

Death and Taxes

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v1.0

James Blake was an adventurer in his youth, and a respected general after that, securing many victories for the loyalist faction during the Seven Years' War, and always leading and fighting with honour. Each of you knew him in some capacity, either as a friend, through joining him on his adventures, or by serving with him in the War. He was known for his gruff and pragmatic outward personality, and the a warm and kind soul hidden within that he only displayed to those he trusted. The last you knew of him, he'd retired from the army and had settled with his young daughter in the town of Axford.

And now he is dead.

You have each received a letter from a man named Brennard, the town priest, inviting you to Blake's funeral.

The Funeral

It is a cool, grey day, and the heavy drizzle seems to be weighing everything down; even the birds are silent. You stand among rows of graves from the past few years, Axford's sons returned from the War, as the local priest, hunched under his hat, intones a eulogy.

"James Blake was a national hero, a loving father, and well-respected and much-loved member of the local community. Since moving to Axford, General Blake lived up to that reputation, befriending many here in the town, and becoming such an intrinsic part of our community that it was as if he'd been here forever. May Primus, sovereign of the gods, guide and protect his soul in the Everlasting."

Aside from Brennard, and two slovenly gravediggers, the smaller of whom looks as if he might have the Red Fever, you are conspicuously the only mourners present.

If asked about this, Brennard will invite the heroes into his cottage for a cup of tea.

The poor turnout?

"Oh he was quite well-liked here. He was from the area originally, before he went on to achieve everything he did, but of course you know that. But I fear that Axford has turned against him in death. I can't say why, exactly, but I feel that certain people here suspect that there is more to General Blake's death than appears."

The death?

"The constable found General Blake, so he may be able to tell you more about that side of things."

The daughter?

"Ah, young Rebecca. Such a... dramatic child. The constable tells me that she has run away, but I have to say that I am surprised that she's not here today."

The Watcher in the Woods!

During the funeral, the hero with the best Perception spots a figure in a dark brown cloak in the treeline at the far edge of the graveyard. By the time the heroes get across the graveyard and into the trees, the figure is gone.

A *Perception* (8+6) task detects shallow markings in the soft earth where the figure stood, although no tracks can be found. A trump will inform the player that the shallow marks suggest that the figure was lighter than it appeared, and the lack of tracks suggests that the figure was either very good at moving without leaving a trace, or had

access to some unconventional means of travelling.

Townsfolk

Sitting in a set of stocks on the village green, near to the village gallows, is a grubby and bedraggled man. His name is Roderick, and he will tell the heroes anything they want to hear, in the hope that they may be able to free him. This is a good opportunity to ramble on about royalist conspiracies, slavers roaming the area for children, and so on.

Other folk are more honest, but not necessarily helpful:

"I think he had something to hide. Some taxmen were in town recently, and seemed quite interested in Blake. They barely spoke to anyone else, but were always talking to him."

"Well he was a soldier, wasn't he? Who knows what he did, what he had to do, in the war, but I wouldn't be surprised if it came back to haunt him."

"Nothing good can come of talking of the dead. Let him rest."

"Oh, it's all very suspicious. Where's young Rebecca? Why were those men at his house so often? It's not very difficult to put the pieces together, is it?"

"The taxmen? Shifty buggers, they were, but that's taxmen for you. I think they're out at the Wheatsheaf Inn. You probably passed it on your way into town. Can't miss it."

The Constable

As you enter the constable's office, you find him in discussion with a man wearing the uniform of a county taxman. Both men stand and turn to greet you.

"Hello, I am Robert Fulton, the constable here. Sit down, sit down. This is Mr Cushing; he's come down from Wexton on a matter of business. You are friends of the late General Blake, are you not? My sincere condolences on your loss; the General was a great man. Please sit, and I'll fetch some ale."

Fulton bundles off to a back room. Cushing turns to you and greets you with a warm smile.

"I apologise most humbly for bringing this up at

such a sensitive time for you, but did General Blake have any contact with you before he died? Did he mention anything about certain artefacts? A book perhaps? You see, my colleagues and I are looking for certain items which may have been captured as spoils of war, by men serving under General Blake. Although we do not think he personally had anything to do with the lost items, as his record was exemplary, but we thought he may have had some information as to their whereabouts. However, with the General's unfortunate passing, our investigation has floundered. Any information you can provide would be most useful."

If the heroes seem unwilling to talk about Blake, Cushing does not press the matter. Eventually he drinks the last of his beer, nods to the heroes and Fulton, and leaves, leaving the heroes free to chat with the constable.

The General's Death?

"The General seemed to have died in his sleep, quite peacefully. I detected no signs of struggle or anything else that was suspicious."

"Well, he was a healthy man, and not too old, so that was a surprise, but not suspicious as such."

"Rebecca is a puzzle though. She was nowhere to be found, so I think she's run off. She was quite fond of her father, and his death may have come as a shock to her."

"I'm not too worried about Rebecca. She's definitely her father's daughter, if you understand me. I expect she's attempted to join the army, and she'll be back soon enough with her tail between her legs."

