



January's Frost

A role-playing game of *choice and consequence*,
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I / Into Darkness

It was a cold and dismal night, much like other nights in the land of my home. I was walking home rather late at night, having escaped the wrath of my father earlier by means of speed and stealth. Even now, I forget exactly what made him angry. Ah yes, the shirking of work or some such other life-threatening issue. When I reached sight of home, my sisters greeted me with no lack of cruel words. Seems they were made to suffer for my daring escapade. After the commotion, we agreed to sneak back into the house with hopes of avoiding further persecution. It was then that I saw the light to the north. Wandering farther and farther from the warmth and comfort of my home, I made my way north. The idea of seeing what caused the faint yellow light consumed me. With my sisters not far behind me, and some of them quite put out, I found the source of the light. It was none other than Nikolai, the lord of our lands. He, an old and benevolent man of some means, was trudging a reluctant path across the snowy ground. It was his light that I had seen, and the source of it was not a lantern at all but something afloat in the air beside him. Now we all became (at least somewhat) curious. What was the light casting object that could float? Where was he going at this late hour? Why was he headed to the dreaded northern valley? We followed him without speech or pause for clear thought. Over the dreaded northern land we traveled, well into the dark of night. Once he began to descend into the dreaded valley, our curiosity was aroused to fervor. The light beside him suddenly cast a stronger glow. A glow that would show strange markings when it fell upon the dead trees that lined out path. Finally, Nikolai ended his walk upon entering a clearing. The clearing was small and peculiar. It had no sign of snowfall, instead the ground seemed very flat and clear. He looked to his light and brushed some snow off his robes. The light changed its hue to a soft red and then I nearly fainted! The clearing was not a clearing at all, but a spindly tower that reached up into the night as far as the red light struck it. The door to this tower opened abruptly, and inside I could see the form of a tall man. His handsome face smiled a bit to Nikolai, and then he made a quick, curt bow. When he resumed his normal posture, I was shocked to realize he was looking at me! I turned in fright and saw my sisters on the ground in some kind of stupor. The ground seemed to shift beneath my feet and I fell into darkness...

This Game

What happened next? Well, I will get to that in a bit. Right now let me lay down the groundwork for this role-playing game. January's Frost is a game about choices and consequence in a land of fairy-tale magic. From the next part of the story, you will see what I mean clearly. The game requires a spirit of wonder and a bit of concern, not to mention a handful of players. One of these players takes on the role of the sorcerer. They have rather extensive control over the game, and are in many ways like the game-masters (GMs) of other role-playing games. At any one time, the player in the role of the sorcerer is playing a particular sorcerer. The other players take on the role of the sisters, a handful of young women who got a bit too curious one night and with a single choice, inflicted amazing consequence onto themselves. Well, now I can get back to the second part of the story.

About the Setting

The name of the game grew from the original setting concept: A small town in northern Siberia in 1845, where the daughters of an exiled Decembrist family discover a valley of untold magic and suffer far-reaching consequence. The name of Nikolai is Russian, as was the original feel of the game. As I see it now, there is no need to link it to that particular setting at all and I don't attempt too (though I'm keeping the name). If I ran the game it would take place in setting though. It has to have a medieval placement due to Nikolai being the lord of the lands, a distinctly feudal concept.

II / Into the Light

When I awoke, I found myself seated at a clean table. Lifting my head from the wood, I could see my sisters around me. They were also lifting their heads and looking about. There were several robed men in the room, most tall and rather attractive. The sound of their conversation mingled with that of the crackling fire behind them. Several of them seemed to be having quite an argument. I found myself unable to understand any of the speech, it sounded foreign. My sisters glanced at me and I shrugged back, but found I could barely move. I had not the strength to stand, and could barely lift my hand from the table. From behind me, a calm and collected voice spoke “Well little ones, It seems we have quite a problem now. It does seem that curiosity may have just killed several cats.” Nikolai moved around the table slowly and surveyed our reactions, ranging from bewilderment to quaffs of anger. He sat opposite me, with a soft and kind smile on his face. “Well, now we are left with only a couple options.” The arguing men in the background became silent, as if Nikolai’s presence alone had squashed all argument. “First of all, let me say that I am a strong proponent of option number two.” He turned and cast a few stern looks at the men behind him before continuing. “Firstly, we could simply eliminate you— this would be a painless sleep of course.” I found my shock mirrored in my sister’s faces. He continued with a gentle calm. “Secondly, we could let you stay here. Only— there would have to be some arrangement made. I mean you troublesome lot would have to offer something of value to the men here.” I could not tell how I felt at that moment about the choice, but it sure sounded better than option number one did. My younger sister, on my left, was the first to speak. She squeaked slightly as she forced the words out, “Value? What would we have of value?” Nikolai smiled. “If you have not noticed, this valley has a distinct lack of ladies. These men need wives. If you will stay, you each would be promised to one... engaged if you will.” We were of course, young and naïve and it did not take long to make the choice. It wasn’t until later that we began to realize sometimes death is better...

