

The making of the *Odyssey Cycle* storyline Caught in the Mirari's Wake, Part 3

Will McDermott

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Part Three: Character Building Exercise

In [part one](#) and [part two](#) of this series, I discussed how the participants of the author summit brainstormed the Mirari plotline and both created and populated the continent of Otaria. In this installment, I'll delve more deeply into the characters who would walk the world we built as the plot unfolded around them.



Cast of Authors

[J. Robert King](#)

[Jess Lebow](#)

[Daneen McDermott](#)

[Will McDermott](#)

[Scott McGough](#)

[Vance Moore](#)

Three days. Three authors. Three novels.

Three main characters. That's basically

where the *Odyssey Cycle* plotline stood at the end of the author summit. We had the plot, the all-powerful artifact that everyone craved, our fiery protagonist, his dementia-summoning best friend, and a loquacious, double-talking antagonist to plot against them. According to Jess Lebow, former **Magic: The Gathering** book line editor, "The process was so steeped in group creation that I really can't remember who started each character."

Wherever they came from, we had basic concepts on the white board for most major characters by the end of the summit. We knew Kamahl would be a brassy-skinned barbarian, that Laquatas would be a deceitful merfolk ambassador, and that Chainer would rise from the lowest levels of the Cabal to become the most powerful dementia caster and the defacto ruler of the "family." But the real character development happened after the summit. Each author went home and worked up synopses for their stories and initial character studies for the characters they would use in their books. And, as the books were written, new characters, like Braids, Eesha, and Skellum, appeared on the pages for they, too, had something to say and something to do in the story.

Up a Mountain

Kamahl: We had Kamahl pretty nailed down by the end of the summit as a tough, battle-hardened barbarian who would fight against Laquatus for possession of the Mirari. What we hadn't figured out was why he wanted the Mirari in the first place. Vance tackled that motivation in his novel when Kamahl began chasing the Mirari because he believed he won it fairly and felt deprived when it was awarded to Kirtar. "The first view of the barbarian shows him very self-involved -- obsessed with personal glory," says Vance. "There is a slow shift to a broader view in the first book,



but no dramatic changes." This slow change was intended because, as those of you who have read [Judgment](#) know, Kamahl's major character change was slated for the third book.

Balthor: The dwarven weapon master was very much my creation. When we discussed the plot of the third book, I knew Kamahl would need a foil -- someone to spar with both verbally and physically. And, I knew Chainer would be dead. I like dwarves and wanted to put a dwarf into the story. I also wanted Kamahl's foil in the story to be his mentor -- a father figure -- so I put these two thoughts together to create Balthor. The dwarf's true character first came out in my short story for the [Secrets of Magic anthology](#). I knew he had turned away from the dwarven ways to embrace the barbarian lifestyle, but the reasons behind that decision (and the power of Balthor's convictions) weren't clear until the end of "Journey Home." He's a lost son of war who is looking for a place in the world. He's only truly happy when he's swinging his axe.



Jeska: Kamahl's sister began as just a plot device. We needed someone close to Kamahl whom the big barbarian could fight in a climactic battle in the middle of *Judgment*. It had to be someone close, and I couldn't use Balthor for this battle because he had work to do later. At one point Jeska was Kamahl's brother. I believe it was Daneen McDermott (my wife, and the former **Magic** continuity manager) who lobbied to make Jeska into the sister. Jeska is even named after Daneen (in a round-about manner). Scott McGough did a wonderful job of portraying Jeska in [Chainer's Torment](#), and I merely built on the smart, strong, and bull-headed character he portrayed. I also needed Jeska to act as a foil for Balthor, so I added a piece to her background -- she had studied with the dwarven clans behind Balthor's back and was more of a dwarf at heart than Balthor ever was.



Under the Sea

Laquatus: The merfolk ambassador also was well-established by the end of the summit. We even knew his main motivation -- power -- and that he was willing to do anything or kill anyone to get it. His first pet, Turg, was Vance's creation. I believe Vance actually came up with the idea of having Laquatus always fight through controlled creatures. The ambassador is too civil to get his hands dirty. Here's what Vance has to say about Laquatus: "He views the rest of the world as something to manipulate for his own benefit and amusement. He wants to control, but, failing that, he will destroy. His greatest weakness is himself. He launches intricate plots and pursues them to extremes. However, immediate gratification of dark impulses complicates his life and he cannot reign himself in. His pit frog is a foil, reflecting his appetites without the veneer of civility."



