

We all know this. Written for humans.

- 1. We are born and we die. No one cares, no one remembers, and it doesn't matter. This is why we laugh.*
- 2. Our pack, our children, our territory, the hunt, the kill, the battle. Health, full stomach, sharp weapons, your packmates next to you under the stars, seeing your child kill her first prey. These are important.*
- 3. Anything else is needless complication, no matter how much fun it is.*
- 4. If you can't eat it, wear it, wield it, or carry it, leave it behind.*
- 5. Plan before hunting, discuss after hunting, hunt while hunting.*
- 6. Lead, follow, or hunt alone. Success—first meat of kill, greater trust. Failure—less trust. Disaster—survivors eat you.*
- 7. Expect trust outside the pack to be betrayed.*
- 8. Two are much stronger than one. Three are much stronger than two. Ten are barely stronger than nine. Fifty are much stronger than ten, but barely stronger than forty.*
- 9. An archer, a swordsman, and a scout are stronger than three swordsmen.*
- 10. Stay alive. Hopeless battles are hopeless. Dead is dead.*
- 11. Stay alive. Once you decide to kill, use all your skill, strength, and deception. Nobly dead is dead.*
- 12. Die biting the throat.*

Education

“Human grows too slowly. Still suckling, can barely walk. Useless! I will be haouka before he can hunt for himself. Carry everywhere, back hurts.”

“Yes, much too slowly. We still must learn more about humans, though.”

“May I eat him? Fed on milk, sweet, tender.” The gnoll grinned.

“Tender, yes, but full stomach only lasts two days, maybe three. You carried and suckled him for months. Wait another day, talk with packmates. Maybe one has a better idea.”

And, as it turned out, someone did.

Both Jacob and Eleanor had been schoolteachers. They took turns running their inn and attached one-room schoolhouse, in which they educated anyone in the string of little villages between Odene and the frontier who needed or wanted to read and write. It was a small room, and even then, infrequently full.

Since they were on the trade route, though, there were always just enough caravans to support a steady trickle of children and apprentices needing to learn to add and subtract columns of figures—and, more profitably, stay in the common room at the inn until their caravan came back the other way. Then, there were local merchants and shopkeepers whose own children and apprentices needed the same skills. Finally, there were the few burghers who hoped to put on airs by exhibiting offspring who could speak like they were from Sostis and perhaps even quote dead politicians or philosophers, even if neither had any idea what they meant.

Between all of these, they managed a humble but comfortable living, finally selling the inn and retiring to a modest house in the northwestern woods, close enough to the local trade route to hear passing caravans, but perhaps an hour's ride from the nearest town. Life was slow, undemanding, and though one of their three children had recently been killed in a bandit raid, reasonably pleasant.

Then one dewy morning, while sitting on their porch watching the sun rise, they saw a war party of gnolls lope silently out of the trees.

They expected to die. Gnoll raids were relatively common this far north, and though they usually killed farmers and herdsmen, not retired schoolteachers, gnolls were never

known to visit socially. With the calm that had allowed them to teach basic mathematics to generations of spoiled merchant brats, Jacob's hand found Eleanor's, and squeezed it.

"I love you, dear heart."

"I love you, too."

Then everything changed.

Two of the gnolls stepped forward. One carried...a small human child? Naked, hair a mess, but reasonably clean and definitely alive—and awake now, making babbling, growling, yipping noises.

"Your child's child," said the other.

And there, in the arms of the monsters few expected to meet and live, was a healthy toddler with dark, curly hair, who really did look a lot like the baby they had last seen seven months ago—not long before news of the daring bandit raid that took their daughter's life, and her husband's, and those of the rest of the trading caravan.

"Joshua?" Eleanor stood. "Joshua?" She held out her arms, and the gnoll handed the toddler that might have been Joshua to her. "Is that really you, Josh?" She looked at the gnoll questioningly, eyes growing wet.

"Didn't know name," said the gnoll who had previously spoken.

Jacob stood too, in wonderment. "Well, he's got the hair, and—yes, the eyes too. Maybe miracles do happen, sometimes."

Eleanor handed Joshua to Jacob, and before she really thought about what she was doing, stepped forward and hugged the nearly naked, brutally fanged, wickedly clawed hyena-woman that towered over her, burying her face in the furry, bony chest. "Thank you. I don't understand, not at all, but thank you." She looked up, through a haze of tears, and

the gnoll was looking down at her with what she swore was compassion, though she knew no one, including Jacob, would believe her.