First Choice and First Consequence

The sisters made a choice, and then had to accept the consequence. The valley was a secret trove of magical knowledge, a place of long-standing heritage and tradition. Each sister in turn pledged herself to a rather unusually handsome sorcerer from the village, and each sister was bound to secrecy by powerful magic. This magic was not mind-control. In fact, it was nothing more than a curse upon them. Outside the valley they became the kind of creatures the men had first called them, rats. They could not speak to any but each other and the sorcerers in this state.

A New Life

Once everything settled down, they began to realize that they were under the influence of other unnatural forces. The pledges they made to their future husbands granted them a magical force that protected them, and sometimes aided them. In addition, they began to learn magic, since it was all about them. After a year of life in the dreaded valley, known to the sorcerers as Senex Senis (Senis for short), they have adjusted marginally. It is about this time that they begin to understand exactly why there are no women found in the valley.

Discovery of Trouble

Once the sisters gained access to the library, they began to learn at an astounding rate. Other than understanding simple magical charms, they came across reference and reference to angels and demons. Each reference seemed to contain a female context. Is there no such thing as a sorceress? When they began to practice the simple magical charms they had learned, their men were furious. It seemed that perhaps there was yet another mystery here that needed solved. The sorcerers quickly deemed their practice of magic as 'trouble' and called the sisters that occasioned its use 'trouble-makers'. Soon of course, all the sisters earned that label, and an uneasy feeling replaced the genuine warmth they had once enjoyed from the men of Senis.

Getting Started

Every sister needs a name, and each sister needs to place trust into her three magics. The three magics are The Curse, The Pledge, and The Trouble. Placing trust into them is deciding how the sister values them, with more trust in a magic meaning more power behind its use. Simply assign a count of dice to each. Give the highest trusted magic a three, the next highest a two and the remaining magic a

one. After you have assigned trust, then select a manner. The sister handles conflict most often with these methods. Think of it this way: How does she first respond to a situation that challenges her? Does she get violent? On the other hand, does she perhaps seek some cunning method to resolve the situation? Once completed, simply dream up some idea of the way the sister carries herself, how she uses her simple magic, and so on. Breathe some life into the character. Make a small spot, track, or such for two ever changing numbers called Shadow and Horror.

While this is going on, the sorcerer will be creating the names and manners of the men of the village. The sorcerer will also note the sorcerer Nikolai with the manner 'Genuine Kindness' into his records. Each sorcerer other than Nikolai will have a place to track a number called Fleece. Once every player feels comfortable with their characters, the sorcerer will introduce the men of Senis to the group. Then each player will introduce his or her sister in turn. After that, it is time to get on with the game itself.

The Three Magics

Each magic has its own consequences and effects. Before you can play the game you need to have some understanding of each. I will define here the source of each magic, the purpose of each magic, and the known rules of each magic.

Nikolai placed The Curse on the sisters, so he is the source of it. The curse was not meant to injure the sisters in any way, though it does limit their existence in a major fashion.

- **The Curse** has only a couple rules: 1) Upon leaving the valley each sister will become a rat of rather large size with at least one feature much like their pronounced human ones. 2) The speech of the rats can be understood by the sisters and other magical kin alone.

