

Sloat and Larkin



a role-playing game by Nick Moffitt

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History

And in that way did the great Fortuna sow the plague of rats and pigeons upon the populace, with the many days and nights filled with the gurgle of mortal screaming from a milliard half-man throats.

—Wawona, blind poet of the First Barony

The history of the Aptos Basin is a sorry, confused jumble of official records, folk legend, and unbelievable dynastic hagiography. Few facts concerning people or politics survive today, but some points are commonly agreed on.

First, the region reached its pinnacle of achievement under the reins of the Bountiful Hydraulic Empire. The Empire made great use of the great Aptos River, carving grids and spokes of canalway within its central city of Ulloa.

Second, the city of Ulloa became first a refugee area and then a defensive fortress for former Imperial subjects following the dissolution of the Empire. The substantial cisterns and waterworks helped sustain the survivors throughout the ensuing sieges. Under the direction of various Baron-Generals, the defensive walls slowly rose to hide the spires of Ulloa from view, and a city on a river became a mesa in a plain.

Finally, the fortress found itself cursed by a plague of rats and pigeons; not simple pestilence, but rather a human disease that passed through unknown means and reshaped its victims with horrifying creativity. All records from this point on are sketchy at best, but it would seem that those affected were banished from Ulloa to the lands beneath the towering mesa.

And so there they live, pigeons and rats in the suburbs and shantytowns. Places like Fauxbourg, Chester's Crannock, and Stinkside house the children of barbarians and half-men alike.

The Aptos River

As fire consumes a branch, so too do the greatest of mankind's congregations process water to ash.

—Youngblood Coleman, Warden of Imperial Water District IV

The Aptos River now has two names. Where it approaches Ulloa it is called the Carrot, and the discharge from the great mesa is called the Jug. The two rivers are as different in character as to be almost two separate rivers, and the habitations on their banks reflect this divide.

The Carrot is, for the most part, clear smooth-flowing water. The settlements that draw from it are largely healthy towns and villages. Most of the region's farms draw their irrigation ditches from the Carrot, including those that are much closer to the Jug.

The reason for this is that the Jug is a slow-moving sludge of murky black muck. Many believe that this foul substance is responsible for a higher rate of plague on that side of the Ulloa mesa, but the numbers do not bear this out. The denizens untouched by plague, however, live in such deplorable conditions as to be often mistaken for Sloatmen or near-Sloat by the casual observer.

The Plague

We sired curious perversions of mankind, a looking glass thrust in our faces as we perched timidly on our turret spires and cowered in our castle walls!

—Baron Pretender Corbett Bosworth, at the battle of Hunter's Point

The symptoms of the plague begin with a fairly standard list: fever, nausea, and delirium. Within hours, cataracts begin to set within the eyes of the afflicted and the gums begin to soften. Speech soon becomes impossible and death by dehydration is possible if care is not given.

It is at this stage that the afflicted divide into at least two groups: Sloats and Larkins.

Sloats take on various characteristics of a rat: elongated jaw formations, increased body hair, claw-like fingernails, overdeveloped hindquarters, and tail-like developments from the sitz bones. The cataracts clear to improved night vision with possible colorblindness or nearsightedness. Sloat teeth may reappear in such a way that they never stop growing, requiring constant gnawing to prevent overdevelopment.

Larkins become more the image of a strange bird, like a dove or pigeon. Hair falls out and turns to down. Feathers may appear, depending on various circumstances such as the age and weight of the afflicted. Bones lighten and become hollow, and cartilaginous edges form on the lips potentially leading to beak formations. If the subject is very small or young when afflicted, the transformation may be complete enough to allow flight over

short distances, but long-distance migration is impossible. Despite the limits of Larkin flight, rumors still circulate that Ulloa has cast a net over the top of the walls to keep the afflicted away.

The Suburbs

Mother and child, they followed the smoke to the icy shoulder of Ulloa. Here they cower, in our fortifications and encampments, praying to Fortuna that her shining city opens to us once more. By the water of their eyes, I must not fail them!