There was a scrabbling noise, as of claws trying and failing to find purchase, on their wooden porch.

“Is Gryka. Feed her meat, not too much. You have books.” It wasn’t a question.

“Um, er, yes, what?” And the source of the scrabbling noise looked up at them with an unbearably cute but disturbingly toothsome grin.

“You keep six moons, maybe. Gryka dies, you die.”

Jacob and Eleanor were overjoyed to see and hold their grandchild, whom they had thought lost in a bandit raid months ago; still terrified of the giant, rangy, savage animal-men who had just presented him to them, completely without introduction; and it slowly dawned on both of them that they had no idea whatsoever what they were going to do with the small, furry tornado of youthful energy that was already scent-marking the rough-hewn timbers of their tiny house.

The gnolls muttered and yipped briefly to Gryka¹, one by one.

And as quickly as they had arrived, they were gone.

Fearing the consequences should Gryka come to harm, yet finding her destructive capability to be considerable, Jacob and Eleanor found on that very first night that her appetite for bedtime stories far exceeded that of their own grandchild, who dozed off almost immediately. Gryka, however, stayed awake and brightly attentive all the way through, until Eleanor said “The End” and closed the cover, at which point she immediately laid down on the bed and curled herself

1: Pronounced “Gricka.”

around Joshua, drawing a shout of alarm from Jacob.

“Get away from our child!” Jacob snapped, reaching for her. “Ow!”

Gryka growled and slapped at his arm, claws drawing tiny beads of blood.

“She’s just cold, Jacob. Besides, we have no clothes or blankets for Joshua yet. And he doesn’t seem to be complaining.” It was true: Joshua was fast asleep.

“I am not sleeping in a bed with THAT,” Jacob said flatly, pointing.

“I’m not sure we have a choice, dear,” replied Eleanor.

And indeed, the bed was crowded that night.

Life suddenly became a lot noisier and more complicated. There were clothes and blankets to sew, sharp tools to hide, a bigger bed to build, two very hungry mouths to feed, and their shelves of books were one of their few possessions not to fall victim to claws and teeth that seemed to grow longer and sharper by the day. In fact, they soon found that any printed matter at all would do, at any time of day. “Read,” Gryka demanded in her rough but intelligible grumble, pulling on an arm, and she would scuttle behind Jacob or Eleanor’s chair, peering over their shoulder and intently tracking their finger as it wandered back and forth and down the page, following the path of the words they spoke.

“Are we teaching you to read, Gryka?” Jacob would ask with cocked eyebrow, disbelieving like everyone else that a savage gnoll could possibly understand or care about the written word. Gryka wouldn’t reply to this, or to any other direct question, with anything more than the quizzical look a dog gives its master when it hasn’t yet decided whether to obey—but if he or Eleanor paused too long in their reading, she would grab their hand and replace their finger on the

page. Given her sharp claws and infrequent but destructive tantrums, both learned it was wise to comply. Besides, now that they were responsible for Joshua, both Jacob and Eleanor were terrified of what would happen if the gnolls returned and found Gryka gone.

Fortunately, Gryka spent much of her time outside, and though she often returned dirty or bloody, they quickly trained her to clean off her hands and paws before entering the house, a necessity she accepted without complaint. And though she preferred to visit the stream to do so, instead of carrying water back to the house in a bucket, she bathed herself as often as they did. However, they were never successful in teaching her to do anything with meat but wolf it down as quickly as possible, let alone use utensils, and soon simply gave it to her to eat outside. They found a benefit to this, though: instead of paying good money for cuts of meat, once Jacob realized he could justify buying anything at all by saying he and Eleanor had a new dog, he could simply take whatever bones, offal, or spoilage the butcher offered cheaply.

“Must be a big dog,” said the butcher.

“Yes,” Jacob replied.

“Good. Never know what’s out there in the woods.”

You have no idea, Jacob thought.

Several months passed in this way, and Gryka grew perceptibly taller in that short time—even faster than Joshua, who was growing quickly himself. The tiny house was full of stories read out loud, Joshua’s happy toddler chatter, and the occasional tantrum, and though they certainly got less sleep than before, Jacob and Eleanor were happier than they had been in some time. Gryka seemed to be able to take care of herself, often disappearing entirely for much of the day, and their fear of her pack returning to find her gone had slowly

been replaced by routine.

