

The Ones Who Walk Away

A System-Agnostic Adventure by Owen Alexander

1. Summary

Premise: While plague sweeps across the land, Sloame, a backwater village, has escaped the ravages of sickness and death. To the outside world, it's a miracle. To those on the inside, the cost is known all too well.

The Setting: In the village of Sloame, life goes on as it always has. The millstone rumbles away up the hill, the farmers till their meagre fields between the fens, and the Mothpyre ritual takes the lives of a few unfortunate souls every summer solstice—for the good of all, of course. These are the simple facts of life. Famine, pox, and pain are all unheard of in Sloame. The village is blessed. But why?

2. The Mystery

Why has the village been blessed?

• **The Mothpyre:** A time-honoured tradition. On the day of the summer solstice, all the village gathers before the Alderman's house. There they light an immense bonfire. After a brief ceremonial speech by the Alderman—one in which he prays for a good harvest and the safety and good health of all the inhabitants of Sloame—the Martyrmoths, attracted by the great flame, descend out of the night and flutter about all assembled. Eventually, they will land on a few unfortunate attendees. The 'moth-touched' are then encased in sheets of silk and buried alive. Everyone else gives their thanks and carries on with their life, knowing, thanks to this sacrifice, they will be spared from famine, disease, and war for another year.

• **The Truth:** In reality, Sloame's immunity to outside ills has little to do with old customs. The village has been placed under the protective hex of Malethka, the Moth Mother. She has killed the original alderman and wriggled into his skin. To her, the village does nothing but provide hosts for her children, the Martyrmoths. She keeps the villagers alive and healthy so that their bodies can incubate her larval brood. To uncover the horrible truth, the players must draw three conclusions. For each of these conclusions, there are three clues.

1. **A supernatural hex is responsible for Sloame's immunity to the plague.**

- a. Folktales are popular among the children of Sloame. Someone called 'The Moth Mother' is often mentioned.
- b. The village knows nothing of medicine or alchemy. There is no apothecary, no doctor, no shaman. There is no need for such professions because no one ever seems to get hurt or fall ill.
- c. Players are unable to suffer damage or become ill while the hex is active.

2. **The Moth Mother is the 'Alderman'.**

- a. The bones of the real Alderman can be found in the well. A signet ring on the finger bone of his left hand identifies him. His ghost will visit the players the first night they spend in the village.
- b. According to the villagers, the Alderman never seems to age.
- c. Despite presiding for decades over the Mothpyre, a Martyrmoth has never once landed on the Alderman.

3. **The Martyrmoths are former sacrifices.**

- a. The Burial Grounds are where the Mothpyre sacrifices are buried alive. Exhuming their graves reveals tatters of silk and no bodies.
- b. When Jenelle is chosen for sacrifice, the Players can stand vigil and watch over her grave. When doing so, the Players can watch as hundreds of Martyrmoths crawl up out of the dirt and fly away. Players can follow the moths to the Longhouse.
- c. If a Player ever catches a Martyrmoth, it will always try to fly back to the Longhouse.

3. Characters (NPCs)

Malethka, the Moth Mother

- **Biography:** A parasitic monster, she has stuffed herself into the skin of the Alderman, Joaquim, after killing him and throwing his bones down the village well. Thanks to her hex magic, the village of Sloame has been inoculated against death, disease, and harm. Every summer solstice, she takes her due: the lives of a few select villagers, the ones who ask too many questions or show signs of walking away from Sloame. Under the guise of ritual, she uses their bodies as hosts to birth more of her children, the Martyrmoths.
- **Motivations:** Malethka will not tolerate any threats to the status quo. She will attempt to thwart the investigations of the players through subterfuge. She will turn the villagers against the players if they try to foment dissent or ask too many questions. She will try to lure them beyond the protective radius of the hex so that they may be harmed or killed.
- **Personality:** Malethka will act as she thinks Joaquim would: she is obsequious, helpful, but assertive. She treats the players hospitably so long as they observe the norms of the village and aren't too inquisitive. She is quick to shut down conversations that verge too close to the truth or would reveal her identity. When confronted with incontrovertible evidence of her deeds, she shows her true colours: a monstrous brood mother who cares nothing for human life other than what sustenance it can provide for her own children.

