

## The War of the Sheaves

*a GM'ed game of war, matriarchy, and caste for 3-5 people*

*by Zac Dettwyler*

[Ronnies 2010 Contest stuff: chosen words are **soldier** and **old**. Age matters, and the military matters.]

### The History

It's been two hundred years, or ten generations, since the war, whichever is longer. It's been hundreds of harvests since then, to be sure.

Why the war happened doesn't matter all that much; it may to you, but that's your own affair. What matters to the both of us is what came next: Durum, a city, a frail old lord's domain, came crashing down. First, the men all went to war, to swell the Emperor's armies.

The women and children were left behind with a few old soldiers, the elders, and the lord himself. They were used to hard and thankless work, those women and children, but the war only worsened their toil: much of cloth they sewed and grain they grew went to men, like always, but now the men weren't even around to take it! It was taken, *stolen*, more like, by men from the White City, faraway men who took the fruits of their labors away, for strangers to use.

No one knew, or no one would say, when the men would be coming home. True, not every single man had left old Durum, but nearly all the husbands and fathers and brothers and uncles were gone, gone like ghosts, down the slopes and into the valley and out of sight like the moon when it's set. Those women who knew their letters did write for those who didn't, and when the White City men came next, for more cloth and more grain, they had a whole bushel of notes and letters and things for those men to take to the men who had gone.

Not a woman among them ever did learn what became of those letters.

The men from the White City, though, they came back – time and again, they were back, regular as harvest-time, ready with wagons for clothing and grain. Yes, they remembered the letters; no, they didn't know if the men had gotten them. Every time they came, some wife or daughter would ask, and every time their answer was the same. And the women would sigh and huddle together to watch the wagons vanish down into the valley with the sun as it set.

That is, of course, until they time when they didn't.

It might have been because the harvest was so small; it might have been that someone thought to herself, *My son is never coming back*. Or maybe she had thought of her husband.

Whatever was in her mind on that day, the men from the White City, they were loading up their wagons and crossing names off a scroll with the Emperor's face on it in wax. This woman, this wife or mother (but probably both), she asked him, “Did you ever deliver them letters?”

And the White City man (he was new), he said, “What letters?”

And the woman, she took up a stone and she killed him dead, like thunder.

And all the women, they ran up, yelling and screaming like the horses of Gods, and they all took stones and they threw them, hard as nails, and the White City men, they screamed too, and fell, and bled and died.

When it all settled down, the women started thinking what they'd done, and they were all afraid. They fretted and wept and tugged on their braids, so afraid that the White City would know, that word would get out and they'd be dead.

That's when one of them said, “Now we have to kill the old lord, stop word getting out.”

And so they did. They did it with their stones and hands and sickles and ropes, things in the ground or out of the ground, and when it was done, they stood together in the field by the keep and felt their fear go out of them. It went into the sky and into the ground and the water and stones, but it was gone from them, and when they wept, it was for the husbands and sons they would never see again, not for themselves.

That's when Durum became what it is, now.

### Places in the World

Durum is an isolated mountain territory – long ago a kingdom, more recently an imperial province, lately a republic run by women.

The White City is somewhere in the lowlands, but how far away is up to the group to decide. What it's like is up to the group, too. What's important is that nobody knows what things are like down there – not that they ever did.

Ask yourself – did anyone ever come looking for the missing quartermasters? Did anyone ever come to take the next yearly tribute from the provincial governor?

Of course, there's another question we could ask ourselves: if none of those things ever happened, *why not?*

### Farming and the Durumian commune

Without the need to tithe to the governor, his soldiers, or the clerical staff, the women of Durum could finally work for themselves, first and foremost. More properly, they worked for one another – the community turned inward, reorganizing the work to provide enough for everyone. After this change, even famines weren't as big a problem anymore – nobody had more than enough to eat in times of want, but the poorest clans were better off, and there *were* no rich folk anymore. Everyone must contribute what labor they can, and learn a trade, and serve in the common defense. No exceptions! Every farm is a commune – everyone who lives off its yield must work it and care for it.

