

# Queen of Thorns

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A short-form role-playing game for a GM and 1-3 players

An entry in the April 2011 Ronnies using the terms “queen” and “chains.”

*“She is the pride and joy of your village, a young woman gifted with beauty, grace, and a gentle spirit. Now she’s gone - cruelly taken by the minions of the Queen of Thorns to their mistress’s dungeon. There she will stay chained until the new moon comes, and with it the dark ritual to preserve the Queen’s haughty beauty at the expense of a young maid’s lifeblood. And it is all your fault . . .*

*You and your companions, others who love her in their own way, would not heed the elders’ warnings. You would not accept the dark fate intended for her, you could not live under the shadow of your guilt if you did nothing. Instead, you took up what weapons and other useful items you have and struck out toward the bastion of the Queen of Thorns.*

*The way ahead is shadowed and fraught with peril, and you may not see your village again. The hulking shape of the Queen’s fortress is on the horizon. You look to your impromptu company and take heart knowing you will not be going into that damned place alone.*

*Meanwhile, she lies in the Queen’s dungeon, imprisoned by twisted chains of thorns that tear at her flesh. She weeps, bereft of everything except a faint glimmer of hope.”*

“Queen of Thorns” is a role-playing game for 2-4 people where 1-3 players each play a character seeking to free the maiden who has been kidnapped from their village by the villainous Queen of Thorns. The remaining player serves as the GM who frames the scenes of their journey and plays the other people and creatures the characters will encounter on their quest. The GM needs to have read these rules and spent a short time preparing the obstacles the characters will face. Other than this initial preparation, the game is intended to be playable from start to finish in a single evening.

## **Character Creation**

The GM guides each player through the following steps in making a character. Complete the sentences listed below, relying on the provided list if there is one. Use a piece of paper (or the handy character sheet once I put one together) to write everything down.

1. Determine your relationship with the kidnapped maiden. I am her (pick one and cross it out so it cannot be chosen again): *father, brother, sister, mother, betrothed, suitor, other suitor, name one of your own.*

2. My name is (pick something evocative and medieval sounding).

3. Choose your first trait - My profession is (pick one and cross it out so it cannot be chosen again): *farmer, herder, blacksmith, village guard, priest, hunter, merchant, innkeep, sailor, fisherman, healer, weaver, local noble, name one of your own.*

4. Choose your second trait - I also know something about (pick one and cross it out so it cannot be chosen again): *magic, the gods, monsters, the fae, traps, the Blood Legion, demons, the undead, the Queen of Thorns, name one of your own.*

5. Decide on your third trait by completing the sentence "I'm \_\_\_\_\_ as \_\_\_\_\_." Pick a character trait from the list, crossing it out so that it cannot be chosen by another player, and then complete the sentence: *desperate, loyal, brave, strong, tough, fierce, quick, cunning, clever, charming, devout, elusive, name one of your own.*

6. Determine the useful items you brought on the journey (each player picks one and crosses it out so it cannot be chosen again, then go around again in reverse order and choose a second one, crossing them out as you go): *my grandfather's broadsword, a wicked dagger, a heavy cudgel, a stout yew bow and arrows, an axe, a length of heavy rope, a set of lockpicks, a wooden shield, a lantern and oil, some strong drink, clean bandages, a vial of holy water, a dented breastplate, a book of lore, a potent amulet, name one of your own.*

7. I blame myself for her abduction because (fill in with your reason). Examples: *my cowardice kept me from stopping her kidnapers, I opened the village gate for a bag of silver, I was drunkenly asleep when they came to our home, I was out hunting instead of at home, we argued and I let her run into the forest alone.*

8. You know all of the other characters since you live in the same village (and may be related). Describe your character's opinion of each of the others in a short phrase or sentence.

9. Characters have an injury track denoting their current physical well-being. The steps on the track are:

But a Scratch / Injured / Wounded / Bloodied / Dying / Dead

As your character is injured, mark off a step of the injury track. If you are Dying, then you can survive long enough to return the maiden to your village but you will die soon thereafter (make your death scene count). If you reach Dead, then your character dies at the end of the current scene.

### **The Structure of Play**

The game begins as the characters first see the fortress of the Queen of Thorns from a distance. That first scene lets the GM establish some initial color for the fortress and its location, as well as letting the players start to inhabit their characters and relate to each other. After some

free role-playing, the GM should introduce an initial obstacle - a difficult piece of terrain or some wild animals are good starts - to give players some basic familiarity with the mechanics.

From there, the GM will spend a set budget of adversity over a series of scenes to impose obstacles in the form of men, monsters, and magic that must be overcome as the characters enter the fortress and make their way into the dungeon. Once there, they will eventually confront the Queen of Thorns and may free the maiden they seek or perhaps fall tragically short.