Gryka had begun to take down and page through some of the children's picture books. "How cute," Jacob said. "I guess she likes the pictures."

"I think she's reading, Jacob. Or trying, anyway. She's watched us read that one enough times."

"Nonsense. She always picks the books with animal pictures."

"Which word 'tortoise,' which word 'hare?'" Gryka asked, pointing to the page.

Eleanor gave Jacob a meaningful look as she bent to help Gryka. "Tortoise, there. Hare, there."

"Good story," Gryka said, closing the book, "but no hyenas."

Jacob burst into laughter. "Well, then."

From that day on, Gryka was full of questions, and since Joshua was just starting to speak in sentences, both Jacob and Eleanor had plenty of time to teach their strange but eager pupil. She seemed almost completely focused on vocabulary, and the few times Jacob or Eleanor asked her about what life with gnolls was like, she would simply shrug. "Play with others, learn to hunt."

One morning not long afterward, to their great surprise, Gryka came to them and said, very simply, "Head full now. Thank you for reading, explaining. I go." She hugged both of them, loped off into the woods, and that was that.

After a long, long pause, during which neither could find anything to say, Jacob threw back his head, laughed...and kept laughing.

"What's so funny, Jacob? I'm sad," Eleanor said. "I'll miss her, and we barely even got to say goodbye."

Jacob finally chuckled to a stop. "I'm sad, too, but we both

knew it would probably happen like this. Besides, now we both know something extraordinary, something that I bet no one else knows...not even the big names at the University.” He paused, thinking. “I wonder why literacy is suddenly important to the gnolls, and I wonder how long it’ll take before anyone at the University, or anywhere else, even admits of the possibility?”

Eleanor smiled, eyes wet. “You’re right. Let’s never tell anyone; it’s funnier that way, and no one will believe us anyway. I’ll still miss her, though.”

“So will I, dear heart. So will I.”

Only later did Eleanor find a large blackened stone some distance from the house, the forest floor surrounding it littered with charred sticks that Gryka had been using to practice her writing, and only later did Jacob connect her departure with a missing pocket dictionary. And though they lived just long enough to raise their grandson Joshua, who eventually grew into a tall, handsome, and reasonably smart young man, neither saw Gryka or her pack again.

Departure

“Study *gnolls*?” the Duke snorted. “Why not just drink hemlock? Jump off the Black Cliffs?”

“I keep hearing stories from the merchant caravans,” I replied. “At least the ones whose route goes all the way to the northwest frontier, past the desert.”

“The ones that come back with all the exotic animal hides.”

I nodded. “They say that’s where they get them.”

“From *gnolls*?” He snorted again.

“No, from the local tannery. But the merchants say the tannery gets most of them from gnolls, at least lately.” I

shrugged. “Some even claim they’ll see a gnoll in town, sometimes, and it isn’t eating anyone and no one is running away.”

“They’re just bullshitting you,” he growled. “That’s the merchant’s third favorite pastime, after cheating and short-changing.”

“Could be,” I said, “but I hear the same stories from different caravans. Usually the bullshit is different, too.”

That got me his “I’m thinking” scowl. “If that’s true, the gnolls are trading for something. But what? They don’t build houses, don’t wear trinkets, and the only thing I’ve ever known gnolls to want is us, dead.” His scowl deepened. “They’re good at it, too. Knights either find nothing or don’t come back. Like fighting shadows. Glad I don’t have any here, in my duchy.”

“That’s why I think they’re worth studying. They use human weapons, we know that, and anything that good at guerilla tactics absolutely has to be intelligent. I don’t buy the Church’s line that they’re just hyenas on their hind legs.”

“They’re scared!” he roared, laughing. “If gnolls were intelligent, they might have souls, and then the Church would have to send missionaries to save them!”

I didn’t have to fake my laughter this time. “Makes trying to convert those Osengo nomads seem like cutting butter.”

The Duke nodded. “That’s why I keep you scholars around, running the University. You keep them busy chasing distant heathens, or just chasing your arguments, instead of making trouble for me. When they don’t have anything to do, they start complaining that they need greater tribute for a bigger cathedral and more expensive junk to fill it up, or they start smelling heresy everywhere and pissing off my allies.”