"The investigation is still open, at least until Rebecca turns up, but I honestly don't think there's anything suspicious about Blake's death. But something seems to have given the townsfolk that idea, and you know how rumours travel in places like this."

The constable?

"I've only just arrived here myself. I'm from Goatsford originally, do you know it? The previous constable, passed away last winter of an infection, so I came to replace him. The townsfolk have been lovely."

Blake's House

Just as Fulton said, Blake's house has been boarded up since his death. It is not difficult to open things up, although it will be difficult to do so without any witnesses; Fulton can probably be convinced to allow the heroes to investigate, although he's unsure of what they expect to find.

Inside, the house has been searched thoroughly, but not utterly ransacked. None of the neighbours saw anything, and Fulton appears to be quite perplexed, as the search was not sanctioned by himself.

The Wheatsheaf Inn

The taxmen have two rooms at the Wheatsheaf Inn. The doors are locked and the keys are held by the taxmen. When not investigating the area, the taxmen will be at the Inn, usually in the main social room. Getting past them to their rooms may be something of a challenge. Someone might have to stick with them and buy them a drink.

Bash the door down: *Strength (8)*

Pick the lock: *Dexterity (8)*

Force the door open without making a substantial noise: *Strength: (12)*

Inside the second room, under one of the beds, is a leather case filled with various implements not usually carried by employees of the revenue office. There are vials of liquid labelled as poison, and various small and easily concealable weapons like daggers, garrottes, and so on. While it all displays murderous intent, it is very well organised.

The townsfolk, while not fond of taxmen, have no reason, up until now, not to believe the group's story, so a confrontation here will be difficult to justify. Is there a way to prove that the taxmen are not who they say they are?

The Watcher in the Woods! (again)

On the way back from the Inn, the hero with the highest Perception will again see a figure watching the party. This time the heroes are able to give chase.

The cloaked figure sprints off at impressive speed across the fields, heading away from the road and towards the treeline. As the woods become thicker, it becomes more difficult to keep up with your quarry as uneven ground threatens to trip you and branches tug at your clothes.

Eventually, the path is blocked by a large fallen tree. The cloaked figure dives and rolls through a small mossy space between the trunk and the ground, rising almost seamlessly into a run on the other side.

Short characters can more easily dive under, while larger types will perhaps find it fastest to climb up and over the tree trunk. The easier option will be

an *Agility* (8) task, while the more difficult option (a big guy trying to squeeze under the log) would be an *Agility* (12) task. A mishap results in 4 points of damage.

Heroes may attempt to destroy the trunk, or at least the part obstructing the path. It is a solid and bulky bit of wood, and has a *Physique* of 25.

Soon you come to a small but deep gorge with a number of trees reaching out across the gap. Your quarry runs along one of the thicker tree trunks then executes a graceful leap across the remaining distance, landing softly on the other side before continuing their escape.

It will require an *Agility* (16) to make the jump without using the overhanging tree, *Agility* (12) using the tree, although it is only strong enough to hold lighter characters. A heavier character will break the tree, fall clumsily into the gorge and suffer 4 points of damage; a mishap has the same result. A fallen character can climb out with an *Agility* (8) task, or can follow the gorge down a bit further where it becomes shallow enough to simply walk out; either way loses time.

Failure at either task results in the heroes losing sight of the figure. However, since their quarry was in too much of a hurry to be stealthy, they leave an obvious track which a *Perception* (4) task will reveal.

The trail ends at a small but steep depression surrounded and overhung by trees. A number of blankets and the remains of a small cooking fire suggest that this area has recently been used as a camp.

If the heroes failed at the pursuit, there will be no one here... yet. After a short while, the heroes will be challenged from above, and in a tree sits the cloaked figure, with a crossbow trained at one of them.

If the heroes kept up, then the figure arrives in the camp mere seconds before they do, and cannot prepare a defence.

The cloaked figure is Rebecca, and her attitude differs depending on whether she's in control of the situation or not. Either way, it should not be too difficult for the heroes to convince her of their non-hostility.

"I don't know why the taxmen kept coming back for Father. When they came, he sent me out of the house. All I heard was arguing."

"Then one day, Father was dead. I ran then."

"I don't know what happened to father. I'm sure

the taxmen were involved. That's why I've been watching. I thought you were with them at first."

A book?

"Father had a box of things he wanted buried with him. It was stuff precious to him. Gifts from my mother. Military service bits and pieces. There may have been a book in there, but he wasn't much for books. Why do you ask?"

It's a Graveyard Smash!

If the heroes dig up Blake's body, they'll be desecrating a friend's grave, and they'll have to be sneaky about it, as the townsfolk will not take kindly to strangers engaging in grave-robbing; although the graveyard is sufficiently outside of town to be mostly out of earshot. Also, it will be difficult to convince Rebecca of the wisdom of unearthing her father.

