



SEALING THE PACT

By Jeff Morgenroth and Arnie Franke

illustration by Jorge Lacera

*“You’ve made a wise decision, my friend.
Now sign here, and we’ll discuss the trivial issue of
the payment I’ll be asking in return for the feats of power
you’ll be able to perform.”*

—Belphegor of the Broken Horn

This article explores the opportunity provided by a warlock's pact as an impetus for unique adventures. This includes advice on ways you can work with a warlock's player to develop a patron using material from *Dragon* #381's "Performing the Pact," as well as a few key points to consider when designing adventures based around that patron. You'll find guidelines on how to bring the warlock's inhuman patron to life, complete with roleplaying suggestions and tips for wielding its immense power in ways that will appeal to your group.

DEVELOPING A WARLOCK'S PATRON

"Performing the Pact" contains everything a warlock player needs to develop his own patron, so let them do most of the work. Still, this can be a collaborative process. Give the player an idea of what the campaign's starting point will be, as well as what will work with your group's gaming style. You might feel that one pact fits your campaign's theme better than others, but try to give your player the ability to let his imagination take charge. Different players will be drawn to different pacts, and you should find ways to accommodate their enjoyment. Work with your player to make a seemingly impossible background more practical.

Once your player has a basic character concept, have him explain the patron to you in detail, including a few specific goals and story points, with the ultimate goal of describing the moment when the character made the pact. Run with these ideas. Flesh out details in the story and add some twists of your own (and be sure to keep some private, since no

patron would reveal every detail of its plans to the fledgling warlock servitor. Take the patron's goals to places the player would never expect, and add your own elements to the patron's personality. Evil patrons exhibiting moments of compassion or good patrons capable of sudden cruelty will make these entities more unpredictable and dangerous. The goal here is compromise: You want a patron that has the core elements of your player's imagination, supplemented by ideas you'll be able to build on to create adventures and story arcs of your own.

Finally, determine where the patron resides within the game world, and how it contacts its warlock to instigate adventures.

DESIGNING ADVENTURES WITH PATRONS

Incorporating a warlock patron into adventures requires some unique considerations to ensure a fun, smooth game experience.

INCORPORATING PATRONS

First consider the importance you want to assign the patron in the scope of the campaign.

Brief Appearances. This is the most common level of involvement for a campaign, since allowing a patron a brief influence gives you the ability to introduce a large variety of plots and quests. Patrons in this campaign appear infrequently, and when they do, stick around only for short periods. This might mean that the PCs undertake adventures pertaining to a patron's goals every few levels, or that the patron's influence is felt during an unrelated narrative. The patron's goals for these adventures are usually lim-

ited, so when the group concludes the adventure, they can move on to the next feeling satisfied. This adventure model is conventional and attractive to most players for its simplicity, but can still establish the patron as a powerful force in the adventurers', and especially the warlock's, careers.

Ongoing Involvement. This model puts the patron or its influence in the foreground of an ongoing narrative. Their goals and personality greatly impact the entire party. Here, a patron's schemes take years of game time to unravel, pitting PCs against the patron's foes, their own morality, or the patron itself. Advanced planning can help you foreshadow future adventures, use thematic storytelling, and build dramatic tension. In an arc, the presence of the patron should slowly become more important, as events build across adventures to a climax. The best warlock adventure arcs emphasize an antagonistic patron, which sets the stage for dark, edgy decision making that tests the party at every turn.

PORTRAYING A PATRON

Next, think about how the patron will interact with the characters.

Subtle Presence. Here the patron's presence is barely felt. Characters have the sensation of being watched or followed, or witness events that point toward the patron's involvement. The patron never directly impacts the narrative; it allows the warlock and her allies to act out of fear or faith. Any instructions given by the patron are sudden, cryptic, and ominous. Use this option to build tension and mystery, or to introduce clues or hooks for players to pick up on that point toward other hooks and adventures. This lets the players know that the patron is out there, scheming to unknown ends, but nevertheless actively involved.