“Scholars love to argue, especially with ecclesiasticals.” I grinned. “Please don’t get assassinated, or we’ll all have to leave Sostis before they arrest us for heresy.”

“You knew the risk when you aligned with me instead of the bishopric,” he shrugged. “You won’t have any exceptional expenses on this trip, will you?”

“Only to the extent that it’s farther than I usually travel for research,” I said. “Getting to Odene is no problem, but after that I’ll have to bribe my way across the Ghamor Desert, then pay off a few riverboat captains and probably at least one mountain guide.”

“Can’t you just follow the trade route around all that?” His eyes narrowed.

“The caravans take two months to go one way because they stop everywhere to trade, and if I follow the route without being part of one...” I let the consequence hang.

“Killed by bandits, second day out.”

I nodded. “Other than that, just the usual supplies, and a big stash of tobacco.”

“Didn’t think you smoked.” He arched an eyebrow.

“I don’t,” I grinned, “but once you get out of civilization, it’s often better than money.”

He laughed. “You’ve got common sense in that pointy head. If you had a trace of discipline I’d have made you a field officer, and if you had a trace of guile I’d have made you a diplomat. Does it have to be good tobacco?”

“No, but it has to smoke properly. Well-cured, not dry or moldy.”

“Done. I support the University because it’s cheaper than supporting the Church. Never forget that.” Suddenly the Duke fixed me with an intense stare: as a military commander, he specialized in withering looks. “You’re not deserting me, are you?”

I shook my head. “No, Captau.”

“You’re not committing an elaborate suicide, are you?”

“No, Captau.”

“Good. Don’t die, don’t change your mind, and be back in four months. I’ve got a few counts- and barons-to-be coming this fall. Maybe even a mini-marquis, if the Keszcnyn alliance doesn’t fall apart.”

I nodded: despite what the Duke had said earlier, our main function was to keep the scions of nobility out of trouble—and out of the bishopric. “Yes, Captau.”

“Dismissed.” He waved his hand; I bowed and departed as he called in some advisers.

Travel is cheap, I thought: it’s only expensive to travel safely. I’d be taking more silver with me than I liked, but a substantial part of it would be spent on the trip out, and no one expects scholars to have much money anyway.

Plus, I don’t fit the stereotype of the timid, bespectacled academic. None of us do, because it takes strong physical presence, as well as a quick mind, to keep lordlings in line—being commoners, we can’t actually order them to do anything—and it takes some weapon skills to return safely from pubs and theaters late at night, somewhat drunk, as is our habit. Though my distant Goidelic ancestry hasn’t left me anything but an utterly incongruous name (“Aidan O’Rourke”), and my light brown hair is both grayer and thinner than it once was, I retain the vaguely ursine build of my father, my mother’s long Northerner face, and the physical endurance of one who is too bored to stay on campus but too poor to own or keep a horse.

It’ll be a long, uncomfortable journey, I thought, as I walked back to my modest room: better pack up and leave before I get waylaid by interdepartmental politics.

The Annotated Gnoll Credo

Aidan O'Rourke, Ph.D
Chairman, Department of Ethnology
Ten Bridges University, Sostis

Overview of the Gnoll Species (*Homo crocuta*)

Since gnolls are little-studied in our field (usually because their culture is thought, like most other feral animal-men, to be simplistic and uninteresting) and there are many misconceptions about them, I will first present an overview of the gnoll species, with some basic facts.

Gnolls are tall, bipedal humanoid hyenas.

Though hyenas are a social species with strong pack structure, they are much more closely related to the civet and mongoose than to the wolves they superficially resemble.¹ There are three extant species of hyena; the spotted hyena is largest, most powerful, and most common, and modern gnolls are clearly related in appearance and social structure to the spotted hyena. (Gnolls more closely resembling striped or brown hyenas have been rumored for many years, but no reliable sightings or evidence have been confirmed.)

Gnoll legs are digitigrade, with larger but hyena-like rear paws tipped with non-retractable claws. Their torso and arms are similar to a human's (though longer and bonier due to their height), with somewhat knobby elbow joints and slightly "loose" shoulders, which seem to take impacts and falls without dislocating or separating as easily as a human's. Their human-like hands, in contrast, are thick and blocky to support the short, powerful, semi-retractable claws that tip

1: Thus, the best answer to the common question "Are hyenas dogs or cats?" is "Neither. They're hyenas."

each finger and thumb, and the muscles that support their tenacious grip make their forearms as large as their upper arms.