Aboshan: Both Aboshan and Llawan were little more than titles (the "emperor" and the "empress") at the end of the summit. We had established the rivalry between them and the separate power bases, but not much more than that. Aboshan's paranoia, which Laquatus capitalizes upon in [Odyssey](#), came out of Vance's first draft. Vance again: "Aboshan is the ambassador carried to extremes. His dream is the genocide of everyone who breathes. He is the state, and all who oppose him are traitors. The mere idea of the queen is his foil. She is the voice of reason and inclusion that he has expelled and becomes his enemy. His own impulses are used against him. His desire to weed out treachery nurtures Laquatus like an adder in his bosom."



Llawan: More important than being a foil to Aboshan in *Odyssey*, Llawan must become a foil for Laquatus in *Chainer's Torment*. We knew her to be the real power under the ocean, but Scott really shaped her character in his book. "I decided to make her extremely patrician and haughty," says Scott, "because she had been raised among wealth and power. But she is also smart and cunning, because she had been sent to the best schools and spent her whole life among the duplicitous cephalids. I didn't want the reader to trust the empress, and even at the very end, I don't think you can say Llawan is a noble character. She's merely looking out for herself and 'her' empire." Llawan becomes more of a background character in *Judgment*, but her manipulations behind the scenes have a huge impact on Otaria -- much more so than anything Aboshan ever accomplished.



The "Cabal"

The First: The First is probably the most complex character in the trilogy. We knew the Cabal would be an organized crime syndicate with a "family" atmosphere. The First as the head of the family, with his withering touch, was created by Rob King (author of the upcoming *Onslaught*) and Vance at the summit. "I had a vision of a humanoid race whose very touch caused pain and suffering," says Vance. "I liked the idea of a 'family' where the worst punishment was being hugged." But the First's character was fleshed out by Scott in both *Chainer's Torment* and his story in *The Secrets of Magic*. "I developed the First's character according to two vectors," says Scott. "One, he was a 'predatory capitalist.' If it's good for business, it's good for the Cabal, and so he does it. When push comes to shove, the First will casually sacrifice any of his 'children' for the family's long-term benefit. Two, he loves spectacle. This comes from his inability to actually interact with other people without poisoning them, so like a mad Roman emperor, the First has people put on elaborate shows, which are as much for his own amusement as for the people in the audience and the money it brings in. This is why he sends Skellum into the pits to die rather than having him quietly smothered in a dark alley, and partially why he lets Chainer have Cabal City without much of a fight. He wanted to see what the mad dementist with the Mirari in hand would do." According to Rob (who is writing the entire *Onslaught* Cycle), "we learn more of the origins of the First in the next cycle. We even find out why he became the First."



Chainer: According to Vance, Chainer is "the street kid made good in the mob. He is amoral rather than evil. I wanted him friendly and able to form connections with characters in the first book so Scott could show his fall in the second book." Rob King actually did some of the work on Chainer and here is his take on what happens in *Chainer's Torment*: "Chainer was the lowest level guy in the family -- similar to typical fans of **Magic**, who begin playing the game and working their way up the ranks toward the Pro Tour. In the end he becomes the head of the family and then does the unthinkable. He destroys the family. He becomes a lost soul who must be redeemed by his only friend -- Kamahl. Much like Michael Corleone [Al Pacino's character] in *The Godfather*, you don't want to see him go bad, so the fall is that much more painful."



Braids: We knew we would need more dementia casters in the books, but the creation of the major ones was left to the authors. I created Traybor, the cool and



collected caster who gets the best of Laquatus in the forest. Scott created Skellum, who may be the most beloved character to die in the trilogy. And Vance created Braids. "The defining moment for Braids, to me," says Vance, "is when she holds the Mirari. The object is the ultimate prize and holds tremendous power, but she is immune to its charms. Braids is too screwed up with her own twisted visions to see new ones." Braids quickly became a fan (and author) favorite. Here's Scott: "The fact that she repeatedly survives huge cataclysms originated in Vance's book, then Will and I ran with it because we all fell in love with writing her and couldn't bear to see her die. In writing Braids, I made her kind of bipolar, where she's either upbeat and manic or quiet and almost withdrawn." I continued Scott's characterization in *Judgment* by having her retreat into her dementia cloud to think because she's less distracted by her own monsters than she is by the real world.