Along the way, the GM will be changing the state of two tracks, or timers with mechanical and fictional consequences. The first is the Doom Track, which shows how much time the maiden has left before the ghastly ritual and her sacrifice takes place. The second is the Alarm Track, which shows the extent to which the Queen's forces have taken notice of the characters' actions. One or both tracks could move at the end of each scene, depending upon its resolution.

Play can generally be continuous and scenes loosely defined, with the players continuing free role-playing after overcoming an obstacle and choosing courses of action until the GM presents a new obstacle. On the other hand, the GM can decide at times to more aggressively cut scenes to resume the story at the beginning of the next key event. The GM should use their discretion and sense of the story thus far to pace the game so that forward momentum is maintained.

## **Mechanics**

In each conflict, the characters will take action to overcome the present obstacle. There is no initiative; the first player to state a course of action and goal gets to roll for it. From there, the remaining players can take turns to undertake additional efforts, help each other, etc.

Describe what your character is doing and what they hope to achieve. Then, roll 4dF (Fate dice with +, -, or blank sides). For every "+" you roll, you can choose one of the following for your character:

1. You achieve what you were trying to. / You inflict damage.
2. You avoid injury.
3. You avoid a special condition (if one is possible).
4. You receive a boon.
5. Your actions do not raise the Alarm Track.
6. The Doom Track is not raised.

In the case of obstacles that require additional successes to overcome them, you can choose to allocate more than one "+" toward achieving your goal/inflicting damage.

Receiving a boon can take the form of acquiring a new item (based on what makes sense from the scene), recovering from a special condition, or confusing the Queen's minions and reducing the Alarm Track by one (player's choice). A special condition that the character has recovered

from still can color the fiction (a maimed limb is not restored), but it no longer mechanically impairs the character's actions.

The GM can inflict consequences, based on what you did not choose. The GM can inflict one consequence, plus an additional one for each “-” rolled. These consequences include: inflicting a level of injury (max one per character involved in that roll), inflicting a special condition, moving the Alarm Track one space, and moving the Doom Track one space (max one per roll).

You can modify your roll and the GM's consequences in several ways. First, other characters can help you, describing what their character is doing in the scene. Then you get an additional dF to use in your roll. However, helping carries a risk. The GM can choose to use a “-” to inflict a consequence on a helping character instead of the acting one.

Second, you can check off a trait to get one additional “+” added to the result of a roll or to re-roll all of your dice. A maximum of one trait can be used per roll. When you do this, provide additional description about how your trait serves to help you overcome this obstacle.

Third, you can check off an item to get one additional “+” added to the result of a roll or to cancel a consequence inflicted upon a character (yours or another's) by the GM. Canceling a consequence happens after the GM has decided on how all their consequences on that roll will be used.

Finally, you can decide to throw your character into harm's way, incurring one or more additional levels of injury in exchange for additional “+”s added to the result of the roll.

### **The Doom Track**

The Doom Track shows how much time the maiden has left before the ghastly ritual and her sacrifice takes place. It contains 6 spaces.

The third and fifth spaces are special. When the third space is reached, the GM provides a cut scene of the Queen's initiates beginning the preparations for the ritual and the maiden's current piteous circumstances. Each player then gets to uncheck one of their traits so it can be used a second time and add a new trait based on how their character has changed/what they have learned from their experiences of the quest so far.

When the fifth space is reached, the ritual begins and the maiden and the Queen of Thorns are now both in a special ceremonial chamber in the bowels of the dungeon. When the sixth space is reached, the ritual is complete and the maiden is dead.

The Doom Track cannot be reduced by the characters' actions.

### **The Alarm Track**

The Alarm Track shows the extent to which the Queen's minions have taken notice of the characters' actions. It contains 10 spaces.

The fourth, sixth, ninth, and tenth spaces are special. When the fourth space is reached, news of intruders is spreading throughout the fortress, and minions and defenses are being mobilized. The GM receives 1dF to roll each time a character does while at this level or above. If this die comes up a "-", then the GM can inflict an additional consequence.

When the sixth space is reached, the Queen's front line minions are trailing the characters and the fortress' defenses are manned. The GM receives a free extra level of resilience for all obstacles while at this level or above.

When the ninth space is reached, the Queen's most elite minions converge on the characters and the fortress' defenses are in full alert. The GM receives a free special condition for all obstacles while at this level. Finally, when the tenth space is reached, the Queen of Thorns herself directly intervenes and appears in the same location as the characters' next scene.

The Alarm Track can be moved back a space by a boon, which takes the form of confusion in the ranks of the Queen's minions and/or effective misdirection by the characters.