Jenelle, the Voice of Dissent

- **Biography:** A young woman, certain that she will be chosen for sacrifice during the upcoming Mothpyre. She has lost friends and family to the ritual. She alone openly questions and defies village norms and beliefs, earning the hostility of her fellow villagers. She dreams of leaving the village but knows she would never get far. Now, it is too late. When she manages to approach the Players in private, she confides in them, telling them all she suspects concerning the hex, and begs them to reveal the truth after her death.
- **Motivations:** Jenelle cannot abide the sacrifice of a single human life, even if it does mean the village will be safe. She believes the ritual is abominable, and that there is a more sinister motivation behind it all. However, her convictions don't apply to her own life: she is willing to die for the truth and will trust the player characters to make the best of her martyrdom.
- **Personality:** On the surface, Jenelle is soft-spoken and secretive. At heart, she is determined and compassionate. She sees herself as a martyr and will become hostile towards any Player who tries to prevent her sacrifice.

Joaquim, the Former Alderman

- **Biography:** A dead man who made a well-intentioned but ill-advised deal. Many years ago, when a virulent pox swept through the village, he exhausted all natural remedies before resorting to the supernatural. In the end, he successfully ward off the disease but doomed himself to a grotesque death and subjected the village to an arguably worse fate than the pox. He was slain by Mathelka, robbed of his skin, and his bones were thrown into the town well. If one peers long into that abyss, one might catch the light glinting off his signet ring, still banded around a finger bone.
- **Motivations:** During his ghostly visit, Joaquim will express ambivalence about his past choices. He does not particularly want the hex to be dispelled. After all, he died for it, and it does keep the village safe on the whole. At the same time, he regrets that the price of such safety is the lifeblood of the village itself. At any rate, being dead, Joaquim has become resigned and merely observes the players as they make their choices.
- **Personality:** In life, he was respected and well-liked. He was pragmatic but not heartless. No one dared

challenge his leadership, not out of fear, but out of doubt that anyone could do better. Tragically, he did not understand that good intentions don't always lend themselves to good results.

Alyoshe, the Spirit-tortured Priest

- **Biography:** A priest of the Pantaurge on an evangelical mission, deeply disturbed by his findings. Hearing of how Sloame miraculously avoided the ravages of the plague, Alyoshe rode into the village on a donkey, fully expecting to be greeted by the adulations of a host of fellow Pantaurge worshippers. After all, what other being has the power to perform miracles? Instead, he was met with disdain, suspicion, and flagrant heresy: these people not only worship folktales but give their lives for them. Worst of all is that it works. Alyoshe cannot deny that a miracle has saved Sloame from devastation. For the past month, Alyoshe has been grappling with his faith, bending it in preposterous ways to make it fit into the crooked timber of his experience.
- **Motivations:** More than anything, Alyoshe wants to resolve his crisis of faith. In order to do that, he needs answers to the following questions: Why has the village had to rely on this cruel ritual? Why does the ritual even work? How could the Pantaurge allow such a thing? He is not particularly interested in stopping the ritual or in saving the lives of those marked for sacrifice. To him, resolving his crisis of faith is more important than any single human life, including his own.
- **Personality:** Usually timid and soft-spoken, he is prone to passionate and incomprehensible speeches concerning matters of faith. His inability to reconcile the apparent effectiveness of heretical ritual with his faith that such rituals must be ineffective has taken a heavy mental and physical toll on him. He has become a man who will grasp at any straw.

