the same page, and we were not! [laughs] And it got heated, and it got, like, it's I think the only time we've had a serious, like, all right, we need to step away from the table and catch our breaths, and come back, and have long conversations about this, away from the actual table—or not away from the table, but like—have long conversations about this in a separate situation, one-on-one, and in a small group, until we like work this out, and I think that was one of those like great learning experiences of like, sometimes, even just having the Veto or the X Card at the table or agreeing that at any point someone can say, I'm gonna pull a Veil on this scene, isn't enough, because there can be things in games that do push you in that direction. Um. So. So yeah.

And yes, Author X [???] [48:10] says, that playbook was rewritten in the Veil, in a way that is mechanically—it's actually mechanically different. They said, "in a way that's mechanically the

same but asked the player to make decisions about the character considers consent." That is new. There is a new thing that's like, how do you consider consent? Who would you steal emotions from, or, you know, emotional energy from? But there's also a major change [slight laugh] in the mechanics with where they get their kind of emotional curren—their empathic currency from, because, as it stood before, the key way—the key place to get it was to steal it from other people. And it's like, I didn't even see that in the class until it happened, you know? Um. It was an interesting dilemma, is what I'll say.

[DRE laughs quietly]

JANINE: Mm-hm.

AUSTIN: Um, any other tips to the second part of this question of like how do you make sure you're having a good time exploring heavy or potentially triggering material? I think it's probably—for me, it's most of the stuff we've already talked about, which is just like setting a much broader understanding of tone [JANINE: Yeah.] from the get-go and like behind [DRE: Yeah.] the scenes. And the other I think [cross] is asking questions.

JANINE: [cross] Well, we also don't make that session really really long also?

AUSTIN: [laughs] Fair.

JANINE: [over ALI laughing] Just in a really—the most straightforward is just like, maybe keep the heavy session—like maybe, you know, take some breaks, [AUSTIN: Yeah] check in with people…

AUSTIN: Yeah. Um, and don't just end right after? [huffs] Like.

JANINE: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Have some breathing room. [ALI: Yeah.] I also think that there is a lot of value in handing over—I mean, this is a thing I think of in general, but handing over authorship to sequences that are going to be heavy to someone else, where you set the stage, and then I say, you know—or I set a stage, and then I say, "all right, how does this play out? What's this look like?" Instead of me trying to describe it in a way that could be…like deeply traumatic, or heavier—or schlocky? Like, if I want there to be a heavy moment, I want the person who—I want the person who is interested in exploring that heaviness with that character to be as involved as possible in that sequence. I think about like the Calhoun stuff, in season one.

JANINE: Mm-hm.

AUSTIN: That's like, all right, Ali, what do you do? [ALI laughs] And I'm gonna tell you how the world reacts! But like, that scene was in your control, you know? [ALI: Yeah.] Like it was literally,

you tell me what happens and then I'm gonna give you the reaction, and that reaction will prod you to have to do some stuff, but I'm gonna—here are the consequences! [ALI huffs] So. You know. Um.

ALI: Um, I think the flip side for this is that liike if you…[sighs] to make sure that you're all exploring—having a good time is like, if somebody has a thing that's like a, I don't wanna do this, like, just, no questions asked.

AUSTIN: Yeah. Yeah.

ALI: Um, I know that that's usually written, but like even something as simple like the trauma-status thing in [AUSTIN: Yep.] Twilight Mirage was like… I don't know that I have a super good explanation for that, besides that I feel like trauma is different in Twilight Mirage than it is Marielda, but like…

AUSTIN: Mm-hm.

ALI: It's a thing that we do now. [slight laugh] [AUSTIN: Yep! Yeah.] So like. Yeah, don't—like, even if it feels small just say it, 'cause like. Be comfortable in anything that you're doing.

AUSTIN: Yeah, because you just don't want that speedbump of like… Like, here's a thing thats been great, is like, we call it status, and in the last…

[ALI chuckles]

three or four episodes, I've seen characters go out of their way to—I've seen players go out of their way to engage with their statueses, either by getting new ones, or by really playing up the ones they have!

JANINE: [sighing] Yeah…

DRE: [as though surprised] What?

AUSTIN: And—yeah, I don't know, Dre!

[DRE laughs]

You fuckin tell me!

DRE: What?

AUSTIN: I mean, that whole session, jesus, I can't wait [cross] for people to listen to that stuff.

DRE: [cross] Yeah. Mm-hm!

ALI: [sighing] Ooh, boy.

