

HARLEQUIN'S BACK...



...AND THE WORLD MAY NEVER BE THE SAME!

It's long been said that trouble follows Harlequin like a loyal dog, but this time he's taking the lead and dragging some shadowrunners along on his waking nightmare. It's clear that the level of magic is rising in the Sixth World, and bigger magic makes the world a more dangerous place. But the particular danger Harlequin's worried about isn't supposed to be a problem for another two thousand years...

Harlequin's Back is a big adventure for *Shadowrun, Second Edition*. It involves magic and mayhem on a scale beyond any previously published *Shadowrun* adventure and is recommended for veteran gamemasters and fearless players. (Experience with the first Harlequin adventure is helpful, but not required.)



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HARLEQUIN'S BACK™



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HARLEQUIN'S BACK

Story Concept and Product Development:

Tom Dowd

Writing:

Aftermath—Nigel D. Findley

A Fistful of Karma—Paul R. Hume

By the Sword—Carl Sargent

The Impossible Dream—Mike Nystul

The Masquerade—Steve Kenson

"Additional Writing"—Tom Dowd

Story Development (in alphabetical order):

Rob Cruz, Tom Dowd, Nigel Findley, Paul Hume, Steve Kenson, Mike Mulvihill, Mike Nystul, Diane Piron-Gelman, Lou Prosperi, Carl Sargent, Sharon Turner Mulvihill

Editorial Staff

Editorial Director

Donna Ippolito

Managing Editor

Sharon Turner Mulvihill

Associate Editors

Diane Piron-Gelman

Rob Cruz

Production Staff

Art Director

Jim Nelson

Project Manager

Steve Bryant

Cover Art

Brom

Cover Design

Mike Nielsen

Illustrations

Aftermath—Earl Geier

A Fistful of Karma—Steve Bryant

By the Sword—Darrell Midgett

The Impossible Dream—Jeff Laubenstein

The Masquerade and **Cast of Shadows**—Paul Daly

"Framing Sequence"—Larry MacDougall

Maps

Aldo Pinkster

Layout

Steve Bryant

FASA Corporation can be reached on the GENIE computer network (E. Mail—FASA Support) on SCORPIA's Roundtable (page 805) and on America Online (E. Mail—FASATom (Shadowrun), FASALou (Earthdawn), FASABryan (BattleTech) or FASAMike (General Harrassment) in the Online Gaming area (Keyword "Gaming"). Via InterNet use <AOL Account Name>@AOL.COM, but please, no list or server subscriptions. Thanks!



VOICES FROM THE PAST

Harlequin sat alone in a quiet room lit only by the sinking flames of a dying fire. He wore a long, simply cut robe shot through with gold and burgundy threads, and he had left his face unpainted. The firelight sparkled off the metallic threads in Harlequin's robe and the intricate metal filigree on the walls behind him. Harlequin stared at the drink in his hand, oblivious to all else around him.

The liquor swirled in the glass, impelled by the gentle movement of his wrist. He watched the magical blending of color as it hovered on the edge of solidity, staying liquid only because of the energy imparted by his hand. He reversed the direction of the liquor's motion, and its colors changed dramatically. Reflected firelight danced along the edges of the brimming crystal goblet.

Harlequin felt tired, worn by the passing of time and emotions and the changes through which the world pulled itself. For the first time in almost as long as he could remember, he lacked a cause or a direction. The time for such things was past, banished with the quick snap of a fine-edged blade. Trivial, he knew—pointless and inconsequential—and now done.

Sighing, Harlequin sipped from the goblet and let the drink's deep fire burn through him. He nearly laughed at the pleasure of it until—as always—the cold aftertaste caught him by surprise.

"How far you have fallen," said a long-dead voice behind him.

Slowly, Harlequin turned from the fire and looked across the room's long expanse. At its center, crisscrossed by shadows cast by the dancing firelight, stood a figure in a black robe. The cloth was torn, covered with the dust of a thousand roads. Dark, gnarled hands hung limply from the sleeves, but no face showed within the raised hood. In its place, Harlequin saw only churning smoke.