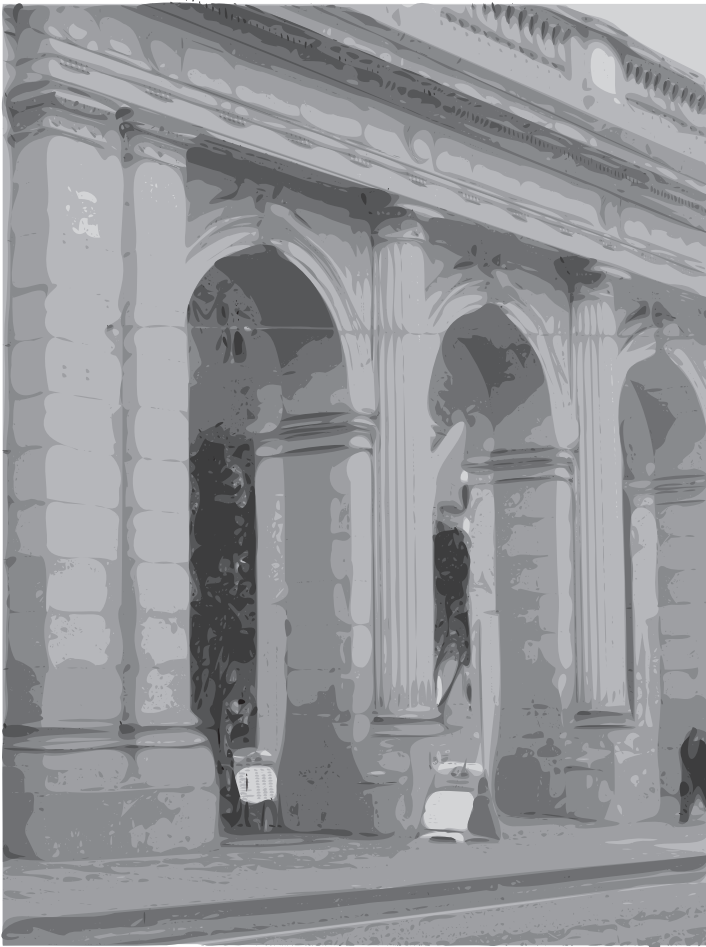
—Captain Bemis Cole, in a letter to his father during the fourth siege of Ulloa.

After the plague descended on Ulloa during the reign of the first Baron-General, the afflicted and any suspected of carrying the plague were exiled into the surrounding plain. In the centuries to follow, the descendants of these exiles took refuge where they could in the camps of invaders, turning them into makeshift villages and towns once the occupying forces left or died.

The siege-towns share a certain similarity to Ulloa herself, in many ways. They tend to have large outer defensive walls; often these are made from wooden logs, but many are of stone quarried in the Horizon Mountains and floated down the Carrot.

Some invaders saw the plight of the Aptos wretches, but wished to keep them out of their camps. Several temples to the goddess Fortuna were erected, and villages sprouted around them. These towns are more fluid, and many of the basin's markets prefer to assemble in the shadow of these cathedrals.





The City

The city as she stands is both the price of luxury and the bounty of loathsome politics. What peasant alive wouldn't sell his plot for a year in the halls of the silk alley? And what man, after living a year in such finery, does not curse its very paving stones?

—Antonyn Crocker, Imperial moderator of the Regat Prospectum Debates

Ulloa stands tall amid the chaos of humanity and half-beast below. Few outside have seen any hint of the city's workings beyond a brief glimpse through the Trade Gates where the Carrot River flows into the mesa. The old Imperial canals and waterways still exist at the ground level, and all goods for trade enter and leave by the Carrot.

The Underside, as its workers call it, is the only region of Ulloa that outsiders may visit. If a pureblood human passes a divination test proving

the absence of plague, he or she may be permitted to work the docks and canals for a modest wage. No Underside workers ever see their masters above, loading goods onto lifts and communicating with their employers through a series of bells and ropes. Legend has it that the Castellan once walked the canals of the Underside, his features obscured by silk robes and cowl.

The exclusivity of the job grants Undersiders a special status in some circles, and makes them pariahs in others. Upon successful application into the Underside crew, a mark of three wavy lines is made indelibly on the left hand. This makes it difficult to hide the fact that you work for the city, and impossible to resign.

As for what exists above the Underside, no one can say. The best clues come from the occasional body sent down on the lifts, eyes clouded and unable to speak as the plague courses through its blood. These exiles are rare, and those who do survive the plague often live out their lives in hermitage on the Horizon Mountains.

The Game

Players in Sloat and Larkin play characters from the many and varied suburbs of Ulloa. They may play Pureblood Human, Sloat, or Larkin in any degree of transformation.

Characters are represented by four pools of dice, each representing some innate characteristic, and sets of dice allocated to particular abilities or skills that these pools may fuel. The pools are arranged into four quadrants as follows:

Raw Mind	Refined Mind
Raw Body	Refined Body

Raw Mind: This is your force of will, focus, concentration, spiritual power, or supernatural ability. It drives your empathy, your charismatic talents, and your general intuitive prowess.

Refined Mind: This is your intelligence, wit, cleverness, and scholarly learning. It drives your knowledge and reasoning abilities.