AUSTIN: 'Cause like all of y'all were on one. Um. it was great, I loved it. And part of me—you know, if you were who someone who looks at the word trauma and is like, eh…then every time you look at that sheet, you're gonna like, recoil a little bit. And a lot of comfort is about smoothing that stuff out, not so that you can ignore the sort of deep character choices and the heavy stuff, but so that you can go into it as smoothly as possible, without hitting that road bump. You know?

ALI: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Um, all right! Let's keep movin.

ALI: Is that the last…?

AUSTIN: No, there's one more. Here we go. Sniper Serpent says, "Hi, Table Friends. I've been running a wonderful Blades in the Dark game featuring a player who brilliantly plays a Spider who has the Soul Contract ability, which lets him make magically-enforceable contracts with people, ghosts and demons. And it's a lot of fun, but he's been relying on it a lot, and I'm starting to want to think of countermeasures for it. I don't want to take my player's fun toy away, and it's a good part of his character, but I want to be able to do something similar to what Austin has discussed doing with the Fantasmo invisibility situation. Austin, [coughs] how do you balance stopping this repeated solutions while not feeling like you're just taking away from the character? Everyone else, have you ever felt this effect impact you from the player side?"

Um, I think there's a—my biggest lesson is, I think I did it wro—mm! No! In the end, the Fantasmo invisibility stuff pays off super well, [DRE and ALI laugh quietly] actually. But I think it was much better with Mako and Larry, right? Which was like, if Mako—if Keith is going to keep Charming people inside of digital constructs, I'm going to treat one of them as actually being Charmed. Right? Eventually the dice are not gonna be a 10. Eventually there's going to be something that has…like, let them keep doing it, until they hit that 6. And then let them keep doing it, after that. And just like, show them what a consequence they didn't expect is, that isn't just, the spell fizzles. Right? Um, the thing that I would say is that your player is brilliantly playing [incredulous] "a Spider who has the Soul Contract ability, [ALI laughs] which lets him make magically enforceable contracts with people, ghosts and demons!"

ALI: Yeah, I don't see a problem here.

AUSTIN: If magic is enforcing, then guess what? That brilliantly-played Spider is also enforced to do whatever that contract says.

JANINE: Yeah, contract—that's what I was gonna say, [ALI: Yeah.] [DRE: Mm-hm.] contracts have terms on both sides.

AUSTIN: [cross] Both sides.

ALI: [cross] I—yeah. I was gonna say that the—it's weird that—it's not weird. It's funny that they bring up um. Fantasmo invisibility thing, 'cause like the perfect example is like the Fantasmo-Samot thing? Where it was [AUSTIN: Mm. Mm-hm!] like, sure, you can Charm him. he's also your best friend. [slight laugh]

AUSTIN: Right.

ALI: Deal with that! [DRE laughs]

AUSTIN: Deal with that. [laughter] But that came out of like a mixed success [ALI: Yeah.] or something, right? So I definitely get the vi—I *definitely* understand the like, "this fuckin ability, and they roll 10 on it every time because they have the +2 or +3 on it…" I guess the other one there is like think of problems that can't be solved with a contract, in your case, with—and I know that's hard, because ghosts, demons and people are all…very good things to make contracts with, but. Any other thoughts on this, while I pull up this move 'cause I wanna see if there's a loophole. Keep talk…[DRE laughs loudly]

JANINE: [laughs] I'm also curious about the like, particulars of this. Like, is it only to fight for you, is it like…

AUSTIN: Right.

JANINE: They have to [DRE: Yeah.] do whatever you say…or they tell you stuff…

ALI: Yeah, I just think, like, contracts have downsides.

JANINE: Yeah. [cross] There's always a clause.

AUSTIN: [cross] But the thing is, as the GM, I would never…if you rolled [sighs] maybe not never. I would state the consequences and ask. Right? So, the thing I wouldn't wanna do is be like, yeah, you signed this, and then you rolled a perfect result, and then I'm like, "oh, actually, it's [cross] bad." That would fuckin suck.

JANINE: [cross] Yeah. Yeah. That would. Yeas.

AUSTIN: All right, here we—I'm gonna read the move.

ALI: But no, but I—okay.

AUSTIN: No, you go ahead. What were you gonna say?

ALI: [laughs] Well, 'cause, what I would say is that like if this person has like five contracts with like different ghosts or whatever, like, at some point one of those guys is gonna come back! [cross] And be like.

JANINE: [cross] That's a question, does that—do they expire?

Like [DRE: Yeah.] do they just keep [cross] collecting contracts?

AUSTIN: [cross] So here's the—here's the book. "When you—" this is called Ghost Contract, which I'm guessing is the same move?