Dynamic Engagement. This option openly reveals the patron. The patron's words, actions, and influence become a catalyst to adventure. A patron candidly asks characters (and specifically the warlock adventurer) to undertake quests, threatening them into obedience if necessary. Its power can be plainly demonstrated, but do not attack the characters; rather, use a patron's might or influence to demonstrate its power to the players' allies or associated NPCs. Use this demonstration to create plot hooks for the players to act on. Make it clear that this is a being of advanced power, able to make their lives interesting at best, and miserable at worst. The goal isn't to torture uncooperative characters, but to give them incentives to pursue these adventures, just as you would with other hooks. Most players will enjoy seeing and interacting with these mighty, otherworldly entities, and you can use them to create gravitas, panic, awe, and wonder. It also helps if the goals of the patron line up with the overall goals of the adventurers—you don't want the players to feel like their characters are acting in a non-heroic or immoral way just to satisfy some evil creature.

SHARING THE SPOTLIGHT

The warlock player will occupy a large share of your attention when you run a patron-themed adventure; however, keeping everyone included will not only make the party happy but make the story more entertaining as well.

Mutual Interest. A patron's plotting should always have ramifications, affecting people other than just the warlock. Design adventures with goals that the whole party wants to accomplish, and use their sensibilities to hook the other players into a plot that might otherwise be "just for the warlock." For example, an enemy the patron wants eliminated

PATRON APPEARANCES

Though a patron might be playing a big role in an adventure, the warlock and the party must always remain in the spotlight. Patrons shouldn't force the party's actions, nor show up to rescue them. They might be able to, given their power, but a patron will seem more mysterious if the players wonder what their worth is to the patron. Focus on players by highlighting their opinions and decision making in regards to what the patron wants. Don't force the warlock player into asking, "Why doesn't the patron just do this itself?"

might also be a recurring villain the heroes have already tangled with. What the characters don't know is that eliminating this villain creates a power vacuum that the patron plans to fill with one of its own minions—someone who could become the next recurring villain in your campaign!

Insidious Patrons. To a vain and selfish patron, even warlocks are mere pawns, so why should the party be any different? Look for ways in which the patron can exploit other party members' desires, strengths, or weaknesses. This presents a fun role-playing experience, since characters can interact with a patron directly. Be prepared for passionate character building as players stand up to antagonistic patrons. Others might make pacts with the patron of their own, taking warlock multiclass or hybrid feats. Either way, you show that the patron has an interest in the whole party, not just the warlock.

USING QUESTS

It's now time to create a series of quests to translate these ideas into the framework of the game. Patrons offer a rich resource for creating unique quests, with goals and themes that change depending on the warlock's relationship with her patron.

PATRON AS ALLY

If the warlock and the patron share goals, beliefs, or alignments, create quests that put the party into a position where they can help or will be helped by the patron. Usually these quests immediately appeal to the characters, and frame the success of the patron's goals as being important to those of the characters. The patron's relationship with the party takes on that of a teacher or mentor, one who can help the party mature through tiers of play as well as send them on important adventures.

Major Quests. Protect a site, creature, or object important to the patron. Seek information or magical lore desired by the patron. Defeat an enemy threatening the patron.

Minor Quests. Uphold ideals held by the patron. Foster a self-enriching relationship with the patron. Learn legends of the patron's past. Establish friendships with creatures allied with the patron. Protect or spread the patron's reputation.

PATRON AS ANTAGONIST

This patron becomes a menacing figure, one whose morality, goals, and alignment are opposed to the majority of the party. They create problems for the party and those around them, directly or through servants. Create quests that have the characters thwarting the patron's plans, or struggling against trials the patron creates for them. They should not

constantly harass or impede the characters, but rather be used as a device to provide them with an intimate, ongoing enemy lurking in the shadows of their adventures. All the while, the warlock character continues to draw on the benefit of the pact, holding the patron to its end of the bargain despite his actions—but knowing that there will inevitably be consequences.

Major Quests. Intercept monsters or agents sent by the patron. Protect a person or site from the patron's influence. Obey a patron's commands without compromising alignment or morality. Keep a vital object or knowledge out of the patron's hands.