Some of the clans lost out in this new arrangement, it's true, but there wasn't any wealth, anymore – without imperial merchants arriving every season, coinage became so rare and precious that the silver shekel is more of a religious artifact, now – a token given by the priestesses to truly heroic members of the community.

### The three ages of a Durum woman

Another necessity was changing who runs society.

Since everyone had to work, the clans who'd been the poor demanded that everyone should get to rule, as well.

And so it was.

Until menarche, Durumian girls have no great amount of responsibility – they must do the planting, and all must learn the rudiments of a trade, but when there's no work to be done (and there's less, since all must do it) they can do what they please. This is the *first age*.

From menarche to menopause, Durumian women must learn soldiery, go on patrol, and spend some part of their time working a trade. Lastly, they must bring in the harvests. This is the *second age*.

From menopause until death, Durumian women must represent their families in the *annum*, a senate of clans that manages the farms, workshops, and patrols. They plan the plantings and harvests, decide what must be made by the artisans, and keep track of the patrols. Individual members of the *annum* are called *anilum*. This is the *third age*.

### The role of men in Durum

Most of the men remaining in Durum during the old war were elders; there were plenty of boys also, and their fate became a matter of great debate.

Those first boys of the new time did what boys had done forever in Durum – they labored, they

watched the borders, and they learned the men's work. It was strange, but not too much so, that their mothers and aunts and grandmothers shared what they knew of man-work. Then the day came when the first boy, newly a man, had to go and choose a wife, and his *mother* was the one who had to help him.

That was a time of many daughters, and hardly any sons, and so it was that a mother went round to a *second* clan seeking a wife for her son, even though she'd helped him choose a first. There weren't enough husbands to go around, and no one stopped her from doing this.

Other mothers, eager for their precious sons to inherit great swathes of land, took the idea and made it their own. What boys there were, they married many wives.

The years passed, babes were born, and there were many new sons among the Durum-clans, but there were no men in great numbers. And so it fell to women, mostly, to do the men's work: women learned the spear and shield, and the hunting bow, and the smith's hammer, and the wood-ax. If they hadn't, there would not be food or firewood or clothes enough for all.

Eventually, men were so precious that the clan elders decided to forbid them doing any work that could see them injured – in short, the men were kept at home to do the spinning, the cooking, and the rearing. Women in their prime were more common, more expendable, and so they did the men-work and made their bodies learn to do it well.

Men have their three ages also, in Durum – from infancy to semenarche, from semenarche until his wives stop bearing children, and from then til death.

In their first age, young boys learn the safe, if drudging, work that's done to keep the household up. They can play with one another, but they must not risk their precious, future seed, so no girl-play – it's too rough!

Second age men marry several women, but fewer than in those early days of Durum after the change. They are considered the precious property of their wives, and must keep to the house unless escorted by a relative or a woman trusted by the clan. They must sire children as they can, with all their wives, so that Durum has the hands it needs to feed and clothe itself.

Third age men have done their duty to society, and may live as they please, especially if their seed has run out. They are expected not to encourage wildness among the younger men, but that's one of their only forbearances.

### Where That Leaves Us

Durum is remote, secreted in a mountain valley far from the heart of civilization.

There are a couple of questions that need answering:

1- have the Durumians any reason to continue their patrols? Have they ever found anyone, or fought anyone?

2- have the Durumians made contact with anyone from the lowlands before? Or, alternately, has any other mountain culture, or even a nation from *beyond* the mountains, made itself evident before?

Eventually, an isolated community will need to pair off its members more carefully, to ensure that kin don't intermarry. Both of these questions will help to address this problem.

There are two other questions that could *stand* to get an answer, but don't require one:

- What is religion like among the Durumians? What was it like before, and what is it now? The sun carries some masculine associations; it's a farming society; and grain is, or was, their primary export. The pieces are there for a sort of Mesopotamian fertility-god scenario, but more likely, there's a *goddess* of grain, or perhaps there is now, but wasn't before. Think on it.