ALI: Okay.

AUSTIN: I think? I'm gonna just doublecheck, one second.

ALI: [slight laugh] This is -- okay.

AUSTIN: Soul contract. It's important! It's important! It's important. All right, I think it's jsut this. "When you shake on a deal, or draft one in writing [ALI: ~Oh!], you and partner, human or otherwise, both bear a mark of your oath. If either breaks the contract, they take level 3 harm Cursed." And then in italics underneath, "the mark of the oath is obvious to anyone who sees it. Perhaps a magical rune appears on the skin. When you suffer Cursed harm, you're incapacitated by withering, enfeebled muscles, hair falling out, bleeding from the eyes and ears, et cetera, [JANINE: [amused] Oh my god!] until you either fulfil the deal or discover a way to heal the curse." Now. Here is what I will say.

[ALI snorts]

Imagine for a moment that you knew some people—that you knew a friend of yours who would occasionally have enfeebled muscles, hair fell out, bleeding from the eyes and ears, whenever they broke a promise. Like, the most Pinocchio—the, like, the most grimdark Pinocchio shit there is [DRE and ALI laugh] of just like, you're just a liar. Then, also, what if they just had tattoos—new tattoos on them every time they made a [ALI: Yeah!] magic promise?

JANINE: [cross] Yeah.

DRE: [cross] But then they also disappeared later.

AUSTIN: Right. Right, *one*—one, if you ever knew someone who was like, I have three ghost contract, uh, marks on me today, and zero—and, you know, two or one the next day, it's like, well, who'd you betray? Which contract [cross] did *you* break?

ALI: [cross] This is the thi—like, if—okay. So if you're making a soul contract [amused] with Betty's mom from Riverdale, like.

AUSTIN: Thank you. [cross] Thank you. You know?

ALI: [cross] If you already—[DRE bursts out laughing] if you already have like Southside Serpents, uh, logo on your arm, she's gonna be like, fuck off!

AUSTIN: Right. Right. [ALI laughs]

JANINE: Or even like, maybe want something different. [AUSTIN: Also—] [ALI: Exactly.] Maybe those two parties are in opposition [cross] in some way.

AUSTIN: [cross] Right, and maybe signing the other one breaks the first one! Here's the other one. "When you shake on a deal or draft one in writing, you and your *partner* both bear a mark of your oath." This isn't—you don't trick someone into this. This isn't a thing where it's like, I roll the di—like, there's no dice roll here at all, actually. The dice roll is tied to can you convince someone to do a thing. And a thing that you as a GM always have in your power is, "no, this isn't an agreement they would ever take." You're in your—a *hundred* percent are allowed to say that. Um.

JANINE: Though now I wonder like if you've set a precedent of…of agreement to this, how do you introduce non-agreement? Without feel—without the player feeling slighted? [cross] You know what I mean?

AUSTIN: [cross] You sh—you say like, hey, all seas—or all campaign I have not been thinking about this in this way, but, [JANINE: Mm-hm.] there are some things people would not agree to. Like, some people would not agree to hurt their parents. Or their loved ones. There's nothing that you could do to convince this person to do that. Or like, there is nothing you could do in a single roll to convince Hadrian to stop believing in Samothes. Okay, you wanna convince Hadrian to stop believing in Samothes? All right. Well, then, we're gonna need three episodes and it's a long-term project. [ALI laughs quietly] Like, seriously! Like, that is a long—that's an [ALI: Yeah.] eight-step or twelve-step clock to convince Hadrian that Samothes is not divine. Like.

JANINE: Look, I'm patient, I can do it.

AUSTIN:: And totally! You can! [DRE laughs] And like that's—but that—but then, you know what you deserve at the end of all of that? [laughing] A ghost contract!

ALI: Mm-hm.

AUSTIN: You know.

JANINE: Or a cool tattoo! [laughs]

ALI: [cross] Right.

AUSTIN: [cross] Both! [laughs] But I think the other way here is like in moves like this, think about the repercussions that are not mechanical, that are fictional. Which is very much, imagine the world in which people who made ghost contracts bared marks of their oath. And don't let them hide them—you know, easily. Don't just be like, oh yeah, it's your—it's on your elbow. You know, like. And also it's really cold here, so everyone wears long sleeves. Make—

JANINE: Does it say glows? Like glowing shows through your clothing.

AUSTIN: Totally. And make it [ALI: [satisfied] Mm-hm.] glow, make it [DRE: Mm-hm.] visible. Or make them moves, make them do things, to hide it. Make it a complication. Say that like—

[1:00:00]

—yeah, people look at you weird when you come into the bar.