Minor Quests. Ward off a patron's corrupting influence. Expose the patron's secrets and use them against it. Conceal your pact when necessary. Protect something loathed by the patron. Strengthen institutions or allies opposed to the patron.

PATRON AS MEDDLER

A meddling patron fills a unique middle-ground between allied and antagonistic patrons. The patron may or may not share goals or alignment with the party, but it is neither hostile nor benevolent enough to direct the narrative. Instead, these patrons stick their noses into the characters' business when it suits their whim. The adventurers become playthings for the inscrutable patron to assist, bother, or otherwise meddle with at inopportune times. How the characters decide to handle these situations help shape later quests. This is an attractive choice early on in a warlock's career, when a relationship with a patron is being developed. Over the course of play, the patron might decide that it likes the party (because its goals and theirs align), and become an ally—or that the misbehaving mortals need to be punished. Use a variety of minor quests incorporated into ongoing narratives to help develop the relationships between the patron, warlock, and party members.

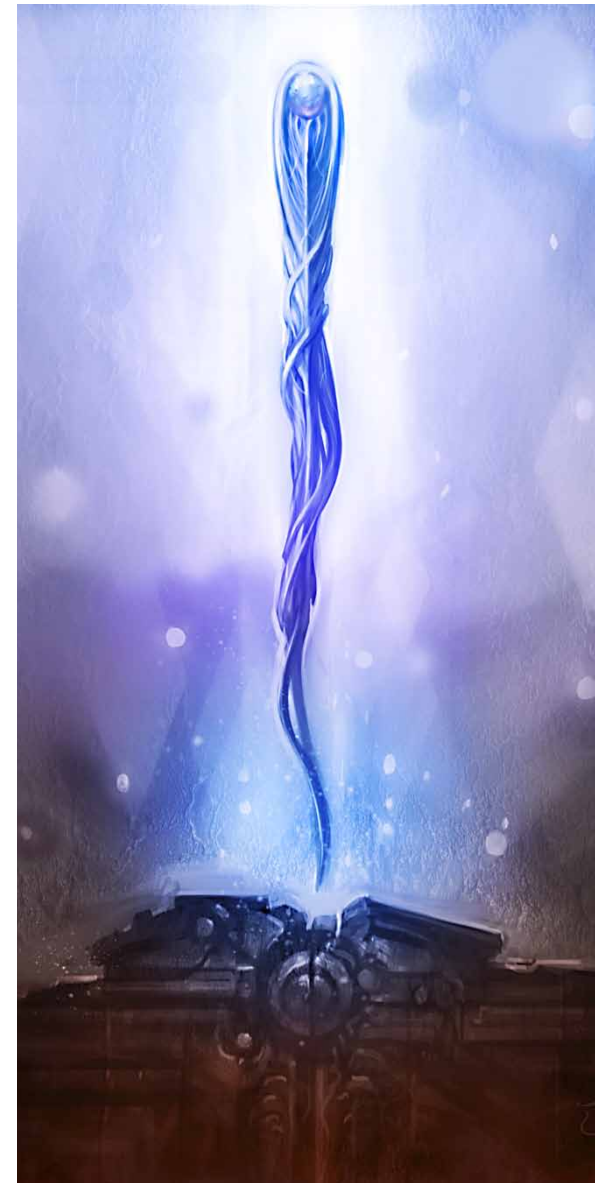
Minor Quests. Deal with a sub-plot put into motion by a patron's meddling. Establish meaningful relationships during and after a sub-plot. Discover the patron's goals or vices and use them to keep the patron out of affairs. Encounter NPCs or creatures allied with the patron.

A PATRON'S REWARDS

Players love seeing material rewards for their actions—and a pleased patron is a perfect way to give characters unique treasures or other rewards.

Treasure. Reward players with treasure parcels sent by the patron. Swapping out loot normally found during an adventure with this treasure can be stylistic and evocative. Though the party is banking the same amount of wealth, perceptions of where the loot came from become more meaningful. You can use these "gifts" as plot points as well, using them to start adventures or put the party into harm's way. The warlock player might claim ownership of these items, which is fine. You can compensate by allocating attractive items for other party members with other treasure parcels.