- How big is Durum, anyway, including the environs? How many people live here, how large is the territory, how long are the patrols, et cetera? This question can have a different answer every time you start a new game of *War of the Sheaves*, but it does demand a bit of mulling over.

However you answer these questions, you are now left with this loose idea for your starting situation: *a stranger has been found by the patrols*.

Ask yourselves – is she alone? What's she look like? Where is she from? What does she want? Is she alive, or dead? Injured, or whole? Harmless or a threat? *A man or a woman?*

To help decide how to proceed from here, it's time to make player-characters.

**[In the event that the Stranger is male, it's very important I express that Durumians are not short on males in any severe way. Male births might not be as common as female births, but mutual polyandry and a healthy, relaxed attitude about female (if not male) sexuality mean that Durumian soldiers are not going to go crazy over *A Man!!!* They have their dignity, and it's likely their first assumption that any male stranger encountered is a threat, a danger, possibly even something that could *pollute* the community. So advised, read on.]**

### Character Creation

Now, as the group has learned the brief history of Durum, and some of how its people live, you're ready to create protagonists and frame an exciting story set somewhere in relation to Durum.

First of all, the default protagonist is a second-age Durumian woman: you're likely married, a soldier, and an artisan. You help to bring in the harvests, your daughters (have you any) do the planting, and your husband (have you one to share) does the spinning and the rearing and cooks for the clan, with the help from other husbands. Any sons you have will live in the clan home, where they learn the spinning and other men's work.

You are well-known, credible, and skilled. Whatever other decisions you make about your character, these three facts must be true.

Mechanically, your protagonist will have defining traits in the form of Keys and Implements – the former are basically prompts, behavior cues, that you can interact with for rewards, and the latter are basically problem-solving methods at your disposal.

You will begin with two Keys from the list below, but feel free to devise one of your own as you wish. As you can see below, they follow a simple formula: do something straightforward that fits the Key and gain 1 experience point. Do something more complicated or involved that fits the Key, and gain 2 experience points. Whenever you do something that pushes hard against the theme of the Key, you have the option of dropping the trait altogether and gaining *ten* experience points.

Keys demand specificity, but in kind of an odd way – they need to be general enough that they can apply to a variety of situations, but they must be constrained enough to differ noticeably from other Keys.

Please feel free to make your own, also, as I said.

You will also begin with four Implements – these are prized possessions, relationships, skills, or connections. To clarify, relationships are emotional entanglements of some sort, while connections are more like “I know a gal who...”, a contact or acquaintance or subordinate who is useful in some fashion.

Choose or devise your *Keys*, and write them down below your character's name on a piece of paper. I would suggest choosing a common theme or feel for all the names the players choose, but some suggestions include: Slavic names, Turkish names, or Greek names.

Next, *devise four Implements*. Important family members are always an easy choice, as is your clan *anilum* or your commanding officer. Skillful Implements can be broad or specific, and can be social (such as oratory or blackmail), martial (spear-and-shield fighting, or archery), physical, or centered on a craft. It depends on how you want your character to go about solving problems – do you recourse to a personal connection, or to your abilities; do you go off and make something that would help, or are you going to kick some ass, instead?

You have seven six-sided dice to split between your Implements. The

Finally, *devise one Banner* – a group or faction with which you have particular influence. This could be your clan, one of the trades, one of the patrols, the members of your farming commune, or suchlike. See *Banners* below for more information. Mark down the title of your Banner on your sheet, below your Implements. You will likely get more Banners as you proceed,

While deciding what traits you want to have, see about coming up with some aspect of Durum, the White City, the mountains, the lowlands, or whatever else that strikes you, and come up with a concept for who and what your character is. Having a husband and children are optional, but it's unusual to go without; going on patrol is optional, but likely only for those who *can't* perform the required duties.

One final question is critical: where are you when they found the One from Afar? I say “are” because this event has just happened – either scouts have returned with word of his capture or discovery, or one or more of you is present *right now* when zhe is found.

## Keys

For an idea of how to spend xp, and what a buyoff is, see *Advances* below.