- **The Pledge** is a blood bond between the sister and her intended sorcerer. The source of the magic, in this case, is her intended sorcerer. The Pledge also has a couple rules: 1) While the sorcerer lives, the pledged one can not die. 2) The sorcerer always knows the location and circumstances of the pledged one.

- **The Trouble** is a purely internal affair. The Trouble is the limited knowledge of magic that the sister has gained from her time in the library of Sennex Senis. Two rules work here as well: 1) Trouble should be used to vocalize cursory (limited) angelic (positive) magic. 2) Trouble is never to be vocalized out of pain or anger, because it serves up provident (unlimited) demonic (negative) magic in this case. I will define more about the two types of magic quite a bit later.

Structure of Play

The play of the game occurs in stories. Each story can be short or long, can be foul or pleasant, or turn out in any form possible. The story however, must concern one or more sisters and one of their magics. In general, the stories feature a central conflict that challenges the magic in some drama provoking way.

Between each story is a period of directed discussion where all the players can offer up conflict ideas for other player's sisters, but not there own. The sorcerer just selects the magic that will be central to the story's conflict. Then they should be quite during each proposal, after which they chose to embrace or dismiss them. Once the sorcerer embraces an proposed idea, then the discussion is done.

The point of letting the sorcerer embrace or dismiss each idea is to allow them to direct the style of feel of play into the realm they want to explore. If the idea proposed by a player is thought provoking and ideas shoot into your head, then run with it. If not, tell that player why it doesn't work for you and ask for another suggestion.

Making Proposals

In order to propose a conflict for a story, start general and then narrow the idea as you go along. For instance, start by select a sister. You already know the central magic for the story conflict. Now you just need to create a situation that provokes the mind of the sorcerer. Let me give you an example. I select the sister Marina, and the central magic is The Pledge. I take the easy way out and simply look for a provoking situation that puts one of the rules in question. Rule 2 of The Pledge: The sorcerer always knows the location and circumstances of the pledged one. I like that, it gives me an idea for a conflict. I say that Marina has fallen in love with a servant boy in Senis, and is visiting him every evening. She is lying to her intended and telling him she is cleaning that tower instead. Sounds like something that could go somewhere. Questions are raised: How accurate is the rule? How much of the circumstance does the sorcerer know? As the sorcerer I would beginning thinking about those things (which could be different in each game you play of course), especially about the manner of the intended in question and how they would react to such a discovery.

Once a Proposal is accepted

Once the sorcerer accepts a proposal, then the sister that is named in the proposal (or perhaps the group of sisters that are named) decide who will be the sorcerer for the current story. Once they decide that, the sorcerer player will play

that sorcerer and that sorcerer only for the story. The other players become the ensemble. Each member of the ensemble can take on the role of his or her sister, an involved character, or the whims of magic itself at any given time. By default, they are whims of magic. In this case, when magic is used they have a say about its affect. They can involve themselves in play as their sister at any time they wish, unless the sorcerer vetoes them with good reason (like their sister is already established as busy, unconscious, etc). They are always allowed to propose interesting involved characters at turns in the story. Given the sorcerer accepts the proposal then they can play that character when it fits (as a sorcerer-player consensus) for the rest of the story.

Narration and the Question

During the game, the narration can be in the hands of any except the sister (or sisters) named in the story's proposal. The narration always begins in the hands of the sorcerer, and can be taken by anyone in the ensemble by a simple question. This question is one of ideas: **Wouldn't it be cool if?** An idea follows, like the outcome of an event or an alternate event in place of the last one to be described. If at least one other player answers yes to the question, then that player takes the narration. They can keep it or hand it back to the sorcerer at any time they so wish. Characters under control of other players, like the sorcerer and the sisters cannot be narrated about without that player's approval. The question can be raised at any time to deflect the outcome of a narrated event, unless the mechanics of choice and consequence are in play.

Magic / Choice and Consequence

When something becomes an issue of the sister's magic, then it becomes a matter of choice and consequence. More accurately it could be stated as consequence and choice, because the consequence is determined before and the choice is made after. The first thing that needs to be determined is the type of magic employed. Here are the restriction on what the three magics can do, starting with the most restrictive:

- **The Curse:** This magic is intended to shield the sisters from detection by anyone of non-magical nature. The magic is that of deception and manipulation, and can be bent to allow deception and manipulation on the part of the sisters.

