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Peace Bought

Freyr and the Gifts of the Gods



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A princess gave an enemy commander her sword in exchange for the prisoners he held. Years later, she dreams of a blow falling at her city gate and asks the party to bring the sword back.

Roleplaying Game Development: The Blade That Will Be Missing

The following version is an independent, system-neutral game design. Its basic rule is: Whoever has adopted the sword as their own weapon and sells, gives away, or permanently loses it will later die in a dramatic situation in which this very weapon could or should have saved them. Death occurs later, but should still take place within the campaign. Using the sword's powers requires neither years of life nor sacrifice. The death penalty arises upon the loss of possession. The design draws on Freyr’s loss of his sword. This curse is my invention for the game.

This rule is explicitly part of the artifact description. The affected player at the table knows before the binding that a later separation will lead to a tragic end. This is an agreement about the story, not a typical disadvantage triggered in the short term by a failed saving throw. The game's appeal lies in the decision regarding possession and later in what the character achieves with the remaining time.

What the Sword Can Do in the Game

The blade guides its wielder's hand as long as they are conscious and pursuing a clear combat objective. For attacks and parries, they use at least the skill level of an experienced swordsman in the chosen system; if their skill level is higher, that level applies. The sword counts as a powerful magical weapon. There are no additional actions, and in this version, it does not act as a flying weapon outside of its hand. The necessary awareness is interpreted as concentration and conscious target selection, without requiring a specific alignment. The rule is freely inspired by Skírnismál 8–9. [1]

Once per battle, the wielder may also completely parry a single melee attack, provided it would be theoretically reachable with a sword parry. This parry is successful even against superhuman strength and is intended to visibly save the character's life at least once. It does not protect against a collapsing mountain or a poison already taking effect in the body. Its significance also lies in establishing a concrete ability whose absence no one will later have to explain.

A person is bound by the sword if they knowingly accept it as their own weapon. Merely touching, repairing, or transporting it does not establish ownership. Only the currently bound individual receives the special powers; a borrower wields an ordinary sword. Therefore, the bond cannot be circumvented by a nominal owner who constantly lends the weapon to others. A permanent transfer counts according to its actual purpose, even if those involved refer to it as a loan.

When Parting with the Sword Counts

The rules distinguish between a completed transfer and a recoverable loss when determining whether the doom is triggered. Dropping the sword in combat should not carry the same significance as giving it away. If the weapon is lost involuntarily, the character has nine nights to recover it. This time limit deliberately echoes the nine nights before the meeting with Gerðr; in the Eddic poem, that number has no connection to a weapon curse.

If the sword is sold, given away, or traded, the character's doom is sealed once the transfer is complete and the new owner accepts the weapon as their own. Deliberately and permanently relinquishing the weapon has the same consequence: the doom is sealed when the character actually gives it up, even if no one else takes possession of it.

If the sword is stolen, surrendered under duress, or otherwise lost, the character's doom is sealed after nine nights without control of the weapon. Permanently abandoning the search before that deadline triggers the doom immediately. Briefly being disarmed or dropping the sword does not trigger it, provided the character regains control of the weapon within the time limit.

Placing the sword in safekeeping or lending it temporarily does not trigger the doom, as long as its return remains possible and it continues to belong to the person bound to it. The person temporarily holding the weapon does not gain its powers.

Buying the sword back or recovering it after the doom has been sealed may make its powers available again. The doom itself remains. Control means being able to wield and keep the weapon yourself; briefly touching it through prison bars does not reset the time limit.

How the Fate of Death is Fulfilled

After the separation, there is time to experience the gained advantage. Whoever saved a village with the proceeds should see its survival. Whoever gave away the blade should experience what the recipient achieves with it. Only later does the old decision become important again. The price does not retroactively change its moral value: A generous gift may have been the right thing to do and still cost one's life. Even an innocent theft can have the same consequence according to this rule. Fate should strike no later than the end of the campaign.