*Key of the Emperor* – whenever someone follows your orders, gain 1xp. Whenever someone follows your orders *or else*, gain 2xp. Buyoff: relinquish a meaningful amount of authority over someone.

*Key of the Worker* – whenever you create something of value, gain 1xp. Whenever others benefit from your hard work, gain 2xp. Buyoff: abandon your tools or destroy your workspace; for the latter, this can also mean sealing it off or otherwise rendering it inaccessible.

*Key of the General* – whenever a plan comes together, gain 1xp. Whenever you foster cooperation between different parties, gain 2xp. Buyoff: let something important be someone else's problem; you aren't going to lift a finger.

*Key of the Commune* – whenever you befriend or ally with someone of equal station, gain 1xp. Whenever you and an allied Banner accomplish something together, gain 2xp. Buyoff: use your allies to enrich or elevate yourself, at their expense.

*Key of Old Stones* – whenever you go through the official channels, gain 1xp. Whenever you move against something because it's new or challenging, gain 2xp. Buyoff: concretely reject or abandon an important law or custom.

*Key of the Hermit* – whenever you told them so, gain 1xp. Whenever your actions prioritize being right over being useful, gain 2xp. Buyoff: work with someone whose ideals you reject, provided it isn't under duress.

*Key of Wheat and Chaff* – whenever your approach to problem-solving is vindicated, gain 1xp.

Whenever you win someone to your ideals, gain 2xp. Buyoff: handle an important problem by contradicting your ideals.

*Key of the Backward Man* – whenever you are ignored or despised because of your station, gain 1xp. Whenever you meet low expectations, gain 2xp. Buyoff: you make the big time, or at least aren't working the small-time anymore.

*Key of the Scales* – whenever you curry favor with business or government interests, gain 1xp. Whenever you sell out your allies to gain such favor, gain 2xp. Buyoff: stick to your principles when it means turning down a lucrative opportunity.

*Key of the Sun* – whenever your approach is more passion than strategy, gain 1xp. Whenever you use a serious confrontation between Banners to show how cool, badass, or awesome you are, gain 2xp.

Buyoff: demonstrate that discretion is the better part of valor.

### Advances

You may spend 5xp to gain an advance for your character.

This will either increase one of your Implement ratings (they're like skills or personal resources), buy you a new Banner (a source of contacts and access), buy you a new Implement trait, or buy you a new Key. You can have any number of Banners and Implement traits, but you may only have up to two Keys at a time.

If you buy off a Key by fulfilling its requirement, you gain 10xp. You cannot re-purchase a Key with experience points gained by buying off that Key. You *can* re-purchase a Key with experience gained from any other Key, however – your outlook can loop back into familiar territory again, given a little time. *Buy-offs are optional. Just because you fulfill the requirement for it doesn't mean you have to go through with it.*

You can only spend experience points between scenes, or when you are not present in a scene. You don't need to give a reason for buying a new Key, as that's an aspect of your outlook on the situation. In order to gain new Implement traits or Banners, however, you must briefly justify how you came to gain that resource.

### Implements

Money, property, favors, relationships, or skilled contacts. You can buy it, do it yourself, or you can trade for it; the way you go about it is the type of Implement you possess. It's also relevant to point out that if a *person* or persons is/are one of your Implements, you likely treat them as such – you might need to act like they're your equal in order to get what you want, but you see them as a resource first and foremost.

“Implement” is the name for what other games would call skills – what's important is what you have available at your disposal, while its specific applications can be explored or determined as you go. Each time you devise an Implement that's at your character's disposal, decide whether it's something that *you* do, something others do *on your behalf*, or some resource only you, or only certain individuals, can access.

If you're an artisan, a farmer, or a soldier, it's likely that you don't have anyone at your command, but it's almost certain that there is something useful you can do. If you're a general, a politician, or a valley-lord, you're more likely to work through other people instead of getting directly involved.

Implements are also the resources with which you prepare for conflict – if Banners help you set scenes, Implement helps you properly prepare and equip yourself and your Banners for confrontation. What are your goals? What are you trying to achieve? Can you do it yourself, or do you need to pressure someone else to make it happen?