Creatures. Another exciting way to reward characters is with the appearance of a patron-themed monster that will aid them in a battle. Most players find battling alongside monsters a thrilling experience. You can also use these monsters to creatively assist the party in a skill challenge or with clues or information relating to a current adventure. To keep an encounter with a monstrous ally balanced, compensate by increasing its difficulty by one or two levels. If you think the warlock player is up to the challenge, let her control the monster. This will not only be a blast for the player, but free up some of your attention.



TIMING

A patron-themed minor quest might show up when least expected. This could be in the midst of an unrelated battle, or firmly entrenched in another adventure. Minor quests should be used to develop the world, patron, and characters. In the course of a story arc, it's often fun to begin a patron-driven adventure just before a level in which the characters gain a new daily power. This gives the player a feeling of accomplishment, as well as the sense that this exciting new power is a gift from his patron as a reward for a job well done.

A PATRON'S PUNISHMENTS

Angry patrons give you a nearly limitless excuse to make things happen. If incorporated smartly, punishments create depth to a campaign and help you craft memorable drama.

When to punish. Patrons are not omniscient, so most of the warlock's actions go beneath their notice. Additionally, most patrons are so complex that they simply don't care what the warlock does—so long as they obey. However, if a player actively makes decisions contrary to a patron's will, they should expect it to come back to them. Just be sure punishments don't railroad the party or foster resentment for the warlock character's player.

Patron capabilities. Patrons do not control what a character says, does, or is capable of. Never burden the warlock or party with penalties to die rolls, rob them of powers or items, or use magical domination to force them into things they wouldn't do normally; how a player handles consequences of the pact is their choice.

Forms of punishment. Monsters are the easiest way for patrons to hinder the party, because you can use them to create new, balanced encounters. Additionally, you could use a patron's influence to create unexpected challenges within an ongoing narrative. Punishments can also be springboards for new quests and adventures. The PCs may have caught the attention of a patron because of their actions, such as by slaying allies of the patron or trespassing in its domain.

For example, a patron feels insulted by the characters because they had a destructive battle in a site sacred to it. In retaliation, the patron destroys something important to them, like a temple or public area. This causes a civil uprising, and when the patron openly appears to chastise the characters, they find themselves forced to deal with an angry mob led by authority figures blaming them for the destruction. This could lead to any number of adventures, depending on the characters' actions.

PROBLEM PATRONS?

If a patron becomes obtrusively needy or a petty bully, you've gone too far. Avoid getting to this point in the first place. Don't use a patron to show the party how tough you are, and remember that patrons are meant to be a tool you can use to make an adventure memorable. If the players aren't into patron-themed encounters, don't include them; the group's fun should always come first.

SAMPLE ADVENTURES

Each pact has different themes and motifs that you can explore. The following sections will help you brainstorm themes, plots, and arcs for patron-based adventures. Each adventure hook uses sample patrons detailed in "Performing the Pact," but could easily be modified for a player's unique patron.

DARK PACT ADVENTURES

These adventures emphasize pain. The characters often act in the role of aggressors. Let the party's morality decide how to best accomplish the patron's goals. Pull no punches when violence occurs, and put the warlock in a position where his powers can inflict agony on villains, allies, and innocents alike.

Themes. Assassination, spitefulness, risks, selfishness, kidnappings, exotic or perverse enemies, revenge, theft.

Yorgrix: Bloated with hate and the souls of countless victims, Yorgrix requires the warlock to strike at its foes beyond the walls of its web-entombed city. Its presence is felt in the silent creeping of arachnid messengers, and it delights vicariously from suffering inflicted by the warlock's powers.

Adventure Hook: Drow from the Underdark city of Aoroon seek vengeance on Yorgrix for its treachery. Knowing that it cannot win a war under the eight-fold eyes of Lolth, Yorgrix commands its warlock disciple to assassinate key leaders among the attackers, chief among them the drow priestess commanding the force, before the attack commences.

Adventure Hook: Millennia of feasting from a cornucopia of victims leaves Yorgrix with a jaded palate. It now demands sweeter meats and charges its warlock to kidnap Athraddis, a dark wizard of great renown, and deliver him onto the stained dais of its feasting hall.

