

# Character Origins

by Fraser Sherman

"Why did I leave my home?" Aelrya, the half-elf, set down the wineskin, glaring at Stephen. "I have no home: my father seduced my mother through magic, then abandoned her to die in the gutter. If it takes five centuries, I'm going to find my father -" Her hand fell to her sword hilt. "- and fulfill my mother's last request."

"And all I wanted was, uh, money," Stephen said nervously. "My town called me a thief and a son of a thief - but when I return loaded down with jewels, gold, and magic, Marion will - er, that is, everyone will look at me differently. What about you, Cyril?"

"I'm sorry, what?" Cyril hadn't been listening; beyond the camp, in the wood, he could swear he'd heard the padding footfalls of the One Who Follows.

The AD&D game has come a long way since Dungeon Masters could just tell players that their characters met in a tavern and decided to journey together to seek their fortunes. Today players are encouraged to flesh out their PCs with colorful cultures, specialized class-kits, and personality types; so why not do the same with their motivations, the spark that sets them on the adventuring road? Players can work with their DM to find a motive that fits both the PC and the game (some of these backgrounds will affect the game, so the DM must have a say).

Reasons for Leaving

## Family

PCs don't always get along with their families. In some cases, the friction is bad enough to drive him off. Imagine being the only rogue in a family of paladins and priests; why stick around? What if the character is not the black sheep in the family but the white sheep, awakened by a priest or mentor as to how corrupt and evil his family's deeds are? The PC may flee out of shame, or his family may cast him out.

The PC may go adventuring out of love for his family. He could be seeking enough money to save them from ruin, looking for a long-lost brother - or simply wanting to stand on his own where nobody knows him ("If I receive my knighthood here, I'll always worry it was out of respect for you, Mother, not for me.").

## **Love and Marriage**

What better motive to drive a PC to heroism than romance? Like Stephen, such a PC is madly in love and believes money or a hero's reputation will melt his true love's heart (of course, as one *Dragonr Magazine* article noted, that doesn't mean the PC has to be heroic - he only has to look heroic).

The lover in many folk tales has to fulfill a specific quest before winning his lover. The ancient Welsh love story of Culhwch and Olwen has Culhwch seeking out over 30 items his prospective father-in-law requires before a wedding can take place.

Alternatively, the PC may be running from marriage, not toward it, fleeing the loveless match his parents arranged; Robert E. Howard's *Dark Agnes* series started out that way.

## **Wealth**

Almost every PC wants to get rich, but for some money is only a stepping-stone to what they really desire. It may be something tangible - a love potion, a ring of djinni summoning, the resurrection of a childhood friend - or it may be a dream; the PC is convinced money will let her gain society's respect, buy back the family estates, or avenge herself on the lord who dishonored her.

## **Curses**

With this motivation, a PC hits the road in hopes of finding a cure for some terrible curse ("The Black Doom will take me in five years if I don't return the Scepter of Skulls to the tomb Grandfather stole it from!"). Perhaps he is running from the unpleasant consequences of some previous action.

Leaving home may enable the PC to escape the curse. In Gilbert and Sullivan's comic opera *Ruddigore*, the hero ran away to sea to avoid inheriting the Barony of Ruddigore - for whoever becomes the Black Baronet must do an evil deed a day or die in agony. The curse in Joseph Payne Brennan's "*The Horror of Chilton Castle*" is that when the head of the family dies, his body becomes lunch for an immortal, insane ancestor. With perks like these, what high-born PC wouldn't want to forsake his family and head out adventuring?

## **Revenge**

Revenge is a classic motivator. The avenging PC will travel the world to hunt down the one who betrayed his regiment, enslaved his sister, or

murdered his mentor. The character may know where to find him, and is seeking a way to destroy him.

### **On the Lam**

This is the gaming version of joining the French Foreign Legion. One of the best ways to elude pursuers is to go adventuring. The PC may be wanted by the law, hunted by the clergy, or sought by assassins and bounty hunters.

His pursuers could be family. The thief PC's paladin brother could be trying to erase the stain on their family name. Using the curse described above, the next-in-line for the PC's title may be determined the PC - not he - will suffer the curse.

Keep in mind that being accused doesn't mean being guilty; like Dr. Kimble in *The Fugitive*, the PC may have been framed for a crime he didn't commit. If so, he'll want not only to stay ahead of his hunters but also to track down whoever really did the deed.

### **Mystery**

The PC has a question or riddle and goes adventuring to find the answers. It could be some prophecy about his fate, a blank spot in family history ("Did my father really betray the king at the battle of Nighting Field?") or a cryptic riddle ("The last words on my teacher's lips were 'coronet blue' - I'll never rest until I understand why he whispered them to me.")