In contrast to their generally lean, wiry build, gnolls have a thick, powerful neck, curved forward to support a scaled-up spotted hyena's head and ears. Their body is covered with coarse yellowish fur, reversed to form a short mohawk-like mane atop the neck and head, that grows more or less shaggy according to climate and season—though gnolls seem to prefer warm or hot weather, and are not known to permanently inhabit any region that receives snow. (Summer and winter migrations are uncommon, but do occur in some mountainous areas.) Their pelt is typically spotted on the back, arms, and legs, and their muzzles, hands, and paws, as well as the tip of their tail, are always black. It is said that the spots slowly fade with age.

A typical adult gnoll stands 7-8 feet tall if she stands fully erect—which, like most bipedal digitigrade species, she rarely does except when asserting dominance. Usual relaxed standing height is between 6½ and 7½ feet, and gnolls generally weigh between 210-260 pounds.² Much of their mass is concentrated in the neck musculature, which accounts for their nearly emaciated build, and inspired the famous observation, “I guess if I were that skinny I'd eat anything, too.”

Gnolls easily outrun humans, but cannot run nearly as fast as wolfmen, lion-men, or other bipedal digitigrades, who have longer and more powerful legs for their size. As such, they are not ambush hunters. The gnolls' success lies in their endurance; they can maintain their steady, loping gait for hours at a time, running their prey to exhaustion if it's too fast

2: Females are taller and heavier than males: they tend towards the high end of these ranges, while males tend towards the low end.

to catch immediately.³ Typically, a gnoll hunting party will find a prey herd, identify the weakest members, then attack to scatter the herd and single one out. One gnoll is chosen as the tracker, whose responsibility is to lead the pack to the chosen prey as it flees; the rest simultaneously follow the tracker and prevent the prey from rejoining the herd. Once the tracker judges that the prey is sufficiently tired and weak to kill safely, and assuming she has not lost its trail, the rest of the gnolls converge, bring it down, and eat it.

Though gnolls usually stay in their territories, they can easily cover 70-80 linear miles in a day over open ground. Voyages of over 120 miles/day are known, and given typical speeds used when tracking prey, 200 miles/day would be achievable, though not verified.⁴

The most common misconception about gnolls, like spotted hyenas, is that they are primarily scavengers of the dead and others' kills. In reality, both are primary predators, and despite their reputations, extensive field observation has shown that lions actually steal hyena kills more often than hyenas steal a lion kill. Thus, the spotted hyena's popular reputation as a sneaky scavenger of the noble lions is much less realistic than the picture of studious, hard-working hyenas frequently having their daily wages stolen by the bigger, more powerful, and lazier lions. The theft is not all one-sided, though; hyenas sometimes get their own back

3: Spotted hyenas are also endurance hunters: they can run at forty miles per hour for up to two miles, and have been observed pursuing prey for over ten miles. In order to support such long hunts, a hyena's heart is twice the size of a lion's, despite a body only one-half to one-fifth as large—so from a strictly scientific point of view, “hyena-hearted” is a greater compliment than “lion-hearted.”

4: Gnolls prefer to hunt and travel at night, when it's cooler. Their night vision is excellent, and they have no fear of the dark, themselves being the monsters the rest of us fear to encounter.

through more intelligent pack tactics and sheer force of numbers. Short-lived but bloody wars between the two species have been known to break out.⁵

The antipathy between the two species extends to their humanoid analogs. The hatred of gnolls for lion-men, and vice versa, is nearly legendary, though as humanoids both are more evenly matched: leonids have greater speed, agility, and raw strength, but gnolls employ more sophisticated tactics and have no cultural imperative to prove bravery against bad odds. In places where both exist, territories do not overlap, and gnoll packs will defend against leonid incursions just as fiercely, if not more so, than those of other gnolls.

Gnolls, like spotted hyenas, are obligate carnivores. They eat anything that is meat, was once meat, contains meat, or has meat attached to it. Like hyenas, gnolls can crush and digest any bone that fits between their premolars, and they typically consume every part of their prey, leaving only a bloodstain and some trampled grass. Furthermore, they can digest carrion, without sickness or other ill effect, that other predators won't touch. In fact, the easiest way to think of both hyenas and gnolls is as a vehicle for directing meat into the most powerful jaws on land, with the digestive system to back it up.