Arc Hook: Yorgrix has developed a taste for arcanists who practice the vilest sorts of magic, each time demanding that one of his followers bring him an arcanist of greater power. Unfortunately for the warlock, whose magic increases with each requisition, the most opulent feast of all has been dangling under Yorgrix's palps for some time—and dark pact warlock is next on the menu.

FEY PACT ADVENTURES

A fey patron's whimsy leads to quests for great beauty or violent mischief, changing without warning because of the patron's impulsive nature. In either case, ends justify means for fey patrons, who view themselves beyond worldly morality. Indulge the warlock's fey side, allowing allure or trickery to influence events—unless cruel magic is called for.

Themes. Magical wonders, amorality, enchantment, sensuality, indifference to the mundane, cultivating beauty, natural splendor.

The Eochaid: Through the chiming of pure streams or the sighing of mystic winds, the Eochaid sets the warlock on quests to please his fey amusement. He is capricious as a storm, and warlocks find satisfying his impulsive whimsy a never-ending challenge.

Adventure Hook: An orc warlord approaches the sacred trees of Iänii Ahvenan, set on felling the grove and using its magical timber to erect a fearsome stronghold. With direct confrontation futile against so large a force, the Eochaid urges the warlock to rely on trickery to inflame the savages' superstition into thinking that the woods themselves are attacking, routing the force before they can lift a single saw.

Adventure Hook: Near the small village of Willowford, the lines between the world and Feywild are mysteriously growing weak, allowing creatures of each plane to accidentally cross into the other—including several confused human children. Outraged by mundane creatures trespassing into the perfect forests of the Feywild, the Eochaid sends the warlock through the mists to track down and return these "eyebrights" to the banality and ugliness of the world.

Arc Hook: The incursions continue, and the Eochaid decides to put an end to the problem by ordering a purge of the forest and its surroundings of potential interlopers. Does the warlock agree to this impulsive demand to preserve the Feywild, or does she resist the coldness of the Eochaid and protect the villagers from her patron's other servants?

INFERNAL PACT ADVENTURES

The high-stakes nature of the infernal pact offers the potential for tremendous drama, intrigue, and violence. Highlight tension between the party and prominent NPCs by bringing up the infernal nature of the warlock and his patron, and give the warlock chances to utterly destroy enemies—body and soul—with his devilish powers.

Themes. Redemption, subversion, manipulation, morality, vice, religious debate, exploitation, demonstrating power.

Prisoner in Iron: Bound in infernal chains for his mortal arrogance, the Prisoner uses a final shred of magic to reach out to living warlocks, directing them on quests to uncover the secrets of his legacy and free his shackled soul.

Adventure Hook: King Morlinon, the ruler of virtuous Sommergard, is desperate to save his only princess from a terrible fate, resorting finally to signing a contract with the fiendish arch-devil Belphegor. The Prisoner wishes to save the good king from the damning fate he himself suffers, dispatching the warlock to find a loophole in the fiend's bureaucracy and save the king's soul.

Adventure Hook: The spirit of the Prisoner urges the characters to travel to the distant barony of Caras Severin, a forgotten realm ruled in secret by cruel descendants of Bael Turath autocrats. Here they must search through ancient libraries that will lead them to an artifact from the Prisoner's mortal life. However, Baron Zodacar and his servants remain steeped in infernal lore, and the group's association with the Prisoner is soon discovered. A chase from the baron's bloodseeker throngs ensues across the wastes as the PCs race to recover the artifact.

Arc Hook: This first discovery is only the beginning, opening the conduit for easier communication between the Prisoner and the warlock. Now, with his freedom in sight, the Prisoner's plea for help sends the warlock on ever more perilous quests, each ending with the discovery of some vital clue or remnant of his mortal life. Once all these artifacts are collected, the breach of the Iron Fortress begins.

STAR PACT ADVENTURES

Wise warlocks realize that each of a star patron's demands is a small piece in some impossibly far-reaching scheme. Maintain the patron's alien nature by using a variety of esoteric goals. Let the warlock explore the possibilities of planar realities and plumb the very depths of the madness waiting.