JANINE: Do a beach episode.

AUSTIN: Do a what episode?

JANINE: Do a beach [cross] episode, where everyone goes to the beach!

AUSTIN: [cross] Right, do a beach episode!

ALI: Yeah.

AUSTIN: Right. [DRE laughs] Yes. Totally.

JANINE: And they have to wear a sweater, and everyone's like what the hell.

AUSTIN: I—yes. [laughs] I think that the Cursed level 3 harm is the least effective way to keep them from doing this. This most effective one is to have people not ever wanna make deals with them, because they know that it will be, you know, magically sealed in place. [ALI laughs] You know? Um. [cross] Go ahead.

ALI: [cross] I just, as someone who was like on a mission with my best friend who was my coworker and my best friend who wasn't my coworker, and then I met someone who made a project I really like, and then my girlfriend was there: some of those ghosts should not like those other ghosts. [laughs] This is an easy solution!

AUSTIN: A hundred percent! [JANINE and DRE laugh] A hundred percent. Yes. Let those ghosts come back.

ALI: You're gonna be—you're gonna be running around town making friends with everyone, [AUSTIN: Yep.] that's gonna come back to you.

AUSTIN: A hundred percent.

[ALI laughs]

God. All right, I think that's a good answer. I like—I really—here's the thing I like. Send us more of these cool like, "here's a specific move. talk about this move." [DRE laughs] [cross] Things we like to talk about.

JANINE: [cross] Also. what if—I don't want to openly solicit a follow-up, but I would love to know if that—[AUSTIN: Oh, *please*.] how that—if that—you know. You know! [laughs]

AUSTIN: You know what, I'm gonna openly solicit—SniperSerpent. Tell me every ghost, demon [ALI: Oh, yep.] or person that they—also, demons! Are. *Very* good. [JANINE: Yeah.] [DRE: Yeah.] Even—like, in Blades? In Blades. There's a whole section of demons in this book, and they are a lot! Believe it or not.

ALI: Oh yeah?

AUSTIN: Uh-huh. Like this was not a thing that we had. If you go to page—where is the demon page? Devils. Here we go.

[ALI snorts]

Page 304.

JANINE: Well are they devils, or are they demons?

ALI: Yeah, is it a subsection?

AUSTIN: Uh, well.

JANINE: [cross] Do they sleep in tulips or roses?

AUSTIN: [cross] Okay, okay, okay okay okay. One second.

[DRE laughs loudly]

They sleep in roses. In Doskvol, a common parlance calls anything supernatural or disturbing a devil. Ghosts, demons, witches, sorcerors and the summonded horrors, et cetera, et cetera. And there's tables to generate these, which makes this book very good. This book has so many good tables in it. Ugh.

[ALI laughs quietly]

Spirit wizards, god damn!

ALI: Wow.

AUSTIN: That's not far enough in, one second.

ALI: [cross] We should play Blades again…

AUSTIN: [cross] Here we go. We should play Blades again at some point. Um.

DRE: It's a very good game.

[ALI laughs]

AUSTIN: It's a very good game. People—not here for people. Here we go. Here we go. Here for devils. Here for Demon Features.

[DRE bursts into laughter and ALI laughs silently]

You know. There's like a whole thing here of like Demon Types, Demon Desires, Summoned Horrors, et cetera, and like the fact that there's a whole Demon Desires section where it's like "oh yeah. they desire mayhem, murder, justice, corruption, power, control, knowledge, pleasure, suffering, war, revenge, chaos, freedom, savagery, manipulation, deception, fear, or achievement?" Those should be the conditions of the contract. And those should not be pleasant.

It shouldn't be like… it shouldn't be like, well, I like war, so if you get me a cool old war sword. No, it's a demon. Like, I'll sign that contract—or I'll make an agreement with you. I'll agree to this. But, you need to light the fuse of this next civil war. Right? Make it hard to get those agreements the more powerful they are. Otherwise it's just gonna be someone rolls to Sway and then they have a demon on their side, and that's not how demons work. And you're allowed to

say that. You're allowed to say, no, this, like big, you know, demon with seven angel wings and you know, a bloody…[weakly] forehead, I don't have a good one. [ALI sputters] I've been away for too long. [DRE laughs] [cross] It wants more…

ALI: [cross] Away from the demon game.

AUSTIN: From the demon—I need to go back to the demon game, you know?

[ALI laughs quietly]

So. Anyway.