4. Factions

The Ritualists of Sloame

- **History:** In the beginning, few really believed the Mothpyre ritual would deter the pox from decimating the village. However, since many of them would die anyway, those original ritualists went through with it. At the Alderman's urging, they buried a number of their own and waited. The pox never claimed a single life in the village, and the ritual has been observed every summer solstice since.
- **Values:** Making up the majority of the village, these people are traditionalists. They were simply born into a world where Martyrmoths pick among their number for sacrifice. They treat this as an immutable fact, as unquestionable as the sun rising every morning. To express doubt about the ritual is to prove oneself less than sane and not worthy of living among the true believers of Sloame.

The Minions of the Moth Mother

- **History:** These creatures are as old as the night itself. Bats, toads, centipedes, creatures too unsightly for the clear light of day. And then there are the scarecrows, the ones no villager can recall having made. Their very existence is inexplicable, for there never were any crows around to scare in Sloame.
- **Values:** Mindless puppets, their wills are one with the will of their master, the Moth Mother. Whatever deed she desires of them is what they will carry out or die in the attempt.

The Ones Who Walk Away

- **History:** In Sloame, there have always been those who simply fade out of village life. Some are outspoken and censorious of village norms. Others simply diminish from public life until one day someone remarks that they haven't been seen in weeks. Dissenters who don't walk away before the Mothpyre are always chosen by the Martyrmoths for sacrifice.
- **Values:** They are those who believe one cannot buy an idyllic life for the many at the cost of a few dying horribly. Living according to Sloame's strictures is intolerable, even if it means their life will be nasty, brutish, and short.

5. Locations

The Village of Sloame

- **Flavour Text:** *The sod-caked roofs of the village of Sloame field bright blue flowers in full bloom. The granaries are always full, the old mill is never short of grist to grind, and the well never runs dry. The people are friendly, secure in the fact that they will always enjoy good fortune so long as the old ways are observed.*

The Town Well

- **Flavour Text:** *A tall rim of piled stones borders this deep hole in the earth. A mineral-smelling dampness wafts up the hollow column, and the spiderweb reflections of the noon sun dapple the chiseled walls.*
- **Key Features:** The Town Well holds more than water. The bones of Joaquim, the Alderman, lie on the bottom. His signet ring can be seen catching the sunlight when viewed from the right angle.

The Old Chapel

- **Flavour Text:** *A small chapel built of lichen-covered granite blocks. Besides the pacing priest within, this old addition to the village has not seen much foot traffic in recent decades.*
- **Key Features:** Alyoshe, the Spirit-tortured Priest, can be found here. The villagers keep their distance, and many pretend not to know of this chapel.

The Burial Grounds

- **Flavour Text:** *A field of soft earth, pocked by thousands of fist-sized holes. Scarecrows stand as silent sentinels, bending and twisting under a wind that none can feel.*
- **Key Features:** The sacred burial place for the 'moth-touched'. Here, those chosen during the Mothpyre are buried alive in their silken cocoons. None may go near the Burial Grounds for three days after the moth-touched are buried. However, if one defies this taboo, one will see thousands of moths crawl up out of the recently turned earth and fly off into the night.

The Mothpyre

- **Flavour Text:** *In the square before the Longhouse stands a pyre built of spare timber, rotten hay, and desiccated deadfall pulled from the fens around Sloame. On the night of the summer solstice, it is set alight. Its flames tower almost out of sight and draw in the Martyrmoths from leagues around.*
- **Key Features:** The Mothpyre is the centerpiece of the ritual. Without it, the Martyrmoths would not come to choose the sacrifices, and the hex would fail.

The Longhall

- **Flavour Text:** *A large house built from imported cedar logs. It seems many additions have been made to this once humble abode over the years.*
- **Key Features:** Once a place for weddings, feasts, and other festivities, this massive building belongs solely to the Alderman. None are invited through its oaken doors, and none dare find other means of ingress in order to trespass.