If an Implement reflects a relationship you have with someone else, it is a *social Implement*. Otherwise, it is a *skillful Implement*.

### Banners

A workshop, a clan, a commune, an *annum* faction, or some other purposeful group of individuals. May be upwards of several hundred people, or as few as one or two score; generally, the more powerful the individuals, the fewer of them make up the Banner.

A single workshop, an *anilum*'s household, and a small clan are all roughly equal in terms of the clout and leverage possessed by the group as a whole.

Banners are useful because they grant *access* – to their own intrinsic resources, or to important or noteworthy individuals among them, or to the periphery of some third party.

For example, the foundry outside town might be a good place for custom ironwork, or the head artisan there might be a pretty big fish in these parts, or it might be the only place where you can meet with the secretive Black-Knife cult.

More specifically, the big thing that Banners let you do is set scenes: the members of the group are friendly to you, or at least tractable, and you can set scenes involving the locality itself, or group-members of the Banner. In the case of “bordering” Banners, you can set a scene at the edge of their territory or jurisdiction. If your character has the local guard listed as one of her Banners, you could set a scene at the guard-house, with soldiers gathered at the site of some disturbance, or perhaps at bay because some clan's honored grandmother will only let a soldier who is blood-kin come and see what the trouble is.

When it comes to scene-setting and peripheries, the important thing is to have an example of the Banner being present, but not *in control*. They're onlookers, bystanders, or eavesdroppers, but they do not have the upper hand in the situation, and might not have even revealed their presence or tried to interject themselves into whatever situation is unfolding. It is *not at all important* to establish exact boundaries – the point is whether they have the initiative in the scene, not whether a given precinct's boundaries end at one street or another.

*Tips for creating Banners* - Given your character's job, status, and station, some Banners will make more sense than others. The dynamic between your character and the Banner will also be shaped accordingly.

### Personal Conflict

Whenever something is about to happen in the course of play, and you don't want it to, you have the opportunity to make things go your way instead.

Choose a relevant skillful Implement, and a relevant social Implement if one applies. Roll a number of d6's equal to the combined Implement ratings. If you only have a social Implement that applies, you can use it. In that event, you

If there is a human or at least living adversary that would try to stop you, they too get to assemble a dice pool, in the same manner.

Roll your dice – for each even-numbered result, you get one success. Whoever gets more successes gets their way, and briefly narrates the outcome of the conflict.

If you are going against a physical obstacle or a form of natural adversity, or some kind of other environmental factor, just assemble a dice pool and consider the difficulty of the task, based on what level of skill would be challenged by the task:

*Amateur* – 1

*Skilled – 2*

*Accomplished – 3*

*Master – 4*

If you get a number of successes equal to the number listed here, you get what you wanted, if only just barely – briefly narrate what occurs. If you get more than the minimum number of successes, you did particularly well – narrate accordingly.

If you fail, things go awry and you don't get what you want.

In either situation, whether you have an adversary or merely an obstacle to overcome, the dice answer the question, “Do you get what you want?” Against an obstacle, failure means that the task was too much for your abilities, or complications arose – in the latter case, describe what it was that got in your way.

Against an adversary, if you were confident of victory and failed, describe some extenuating circumstance that worked in their favor.

### Banner Scenes

Whenever the scale of a scene involves entire groups of individuals, you will use a Banner you're connected to in order to get what you want.

Set the scene, making sure to include the Banner you are acting against. This scene is known as a *Banner scene* – you declare that it is such a scene before you begin describing it, and then give everyone a brief synopsis of what is happening.

Make sure to include a group of people in your description, but you can use individuals within that group to provide a focal point for your narration.

Whoever starts the scene will take the initiative, narrating as they wish. *At any time*, the other player, the adversary, may use any of the following key phrases (explained below) to interject, to edit, or to end the conflict.

Whoever's currently narrating will add whatever details they wish, with the goal of getting what they want from the situation.

Using any key phrase begins a conflict in this scene; using the phrase *As you say* ends it.