There's a whole section on Various Forgotten Gods, there are 66 Forgotten Gods on this page!

ALI: [whisper] Jesus Christ…

AUSTIN: Give me a number!

DRE: [cross] 22.

ALI: [cross] …57—ooh.

AUSTIN: Okay.

DRE: 22 and then 57.

AUSTIN: All right, 22 is—I can mix in god—I can—here we go! Mix and match. Forgotten Gods mixed with Cult Practices. So I'm gonna mix a god and a practice [ALI: Oh wow.] as I see fit. 22! The name of the Forgotten God is, uh, "Our Blood Spilled in Glory…"

DRE: Mm-hm.

JANINE: That's an excerpt!

AUSTIN: Uh-huh! Uh-huh! And then actually it's not 50—it's not actually 66, it's 2 die—so you said 57? Ali?

ALI: Yes. Yes?

AUSTIN: Okay, do you want 56 or 61?

ALI: 61.

AUSTIN: Okay, so again, it is Our Blood Spilled In Glory, whose cult is all about the debasement or defilement of one sworn to an enemy order. So they just have like dope like evil altars to an enemy, like, Forgotten God order, where it's just like—they're constantly burning it, or like, covering it in…I just was gonna say jelly, and that's not a really great defilement!

JANINE: [laughs sharply] Offal?

AUSTIN: Awful. Thank you.

JANINE: O-F-F-A-L?

AUSTIN: Oh, yeah. [cross] Uh-huh? Perfect. Perfect.

DRE: [cross] Yeah yeah yeah.

AUSTIN: I'd roll on this thing all day! Ugh. [DRE laughs] All right. We should probably wrap it here, huh?

ALI: [sighing] Yeah.

AUSTIN: Yes. And yeah! To be clear, as Nick says in the chat, Sniper Serpent should talk to his player before doing the stuff, if they've been allowing the Soul Contract move [JANINE: Yeah.] freely prior, though. And a hundred percent, like, I think at any point you should be like, oh you know what, I've been reading this rule differently, I went back and I read it, and I think there are some things, like, blah blah blah blah blah. I think that that's a totally fine way to have that conversation.

JANINE: Any time you're like changing a course of something that isn't like deliberately spoilery, probably talk to the players, right? Like.

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JANINE: If you've been interpreting something weird or if you sort of have changed your mind about something, it's…

AUSTIN: Yeah.

JANINE: Worth telling them, 'cause otherwise they might feel that swerve in a way that detaches them a little bit from where they're at in the game.

AUSTIN: Totally. And like…you're always able to say, like, you don't—I really—I think that it's been getting in the way of some really dramatic stuff that we could be doing. It would be really fun to have those dmeons come calling. So going forward, x y z. And you can also—there are

also ways to situate that in a fictional thing, right? Which is like, you can have that conversation with them, and then say, but I think it would be cool if we keep it the way it worked until now, and something changed about the way your ghost contract worked. Why did that happen? What happened to the ghost contract where suddenly—you used to be able to just Sway—roll Sway once, and people would come—you know, under your spell, and now, it's this whole long thing. Like, is something interfering with your powers? Did the nature of magic here change? And roll with that, because that will end up being really fun. Um!

JANINE: Ran outta tattoo space.

AUSTIN: Ran out—that's it. [ALI: [snorts] See?] You ran out of all that tattoo space. They ran out of the magical tattoo ink, you know. That's it.

ALI: [cross] Yeah.

JANINE: [cross] Mm-hm.

AUSTIN: Um. Okay! Oh, apparently…uh, mm—no, I think that's gonna do it for us. We've already gone over the time. It is 11:44 here, so. Um. All right. That is gonna do it for us. As always, you can, uh, you can send your questions in to TipsAtTheTable@gmail.com, and you can support the show over at FriendsAtTheTable.cash. Thanks for hangin out, everybody. Let's time.is? You wanna do…15? Are we good for 15?

ALI: Time.is.

DRE: Mm-hm!

JANINE: Mm-hm!

AUSTIN: Uh, let's do 20.

ALI: Oh, sorry.

[JANINE makes an amused noise]

[DRE laughs]

AUSTIN: It's fine. Let's do 20 seconds.

[pause]

[clap]

ALI: Didn't we do 20 seconds at the start? That's so funny.

DRE: I think so!

AUSTIN: Yeah.

ALI: Aw.

[AUSTIN huffs]

JANINE: It's a good second.

[ALI laughs]

AUSTIN: It's a good second. Shoutouts to 20 seconds—all right, everybody, have a good night.

[JANINE laughs quietly]

[1:07:48]