Themes. Questioning reality, fate, monstrous enemies, truth, metaphysics, illusion of free-will, secrets, organizing or thwarting star spawn cults.

Ulban: The comet Ulban soars out of prophesy and the distant future, proclaiming its struggle against the doomed fate of all existence. It reveals magical secrets to warlocks who would use that power to protect it, and stop those who would hasten it.

Adventure Hook: The mysterious and prophesized appearance of the comet Ulban has come to pass. Led by its eldritch iridescence, the warlock is drawn to a mountaintop ruin, long forgotten by the wisest scholars. Here, the warlock encounters other questing rivals, and discovers that only one will be chosen to be included in the comet's otherworldly plans. Will the warlock and her party be the last ones standing?

Adventure Hook: The Stargazer's Journal has returned! These moldering parchments, said to be the half-mad ravings of the astrologer Thulzar, were lost centuries ago. Their mysterious resurgence has drawn the attention of numerous competing star spawn cults, each eager to claim the forbidden lore as their own. The comet Ulban, ever defiant against the star spawn, commands its warlock champion to find the manuscripts before the cultists do.

Arc Hook: Once the journal is in their hands, the warlock and her companions must decide what to do with it. Ulban demands they surrender it—but the forbidden knowledge within the journal is too priceless to give up. Refusing Ulban brings the comet's single-minded wrath upon the warlock and threatens entire regions with calamity at the hands of its messengers.

VESTIGE PACT ADVENTURES

Vestige warlocks will be called to undertake tasks in accordance with their patron's relationship to vestiges, be they honorable or selfish. Find ways to incorporate flavor from vestige powers as story elements in the adventure, which will lend a sense of scope and history for the warlock.

Themes. Historical mystery, lineages, revelation, closure, uncovering secrets, personal legacy.

The Guidesman: Even in death there are tolls to pay, and the Guidesman would punish those that subvert the orderly transition of souls to the Shadowfell. Though only able to manifest as an eldritch lantern, this signal is enough to set the death-spirit's vestige warlocks into action against necromancers and restless spirits.

Adventure Hook: The battlefield's blood washes away, but faces of the wayward dead still roam the charnel wastes. Seeking release, they wander the outskirts of the losing side's borders hoping to find the Guidesman's guiding light. The divine "heroes" of that realm are resolved to purge these unquiet spirits—but if destroyed before the Guidesman comes for them, the warlock knows that they will rise again, this time aflame with vengeance.

Adventure Hook: The wicker fires die down in Trentshire and autumn's dirges become yule feasts, but not for some. A friend of the characters has died, and this passing heralds mysterious threats. Furtive shadows lurk in the fields, and soon wraiths stalk the empty streets. The deceased's soul knows the secret to the wraiths' appearance, but to commune with the lost soul, the warlock must pass beyond the pale, risking death to stand before the Guidesman once again—for only he is able to bring the departed soul back to be questioned.

Arc Hook: This discovery reveals that the characters departed friend lived a dual life. Apart from their friendly persona, they were the cursed steward of the Orrery of Life's Eclipse, half of an artifact said to be a gateway to its twin in the Shadowfell which rests within the very depths of Maikedhon's Tower. The undead invade until the Orrery is reunited with its shadowy echo, but only the Guidesman knows the way.

About the Authors

Lurking in the outskirts of Seattle, **Jeff Morgenroth** has mastered fires of endless academia and the soulless drudgery of the skittering rat-race, at last making his pact with the baleful entities at Wizards of the Coast. He edited a portion of *Monster Manual*®2, and it is prophesized that his name will defile the pages of more books soon.

Once every five hundred years (starting now) the dark and unnatural clouds vigilantly shrouding the towering heights of **Arnie Franke's** third story apartment dissipate. On these nights, the peasants of Seattle's northlands gather in fearful speculation: "He's an illustrator!" "Copywriter!" "Designer!" "Nay, 'tis written that he toils endlessly as a freelance advertising creative fantastique." Too late these simple folk will realize that Arnie Franke, looking down upon them in smug majesty, is all of these things, and more.