Skellum: This was Scott's character from beginning to (tragic) end, so I'll let Scott describe Skellum. "We decided to make Chainer an apprentice so we could fully explore the dementia summoning concept as he learned it, so he had to have a dementia master. That was all we had at the Summit . . . Skellum's hat and personality were all mine. I really liked the idea of a small, elegant, powerful mentor who occasionally just spaced out in mid-sentence and had to be gently prodded back out of his own head. His pride became a key feature, because he would not allow himself to abandon his dignity even though he traffics with monsters and trains apprentices for a bloody life in the pits. He takes this to the extreme, so that even when he's being mauled by a wolf-monkey, he pauses to politely introduce himself. Some people cry when faced with ugly death, some pray. Skellum displayed good manners, and he did so because they were an important balance to the sometimes awful things he had to see and do as a Cabalist."

The Order

Captain Pianna: The two main Order characters were created at the summit to manifest the two extremes of the Order philosophy. Pianna was the voice of reason and compassion, while Kirtar was meant to show how that compassion could be corrupted by a fascist need for order in the world. Vance got to play with this coin more than Scott or I because the Order is the first to lay claim to the Mirari. "Pianna grew up in the Order and has preserved the ideals without losing perspective," says Vance. "Her loss in *Odyssey* reflects a triumph of fanaticism over reason."



Lieutenant Kirtar/Major Teroh: "A raptor made into a man," according to Vance, "Kirtar sees the world as friends and enemies with the ranks of enemies growing larger. The world will be perfect as soon as he controls it and destroys the evil elements. Kirtar believes in the ideals of the Order and that 'the ends justifies the means'." Teroh shows how far down the road toward fascism the Order can go without someone like Pianna guiding them. He also points out the class struggle within the Order, as the avens take over after the death of Pianna (a human). "These two characters came out of the aven idea (Vance's) and the fascistic bent of the Order (mine)," says Scott. "Kirtar and Teroh represent the hard, militant side of white law and order."



Commander Eesha: The leaders of the Order kept getting killed, so I needed to create yet another aven soldier to command the troops. We were also running



out of military ranks, so Commander Eesha was created to fill the void after Major Teroh's death in *Chainer's Torment*. I wanted the Order to reclaim some of what it had lost when Pianna died by the end of *Judgment*, so I showed Eesha as a capable leader who believed in the military principles of the Order, but who saw her role as more of a police officer of the continent than a military dictator. Instead of continuing the Crusat begun in book two, Eesha sends her troops out to scout, maintain order, and create a reliable map of the continent so she can keep track of the Order's enemies.

In the Woods

Seton: The druid character that Kamahl meets in the pits was established at the summit because we needed a foil for Kamahl in the first book (before he bonds with Chainer in the second book), plus we needed someone Kamahl could turn to for help after Jeska is struck down in book three. Although white is known as the healing color in the game, we knew Kamahl could not turn to the Order because they would be chasing him throughout *Judgment*. Green can also heal in **Magic**, plus it's an allied color to red, so the choice of a druid became obvious.



Seton did not become a centaur until Vance began writing, though. "Seton needed to be a companion who could be ridden," says Vance. "Jess suggested a centaur and I went with it." This choice helped Scott, as he used the death of a centaur during Kamahl and Chainer's expedition into the Krosan forest as a moment of growth for the barbarian in *Chainer's Torment*.

Thriss: The Krosan forest is a mystery to the readers as well as the inhabitants of Otaria throughout most of the trilogy. In fact, until Kamahl pierces the veil of the heart of Krosan near the end of *Judgment*, the only green character we see is Seton. But even his motivations are unclear. What you find is that all the actions of the forest are governed by Thriss. He is the guardian spirit. We knew Thriss would be a giant Nantuko (called mantis warriors at the summit). I knew he would be a pacifist at heart. Thriss is, in many ways, the conclusion of Kamahl's journey and has to be a stark contrast to the chaos of the barbarian life that our hero has left behind. From the very beginning I pictured Thriss as "Yoda meets Chance the gardener (from *Being There*)." Thriss lives and governs by the strict law of the jungle. He believes that you fight to protect or to feed only, and that death and life flow around and through one another. If Balthor is the heart of *Judgment*, Thriss is the book's soul.



Now the Hard Part

About six weeks after the author summit, all three authors had finished their plot synopses and character outlines. Most of the characters described above were now ready to walk Otaria and chase down the Mirari. All that was left was to write the novels (and re-write and re-write again). Of course, that process would take the better part of the next two years. Next time, we'll take a look at the writing methods of all three authors.

If you missed the first two articles in this four-part series, catch up by reading them now!

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