In the grave, at Blake's feet, is a sturdy oak box, about 20x20x40cm. It is locked, but a *Dexterity* (4) or *Strength* (4) action will open it easily enough, although the latter will break the lock. Inside is a silver locket containing a curl of bright yellow hair (Rebecca: "My mother's hair. From when they were first courting."), a well-used dagger in an scruffy old scabbard (Rebecca: "That was my father's first military weapon.") and some sort of package wrapped in oilskin (Rebecca: "I've never seen that before; what is it?").

The Book

The package is secured with string and contains a small book with a battered leather cover. There is no title and the brittle pages inside seem to be handwritten rather than printed. The scribbled text is in an archaic form of the current common tongue, and is incredibly difficult to read. A *Reason* (12) action, and six hours of study (reduced by one hour per trump, but no less than one) reveals it to be a rambling text concerning prehistoric, and possibly mythical, religions operating in this corner of the country. The book is full of hand-drawn images (including a number that vaguely match the taxmen's tattoos).

When Taxmen Attack!

Whether or not the heroes go to the graveyard, the taxmen have been watching, and have realised that the heroes may know where the book is. They are not content to wait any longer, and will beat the information out of them.

Perception (12) to avoid being surprised by the sneak attack. The initial range is Near Missile.

Tactics: Two of the taxmen will hang back, behind

cover, attacking with crossbows. The leader will cast some kind of weakness spell on the most dangerous hero and then will attack with his two pistols. Should the heroes look to be approaching, he will chuck his pistols aside with a snarl and draw his rapier.

As the heroes respond to this, the remaining taxmen will run forward from the side and attempt to engage the heroes in close combat.

The taxmen are cultists, and so will fight to the death to achieve their goals, but will nonetheless fight intelligently; while dedicated, they are not stupid.

Rebecca is likely to be in the way, and may get hit in the crossfire. If the heroes do too well, chuck in one or two reinforcements.

Cushing:

"I don't know who you are, or why you oppose Lord Simon's plans, but even if we fall here today, you cannot deny us our final victory!"

Conclusion

Essentially, the end. A triumph, if not exactly a happy ending.

If the players stick around, the constable will attempt to apprehend them, at least until he's worked out what has been going on. With the taxmen defeated, their gear at the Inn is discovered, and it becomes quite clear that they were not who they claimed. Devious players may even be able to pin the desecration of Blake's grave and Rebecca's "disappearance" on them, especially if she confirms the story.

If any of the taxmen survive the final fight, they will be apprehended and all of them hanged the next day in the village square.

And what to do with Rebecca? She has no other living relatives, and by law should be in the care of a responsible adult. The heroes may be able to convince Brennard and the constable that they can serve as her guardians, although their occupations and status may cause difficulties. Rebecca herself does not particularly want to stay in Axford, although it is unlikely that she'll be let go without some kind of guardian established.

The taxmen claimed to come from the revenue office in Wexton, which is a couple of days' travel away.

Who is Lord Simon? None of the townsfolk know a noble by that name, although they only really know local personalities, so he could be from further afield.

And depending on how they unearthed Blake, could his vengeful spirit demand revenge?

Unless the heroes were completely inept and achieved little, they should all receive one Quest point.

Characters

Godfrey Cushing: *Human male adult, charismatic, champion.* Ag7D, Dx6B, En7C, St5C, Re7D, Pe7C, Sp7B (49), Pr7C, Damage +5 (rapier), Def -2 (leather).

Also has two flintlock pistols (+4) and has access to channeling.

A tall, thin man who looks strong despite his middle age. His craggy features belie a warm and open personality. He wears the plain dark uniform of a county taxman and a Pilgrim hat. He speaks softly and precisely, and always looks directly into the face of his interlocutor.

False Taxmen (one for each player, plus one):

Human male adult, various, adventurers. Co6, Ph6, In6, Es6, Damage +5 (rapiers), Def -2 (leather)

Also armed with crossbows (+5).

Each of the taxmen (including Cushing) has a rough tattoo of some kind of serpent-like creature coiled in a spiral around his left forearm, starting from the wrist and ending at the elbow.

Rebecca Blake: *Human female teenager, relentless and independent, novice.* Ag6B, Dx6C, En4B, St4B, Re5X, Pe5C, Sp5X, Pr6D, Damage +2 (dagger), Def -1 (padded).

A wiry young girl of fourteen. Possibly pretty, but has a cold, fierce expression on her round face that makes it hard to tell. Her curly dark brown hair has been inexpertly hacked short, and she's covered in dirt. Tends to talk in clipped sentences.

Constable Robert Fulton: *Human male adult, gregarious and optimistic, novice.* Co5, Ph6, In5, Es5, Damage +2 (baton), Def -2 (leather)

A rotund man with slightly blotchy skin and greasy dark hair, he barely fits into his slightly dishevelled uniform. Always seems to be eating something, and often speaks with his mouth full.

Father George Brennard: *Human male adult, compassionate, rabble.* Co5, Ph5, In6, Es6, Damage +0 (none), Def -0 (none)

A short, stocky man of middle years with a hawkish nose and striking silver hair. Has a slightly distant, distracted tone to his voice.