1. **The Entry Hall:** *The floor has been worn down by thousands of comings and goings, scooping out a desire path into the stone itself.*

2. **The Parlor:** *Decadent furniture sits crumbling, little better than kindling now. The upholstery is moth-eaten and so faded its original hue can only be guessed at.*
3. **The Master Bedroom:** *Whoever last slept in the massive goose-down bed did not bother to make it after getting up. That must have been decades ago.*
4. **The Larder:** *Down the rickety steps is a cool pocket of stale air. The wooden shelves built into the wall support nothing more than ancient mouse droppings. Despite not housing victuals for years, this room appears to have been used often and recently: muddy footprints trace a path across the floor. There is a hole in the wall with nothing to see but darkness, and nothing to hear but the barely perceptible fluttering of thousands of moths.*

Den of the Moth Mother

• **Flavour Text:** *The hole in the wall of the larder turns into a tunnel. After crawling on your hands and knees, the tunnel turns into a chamber. By torchlight, you can see that the soft, earthen walls have been gouged horrifically, with furrows left by long fingernails.*

• **Key Features:** In game terms, the Den of the Moth Mother is a mini-dungeon, sporting traps, combat encounters, and a boss fight.

1. **Combat Room:** *A nearly circular room with a single, unmoving occupant: a scarecrow.*
 - a. The scarecrow is a minion of the Moth Mother. Under its sackcloth skin, hundreds of moths can be heard fluttering. It will attack any Player who approaches. It is weak to fire.
2. **Storeroom:** *Horse-hair dolls, carved canes, flour-stained frocks, and wooden swords. This chamber is packed to the root-festooned ceiling with the former possessions of the moth-touched.*
 - a. Players can find helpful loot here to prepare for what is to come, such as charms, potions, weapons, and armor. There is also a great deal of coin, featuring the minted visages of rulers from the past sixty-three years.
3. **Trap Room:** *Threads of glistening silk run wall to wall, floor to ceiling.*
 - a. If Players do not clear a path, they may become entangled in the silk threads.
4. **Boss Room:** *The air is thick with moths, thousands of them, battering your face, crawling in your hair, filling your mind with the horrible noise of their spasmodic flapping. And against the far wall, wearing the shredded skin of the Alderman, is a creature with frayed wings, a distended, throbbing abdomen, and feathery antennae that twitch. The Moth Mother has emerged from her human chrysalis at last.*
 - a. Killing Martyrmoths will enrage the Moth Mother. She always targets the Player who has killed the most moths.
 - b. Her abdomen is her weak point. Attacking her from behind will deal great amounts of damage.
 - c. The thousands of fluttering Martyrmoths lower visibility and are distracting. They are most attracted to any Player carrying a light source.

6. Timeline

The First Day

- **Morning:** The Players arrive in Sloame. They are greeted enthusiastically by the Alderman (the Moth Mother in disguise). Both the Alderman and the villagers are hospitable, and they put the Players up in a vacant hut at the edge of town. Jenelle takes notice of the Players and stalks them, waiting for an opportunity to speak in private.
- **Midday:** Excitement is building throughout the village: the summer solstice is tomorrow, and so is the Mothpyre.
- **Night:** The ghost of Joaquim, the real Alderman, visits the Players.

The Second Day

- **Morning:** Jenelle is waiting for the Players to wake up. She talks to them in private, expressing certainty that she will be chosen during tonight's Mothpyre. She begs you to make good of her death, uncover the truth behind the ritual, and put an end to it. Scarecrows, minions of the Moth Mother, stalk the Players throughout the day, reporting to their master everything the Players do.
- **Midday:** The Mothpyre is built. Every villager chips in. The mood is jovial only on the surface. Undercurrents of fear and anxiety show on the face of every villager. In the evening, just before dusk, the ritual is performed. The Martyrmoths, drawn to the great fire, come swarming. They land on six villagers; Jenelle and Alyoshe are among their number. Jenelle goes peacefully; Alyoshe must be forced into the silken cocoon. All the moth-touched are taken to the Burial Grounds and buried alive.
- **Night:** Around midnight, the Martyrmoths crawl up through the loose dirt of the fresh graves. They fly off to join their mother in the chambers under the Longhouse.