The elf raised an eyebrow, snorted once, and raised his drink to his lips. "Oh, please," he muttered.

"You cannot ignore me," said the robed figure, its icy voice underlaid with a howling wind.

Harlequin snorted again, spraying a few drops of liquid from his mouth. "I can do as I please," he said. He drank again, this time more deeply.

"You are drunk."

Harlequin laughed. "And you, sir, are a feeble attempt to frighten me with an image so common that it would not frighten a child." He gazed into the heart of the fire. "Lewis Carroll must be spinning in his grave."

"Indeed he must," agreed the figure. "You are not only drunk, but confused. A *Christmas Carol* was written by Charles Dickens, not Carroll. You fog your mind so that you cannot see the truth."

Abruptly, Harlequin stood and hurled the glass toward the robed figure. The missile fell just short of its target, exploding into fragments of brilliant crystal and a spray of liquid color. The specter did not move.

"Begone, foul spirit," Harlequin cried. "I summoned you not into my home and I banish you hence." He flung his hand toward the robed figure, spreading his fingers as if throwing dust. A hint of power danced between his fingertips.

"You cannot banish me," said the dark figure, unmoving.

Harlequin's face grew wild. "*I can and I do!*" he shouted, thrusting his arms out to his sides. "*M'aela j-taarm querm talar!*"

The room darkened suddenly. Pockets of moisture sealed in the blazing firewood burst open, throwing showers of sparks into the air. They rained down on Harlequin, ignored until a cool wind rushed back at him and damped them into embers. He brushed the char from his shoulders.

The black robe still had not moved. "It has been a long time since those words were last spoken, *Har'lea'quinn*. And this is not the first time you have used them against me." The figure's robe rustled slightly. "They did not aid you then, either."

Harlequin paled. "No ...," he breathed, stumbling back to his chair. "You are gone ... forgotten ..."

"Forgotten, perhaps, but never gone. How can we ever be truly gone?"

Harlequin turned away, shielding his eyes with his forearm. "You are the past. Your place is there," he moaned. "That world is gone."

"Perhaps," replied the figure, "but as long as you remember ..."

"Yes. That is the key, isn't it?" Harlequin said, lowering his arm. He faced the robed figure. "My mind. You are right, whatever you are. I am drunk, and that is a bad state for one like me."

"Then I am a figment of your imagination?"

Harlequin shrugged. "Were you ever anything more?"

The robe moved as if the figure laughed, but Harlequin heard no sound. "That borders on blasphemy. Once, you were more devout."

"Never for you."

"I understood you too well."

Harlequin thrust his shaking hands into the pockets of his robe. "Or vice versa."

The figure bowed slightly. "Perhaps. Madness can bring wisdom."

Harlequin sneered. "You are the Master of the Twisted Path. The only wisdom you teach is avoidance."

"And yet I am here."

"*Alamestra*," said Harlequin, pointing to the now-motionless, solid globs of color around the figure's feet, "is not an indulgence known for gifting wisdom."

"Then what of me?"

"What of you?" replied Harlequin.

"If I exist only as a creature of your mind, why am I here?"

Harlequin shrugged. "It matters not. Your words are lies and your deeds treachery. Your inspiration is betrayal. I care not why you are here and will not listen to you."

"And yet you say you summoned me."

"I am—was—drunk."

"If I am of no consequence or concern, why did your dispelling fail?"

Harlequin stared at him.

"You have cleared your mind. The fog is lifted, yet I remain."

"You are a hangover incarnate, nothing more."

The figure shifted again. "You lie to yourself."

"No," said Harlequin, "you lie to me."

"As I said."

Harlequin tensed. "This is foolishness. You are a shadow of the dead past conjured by my drunken mind to vex me."

"Why me?"

"I do not care," Harlequin snapped, turning back to the dying fire.

"You lie to yourself."