The game master announces the end through recurring, concrete omens. The character might dream of a blow that their empty hand cannot stop. An opponent eventually develops an attack against which the special parry would have been effective. Between these clues lie real adventures and decisions. The omens point to a recognizable danger; they are not a countdown after which the character falls dead without context. The hero does not die in their sleep, but through a situation in which the sword would have helped them.

In the finale, the sword must actually be missing or unreachable. The fatal situation references a previously demonstrated ability of the blade. For example, the former owner cannot intercept the Giant Lord's blow, which she would have easily parried in the past. The sentence is not fulfilled by any arbitrary fever. The connection between the previous renunciation and the present defeat must be evident in the scene.

Recovering the sword does not negate the death sentence. The player should not search for the sword if they realize that their death is sealed by its loss. Regaining the sword can grant a

reprieve or allow for another success, but a later separation remains part of the agreed-upon ending. This separation must be prepared: Perhaps another defender needs the blade while the former owner maintains a second access point. A surprisingly invented unusability would obscure the significance of the earlier decision. Even ordinary curse-breaking does not negate the sentence in this version.

A guaranteed, predetermined death and completely random outcomes for every possible character death cannot be guaranteed simultaneously. This version opts for a jointly agreed-upon tragedy. Dice determine the successes and losses of the final mission; the final death of the affected character is predetermined. The player helps decide which task they will ultimately undertake and which goal they still wish to pursue. For player characters, this requires a campaign in which such endpoints are collaboratively shaped. The motivation can also be experienced first through an important non-player character before someone from the group takes up the sword. Through a prophecy, the player can know their fate even before gifting the sword and accept it knowingly, or they can learn later what this decision truly means for them.

Each owner bears their own fate. A resale does not transfer any old obligation to the buyer but can later burden their own story. In this way, a succession of significant owners can be told across several generations without giving them identical motivations or identical ways of dying. For campaigns with resurrection mechanics, this tragic version stipulates that fulfilling the death penalty permanently ends the character's life. Otherwise, the actual cost would be reduced to the subsequent acquisition of healing magic.

An Adventure: Peace Bought

Many years ago, a princess gave a sword to an enemy commander. In return, he freed the prisoners and withdrew his troops. Peace held. Now, she has the same dream for the third time: Beneath the gate of her city, she raises her arm as a mighty blow falls upon her. The characters are to retrieve the sword. The princess knows the old warning but hopes that repurchasing it might still save her.

The new owner has since used the weapon to protect a border settlement from the servants of a giant. He knows what a voluntary transfer means to him and therefore doesn't demand a large pile of gold. He insists that the group first open an escape route for his people and ensure their safe passage to the princess's city. Thus, the acquisition of an object becomes a negotiation about the consequences of both parties' decisions regarding ownership.

The group can facilitate the exchange, negotiate a joint defense plan, or attempt to steal the sword. Each solution changes who can wield it and who will bear its fate in the future. Betrayal may destroy the peace that the initial gift established. An honest bargain can create a new obligation, the price of which will only be due in a later adventure. The blade remains useful enough that no one will relinquish it lightly.

The Princess's final scene is prepared together with the group. While the blade protects the fleeing at another entrance, she holds the gate from her dream. Her death is certain; whether the people escape and whether the giant gains control of the city depends on the characters' decisions and successes. The Princess can look back on the peace she achieved through her initial gift. Her end need not prove that this decision was wrong.

For the next owner, a question remains that cannot be answered by any higher weapon stat: What would she one day relinquish the sword for? As long as she keeps it, she carries the possibility of that relinquishment within her. Once she makes her decision, another story begins, one whose ending is already predetermined but whose meaning remains open to interpretation.

Sources

[1] Edward Pettit (ed. and trans.), The Poetic Edda: A Dual-Language Edition. Open Book Publishers, 2023.

Skírnismál 8–9, 214–215 · p. 3

Read the essay · Freyr's Lost Sword