- **The Pledge:** The magic of The Pledge bonds the sister to her intended. It is a magic of protection and knowledge, and can be bent by a sister for those purposes.

- **The Trouble:** All of the learning the sister has done in the library has given her the ability to cast one word charms. These charms can be anything the sister wishes, but she reaps what she sows when using trouble in a negative manner. Both the songs of angels and demons are vocalized through her charms, as I will discuss later.

Consequence is measured on a seven point scale, where one is minimal and almost unobtrusive consequence and seven is dire and consuming consequence. Dice rolls in the game are a pool affair, tossing one or more six-sided dice. For the use of a given magic, you roll the amount of trust dice you decided to award it at the start. You then keep the lowest die unless the target of your magic is a sorcerer, in which case you keep the highest die and add one. If you employ your sister's manner in the magic well, then you can roll an additional die as a reward.

You end up with a consequence result on a scale of one to seven (more than seven is capped at that score), higher is worse of course. Now the player of the sister working the magic must make a choice. There are three options: shadow, embrace, or refute the magic. The player can choose to shadow the magic, and let it fail with some mishap. The benefit of this is that there is no consequence, instead half of the consequence rounded down is added to her shadow score (that little track added to the character sheet). The player can choose to embrace the magic, both letting it succeed and suffering the immediate consequence upon the sister. This choice is the only one that will let the magic work its effect normally. Finally, the player can choose to refute the magic, this is the sister challenging the consequence with hopes of mastering it the charm. The sister must have shadow to refute magic. Literally, she duels magically with her shadow for mastery of the magic. If she succeeds, she has control of the charm's effect. If she fails, her shadow is freed and goes out into the world to wreak mischief. In addition, her shadow is immune to her own magic. A sorcerer or another of her sisters will have to deal with it.

Magic / Choosing To Shadow

When a sister opts to shadow her magic, she has no desire to suffer the determined amount of consequence. Instead, she whispers to her charm and it returns to her. It infuses her with power instead, but the kind of power one can't truly control. The power returns to her as a shadow of herself, isolated from her like a bad memory.

The shadow itself is a spirit of mischief and wonder. When it is let loose, it runs rampant using the type of magic it contains (the kind of magic the sister shadowed into it). It is a mirror of the sister magically and immune to her charms, making it an issue that has to be dealt with by the other sisters or sorcerers.

Magic / Choosing to Embrace

The choice to embrace the magic says: Ok, so I know I'm going to suffer but damn it all - I want this to happen! When a sister embraces her magic she lets it all out, the good and the bad, with her focus simply on the desire to make it work. The player of the sister compares the consequence amount to her current shadow. If it is higher, then she suffers torment. If it is equal or lower, her shadow whispers out mischief that causes consequence all around her. Torment is deep personal pain, horror in the terms of this game. You gain horror equal to half the consequence rounded up. I cover Torment and Mischief in its own section shortly.

Magic / Choosing to Refute

Refuting a use of magic is actually attempting to unite the sister with her shadow in an attempt to master the affect of it. The shadow and sister argue in unintelligible whispers until either the shadow wins or the sister wins. Mechanically, this is represented by tossing a die and adding three. Compare this result to the sister's shadow plus the consequence of the current magic. If she beats that number she wins, otherwise the shadow wins. If she wins, the magic is under her control and does as she describes (limited by its intent of course). If the shadow wins she suffers torment equal to the total she was rolling against (half of that rounded-up added to horror).

Consequence / Torment and Mischief

The outcome of all consequence is either torment or mischief. Mischief is on the surface, the kind of consequence that goes away with time. Torment is deep and close to the heart, the kind of consequence that is lasting. Some examples perhaps?

- **Mischief:** A 'Stun' charm that ricochets off of a pillar that lands on a sister's leg and pins her. A 'Deceive' charm that causes the victim to learn the sister's true name.

- **Torment:** A 'Stun' charm the ricochets off of a pillar that lands on a sister's arm and cripples it. A 'Deceive' charm that imparts one of the sister's magics into the victim!

Of course the more personal the torment is, the better it will play in the game. The player of the sister suffering the torment should always have the choice to describe something personal, and then allow the narrator to employ that in the torment.