"You repeat yourself, bland spirit."

Slowly, the figure raised one arm and pointed at Harlequin.

"I am Deceit. I am Deception. I am Treachery. I am Betrayal. I am the passions that lead men to lie to others and themselves."

Harlequin turned and stared, his eyes growing wider. "As you say," he said.

"As you do, now."

"Your words can never be believed," said Harlequin.

"I am not words, *Har'lea'quinn*. I am emotion, I am passion, I am what you feel."

Harlequin fell silent.

"And you feel them, do you not?"

"I feel nothing."

"You can taste them in the air."

"I taste nothing."

"Smell them on the wind."

"The air is still."

"Hear them laughing in the silence, calling for their due."

"I hear only your maddening voice."

The figure lowered its arm. "You lie to yourself."

Suddenly, Harlequin strode toward the figure. "*I do not!*" he howled, his hands held before him and clenched into sweaty fists. He shook them at the robed figure. "It is too soon!"

"They are coming."

Harlequin spun away, then rounded back on his antagonist. "It is too soon! They cannot be coming!"

"You deceive yourself."

"It is you who deceives me!"

"As I have said."

His shoulders slumping, Harlequin stumbled back toward the fire. "It is too soon ...," he mumbled. "Nothing is right ... I cannot understand. ..."

"You do not wish to understand. The humans play with things they do not comprehend because no one teaches them."

Harlequin whirled back to face the figure. "And telling

them would stop them? I think not."

The figure shifted. "The humans have danced their little dance, *Har'lea'quinn*. They shook this world, and the others. Now they pay the price."

Harlequin grasped his head and shook it. "No ... it is too soon. ..."

"You will still be saying that when they tear the fingers from your hands and blind you with them. Have you fallen so far, *Har'lea'quinn*? Have you forgotten the horror?"

"I can't ..."

"Nor can I." The figure stared at Harlequin. "I expected more from the last Knight of the Crying Spire."

Harlequin stared back at the figure. "The Northern Islands are gone. Forgotten dust of a forgotten world."

"As all shall be, *Har'lea'quinn*, as all shall be."

"What would you have me do?" Harlequin cried.

"Destroy the bridge."

Harlequin blanched. "That cannot be done ... How ..."

"Thayla's Voice."

Harlequin sat abruptly. "No."

"You know where she roams. Her song will prevent them from crossing. They cannot pass her."

Harlequin stared into the darkness and slowly nodded. "Yes ..."

"Travel lightly. Their allies already wander the netherworlds. It will not be safe. They will smell you coming."

"I understand."

The figure walked past Harlequin toward the dying embers of the fire. "Move quickly, Laughing Man; they have built their bridge before."

Harlequin stared silently into the shadows, still nodding.

Shaking its head, the figure stepped into the fire. The embers flared and kindled, but no heat warmed Harlequin. At last he looked up, saw the growing shadow of his chair on the wall, and turned in time to see the last swirls of burning cloth as the heat from the now-raging fire spun them higher and higher.

He stared at the fire, then turned swiftly as the large, ornate doors at the far end of the room burst open. A young woman entered, her long white hair falling in waves over the black satin dressing gown she clutched to her body with one hand. The other hand held a heavy-barreled chrome pistol. "Did you ...," she stammered. "I felt ..."

Harlequin stood and walked toward her. "Indeed you did. Prepare yourself; it is time to see how much you have learned."

She stared at him. As he moved past her he turned and continued walking, backward.

"The netherworlds ... " He paused, and smiled. "Pardon my anachronism. The *metaplanes* will ring with the sounds of battle and songs long unsung." He walked backward out of the room and down the hall.

She followed quickly. "I don't ... What happened?"

Harlequin grinned broadly. "Times have changed." His path arced across the large hall they had entered. He began ascending the staircase, still facing her.

She stopped at its foot and yelled up after him. "Will you tell me what the frag is going on?"

"Why, my dear," he said, finally turning away from her, "Harlequin's back. Can't you tell?"