5: Usually lions win these conflicts due to their much greater size, strength, and agility, especially if the much larger males are present (lions are two to five times the size of hyenas)—but groups of spotted hyenas have been known to kill healthy lionesses, and are the only four-legged predator known to do so.

Since the two species fill the same ecological niche and hunt much of the same prey, conflict between them is intense. They will obliterate each others' territorial scent markings, defend their territories against each other, and some of their behaviors are difficult to interpret as anything but hatred: lion males will kill hyenas even when no food is in dispute, and when hyenas do manage to kill a lion, they will frequently roll around on the corpse before tearing into it, as if gloating. Both species will also eat the others' cubs whenever they find them.

A Brief History of the Credo

As a leading ethnographer and ethnohistorian, I had heard rumors that the gnolls of the far northwest frontier actually engaged in limited commerce with humans—as opposed to the rest of Human civilization, which usually finds itself at war with gnolls any time it decides to build on new land instead of simply hunting in it or traveling through it. Finally, progress having ground to a halt on my Orcish-Human dictionary, I decided to undertake the weeks-long voyage, an account of which could fill an entire book by itself.

Upon arriving in a tiny village approximately at the end of nowhere, I promptly encountered Gryka—a seven-and-a-half-foot-tall humanoid hyena is difficult to miss in a hamlet of perhaps a hundred, even if she only shows up once every week or so. I was just starting to debate the wisdom of a plan that involved long solo contact with creatures that could eat my head in two bites—and were known to do so when provoked—when she spotted me across the village square, closing the distance between us in an alarmingly short time.

“Aidan O’Rourke. What do you want?” she boomed: her voice was rough and intimidatingly deep, but surprisingly intelligible. (I quickly learned that gnolls never use pleasant-ries, which I initially interpreted as a dominance tactic. Well, I was happy to submit to her dominance, considering she could probably use my head as a toothbrush.)

“I study other races and other languages. I want to learn about gnolls.”

I fully expected her to laugh at me or be offended. Instead, she simply asked “What do you want to know?”

Given the length of my journey and the completely unexpected (to an ethnologist) appearance of a straightforward reply, the words spilled out as if her question had pulled a

cork in my brain. “I want to know if you have a religion or a philosophy, and if so, what it is. I want to learn your language. I want to learn everything I can about your culture. I want—”

She shushed me with a quick gesture. “Too much talking. Ask one question.”

I thought for a moment. “Do gnolls have a written religion or philosophy of life?”

Gryka cocked her head for a long moment. “No, but I write it for you. Come back tomorrow, same time.” And with that, she loped out of town to the west.

I stood there, mildly dumbfounded, and finally remembered to close my mouth. A couple villagers laughed at me. “Not much for small talk, is she?”

The questions rattled around my head like dice in a cup. How had she known my name and what I looked like? Did the gnolls have an undiscovered oral tradition? Could she actually read and write, or was I going to be the human victim of a macabre gnoll joke? Did gnolls even have a sense of humor? (They would occasionally laugh hysterically, like spotted hyenas, but no one really knew why. I’ve studied them for years, and now I have a definitive answer to my question: yes, they do, and I know why as much as any human can. I’ll talk about that later.)

In other words, I was starting to feel the excitement of a thoroughly interesting ethnological problem.

I half expected Gryka to return with the bloody skull of a prey animal, or simply not show up at all—but as I sat outside the local general store watching the hot, dusty afternoon crawl by, she walked straight up to me and dropped a large, much-folded piece of paper in my lap.

I opened it and saw...a merchant’s column of daily figures. “Turn it over.”

She stood next to me, apparently waiting for me to read it. I turned it over, revealing a large block of closely, meticulously-written gibberish—in the Roman alphabet, but gibberish no less. “What language is this, Gryka?”

“Ours. I try your language, but words missing. You don’t know ours?”

“No, I don’t.” No one did. Back in civilization, anyone who got close enough to gnolls to hear more than a few words was generally eaten.

She gave me the wide, toothy, slightly lopsided grin I came to know so well. “Then come with me.”

The Gnoll Credo

by J. Stanton

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