Frostgrave, Rangers of Shadow Deep and Frostgrave Perilous Dark

By Joseph McCullough

Review by Paul Le Long

This is a review of three related books. The two Frostgrave books were published by Osprey in 2015 and 2019 respectively. Rangers was self-published in 2018. Briefly, Frostgrave is a two-player game of fantasy skirmishes where the main character is a wizard leading a small troupe of henchmen on missions in a lost city. Rangers is similar and uses almost identical rules but is aimed at solo or cooperative play and the lead character is a ranger or fighter rather than a wizard. Perilous Dark is a supplement for Frostgrave, which marries up the two games by introducing solo/co-op mechanisms and advice to Frostgrave so that you can play it like you would Rangers. In fact, you could easily merge the games.

I'll quickly give an overview of the contents of each book.

Frostgrave

We have 131 pages starting with a forward which is a short introduction to the setting. Then we are into creating wizards and warbands. Here your central character is a wizard of which there are 10 types (Enchanter, Necromancer, Witch and so on) from which to choose and each comes with a choice of spells – it's very customizable. Next you create an apprentice as your assistant and then you recruit a warband – henchmen essentially – examples include Thug, Thief, Marksman, Tracker, Man-at-Arms and so on.

Then there is a section on game rules which include the things you would expect, like turn sequence, movement, shooting, and combat. But we're only up to page 48 so far – the rules are actually pretty simple and all based on the roll of a D20. Personally, I'm not keen on the combat system and the author admits that it is a bit swingy but it is easy and unfussy so it will be a matter of taste in the end.

Then we have 25 pages or so on Campaigns, which is the real point of Frostgrave. Essentially, your wizard is exploring a magical city that has just started thawing after

1000 years encased in ice. He is trying to loot all the magical treasures he can find and for protection you take along a band of henchmen. The point of the game is that there are other wizards doing exactly the same and thus ensues a two-player skirmish wargame. The campaign section is all about collecting loot, improving the abilities of wizards and henchmen and learning new spells.

Spells is the next section, again covering over 20 pages. Then we have 10 scenarios and a bestiary. Now monsters are interesting because, although the focus of the game is a two-player skirmish between rival warbands, the city is also full of monsters that are hostile to both parties and are controlled (albeit very simplistically) by the game. Monsters tend to wander around randomly but attack whatever figure is closest regardless of whether that figure belongs to Warband A or Warband B – monsters are effectively just an environmental threat to both sides, a nuisance.

Rangers of Shadow Deep

Rangers is a larger book (210 pages) with a different setting; rather than a frozen magic city, a darkness is swallowing the land and spewing forth abominations. You play a Ranger journeying into the dark realm to fight monsters, rescue innocents and generally be heroic.

Again, we start with character creation but it's more in-depth than in Frostgrave – you have Build Points that you use to build stats, gain special abilities, skills, even some spells. The emphasis is not on wizardry however. There are only a few spells and they really just act like extra abilities. Again, you will recruit companions – Archer, Man-at-Arms, Knight, Conjuror, Tracker and even a faithful hound. Many of these also have skills. Going on missions earns experience points and you use these points to improve your Ranger and also your companions so once again campaign play is extremely important.

The rules for moving, shooting and combat are virtually identical to Frostgrave and are quickly dealt with. There is also an equipment list, bestiary and things like that. There is a fair amount of space dedicated to campaign aspects and more than 100 pages are given over to scenarios of which there are 17, divided between four overarching linked mini-campaigns. The first Mission has two scenarios, the last Mission has nine. So games are linked and rely on scenarios rather than just a line them up and fight approach. It feels very RPG in this way.

What I haven't mentioned yet, however, is the monsters and structure of scenarios. Rangers is designed to be played solo or cooperatively. So the scenarios are designed so that you don't have a total helicopter view of everything that might happen. And the monsters have a much better – though still simple – AI. This is because there isn't a rival player so the opposition comes not from your opponent as in Frostgrave but from the scenario itself and the monsters in it. Basically, every monster follows a simple flowchart to see what it does on any given turn – usually that's to attack the nearest figure or move

to a designated point on the table. It is simple but it's also effective and it feels pretty natural.

Frostgrave: Perilous Dark

This book feels like a hybrid of the other two. It's set in the Frostgrave universe obviously, but it is a toolkit for creating Frostgrave scenarios that are fit for solo or cooperative play and the ideas it uses to do that are taken from Rangers. The book contains 10 scenarios (which together form a campaign) that are used to exemplify the advice given in the toolkit sections.

What advice does it give? Levels of difficulty, use of spells and monsters, introducing definite objectives, monster spawning and time limits into scenarios. There is also advice on clue markers (which might earn you experience points or give you a bonus in future levels when found), treasure, traps, obstacles (much of which happens as random events). Then there is material on designing dungeon crawls with randomly generated rooms and even entire dungeons.

The book ends with new treasure items and a bestiary covering monsters introduced in the 10 scenarios. But the real emphasis here is advice on how to create solo scenarios and environments. There are designer's notes throughout as well. This is what readers of this blog will be interested in. The author doesn't spell everything out for you – the reader will have to go and do the work themselves – what you get here is advice on how and why to do it.

Conclusion

I really like Frostgrave; the setting is evocative and although I'm not keen on the combat rules and don't generally play two-player games, I still think it's a good, fun game. I was always intrigued by the potential to convert it to solo play. And then Rangers came out and essentially did that, albeit not for wizards. Rangers is terrific in terms of its campaign play and scenario design. Perilous Dark is the offspring of both, full of advice in designing games for solitaire play. I would recommend all three books – all three retail at less than £20 each so they are good value too.

In a future edition of *Lone Warrior* I hope to present a slightly different version. For my own games I've kept the basis of character creation and progression as well as scenario design but I've replaced the combat system with my own Shields and Skulls combat rules (printed several years ago in LW) and an adapted form of Song of Blades and Heroes. The result is a game I'm grandiosely calling Song of Frost & Shadow.

I suppose the point here is that this family of games by Joseph McCulloch is adaptable, inspirational and customizable, which is very much the point of the Perilous Dark book. Again, recommended.