Horror is the suffering and anguish of the sister. Whenever torment is suffered, the player of that sister must roll a die and compare the result to her horror score. If it is greater, she cannot act for one word (enough time spent on an action word for the use of The Trouble). If it is equal she is delayed for that many words. If it is less she is unconscious, crazed, or otherwise preoccupied for a period of hours equal to the roll. During this time the player becomes one of the ensemble, and another sister chosen by the sorcerer steps forward to become the center of play. When the other sister returns, continue the game as if both were named in the story's proposal.

Consequence / Shadow and Horror

Both the shadow and horror numbers are derived of consequence. The two numbers play crucial roles in parts of the choice and consequence mechanics. Both numbers cannot exceed seven, and anything that would make that happen causes the sorcerer to confront the sister. The confrontation will occur as soon as possible, and in the manner of the current sorcerer. The outcome of the confrontation will be either forgiveness or a curse. The sorcerer and the sister's player play out the confrontation, and the ensemble decide which she gets in the end. Forgiveness wipes clean the offending score (either horror or shadow, but not both) and causes the gain of a trust die placed into one of the three magics. A curse also wipes clean the offending score but also adds some new limitation to the sister's existence and costs her a trust die (from any of her magics, player's choice).

Narrative Challenges

When the narration meets with dispute, it is a challenge. In general the player of the acting sister challenges the narration. In that case, the challenger needs to offer up an alternate narration. Then the ensemble and the sorcerer cast votes (or use open discussion, or whatever they want) to reach a consensus and decide on which narration sticks. These challenges cannot override the choice and consequence mechanics though.

The most common time a challenge should be used is to determine the power of magic. How powerful is a sister? What can they achieve with their magics? This is a good instance of using the challenge to resolve something the mechanics don't even try to describe. The only time that special consideration is needed is when a sister has a magical conflict with a sorcerer...

Sorcerers and Sisters

The sorcerer is on a level far beyond the sister. They are immune to all but The Curse, so a sister's best bet is to deceive and manipulate them with their magic. Additionally, the sorcerer will always see through all such magic unless unified through choosing to refute it. Every time they fleece their intended in this manner, they get one step closer to breaking The Pledge. The sorcerer player simply raises the fleece count one and rolls a die against it. If the die is less than the fleece then The Pledge is broken and it's trust dice are placed into The Trouble instead. Soon after this they will enjoy a talk with Nikolai.

Breaking the Pledge - A Talk with Nikolai

This is simply a meeting between the sister and Nikolai to determine the intentions of the trouble-maker. It is important to remember that Nikolai's manner is 'Genuine Kindness' and that often averts a disastrous showdown at this point. He will always lay down the facts, both good and bad that their actions have set in motion:

- **No more protection.** The Pledge was giving the sister pretty much unlimited protection from death. Now without that, injuries inflict horror (even when they are caused by mischief- 1 to 3 horror based on how severe).

- **No more forgiveness.** No sorcerer will forgive the sister, and confrontations with always result in curses.

- **No Safety.** Once all the trust dice are cursed away, she will become nothing more than a demon.

- **Some Freedom.** The sister now enjoys a new measure of freedom, and if they can prove they can handle themselves Nikolai will remove The Curse.

- **Some Future.** The sister can elect to study with Nikolai, and if she does she will place one of her dice from The Trouble into The Wish.

Níkolai and The Wish

If a sister elects this path, she gets a new magic called The Wish. The Wish is not unlike a dream, and needs narrowing. The sister decides on the type of virtue she wishes to express with all her heart. She can use The Wish as her magic when expressing that virtue. The ancient magical virtues are Charity, Integrity, Morality, Courage, and Mercy.

Other Strange Occurrences

Some other strange things can happen in the game. If the all the sisters are otherwise preoccupied by their torment via horror, then a wrap occurs. The sorcerer steps in and cleans up the mess, wrapping things up and closing the story. When torment preoccupies the sister originally named in the proposal, the ensemble can decide to call for a wrap (group consensus) right then, with the same affect as above. This can be used to end long games, or perhaps curtail real bad things from happens depending on the situation.