### **Amnesia**

This is actually the ultimate mystery.

The PC has no memory of who he is, except vague hints-a picture of someone's face, a remembered phrase or image ("In my dreams, I see a golem in a tall tower, ringing a golden bell."). Although he possesses all class-related skills, he has no idea where he learned them or from whom (as he acquires added nonweapon proficiencies with levels, he may simply discover that he already knows how to do something). This could be interesting for the DM, as well.

### **Tragedy**

A shaman or beast-rider finds his tribe massacred. A prince discovers his uncle has murdered the king and married the queen (sound familiar?). An orphan's treacherous guardian steals the family fortune and throws him out into the snow. Events like this leave the PC scarred and shaken. Unlike the avengers, such characters don't want to get even; rather, they're simply

desperate to put the scene of their tragedy behind them any way they can.

### **Shame**

PCs want to travel as far as they can from anyone who knows about some great humiliation. For example, a paladin who failed his deity on his first mission and is now a common warrior doesn't want people to know his roots; an erstwhile thug has become a devout priest. This also works for anyone who's violated a major taboo of his faith or culture ("I killed and ate my horse to stay alive; as a Lishari nomad, I should have died to save the horse.").

A PC could also be ashamed not for himself but for his family, who are all slaves, untouchables, prostitutes, or something else he'd rather forget about. The PC may simply never mention his past, or he could fabricate one to try to pass himself off as a man of breeding and taste, never letting on to his low-class origins.

### **Origins and Personalities**

Some of the character handbooks (The Complete Fighter's Handbook, The Complete Wizard's Handbook, etc.) describe personality types for the different character classes. Combining these personalities with the backgrounds here can give a PC added role-playing potential. Be careful, though. A misanthropic druid is hardly likely to have winning true love as a motivation; a naive, neophyte wizard wouldn't be credible as the victim of tragedy.

Other personality and origin combinations will work perfectly. A mercenary wizard's motive is, by definition, wealth (though what he wants the money for is an open question); a brooding warrior is perfectly suited to being under a curse or fleeing a tragedy.

Don't overlook the potential of seemingly inconsistent matches. In movies this is called "casting against type." A merry showoff warrior may adopt his attitude precisely because he's under a curse ("Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow I die - and if not tomorrow, certainly by Thursday."). An intimidating wizard's commanding manner may cover up some secret shame in his past.

### **Use in Play**

Most DMs have their own ideas and vision for a game. Once it's set up that a PC is seeking his long-lost father or the Orb of Curse-Breaking, where does that leave the DM's goals? How do you accommodate a PC's personal

mission on a weekly basis, especially if several PCs have their own, different goals?

In a one-shot game or a module, this isn't a problem; with a little rewriting, a PC's background can fit the adventure at hand (perhaps the bandit leader is the man she's been seeking vengeance on for years, or the treasure includes the lost talisman her family was cursed for losing). Alternatively, a DM could build an adventure around the PCs having a common origin: perhaps they are hunting down the general who betrayed their army.

In a long-running campaign, DMs and players first need to decide if the PC's motivation affects the game at all. Fleeing an arranged marriage gives a PC a reason to leave home, but it's not very likely to be a recurring plot element or to affect the course of the game (except in the way it shapes the PC's attitudes towards love, marriage, and family). Other motivations, like seeking wealth, fit with almost any adventure.

If the PC is lifting a curse, running from assassins, or tracking down a one-armed man, it involves more work for the DM, but he shouldn't feel obligated to incorporate the PC's quest into every session. Let the PC check over his shoulder for assassins at every stop; they needn't show up more than once in a while, ideally at the worst possible moment.

Even if the DM doesn't advance these quests, players can use their motivations to keep their PCs busy during down time: ducking the constabulary, asking inn-keepers if any strangers have passed by, or haunting libraries for clues. DMs can also use false clues or hints to steer PCs in a particular direction: a rumor that a PC's long-lost father entered the ruins of Madmoor Keep can send the party willingly into your new dungeon.

Eventually, of course, the PC should have a chance to attain his goal - an opportunity to clear his name, lift the curse, become even richer than he imagined. Then what?

If the player's leaving the group, this is a great opportunity to send his PC off with a bang. If he's staying, the PCs may stay together out of friendship, or the PC's success can steer the group in a new direction ("This gold will raise an army to overthrow the tyrant of Nightmare Valley - will you fight for freedom with me?").

It's a character's life we're talking about here.