### **The GM's Role**

As GM, you have the responsibility of framing the individual scenes that make up the characters' quest to free the maiden and providing challenges for them to overcome, be they man, monster, or magic. You start with an adversity budget equal to 5 plus 5 times the number of characters. So a single character has a budget of 10, while three characters has a budget to 20.

You will spend this budget throughout play to fuel the obstacles faced by the characters. The handy lists provided below let you quickly prepare the key points of the journey, and an adventurous experienced GM could even create obstacles on the fly.

Keep in mind the characters' traits and items in choosing the types of foes they face. Even if you have done some preparation, it's often easy to change a foe from a demon to undead, or vice versa, to reflect the special knowledge of the characters.

#### Portions of the Fortress

the gatehouse  
the kitchens  
the armory  
the great stair  
the sewers  
the torture chamber  
the grand hall

#### Men

Blood Legion troopers  
the Queen's chamberlain  
a huntsman with dogs  
the executioner  
pit fighters  
eunuch slaves  
Blood Legion dragoons

the barracks  
the dungeon  
the gardens  
the smithy  
the parapet wall  
the moat of thorns  
the catacombs  
the ritual chamber

the jailers  
a scything blade  
poisoned darts  
a concealed pit  
a falling block

### Magic

the mages of the Pierced Circle  
the Queen's initiates  
a maze of illusions  
a blind seer  
the Horned Man  
a talking door  
a fae delegation  
the Queen's immortal consort

### Monsters

living vines  
a rock troll  
giant spiders  
a great serpent  
a spined horror  
thorn zombies  
a golem  
the shades of past victims

[May need to add more items to lists]

An obstacle generally costs one point from your budget and can be overcome with a single successful result (either accomplishing a particular goal or inflicting damage). Making an obstacle more resilient costs an additional point for each additional success necessary to overcome it. For example, a rock troll might take three successful damage results to slay, requiring three of the GM's budget.

An obstacle also may do more than simply impede progress or inflict normal damage by inflicting a special condition like poison, maiming, draining, or stunning as well. If you choose to have an obstacle inflict a special condition, the obstacle costs an extra point. An obstacle should not inflict more than one special condition.

### Special Conditions

Special conditions should generally force a character to roll one less die when making particular types of actions for an extended duration, set one of the character's dice to a "-" for a single roll, or take away a "+" from a roll, etc. Examples include:

poison (the character rolls one less die for actions requiring physical strength or vigor)

maiming (the character rolls one less die for actions requiring speed or deftness)

stunning (one die in the character's next roll against this creature is set to "-")

blinding (the character rolls one less die for actions requiring vision)

draining (the obstacle recovers one level of resilience)

confusion (the character's first "+" is lost from their next roll)

[Need more examples of special conditions]

### The Queen of Thorns

The climactic showdown with the Queen of Thorns may take place in her dungeons, but it also could happen in another part of the fortress or outside of it as the characters try to escape with the maiden. The Queen does not count toward the GM's budget, and she could be combined with other challenges in the same scene if there are three characters.

The Queen of Thorns has a resilience of 5 and can inflict the special conditions of draining and stunning (each requires its own "-"). She is a special exception to the general rule that an obstacle not inflict more than one special condition.

### Handling "Failure"

Often a player will choose to have their character achieve their goal or inflict damage as part of their roll. However, a desire to avoid graver consequences could motivate a player to accept failing to achieve success on a roll.

In a combat conflict, failing to inflict damage likely speaks for itself and remains interesting due to the likelihood of consequences. But failing to leap over a pit carries the probable fictional effect of falling into it. So when characterizing any consequences you inflict on that character, you are also free to introduce additional fictional effects like needing to climb out of the pit.

Deciding not to put a "+" in achieving a goal or inflicting damage should create interesting results, not simply lead to trying the same action again. You should add a twist to the scene by immediately introducing a different type of obstacle (among men, magic, and monsters), shifting away from the "failure" to keep up the pace and maintain interest.

### Using Consequences

The players are pushed from a variety of directions, and the first few consequences in each one are not that difficult to accept. As play continues, though, the players will be hard-pressed to hold the GM back from all of the possible horrible results. In using your consequences, let the events of the current scene guide your judgment, but do not shrink from striking the final blow to kill a character or even the maiden. The characters have resources to spend to cancel your consequences, so you can strike that blow only to have it put off for a while longer. Don't pull your punches, make the players earn any happy ending.

### Dead Characters

Players whose characters are killed before the end of play can still check off any remaining items for use by other characters. They also can use the memory of their dead character to help each of their companions one last time.

After that, the GM should let the player assist them in playing other people and creatures in scenes.

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