Raw Body: This is your strength, your endurance, and your innate physical prowess. It drives your speed, your resistance, your fitness, and your overall health.

Refined Body: This is your dexterity, your agility, your reflexes, and your flexibility. It drives your accuracy, your reactivity, and your physical coordination.

Character Creation

To begin, take four index cards (or a sheet of paper divided into four quadrants) and label them with the four pools. On the back of each pool, write a short micro-story that describes that aspect of your character (20 to 50 words is sufficient).

Each character begins with 20 dice to allocate among pools and abilities. The number of dice in a particular pool are marked at the top of the card, and dice allocated to abilities associated with that pool are listed beneath.

Playing the Game

When a conflict arises, players allocate dice from pools and abilities to a roll. When the dice are rolled, the following results are tallied:

- Dice showing 6 are successes
- Dice showing 1 are exhausted and moved to the GM's stash

The number of successful dice indicate the degree to which the character succeeds. One success is good, two is better, and three is great. A roll that shows no sixes is a failure.

Allocating Dice

Allocating dice happens in three stages:

1. A player may choose an ability that applies to a situation. Those dice are added to the roll.
2. The player may then allocate any, all, or none of the dice from that ability's pool, adding them to the roll.

3. The player may allocate dice from the other three pools, using the following exchange rate:

1. Two dice may be used to equal one die in a quadrant beside or above/below.
2. Four dice may be used to equal one die across the diagonal.

So one die may be added to a "Raw Mind" roll at the cost of two "Raw Body" or two "Refined Mind" dice, but it would take *four* "Refined Body" dice.

Returning Dice

Once the roll is complete and all exhausted dice are removed and successes tallied, dice are returned to their various locations in the following order:

1. Dice are returned to the ability that was used, refilling it from the GM's stash if necessary.
2. Dice are returned to the ability's pool
3. Dice are returned to the other three pools, reversing the exchange rate. First return to

Example Character: Drumm

Drumm is a hardy sloat from the slums of Rickets-on-Jug. He is an orphan, and believes that his true pureblood parents still reside in Ulloa. Drumm has devoted his life to finding a way into the walled city.

Raw Mind: ****

Uncanny Senses: *
Smooth Bluffer: *

Refined Mind: **

Detective: **

Raw Body: ****

Brawling: *
Climbing: *

Refined Body: **

Sneaking: **

adjacent pools, and finally to the diagonal.

This has the result that ability dice are never depleted, pool dice are likely to be exhausted, and costly exchanged pool dice are the most likely to be exhausted.

Opposed Rolls

When two characters or active forces strike at each other, the number of successes each receive are taken from the opposing side's target pool.

Defensive Stance

If a roll is declared to be a defensive roll, each successful die will cancel out a successful die from an opponent.

Preparation Rolls

Successes in a preparation roll are granted as a number of extra dice for some particular roll to follow.

Healing Actions

If the story permits, players who have the means to repair or heal exhaustion or battle damage may roll to restore a player's pool. Each success adds a die to the target pool.

Character Advancement

Through GM bonuses and healing actions, players may occasionally accumulate more dice in a given pool than their character cards list. At the beginning of each session, however, this number is reset to what's marked on the card. More permanent improvement only comes when a particular pool does particularly well or poorly.

When a player exhausts a pool entirely or rolls four or more successes in a given roll, the GM must grant an "experience die" for allocation anywhere in the quadrant that was rolled. If a player wishes to add a new ability, there must be an appropriate story-based reason for why this new capability was learned.

The GM's Stash

At the beginning of each session, the GM gets a number of dice for each player. Initially this number is five, but the GM also gets one die for each "experience" die previously earned by all present players.

All dice that come up 1, including those rolled by the GM, are placed into the GM's stash. This stash is what the GM uses to allocate dice to NPCs, grant situational bonuses to players' rolls, and pay out the result of healing actions or preparation rolls.

The stash mainly limits the strength of the conflicts faced by the players in a given scene. The GM may naturally recycle the dice from absent NPCs and allocate

them to new foes and supporting characters.

NPCs are normally represented as raw pools, unless they are central to the story. Often even throwaways will have some crucial artifact or ability that is worth representing as an ability.

Example NPC: Sansome

Sansome is an undertaker who handled the body of a key player in Drumm's research. He knows who was at the funeral, but speaks in riddles. He is devoted to his work, and thinks of people mostly in terms of coffin styles: "Oh yes, that poor lad from Stocktown... Bare pine with spruce floral detail and wicker handles. Sad way to go, really..."

Raw Mind: *****

Raw Body: *

Finessed Body: **

Finessed Mind: *