### **Key Phrases**

*And then...* [accept opponent's statement and add your own. Use this statement when you want to take over narrating, but it requires you to agree that what the other player said, goes.]

*I know \_\_\_ better than that!* [opponent must revise statement; exhaust a personal Implement. The Implement needs to refer to a person used in your opponent's description, or it's not relevant. Wait until the offending narration is complete, and then interject.]

*Clearly, I could...* [opponent must either withdraw last statement, or accept your addition; exhaust a skillful Implement. The Implement must relate to some manner in which you could respond to the previous statement.]

*As you say* [accept opponent's statement, conflict ends. Each time someone uses this phrase, the conflict ends and you return to narration.]

An exhausted Implement cannot be used in conflicts until it is refreshed – you can refresh a single Implement for 3xp, or two for an Advance.

If at any point the focus of the scene shifts to interaction between individuals, and away from group interaction, the Banner Scene is over, and a normal scene begins – use the normal conflict rules for the duration.



## Role of the GM

Ah, the GM – briefly mentioned on the title page, and never again until now.

What does the GM do, you may ask?

The players certainly have plenty to do already – handling the discovery of the Stranger, exploring the wider world, keeping up with the needs of their family and clan, and so forth.

Basically, the players are going to be forever saying, “I do this! I do that!” and taking the lead and the initiative and stuff. If you're the GM, it's your job to say, “Okay, this happens in response. Okay, that happens in response.”

When a new scene begins, the GM sets it. It should follow the players' lead, cues, clues, or explicit suggestions as to where it is and who is there. It is then up to the GM to say what all the not-protagonists are doing.

[The exception is Banner scenes – players always set those, 'cause they clearly have a strong idea in mind. That's the only reason the GM sets regular scenes – zhe probably has some ideas popping as to what *someone* could be getting up to next!

And if you aren't popping right now, just turn to someone whose protagonist hasn't moved in a while and say, “So, what's (name of character) doing right now?” If that player doesn't know, ask someone else what *their* protagonist is up to! Follow up on wherever they left off – think of a plot thread left untied or an Implement or a Banner that hasn't made it into play yet.]

The players can and should use their Implements to contest, tweak, or overturn anything that's not in their interests. Whether those are their interests as players or as *characters* is entirely up to each player, but don't let any player fall into the trap of things like in-character knowledge or “it's what my *character* would do!” If faithfully abiding by in-character knowledge creates some tension or dramatic irony, that's fine, but if the player is not *enjoying* the handicap, pause the game and remind them of what they're doing.

The trap of “my character would...!” is more insidious and potentially destructive, also – if ever a player shields himself from criticism with this idea, or is making play *less fun* for others as a result, pause the game and remind them of what they're doing.

GM, engage the players in every scene you possibly can. If someone's protagonist is not present in a scene, and there's another character they could be portraying, *especially* if they have a Banner or an Implement related to that character, *ask them to play that character*. That's half of what a player-character's traits are for!

If somebody is really, totally content to just chill out and watch a scene unfold, don't make them jump in against their will. But make it clear that they can if they wish.

GM, it's your job to decide the difficulty of tasks when there is no living opponent. It's also up to you to use that list of difficulties as a yardstick for deciding how many Implements and dice a living, breathing adversary should have.

When players win, or lose, a conflict, especially if it's a matter between Durumians, *the outcome has to matter*. If it's uninteresting or irrelevant to see who would win in a contest of [whatever], don't bother to roll dice. Instead, just get a vibe from around the gaming table as to who everybody thinks should win.

This part is key: *if there's disagreement*, then you should go ahead and roll after all! Ta-da!

One last, big thing: GM, the players have chosen Implements, Banners, and Keys to act as their resources, but they have also done so to show what they are interested in doing in the game. *Act accordingly, but do not plan* – if something leaps to mind, introduce it, but otherwise try and follow logically from the current moment in the story to the next. Don't be afraid to twist, jump, leap, or

backtrack – the players will let you know pretty quickly if you took it somewhere they weren't anticipating.